

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**

by Zora Neale Hurston

written by Rebecca Challman



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 301626

# Their Eyes Were Watching God

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. investigate the apparent use of myth and folklore in the novel.
2. reveal and understand recurring symbols and motifs in the novel.
3. explain the narrative technique of frame narration.
4. identify and expound upon the literary elements that define Hurston's style.
5. analyze the central and related conflicts in the novel.
6. compare and contrast the formal voice of the narrator with the informal voices of the characters.
7. identify and discuss the main idea and the underlying ideas of the novel.
8. Explain how Hurston's use of idiomatic discourse lends meaning to the text.
9. reveal and discuss parallels between Hurston's life and that of her protagonist, Janie Crawford.
10. analyze the tone of individual passages of the text.
11. write about the author's use of language as it relates to theme, characterization, and story development.
12. discuss Hurston's use of irony as it relates to individual characters and as it relates to Janie's quest for happiness and self-fulfillment.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
14. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
15. offer a close reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or authoritative criticism of the novel.

## Lecture Notes

### ZORA NEALE HURSTON: FROM DISAPPEARING DUST TRACKS TO A LITERARY LEGACY

#### DAUGHTER OF EATONVILLE

Although Zora Neale Hurston claimed to have been born in 1901 in Eatonville, Florida, records reveal she was born on January 7, 1891, in her parents' hometown of Notasulga, Alabama. She was the fifth of eight children born to John Hurston, a mulatto sharecropper and carpenter, and Lucy Ann Potts, a schoolteacher and daughter of a well-to-do landowner. Lucy's parents did not approve of John Hurston, and John had no more job prospects in Notasulga, so he soon moved the family to Eatonville, the first and only incorporated all-black town in America. Here he served as both Baptist minister and mayor, and his family thrived. The historic town of Eatonville serves as the setting for Hurston's most celebrated work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

By her own account in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston enjoyed a happy, healthy childhood in this unique southern community where whites did not interfere. She did not worry about racial prejudice and persecution, but rather spent her days eating fresh food from her family's garden and neighboring farms, reading books, and playing with her siblings and children from the community. She tried to linger in Joe Clarke's general store listening and learning from the colorful local characters. In fact, Clarke (renamed Stark) and his store became the cornerstone of her community in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Though her father seemed disappointed in his second daughter's willfulness, her mother favored Zora and called her "Mama's child." Her mother provided the children with structure, discipline, and inspiration. She told them to jump at the sun; even if they would never reach it, they would at least get their feet off the ground. Her mother worried because Zora's feet were always wandering in search of the horizon, but she remained within the safe confines of Eatonville. Zora also searched for the horizon in books. She read the Bible, her mother's medical book, and any other books she could find. In 1901, young Zora so impressed two white visitors with her ability to read aloud that they gave her books of fairy tales, Greek and Roman myths, Norse legends, and works by Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Hurston's mother died in 1904 when Zora was thirteen years old. Her funeral would be the last time all the Hurston children would gather. Within the year, her father remarried and dispersed Hurston and her siblings to schools and the homes of relatives. Zora joined her sister Sarah at Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville until her father stopped paying the bill. Administrators put fourteen-year-old Zora to work in exchange for finishing out the year. At year's end, her father sent a letter telling school administrators that they could adopt his daughter. Instead, they paid her train fare home. Back home, Zora could not bear to see her twenty-year-old stepmother sleeping on her mother's featherbed. She wrested it from her and left. For the next five years, Hurston moved from place to place trying to support herself. When she was twenty, her father invited her back home. Her stay there ended a month later when her anger toward her stepmother erupted in physical violence. In 1911, Zora wandered away from Eatonville. She spent five years just trying to survive.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What effect does Hurston's third-person omniscient narrator have on the novel as a whole?
2. Contrast the predominantly formal, or high, diction of the narrator with the informal, or low, diction of the characters.
3. Describe Janie's relationship with each of her three husbands as it relates to her quest for her truest self.
4. Support or refute the statement that none of the characters in the novel mean to hurt Janie.
5. Examine and discuss the multifaceted relationship between language and power in the novel.
6. How does the specific setting of Eatonville contribute to the development of the novel's plot?
7. What literary elements define Hurston's style?
8. Define and characterize the genre of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
9. What is the significance of the title of the novel?
10. How does Hurston's use of irony lend meaning to the narrative?
11. Give examples of symbolism that inform the central theme of the novel.
12. In what ways does the narrator appear sympathetic toward the people and events in the novel?
13. Interpret the following statement using incidents from the story: "Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves."
14. Identify and describe the major conflicts in the novel. How is each resolved?

# Their Eyes Were Watching God

## Chapter 1

1. Why does Hurston open the novel with an analogy? What authorial purpose does it serve?

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2. What conclusions can you draw about Janie Starks, her character, and the events in her life based on the dialogue of her neighbors?

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3. How does Hurston’s narrative voice differ from the dialogue of her characters?

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4. In what sense does the novel begin at the end of Janie’s story? What is the literary term for this type of structure?

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5. Hurston locates her protagonist in Eatonville, Florida, her own hometown. How does this fulfill one of the major purposes of setting?

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**Chapter 7**

1. In what way does Janie reassert herself in this chapter? How does Jodie react to it?

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2. What potential foreshadowing regarding Jody can be found in this chapter?

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3. What is the significance of the allusion: “The thing that Saul’s daughter had done to David”?

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**Chapter 8**

1. What do the following metaphors that begin Chapter 8 suggest? “He had crawled off to lick his wounds.” “But the stillness was the sleep of swords.” “Well, if she must eat out of a long-handled spoon, she must.”

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2. What does the narrator reveal about Jody that Janie does not know?

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3. How is the couple’s situation ironic? What type of irony is it?

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5. What symbolic significance do the Everglades take on?

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6. What might Tea Cake's teaching Janie to shoot symbolize? How is the fact that Janie becomes a better shot than Tea Cake significant?

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7. What might Janie's learning to shoot even better than Tea Cake foreshadow?

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8. What is Hurston establishing by having Janie go out to work with Tea Cake?

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