

Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

# Their Eyes Were Watching God

Zora Neale Hurston

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# THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

by  
Zora Neale Hurston

## Teacher Guide

Written by  
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### Note

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**Please note:** Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with your class.

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ISBN 978-1-60878-445-5

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**Publisher Information**  
For a complete catalog, contact—

Novel Units, Inc.  
P.O. Box 97  
Bulverde, TX 78163-0097

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## Chapters 16-18, pages 133-159

Tea Cake knew jealousy, too, when light-skinned Mrs. Turner made it clear that she thought Janie could do better than dark-skinned Tea Cake. When she tried to introduce her brother to Janie, Tea Cake beat Janie—and so earned praise from his friend Slop-de-Bottom (“Uh person can see every place you hit her.”) While claiming to be defending Mrs. Turner from ruffians, Tea Cake joined a group of brawlers who wrecked Mrs. Turner’s restaurant and drove her and her family out of town. One day a powerful hurricane struck and Janie raced with Tea Cake to find high ground. While defending Janie from a vicious dog, Tea Cake was bitten by the animal.

### Vocabulary

droves (133)	lewis (133)	barrel (133)	fanatical (136)
affront (136)	criteria (138)	inseparable (138)	deity (138)
roughing (136)	indiscriminate (138)	unattainable (139)	smite (139)
innocles (139)	seraphs (139)	fanaticism (139)	transmutation (139)
defilement (139)	frays (145)	profusely (145)	deity (146)
grotesques (147)	altars (147)	procession (147)	cherubim (149)
peevish (150)	shades (151)	cosmic (151)	fugitives (153)
figures (153)	mammoth (154)	turbulent (155)	preempted (156)
oblique (157)	massive (157)		

### Discussion Questions

1. Why don’t Janie and Tea Cake leave when the season’s over? (*They decide to stay since they plan to work there again the next growing season.*) Would they be better off if they had left?
2. What are your impressions of Mrs. Turner? (*Mrs. Turner is light-skinned, treats dark-skinned blacks with contempt, tries to ingratiate herself to Janie.*) Why do you suppose she is so prejudiced? Does Janie mind her? (*Janie is annoyed and irritated that he coldly.*) What advice would you give Janie so how she should treat Mrs. Turner the next time she comes to visit? Have you ever been in a situation like Janie’s?
3. Why doesn’t Mrs. Turner like Booker T. Washington? (*She feels he was “uh white folks’ nigger”—that he betrayed his people by encouraging them to work harder and by aligning himself with whites.*) Why does she blame black people for the race problem? (*She says that dark-skinned people hold others back from being accepted by whites.*)
4. Why does Tea Cake whip Janie? (*He wants to show Mrs. Turner and her brother that Janie is his, off-limits.*) Does this ever mean anything? What do you think a husband should do if he is jealous—when he doesn’t like one of his wife’s friends?



5. How does the disturbance at Mrs. Turner's place start and why does Tea Cake join in? (*Some of her drunken customers start brawling and Tea Cake chases them out, telling them that they should respect Mrs. Turner.*) Are you surprised to hear him threaten to take out anyone who doesn't show Mrs. Turner respect—when we know he can't stand her? (*He is being sarcastic, and realizes he is making the brawl worse by defending her—just what he wants.*)
6. What are some of the signs that a big storm is coming? (*Some Seminole Indians pass by and tell Janie that they are going to high ground because the sawgrass is blooming and a hurricane is coming.*) Why doesn't Tea Cake follow the Indians' example and leave? Is he prejudiced? (*He says if the Indians were smart, they would have won this country.*)
7. How do Tea Cake and the others spend their time as they wait for the storm? (*They collect at Tea Cake's place, eating beans and biscuits, telling stories, listening to Tea Cake's guitar playing, playing coon-can, and dice.*)
8. How does Janie get out of the rushing water? (*She grabs the tail of a cow in the water.*) What else could she have tried? Does she owe her life to Tea Cake? (*Yes; if he hadn't killed the snarling dog on the cow's back, she would have let go and been swept away.*)
9. Why does Tea Cake kill the dog? (*The dog is getting ready to attack Janie, so Tea Cake kills him with his knife.*) What is so frightening about the dog? (*He is large, and growling like a lion, probably because of his own terror.*)
10. What do you think about the way the title phrase is used in this section? (*It is used on page 57 to describe the fearful people, watching the storm as the storm rages outside.*) What emotions are captured by that phrase? (*The phrase suggests terror, helplessness, a silent appeal for mercy.*)
11. Would you have reacted differently than Janie did in any part of this section?
12. **Prediction:** What will happen to Tea Cake and Janie now? What new problems will they face?

## Supplementary Activities

### Literary Analysis: Conflict

Explain that **conflict**, or struggle, drives the plot. There are several types of conflict: *person against person, person against nature, person against society, and inner conflict*. Have students identify at least three types of conflict that surround Mrs. Turner. (There is conflict between her and Tea Cake; she is a member of a social subclass, oppressed by whites but not liking darker-skinned blacks; she undergoes inner conflict—her ambivalence about her racial identity.)

### Research

- Learn more about Booker T. Washington—and why some African Americans such as Mrs. Turner did not accept him.

- Find out more about flip and coon-can and the other games Tea Cake and his friends played while waiting out the storm.

### Writing Ideas

1. Write a character sketch of Mrs. Turner. Begin by describing in detail her particular characteristics. Illustrate your description by referring to what she says and does. As part of your sketch, write an episode that shows her after she has been driven out of town. Your sketch should reveal a lot about the type of person she is.
2. Describe the thoughts going on in Tea Cake's mind from the time he woke up and saw Janie in the water to the moment when he killed the dog.
3. The narrator compares Mrs. Turner's attitude toward poor African Americans to the pecking order in a chicken yard (page 138). Describe a time you observed or read about an example of "insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can't" (page 138). What is the narrator saying when she refers to love as the most "divine emotion" (page 137) and to cruelty as characterizing all gods who receive homage?

### Chapter 19, pages 170-180

White men forced Tea Cake to join others in burying the bodies left behind after the storm. He and Janie decided to run away, back to the muck, where at least the white people know them. One day Tea Cake grew ill and Janie went for the doctor, who told her privately that the dog that bit Tea Cake must have had rabies; his brain was dying. Half out of his mind in the final stages of the illness, Tea Cake raised a gun at Janie, who shot him dead in self-defense. A jury acquitted Janie, although Tea Cake's friends blamed her for a while. A grief-stricken Janie held a big funeral, attending it in her overalls because she was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief."

### Vocabulary

dishevelment (162)	defensively (162)	insolidated (164)	serum (167)
loping (174)	paltry (174)	delirium (174)	swiftly (174)
relic (177)	barf (177)	wanton (179)	

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do the white men call Tea Cake "Jim"? (*Jim Crow* was a disparaging term for an African American.) How do you imagine their tone? (*They sound threatening, sarcastic.*) What would happen if Tea Cake refused to help bury the bodies? (*These men have guns. Tea Cake knows they would shoot him.*)