

Review

Self-fulfillment through Validation: A Study on Zora Neale Hurston's Portrayal of Spirituality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Janie Crawford is born invisible, grows up invisible and is forced to be kept invisible all through the novel. She is on the margins of her society by being barred from participating in the rituals, traditions and distribution of power. She creates a special version of spirituality in which no one can enter and no one can be oppressive. In this paper, we will discuss Janie's spirituality and how she reaches her mature identity through self- created spirituality.

Keywords: Spirituality, Religion, Feminism, Womanhood, Faith, Black, Marriage, Community

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INTRODCTION

Spirituality

Religion provides the means for women to endure an unbearable life. African Americans in general and black women in particular appropriated European Christianity to express, in their own words, and according to their own experiences, the divine presence in their lives. In Harlem Renaissance period, Christianity undergoes some changes. In the Renaissance "Christianity is often depicted as weak or debilitating, something that interferes with the masculine struggle for recognition carried out by the New Negro. I believe that they dismiss the Christ of the churches and instead value the God they find in socialism. The spiritual emancipation of each individual is

an important step in the building of the identity. African American women turn to religion to be awakened and to survive.¹

Religion is an institutionalized form, so feminists choose the word 'spirituality' to refer to their individualized experiences of religion.

¹ Peter Kerry Powers, " Gods of physical violence, stopping at nothing: Masculinity, religion, and art in the work of Zora Neale Hurston." *Religion and American Culture* 12:2 (2002) 242-243.

Kimberly Rae Connor, *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of Afro-American Women*. diss., (University of Virginia, 1991)21.

Spirituality refers to personal attitudes towards life, attitudes that engage an individual's deepest feelings and most fundamental beliefs. It encompasses the religious attitudes and experiences of individuals and may often be used as a synonym for religiousness. But spirituality covers a larger domain than that staked out by religion because it does not require ... commitment to institutional forms of worship.²

Their Eyes introduces a new religious context, a new spirituality. It moves beyond the notions of Christian Ideology. In this novel the elements of Christianity and African spirituality are in harmony. Janie's religion has the objective of self-creation and life in itself. The white eyes with which Janie looks "see the black self as absent, that is, do not see the black self at all". This is a particularly important point, for it indicates that Janie needs not just vision, but "black vision-black eyes."³ Further we should notice that, "the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining being seen through the eyes of another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze."⁴ In this novel, Hurston craftily mingles secular and the sacred. In addition to these elements, the south as depicted by Hurston is fertile for religion and spirituality.

Southern writers themselves still know, as Faulkner did, that religion is "just there," a compelling part of the landscape in which they live. Some writers see in the sometimes dramatic spiritual phenomena of the South glimpses of a spirituality that is an anchor in a global world that is connected but often anonymous, materialistic, superficial, and dysfunctional – a breeding ground for spiritual questing, with the South a major spiritual landscape of the imagination.⁵

Beginning with the title *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we can suggest that 'their' can refer to this special community or on a larger scale, the whole humanity. They are watching God and this can be interpreted in the

² Connor, 52.

³ Deborah Clark, "The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking": Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", *African American Review* 35:4 (winter, 2001) 607.

⁴ In Hurston's hands, looking is indeed a performative act. In fact, it becomes a linguistic performance which affirms bodily presence, reversing Fanon's claim that, in the white world, "consciousness of the body is solely a negat-ing activity" (Clark, 611)

⁵ Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, Ed., *A Companion to the Literature Culture of the American South* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 252.

way, they see the world or the perception toward things, or directly the way they see God. In this regard Rachel Blau Du Plessis offers that: "In this novel, "God" is evoked mainly as a cosmic critique of the lunacies of racist politics; the use of God in the title is an "inside meanin' "that suspects the normative politics of race and power. And thus one might watch Him with awe. But He also might be an image for the implacability of political power, as experienced by African-Americans."⁶

Holland refers to the role of God in Janie's life. She says that God function as "invocation - - a calling on authority - - and as remembrance of things past." She continues that God is an axis for Janie "upon which all other relationships, between Janie and Nanny, Jody or Tea Cake, pivot and revolve."⁷

There are many instances in the novel that refer directly to spirituality. The novel begins by this sentence:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (TE, 1)

These two paragraphs refer to the differences between the language of men and women, how they see the world. The narrator also refers that men have more physical and social space to move in. However, not all men have success as the passage suggest. It tells us that some ships sail forever on the horizon. There may be a power that intervenes like God.

In another instance, she is watching the pear tree. In this passage I believe that "Hurston' employment of charismatic diction to express Janie's fascination with her natural environment"⁸ suggests that one does not need a church to undergo a spiritual awakening.

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear

⁶ Rachael Blau DuPlessis, " Power, Judgement, and Narrative in a work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies" *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God* ed. Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge, 1990).

⁷ Sharon Patricia Holland, *Qualifying Margins: The Discourse of Death In Native and African Women's Fiction*, diss., (University of Michigan, 1992) 106.

⁸ Anton Lowell Smith, *Stepping Out on a Faith: Representing Spirituality in African American Literature from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*. diss. (University of Southern California, 2010)52.

tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (TE, 11)

The image of pear tree recurs many times all through the novel. It suggests a kind of affinity between Janie and the pear tree. As Smith observes "her invocation to the pear tree symbolizes a spiritual affirmation. In effect, Janie "prays" to the tree, believing that it would validate her womanhood. Janie placed her faith in the pear tree when no one around her, including her nanny, refused to recognize the physical and psychological changes initiated by adolescence."⁹The pear tree inspires Janie and directs her toward the unique understanding that life "offers more than domestic or financial stability."¹⁰

Religion and spirituality is like a refuge for Janie. Even after she gets married to Logan, she constantly walks under the pear tree, as if to tranquil herself. I believe that religion acts as a tranquillizer for the longings of black women. It is like a panacea.¹¹ Janie turns away from materialism to create an idealized, humane society.

In the first pages of the novel, Phoeby commenting on the porch talkers, complain about their permanent presence on her porch to Janie. Here, an important aspect of the community's religion is revealed. Phoeby quotes from Sam, her husband, "Sam say most of'em goes to church so they'll be sure to rise in Judgement. Dat's de day dat every secret is s'posed to be made known. They wants to be there and hear it *all*." (TE, 6)

After this reference to religion, the next explicit one refers to the time Janie is worried about Tea Cake, when he is sick. Tea Cake has to die for loving her:

She looked hard at the sky for a long time. Somewhere up there beyond blue ether's bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must be because He knew

⁹ Smith, 53.

¹⁰ Maureen McKnight, "Discerning Nostalgia in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Southern Quarterly* 44:4(2007)90.

¹¹ Beverly B. Holmes, *The Influence of Sentimental Novel and the Attendant Cult of True Womanhood on Four Novels by African American Women*, diss. (Parkway: UMI, 2008).

everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He'd give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even the mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart. (TE, 178)

First of all, we should notice that she does not go to church to ask God for Tea Cake's health. As always she seeks her answers in nature. If we analyze this passage, we can grasp Janie's spirituality in terms of her relation to nature. Sky is a place where normally, everyone seeks his/her God. Stars, sun, thunder are images that are repeated in the Bible. We are told that she does not plead rather she seeks answers. Janie is not angry with God. She knows that God made this sweet living with Tea Cake possible. God gives Janie the transcendent vision as a gift, so that she can live on her own feeling completely self-worth. Another interpretation can be the care for others in Janie's spirituality:

There were substantial differences between the moral perspectives she found among women and those that were typical of men. Women's moral concerns were more likely than those of men to focus on caring for particular others, not hurting them, responding empathically to them, and maintaining relationships with them.¹²

So, from these examples we would notice the difference between Janie's and her community's religious attitudes. Janie is both woman and black so likely to suffer exploitation and oppression. From the first steps of her journey toward gaining her specific spirituality, she opposes the dominant ideologies. Her vision rejects the assumed dignity of having landed property. She cherishes Eden-like world in which she comes to full realization of her individuality:

It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom

¹² Linda Martín Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay, Ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007)81.

had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snow virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears.

The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.

She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.

She was waiting for the world to be made. (TE, 10-11)

In this early stage of her life she still has to find her true self. She has many things to experience to notice where to find God. She asks what? How? Why? And there is no answer for her. Later, as she narrates her life story to Phoeby, she knows the answers. The last sentence immediately attracts our attention. What does she mean by waiting for the world to be made? I would like to suggest that Janie believes in rebirth. She hopes to create her own world and impose order on its chaos. She wants to make a new world, in which she can have the control. In this regard Alice Walker explains that "as creator...she is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty."¹³

Janie tries to create a sacred world in a world in which her community denied her integrity and see her in terms of her body. She creates this world to provide the conditions for her growth. Janie mingles the elements of Christianity with those of her folk culture to create such a world. Connor explains in this regard, "Afro-Americans internally created an expanded universe and willed within themselves the desire to be reborn in their new image, in this new world."¹⁴ In this world of spirituality Janie feels the sense of change and personal worth.

Janie tells her story to Phoeby, and this shows that Janie reaches a moral resolution. Her story contains her spirituality that encourages both self-expression and self's capacity for transformation. I would like to emphasize that the quest of women for spiritual dimension has a cultural dimension too. This cultural and spiritual quest leads women to question traditional and

conventional notions of being in the world.¹⁵

Janie's spiritual view of reality helps her to sustain herself, to define her womanhood. Through this spirituality, she learns to care about herself as well as others. Janie knows that if she wants to keep her religious ideas sustained and safe, she should participate in cultural expression, which is storytelling.

Janie has two major signs in her life, one is horizon and the other is a pear tree. While she finds integrity and solidarity in the pear tree, she seeks individuality in the horizon.

The inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (TE, 11)

Finding a bee for her blossom is a symbolic act. She, somehow, converts to a path in life to follow the horizon. Janie realizes that "she must "invent" herself; she cannot wait for the world to be made, but must create it for herself." At the core of Janie's spirituality is self-fulfillment. Janie goes to the horizon with the help of Tea Cake and establishes relationships "with God as well as with men and women." She learns to pay attention to her inner voice and " increasingly, she comes to validate 'the kingdom of God within' because 'her eyes have been watching God—the God who manifests himself in nature, in other human beings, and especially in our deepest selves'"¹⁶

If we remember Janie's words to Tea Cake that " if you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all, ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door, "we can judge by this passage that Janie reaches a spiritual fulfillment that is based on love and maturation through love. (TE, 159)

Janie is a convert in that she gently rejects her notions of living and communicating with God, which reaches her through her grandmother. She has been to the horizon and back, so she returns to help her community converts as well. She is forced to marry a man whom she does not love and all this because of Nanny. Her first marriage fails because Janie values the spiritual over the material:

¹³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (New York: Harcourt, 1983) 241.

¹⁴ Connor, 24.

¹⁵ Connor, 54.

¹⁶ Connor, 171.

She knew things that nobody had ever told her... she knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. (TE, 25)

She marries Jody in hope of the literal horizon, she seeks, but her life turns out to be more oppressive. She decides to seek an imaginary horizon instead of the literal one. Her gained spirituality reveals that she preserves the inside state of her being. This is an important step in her coming to the realization of true womanhood. So, she substitutes an image for Jody: This image,

Fell off the shelf inside her...tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings during pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she has a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him and numerous emotions she never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew not to mix them. (TE, 72)

It is with Tea Cake that Janie's soul revitalizes and comes out of its hiding place. Tea Cake reminds Janie that "you got de key to de kingdom." (TE, 109) According to Connor Tea Cake is "Janie's spiritual mentor who affirms but does not himself create her sense of sacrality. Moreover, the values Tea Cake holds are like Janie's in their non-materialistic basis."¹⁷

The most revealing section of Tea Cake's and Janie's life together comes at the times of hurricane. Janie reassures the worried Tea Cake by saying that "if you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door." (TE, 159) In Janie's spirituality the length of life has no value but the quality of life and the way one lives it. As Connor observes: "The hurricane comes to take on an almost apocalyptic symbolic significance as living and dead are inverted by the storm-inanimate objects tossed into animate motion, living things crushed and rendered

lifeless by the waves."¹⁸

With Tea Cake as her guide, Janie, learns to tell her own story. She explores the soul of her culture and comes to value herself. Janie's story is like a sermon for Phoeby. As Connor explains: "By the end of the novel, Janie's organic vision of unity and her independent vision of herself - the pear tree and the horizon—are resolved into one image of " a great fish-net," which Janie pulled "from around the waist of the world and draped it over shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see."¹⁹

Janie's faith is rooted in her culture. She finds her true self and visibility through evoking God in her inner invisible self. Nature acts as a guide for Janie's spirituality. Janie has her own interpretation of reality and based on this transformation of reality she constructs her being and maintain her becoming. According to Connor, Janie "had been called to preach." She creates" her own scripture."²⁰

Her journey takes the form of self-discovery in her created spiritual world. She learns to respect the "you" within. This universal,

Human situation or posture before God- - of recognizing a force behind reality that makes sense of human life - - is what links Janie to her community. Thus in telling her story to Phoeby, Janie mimics God, "the great artist," and makes sense of her experiences for her community who keep their eyes on her as their interpreter ... so Janie is in one respect a classical convert in the Christian tradition because she finds herself losing herself, by transcending "I" through her relationships with people and Creation and God.²¹

As the narrator tells us, Janie finds a jewel inside herself:

When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine. (TE, 90)

¹⁷ Connor, 186.

¹⁸ Connor, 188.

¹⁹ Connor, 191.

²⁰ Connor, 196-197.

²¹ Connor, 199.

This story can be applied to the status of African American women in particular and their invisibility. Their glistening singing appearance is covered by the patriarchal mud all over. In their invisibility they, still, shine and sing and try to make themselves visible. The story of Janie Crawford is the story of a woman who learns to sing and shine again. Her journey is a journey of soul and spirit. She comes to wholeness. Janie has a lesson for the porch talkers: "Tell 'em dat love ain't somethin' lak a grindstone dat's the same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's hu movin' thing, but atill and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore." (TE, 191)

And through this message she gives birth to herself. Janie does not conceive a child with Tea Cake; instead she gives birth to herself. We can suggest that "as creator, she is like a god. This is what her friend Phoebe means when she says "Gal, you sho' looks good...you looks like youse yo' own daughter..."²²

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²² Gloria Graves Holmes, *Zora Neale Hurston's Divided Vision: The Influence of Afro-Christianity and the Blues* (State University of New York, 1994) 186.

