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ENGL 400

Applied Theory Essay

Patriarchal Values and Submission in: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In the documentary, *Zora Neale Hurston: Jump at the Sun*, Zora Neale Hurston once defiantly said: “I belong to no race...nor time”. Zora Neale Hurston was considered a rebellious author throughout her lifetime during the Harlem Renaissance (1930s), as her male African-American counterparts—Richard Wright and Langston Hughes—thought Hurston’s literary publications should be directly addressing the race problem, in other words, the racism and oppression African-Americans faced as a community, rather than about gender and romance. Indeed, Hurston’s work like her confident and revolutionary self, have remained timeless in today’s African-American literary canon. One of her three most well-accredited books, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937, was written within seven months while under pressure in Haiti. In addition, the novel *Their Eyes* is among one of the most controversial texts in feminist literary studies. More specifically, feminist critiques from all backgrounds celebrate this work as an empowering piece in the African-American woman’s journey to selfhood. Though this statement stands without question, it fails to acknowledge how ideologically-conflicted the characters journey to a woman’s selfhood came to be. Throughout the novel *Their Eyes*, the main character Janie Crawford is consistently seen in marriages that reinforce traditional gender roles that capture Janie as a patriarchal-black woman. Lois Tyson, an English professor and author of *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, defines a patriarchal

woman as “a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson, 82). Similarly, Janie as a patriarchal woman is all the more evident within her three marriages when she yields to them from a submissive to resilient standpoint, while ultimately retrogressing back into a submissive position with each new husband Janie acquires. With this characterization of Janie in mind, one can readily see how the novel reinforces a patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, Tracy L. Bealer, a scholar and author of the journal article; “The Kiss of Memory”: The Problem of Love in Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God” states, “Though Janie does learn to assert her own will and subjectivity throughout the course of the novel, she must constantly combat the pervasive hierarchies that make black women vulnerable to oppression” (Bealer, 312). Thus, by using a feminist lens, I argue that Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reinforces a patriarchal agenda—one in which men limit a woman’s interactions; to the point of submission—through Janie Crawford’s passive to non-existent interaction with her three domineering marriages.

The first of the three marriages Janie Crawford partakes in, begins with her first husband Logan Killicks. This marriage stands as a roadmap of the patriarchal agenda that ultimately unfolds throughout the novel as it begins to show the effects of the patriarchal gender roles which subjugate Janie into submission. Janie was married off to Logan Killicks—an old and wealthy sixty-acre property owner— through Nanny, her grandmother, at the age of sixteen. All Nanny wanted for Janie was for her to be protected from the labor and oppression that black woman in her time in slavery faced. Yet, this well-intended marriage is exactly what leads (or subjects) Janie into a patriarchal suppressed womanhood. For instance, once Janie realizes that her marriage to Killicks was not what she thought love would be, she asks Jody what he would

do if she left him, Killicks responds, "A whole lot of mens will grin in yo' face, but dey ain't gwine tuh work and feed you. You won't git far and you won't be long..." (Hurstons, 30).

Essentially, Killicks tells Janie that she needs a man to provide for her, to keep her well-fed.

Undoubtedly, this male patriarchal ideology; wherein the men are the leading bread-winners of the household, is a reoccurring overarching idea in *Their Eyes*. It should be noted that this ideology is emblematic of a type of suppression that patriarchal woman faced from men in order to keep them subjugated under their influence. Likewise, another instance in which Janie can be seen coyly subjugating herself under Logan's authority is in their interaction outside in the field. Janie says to Logan: "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. You'se in yo'place and Ah'm in mine" To which Logan responds, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, dat quick" (Hurstons, 31). Here, Janie can be seen explicitly accepting her place inside the house as a dutiful wife. Though, this is quickly challenged by Logan who re-assigns her into an unequal position, no longer as a wife, but as a servant fit for servitude at his request. Thus, here one can see how gender roles are exemplified, if not, surpass the patriarchal ideology Janie faces by being placed from a semi-submissive standpoint (as a wife), into the lesser category of full-submissive slavery (as a slave). Similarly, in "The Kiss of Memory", the author states, "Though Logan does not abuse or violate Janie, even his money proves no protection from unsatisfying labor, as his ominous purchase of a mule "all gended up so even uh woman kin handle 'im" (26) implies" (Bealer, 316). Indeed, even Bealer acknowledges that Janie is portrayed as less than human with the maltreatment from her husband. In this regard, one can see how Nanny's wishful thinking counteracts her intentions as it places Janie into oppression rather than liberation. In addition, the last scene in Logan and Janie's marriage can be regarded as problematic given that Janie leaves him for another man. The novel states, "She untied it (the

apron) and flung it on a low bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet. After that she came to where Joe Starks was waiting for her with a hired rig” (Hurstons, 32). Though some critics have argued that this is a significant moment in Janie’s journey to selfhood given that Janie leaves on her own terms, this analysis fails to acknowledge the fact that Janie is willingly submitting herself to another man; rather than having left Logan on her own without a male’s presence. Similarly, the fact that Janie is picking flowers on her way to Joe Starks only supports the idea in the novel that Janie needed a man to leave her last relationship as she walks to him in a bridal-ceremonial way. Joe Starks appears to Janie in a savior prince-charming manner as he awaits her in his carriage. Thus, the marriage between Janie Crawford and Logan Killicks, arguably, establishes the most blatant ways in which the novel reasserts a patriarchal agenda through gender roles and oppression. Janie as a character represents the submissive patriarchal woman that cannot escape the loop of male dominance.

Janie’s second marriage is with the character Joe Starks. In this marriage, Janie’s position is placed further into male possession more so than in her last marriage as she experiences herself as nothing more than an object that remains complacent to her partner’s desire. In *Critical Theory Today*, the text defines a woman as an “other” as “objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have” (Tyson, 88). To Starks, women in the novel (including Janie) lack the mental capacity to think for themselves as he believes that men are the ones who are capable of rational thinking and thus, should be in charge of making all decisions that women can’t think through. For instance, shortly after Joe Starks becomes the official mayor of Eatonville, Joe and Janie’s partnership—in regards to love and affection—dwindles as he begins to disregard her as a commodification. The text states, “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that

evening. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other woman were the gang. So she put on one of the bought dresses..." (Hurston, 41). Clearly, this is troublesome in itself due to the fact that it is first, pitting women against each other in the sense that there can only be one woman who is the most beautiful of all. Secondly, it re-asserts the idea that beauty, while in part due to status, is what matters the most about a woman. Not the way she is as an intelligent being but rather, the way she looks as an object. Which leads to the third reason as to why this quote is troublesome, that Janie obeys what Starks tells her to do by willingly wearing a red-wine colored dress that he felt was necessary to appease her looks to the people of Eatonville. This is significant because it shows how she is dictated to stand by whatever decision Joe makes for her very early on in the relationship. Joe Starks takes advantage of this submissive aspect in Janie—long before she even realizes he had been doing so in their marriage—in front of the townspeople when he dismisses the public's call for Janie to make a speech in honor of the lamp-post lighting. For instance, Joe says: "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's a woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston, 43). In response, Janie said nothing to counteract Joe's sexist remark and is rather left to the audience feeling cold. Joe's remark is emblematic of the assigned gender roles of the novel in which, once again, men are deemed to be the ones fit for anything besides the home and the women are fit only for domesticated house chores. In addition, it further solidifies the idea that Janie is nothing more than a complacent object, to the point that she is reduced as such by Joe who disregards her feelings as he expects silence from her. In "The Kiss of Memory", the author places the reasoning behind Joe's objectification of Janie as a part of Joe's unfortunate need to make up for the lack of superiority he feels due to his race. For instance, the text states, "Joe appropriated class status symbols to compensate for racial

inferiority” (Bealer, 321). In this interpretation, Janie then functions as a class status symbol through his objectification of her—not as a partner, but as an object used to display his wealth for his own status and benefit. Though it is important to acknowledge that hierarchal ideologies such as socioeconomic status and racism are what influence the men in the novel to act out as misogynistic partners; which, evidently appears to be the case in this marriage alike the next marriage with Vergible Woods, or rather, Tea Cake; it should not excuse or narrowly condemn the sexist behavior Janie undertakes given that woman in the novel, more broadly, have it much worse than their male-counterparts as they not only experience those same oppressive hierarchical ideologies, but face a third oppression due to gender and violence. Conversely, a moment in which Janie appears to confidently stand up for herself after years of silenced oppression, Janie says to Joe on his deathbed, “You ain’t tried tuh pacify nobody but yo’self. Too busy listening tuh yo’own big voice” (Hurston, 87). Surely here, Janie at last is standing up for herself by calling him out on his meaningless authoritative figure. Even so, this only begs the question, why now—alike when Janie spoke out against him in front of the townspeople—does Janie defend herself so vigorously? Throughout their entire relationship, she had learned to keep to herself, though, it wasn’t until now that Joe was passing away that Janie can actually express to him what she had been feeling inside. This is problematic because this moment in Joe’s vulnerability shows how Janie had to wait for him to stoop at her level of inferiority in order to smack him with the only form of defensive mechanism she had inert all along, her voice. Furthermore, this reinforces the assertion that woman could only defend themselves in moments of crisis wherein the husband was ill or passing, rather than when both partners were in stable conditions. Thus, the marriage between Joe and Janie is reprehensive of how a male, even in marriage, can suppress a woman into an object or commodity while minimizing the little to non-

existent, platform of self-defiance a patriarchal oppressed woman has left in a novel that reinforces a patriarchal agenda.

Janie's third and final marriage is with Tea Cake, formally named Vergible Woods. This marriage is often portrayed by many critics as an equalitarian relationship however, this enlightened view fails to acknowledge the stealthier ways in which Tea Cake mistreats Janie in a similar sexist pattern that her previous marriages have participated in. This claim can be further supported in "The Kiss of Memory" which states, "Tea Cake does provide Janie with real liberation from the type of class-based femininity that Joe Starks imposes upon her. However, he also replicates those same classist concerns in disturbing ways" (Bealer, 316). This is evidently seen at the start of Tea Cake and Janie's relationship, wherein Tea Cake steals Janie's two-hundred dollars, disappears for some time, and throws a party without her consensus or acknowledgment. For instance, when Tea Cake comes back to Janie, he says to her: "Dem wuzn't no high mucky mucks. Dem wuz railroad hands and dey womenfolks. You ain't usetuh folks lak dat and Ah wuz skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin' you 'mongst 'em" (Hurstons, 124). Here, Tea Cake's fear of Janie rejecting him for his class and the type of people he associates with—therefore, excluding Janie from the party all together—is strangely familiar to the way in which Joe restricted and reduced Janie's actions to those he deemed fit to 'her class'. In this regard, the idea that their marriage is equalitarian begins to crumble as he merely reduces Janie to a class he thought she belonged to without considering how she may feel. Janie once more is fit into her place as a subordinate being as she only pouts to him about how she too would have liked to come. This, while completely ignoring the fact that he stole her money, she gets wooed back into liking him as he promises to return the money through the means of gambling. This moment in the novel, like her relationship with Tea Cake in general, is

problematic because it justifies his arrogant view of what is acceptable in what he, as a male, can get away with in a relationship. Had the actions been reversed, surly, Janie would have received a whipping. Thus, this asserts Janie into the patriarchal woman role of forgiveness and condemnation as she seems to all of a sudden, forget what set her into the negative stream of consciousness she was in prior to Tea Cake's arrival. In addition, a scene, or rather roadblock that many critiques seem to overlook or vaguely mention in their analysis of Tea Cake and Janie's troublesome marriage is when Tea Cake beats Janie in front of the Turners in order to reassert his male dominance over Janie. For instance, the novel states, "Before the week was over, he had whipped Janie. Not because it justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (Hurstons, 147). This is an unmistakable issue because the narrator attempts to downplay the severity of the issue of Tea Cakes jealousy when saying that he was slapping her around just a "bit". This is unfortunate on the novel's part because by not giving Janie a platform to defend herself on, it reinforces that patriarchal women, even in marriage, will be subjected to oppression in one form or the other. Hence, in a woman's journey to selfhood, there is no such thing as an actual liberation completely-free from male dominance. Likewise, this scene is a reminder of the way in which Joe would use physical violence against Janie in order to keep her objectified and voiceless. Which could be why here, Janie's character is nowhere to be seen. Similarly, Tea Cake continues, "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it...A didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (Hurstons, 148). Confidently, Tea Cake masks his true intentions, that is; showing that he owns Janie, by using the excuse that he had whipped her to show "dem Turners" who is boss. Yet, this excuse isn't fooling anyone. Tea Cake didn't whip

her only because the Turners were looking. Rather, he asserted his male dominance out of insidious jealousy and the desire of knowing that he owns her like a plantation owner owns a mule. Furthermore, Tea Cake committed this violent act to remind Janie of her place as a possession—a theme that woman in this novel cannot exist without—that corresponds to him and him only as he gains kudos from his male peers as they see that he was man enough to hit a “tender woman lak Janie” (Hurston, 148). Thus, by doing so, we are once more reminded of the ways in which the novel reinforces a patriarchal agenda as it places the patriarchal woman into the possession of male dominance. In the article, “The Kiss of Memory” the author argues, “It is a socially mandated racial hatred that infects Tea Cake’s psyche to the degree that he feels compelled to demonstrate power along the axis of gender: manifesting itself as a brutal beating of Janie” (Bealer, 319). As aforementioned, it is critical for an analysis to acknowledge that these male-induced misogynistic maltreatments of women are, in some part, influenced by socioeconomic and racist conditions. Conditions which pave way for their aggressive assertive outbursts of male dominance. However, within this context it is crucial to also reiterate that African-American women, alike their African-American male counterparts, are also facing the same oppressions regarding race and class. If anything, the women in the novel are facing worse oppression, given that aside from racial and social hierarchies, they also face oppression due to their gender. This inference is crucial because it assures the issue that the novel has a hard time resisting, that is, patriarchal dominance and submissiveness. Last but not least, is the way in which the novel ends with an immaculate image of Tea Cake once Janie retreats back to Eatonville. The novel states, “The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace” (Hurston, 193). It should be noted here that the novel choose to end with the memory of Tea Cake as a positive partner whom was nothing but good to Janie. It completely

neglects the fact that only moments before her arrival to Eatonville, Janie had shot Tea Cake's rabid-induced persona out of fear for her own life as well as every other instance in which Tea Cake oppresses Janie. Some scholars argue that the moment Janie shot Tea Cake, it solidified the novel's overarching theme of a woman's journey to selfhood. Though this particular moment can certainly be interpreted in that way, the claim appears flawed given that the novel still chooses to end with the image of a man, Tea Cake. Here, more so than ever, one can see how Janie has regressed insofar as the patriarchal norms and values that she has been subjected to during her marriages that even she no longer remembers or recognizes that these oppressive relationships were a setback to her journey to gendered selfhood. By failing to recognize the oppression she faced with Tea Cake in the end, Janie re-asserts the novel's patriarchal agenda as it places Janie into the position of acceptance with the oppression she faced with Tea Cake—and by extension, with the oppression she faced in all three of her marriages. Thus, the marriage between Tea Cake and Janie is exemplary of the fact that though the novel attempts to bring a variance of masculinity in the male characters' treatment of Janie, the same undermining intention of male dominance remains persistent until the very conclusion of the novel. In this regard, the novel leaves Janie in the same way she had begun, a subject of oppression to the patriarchal agenda that the novel enforces.

Though the novel attempted to give Janie a liberating male-free dominant ending, in retrospect the novel fails its own ideology because it does not provide sufficient room for the patriarchal suppressed woman to stand up for herself as we see happen to Janie in time and in time again as she falls into marriages that oppress her—whether that maltreatment be blatant or not. In particular, and arguably, the most evident of these patriarchal effects can be seen in Janie's relationship with Tea Cake as it is the emblematic pinnacle of how patriarchal norms

could not suffice in the novel. Though Hurston attempts to show an equalitarian relationship between the two, ultimately, what it ends up revealing instead, is that no relationship in the novel can do without masculine dominance over the feminine. Thus, by using a feminist lens, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reinforces a patriarchal agenda—one in which men limit a woman's interactions; to the point of submission—through Janie Crawford's passive to non-existent interaction with her three domineering marriages as it places Janie into the position of a patriarchal woman.

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