



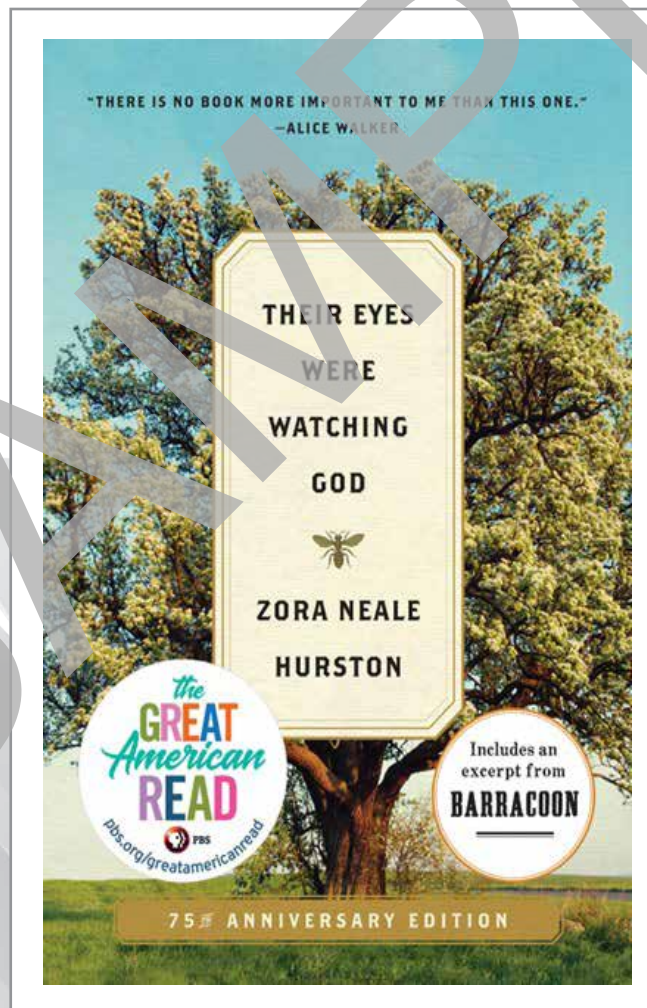
## TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Their Eyes Were Watching God

Zora Neale Hurston



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**



# Their Eyes Were Watching God

Zora Neale Hurston

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Plot Summary

One of the first novels to depict a strong African American heroine, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become a classic of black literature. It tells the story of Janie Crawford's journey to self-discovery as she suffers through two unhappy marriages, then marries an exuberant young man who loves her completely. First, light-skinned, long-haired Janie obeys the wishes of the grandmother who has raised her, and marries an older man who expects her to be a workhorse. Then she leaves him for a man who becomes the mayor of an all-black town and expects her to spend her life serving in his shadow. When she meets fun-loving Tea Cake, Janie finally learns what it is to be loved for who she is—and experiences real self-expression.

## About the Author

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1903 in Eatonville, Florida—the first incorporated all-black town in the United States. The daughter of a preacher/carpenter and a seamstress, she dropped out of school at 13 to take care of her cousins. When she was 16, she joined a traveling theater group and earned her way working as a maid. Her white employer sent her to high school in Baltimore and she later attended Howard University in Washington, DC. She then went on to earn her B.A. at Barnard College, followed by graduate work at Columbia—where she studied under the famous anthropologist, Franz Boas. She went back to her home town to do anthropological study, collecting black folklore there and in Honduras, Jamaica, Haiti, and Bermuda. Her career also included work as a drama instructor, a Paramount Studios staff writer, freelance writer, librarian, and teacher.

Her work influenced such writers as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara—but her finest work—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)—was out of print until the late 1970s, and her writing was neglected by critics and readers for many years. This neglect may be explained in part by the fact that she rejected the idea—embraced by many of the leaders of the Black Arts movement—that African Americans were from a deprived culture, their behaviors and attitudes mainly reactions to oppression. While Richard Wright condemned *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for being “counter-revolutionary,” Hurston herself wrote in 1928, “I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (*Dust Tracks on a Road*—autobiography—Lippincott, 1942).

Hurston died in 1960, and was buried in an unmarked grave. It wasn't until 1975—when Alice Walker published an article in *Ms.* magazine about her search for the grave—that interest in the once-famous writer was rekindled, and her most successful novel was “rediscovered.”



5. After students have read the novel, have them pick the ten words they believe are important to know in order to understand the book—and explain why.
6. Have students—especially those for whom English is a second language—do “synonymic webbing” of words with multiple meanings. For example: for “**spell**”—p. 77—“Jody might get over his mad spell any time...”:

<b>spell</b> <i>various meanings:</i>	<b>*fit</b>	<b>magic words</b>	<b>give the letters</b>	<b>take the place of</b>
<i>synonyms:</i>	bout turn	charm incantation	name write	relieve take over

\*meaning as used in the novel

Help students write several sentences containing “spell”—with its various meanings.

## Vocabulary • Discussion Questions

## Writing Ideas • Activities

### Chapters 1-3, pages 1-24

Janie’s neighbors are buzzing about her return after an absence of a year and a half. A proud woman of forty-something, Janie ignores their gossip, but when her friend Pheoby brings over some food, Janie offers to tell her story. Janie was raised by her grandmother, a former slave who ran away from the plantation with her fair-skinned newborn infant (fathered by the plantation owner’s son) to avoid a whipping. She moved to West Florida to raise her daughter, who was raped by the school teacher at 17. As a result of that encounter, the daughter had a baby. The daughter began drinking and finally disappeared, leaving Nanny to raise the little girl. When Janie was a teenager, Nanny arranged for her to marry Logan Killicks, an older man with some property. Janie reluctantly agreed to marry Logan, but try as she might, she could not learn to love this humorless man with his paunch and his dirty feet. She felt it was the final straw when he informed her he was buying an extra mule and that he expected her to drive a plow.



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## Vocabulary

resignation (1)	judgment (1)	brutes (1)	relish (2)
pugnacious (2)	pelting (4)	consolation (7)	barren (10)
virginity (10)	caressed (10)	consciousness (10)	alto (10)
inaudible (10)	sanctum (10)	calyxes (10)	revelation (11)
languid (11)	confirmation (11)	elude (11)	pollinated (11)
persistent (11)	lacerating (11)	reproof (12)	dissolution (12)
diffused (12)	affirmation (12)	desecrating (13)	desisted (14)
expound (15)	overseer (17)	cosmic (20)	conjectures (20)
mien (23)	gulf (23)		

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is everyone so curious about Janie? *(She has been away for a year and a half.)* How is the men's reaction to Janie's return different from the women's? *(The men admire her body; the women notice her muddy old clothes, make snide comments.)* Why do you suppose that is?
2. What are your impressions of Janie? *(She seems tired after her long walk, happy to see her friend, self-possessed.)* How does she take all the gossip? *(She doesn't care much what the others say.)* What does she mean when she says, "They don't know if life is a mess of corn-meal dumplings, and if love is a bed-quilt!"? *(She is scornful of the others, who talk a lot, especially about other people, but don't know much about life.)*
3. What does Pheoby bring Janie—and why? *(Pheoby brings food because she knows her friend will be hungry after her trip—and as a reason to go over and talk.)* What can you tell about the relationship between Janie and Pheoby? *(They seem close and affectionate, able to joke with each other.)* Why do you think Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell the others what she says to Pheoby? What does she mean by "Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (p. 6)? *(Her friend will do an accurate job of repeating Janie's story to the others.)*
4. Why did Janie's grandmother raise her? *(Janie's mother was raped, had Janie, became a drinker, and disappeared.)* Do you think Janie's grandmother was a good "parent"? Why or why not?
5. Where does Janie do a lot of her daydreaming? *(She sits under the pear tree.)* Why do you think the author includes the pear tree? Why does it stir Janie so tremendously? *(It seems to represent the mysteries of the romantic life she hopes to lead one day.)* Have you ever felt that way?



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6. Why do you think the author uses the word “lacerating” to describe Johnny Taylor’s kiss (p. 11)? How does Janie’s grandmother feel about what she sees? Why? (*“Lacerating” means “wounding” and conveys the grandmother’s view of the kiss; the grandmother assumes that Taylor has nothing to offer Janie, might ruin her.*)
  7. Why doesn’t Janie share her grandmother’s enthusiasm for Logan Killicks? (*Janie isn’t in love with this older, unappealing man; the grandmother likes him because he owns property.*) Choose the passage that you feel best conveys how Janie feels about him. Why does she marry him if she feels that way? (*She wants to please her grandmother, hopes that she will grow to love Killicks when he is her husband.*) What advice would you have given Janie about Logan Killicks?
  8. Shortly after she is married, Janie goes to her grandmother and tells her she doesn’t love Killicks. How does Nanny react? (*She has no sympathy, tells Janie she will change her mind.*) What do you think of the grandmother’s response? What do you suppose Janie wanted to hear? Do you think there is ever reason to stay in a loveless marriage?
  9. How do you interpret the last line on page 24? (*Her first great disappointment in love matures her.*) Why is Janie a woman now? Can you become an adult without losing some of your dreams?
  10. **Prediction:** At the beginning of the novel, readers are told that Janie has just come back from burying the dead. Who do you suppose these “sudden dead” (page 1) might be?

## Supplementary Activities

### Literary Analysis: Framework Story

A **framework story** is a story within a story—a convention used in such classical writing as *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The framework may or may not have a plot itself, and the story may or may not return to the frame situation at the end.

**Ask:** Who is telling the “story within a story” in this novel? (*Janie*) To whom is she speaking? (*to her friend, Pheoby*) What do you know about the content of her story? (*She will tell about what happened while she was off with Tea Cake—and will relate events from her past leading up to that time.*) What is the frame situation? (*Janie has just come home after an absence of a year and a half. Everyone is curious about where she has been and what she has been doing. When her friend comes over with some food, Janie offers to tell her.*)

Ask students to predict whether the story will return to the frame situation at the end—and if so, how.

### Research

See if you can find a recipe for “mulatto rice”—what Pheoby made for Janie. Find out how it got its name.



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## Writing Ideas

1. You are Janie, sitting under the pear tree. What do you see? smell? hear? feel? think about? Write a poem or diary entry that captures the moment for you.
2. Janie's grandmother asks Janie for sympathy by saying, "Put me down easy...Ah'm a cracked plate" (page 19). Make a list of other expressions that mean something similar. Make up a few of your own.

## Chapters 4-5, pages 25-47

Rakish Joe Starks came by while Logan was away shopping for the mule and asked for a drink. Starks told Janie he had come from Georgia with his life savings to take part in a plan he heard about to build a town in Florida entirely run by black people. A week or so later Janie left Logan and went off with Joe. They took a train to Maitland and a buggy to the "colored town." Soon thereafter, Jody became mayor and prospered as the owner of the town's general store. Vaguely dissatisfied by her role as Jody's showpiece, Janie nevertheless remained by his side.

## Vocabulary

portly (32)	incredulous (35)	surly (35)	boisterously (36)
presiding (38)	percale (39)	calico (39)	invested (41)
hospitality (42)	saw-horses (42)	brazen (43)	innovations (43)
cowed (44)	literate (44)	tangible (44)	bannisters (44)
promenading (44)	spittoon (44)	temerity (47)	

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Jody? (*self-important, domineering*) Why do people put up with his bossiness? Have you known people like him?
2. How do you imagine the town in your mind's eye when Jody and Janie first appear? (*a few run-down houses in the sand*) How does it change under Jody's leadership? (*The town expands, attracts more residents, gets a general store and post office.*) Do you think Jody is a good mayor?
3. Why is Hicks irritated by Jody's idea of the town's getting a post office? (*Hicks can't imagine black people in post offices.*) What does Coker mean when he says that they don't have to talk about the white man keeping them down—that they keep themselves down? (p. 37) (*Coker thinks his people could do more for themselves if they stopped making excuses.*) How do you imagine Coker's tone of voice?
4. Why does Jody hurry to have a store built? (*He says the town needs a center—especially a place for landbuyers to congregate.*) How do you imagine it? Do you think he is motivated more by pride in his town—or by greed?