

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Their Eyes Were Watching God

by Zora Neale Hurston

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Notes

This story written in 1937, of a black woman's search for love, her own happiness, and her identity, takes place in the town of Eatonville in the Florida Everglades, a black community. The author, Zora Neale Hurston, relates the story in the dialect of the times, rich with local color and colloquialisms, including examples of the black oral tradition.

While the text contains what would be considered, by today's standards, racial slurs, they are spoken, for the most part, by the black characters themselves and represent normal speech patterns, jargon, and slang of the time.

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Objectives

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

1. discuss the extent to which the author exaggerates the actions and attitudes of her characters.
2. comment on the significance of the title, particularly as it relates to the protagonist's fate.
3. identify the author's use of personification in the novel, particularly in her descriptions of death.
4. point out why this novel is an example of frame narration.
5. discuss the following symbols:
 - the horizon
 - the pear tree
 - the removal of the head rags worn by Janie.
6. cite incidents from the novel to support or refute that the following statement reflects a major theme: it is important for people to find their own paths to God and to seek out their own love and happiness in life.
7. support or refute these two additional themes:
 - people in power are often hated
 - men do not understand women's feelings
8. point out how mules are used as a metaphor for the black women's place in their community and black people's place in the white world.
9. write a character sketch of Joe Starks that supports or refutes the idea that Joe Starks is a static, or flat, character.
10. define folklore and discuss how the porch talk is an example of black folklore.
11. support or refute the idea that in the author's view God does not approve of the following:
 - black men's treatment of and attitudes toward black women
 - white people's view of black men and women
12. discuss the author's view of fate as a driving force in Janie's life.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why does Janie agree to marry Logan? Do you think he truly loves her?
2. How does Nanny's past influence her dreams for Janie's future?
3. Discuss what a frame narrative is. Why do you think the author writes this novel in this form?
4. Discuss the pear tree as a symbol for Janie's dreams about her future. Where else in the story is the pear tree mentioned?
5. Compare Tea Cake and Joe. What does Tea Cake have to offer Janie that Joe cannot supply?
6. Why does Tea Cake dislike Mrs. Turner?
7. Trace the life of the old yellow mule in the story. How is it similar to Janie's life with Joe?
8. Why does Janie leave her first husband for Joe? What does she want from Joe that he is unable to give her?
9. Do you think the incident with the cow is believable? Why do you think the author decides to end Tea Cake's life in this way?
10. What does Pheoby learn from Janie's life story? How does Pheoby try to change her own life after listening to Janie?
11. Why does Joe make Janie wear the head rags?
12. Why does Janie accept Tea Cake's gambling and his reasons for staying out all night?
13. What is the purpose of the porch sitters in the novel? How do they contribute to the action?
14. Compare the natural surroundings at Eatonville with the Everglades. Which environment do you think Janie finds more attractive?
15. Why does Tea Cake not trust the white men that stay in town after the hurricane?
16. Compare the way Logan tries to get Janie to work in the field with the way Tea Cake tries to get her to work in the fields. Why is one more successful than the other?
17. What is ironic about Tea Cake's death?

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Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

bander log – group of people with no leader or law
dilated – widened; expanded
pugnacious – aggressive
resignation – an act of surrender
sodden – dull or expressionless
treacherous – not trustworthy; deceptive

1. Who are the sitters referred to in the following quotation? Why does the author compare them to mules?

“These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins.”

2. Find an example of personification in this chapter.

3. Why does Pheoby go to talk to Janie?

Chapter 5

VOCABULARY

boisterously – in a loud and noisy manner
calico – a coarse, brightly printed cloth
capers – playful pranks
gloaty – displaying great pleasure or self-satisfaction
incredulous – expressive of disbelief
innovations – things newly introduced
jurisdiction – the extent of authority
peeved – annoyed, irritated
percale – a cotton fabric
portly – majestic, stately
promenading – displaying with pride
sauntered – walked at a leisurely pace
temerity – foolhardy disregard of danger
tittered – laughed nervously

1. What does Joe Starks do that surprises the townspeople? How do the men react to Janie?

2. Why does Janie go home after the town meeting “feeling cold”?

Chapter 11

VOCABULARY

abyss – an immeasurable depth
excruciating – intensely painful
temporized – evaded immediate decision so as to gain time

1. Why is Janie afraid to ask Hezekiah about Tea Cake?

2. What new experience does Tea Cake give to Janie in this chapter?

3. Why does Janie take a “good look at her mouth, eyes, and hair” before going to bed?

4. What do you think Tea Cake means when he says “Ah ruther be shot wid tacks than fuh you tuh act wid me lak you is right now. You got me in de go-long”?

5. Why do you think Janie compares Tea Cake to the pear tree in the following quotation?

“He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring.”

6. What two new experiences does Tea Cake provide for Janie in this chapter?
