
Their Eyes Were Watching God: Theme Analysis

The American novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, written by author Zora Neale Hurston, is about a young woman named Janie who wants freedom and looks for self-awareness. Throughout the novel, there are recurring situations where it is obvious that women are not treated with equality by a lot of men. These men think they have all the power and say and women are not given any respect and what they say did not really matter according to them. There are a few examples of how Janie is not treated as equal by some men and two of her own husbands, such as her being limited, being treated as a possession, and being seen to do the things that men expect of her.

In the novel, women and men occupy different roles. Women are considered the weaker sex and they are defined by their relationship to men. Marriage was a big thing during this time, which is why women can only gain power through getting married or through men who are ambitious. Men disrespect the standards of women by silencing the things they have to say, limiting their actions, and insulting their appearance and sexuality.

In chapter six, Hurston displays the importance men put on feeling a greater power against their female lovers. Using Janie's second marriage as an example of how men do not respect woman, her husband, Joe Starks, makes the attempt to put her into a submissive role by silencing her opportunity to speak in conversations and treating her as his personal object of possession. These actions being made so early in their relationship serves as the slow, growing realization for Janie to decide that her own personal growth and development as a woman will only take place once she has broken free from the grasp that Joe keeps her trapped in.

There is an example of how women should complete the task required of them, much like the mule in this chapter, is shown when we notice how much influence Joe has on which conversations Janie can indulge in and the tasks she is allowed to do. "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge". Being involved in the conversation involving the mule and its funeral is very important to Janie because she relates to it. The mule was mistreated and overpowered by its owner just how Janie is by her husband. Joe eventually purchases the mule to free it from its stern owner and gives it a spot to die in peace, all while making himself appear like a courageous man in the town. On the other hand, he never sets Janie "Free". She has to live until Joe passes away before she can be freed from the gender mold Joe has created over the years of them together.

Joe's feelings that females are and should be seen as objects of a man's possession is shown when he catches another man lusting towards Janie without her realization and becomes jealous. "Her hair was NOT going to show in the store". "And one night he had caught Walter standing behind and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing". "That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store. That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others". These quotes show that Joe sees his wife as something that is there to serve the purpose of pleasing only him, and he will not hesitate to take action in making sure Janie doesn't distract any of the customers with her appearance. He

feels threatened by her because Janie is staying a beautiful woman as she ages but he grows old looking.

We see that men display their feelings of high power towards women throughout the novel. If a man's wife gets out of line, common punishment is to beat them. Many of the men assume the women are ignorant and need to be instructed on what to do all the time, something that makes them feel like their gender is superior to that of a female. In chapter six, Janie and Joe have a conversation with one another about how he treats her. "You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin' Ah see!" "Dat's 'cause you need tellin', It would be pitiful if Ah didn't. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves". From what Joe says, not only does he think and feel that women are supposed to know their role as a man's wife, but in the comment he makes, he basically compares their smarts and brain power to that of a cow or chicken.

At the end of chapter six, Janie is finally able to be free from her hold as a woman who speaks when given permission to and does what she is told. She speaks her mind to Joe, saying

"Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different, and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens." Here, Janie is speaking back to Joe for the first time while in a public setting, telling him how she feels that God speaks to not just men, but both men and woman. During this moment, she is letting Joe know that: one, she deeply believes that God listens to what women have to say and that they are not similar to mules despite how poorly women have been treated in the past. And two, Joe needs to not talk and act like he's the town's God because her gender is close to him so that would make her the town's God as well. The statement she makes here is important because for Janie's character who was looked at as Joe's possession and with restrictions at the beginning, she is coming out and showing us how she feels on the inside and that she is willing to fight for her own independence in her life.

Hurston does an excellent job of portraying what men, like Joe Starks, for example, felt the everyday roles for females were. She shows us how Janie goes through this with her relationship with Joe that is toxic and obsessive to how she comes out a strong woman who did not care about what her female companions thought about the things she did or say. At the end of chapter six, we see a woman who won't be shut down and quieted by men any longer or be treated as something that is less than equal. Janie turns from an obedient and submissive woman to one who has a desire to take a role in gaining the rights and forming the responsibilities of her gender.