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Zora Neale Hurston’s book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one that tells about love, gender roles and racial discrimination. The book follows Janie through her love life, but also, deals with deeper issues rooted within society that affect Janie in her relationships. This paper will put this book into conversation of modern issues of that black women face within society.

Janie, the main character, is the product of rape. Her mother and grandmother were both raped by white men. Because of this, Janie’s grandmother, who raises her after her mother runs away, wants to marry Janie off at a young age in order to protect her from falling into the same fate. Contrary to that, Janie desires to find true love. She lays under a pear tree envisioning what true love would feel like. She sees the blossoms meeting with the bees to create an orgasmic-like experience for the tree. This is what she envisions intimacy with a lover to be. She bases her search for love off of this experience.

The first husband that Nanny arranges for her is to Logan Killicks after Nanny sees Janie kissing a young man over the fence. Logan is an older man that shows little affection. He rarely washes his feet, for which Janie criticizes him, and he is ugly and old compared to her youthful beauty. She does not feel the pear tree love that she desired to feel in a marriage; for this, she leaves him after Joe Starks comes riding through the neighborhood and sweeps her off of her feet. Joe (Jody) Starks is a black entrepreneur, which is rare. His ambition and charm woos Janie causing her to leave Logan. Janie soon finds out that Joe is a man who lets power get to his head and is sexist. He buys a town and becomes the mayor. He controls her by telling her everything to do with her appearance and the “right” way to conduct herself. Eventually, the stress of his power takes a toll on his body and it begins to shut down. It is at this time that Janie finally gains that courage to tell Jody how she truly feels towards him. He dies and she has lavished funeral for him. Janie meets her third husband after he comes into the store that her previous husband owned. Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods shows his charm by telling her that she is able to do everything that Jody forbade. Tea Cake wanted Janie to work alongside her. He respected her and allowed her to be his equal. Aside from him beating her once, he showed her the “pear tree love” for which she yearned. During the hurricane, he was bit by a rabid dog, which caused him to get really sick. Janie had to shoot him to save herself. Janie gave him a beautiful funeral, but mourned his death differently than she mourned the death of Joe Starks. She then returns to Eatonville where the book starts as she is telling her best friend Phoebe her story.

Janie goes through an additional awakening while married to Logan Killicks. In the book it says, “She knew God tore down the old world 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. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman,” (Hurston 25).

The excerpt relates to Sharpe’s *In the Wake* in her many definitions of black women in the wake, or through the struggles, of life. Her definition of the wake: “the state of wakefulness; consciousness” relates to Janie’s awakening that she first had under the pear tree (Sharpe 4). The culmination of the pear tree experience and the lack of love received from Logan Killicks, Janie realized that this marriage was not what she deserved. In this excerpt, she is looking towards the horizon where she believes love lies. Her first marriage failed her, so she believed that she had to find better. This made her a woman. She was still a teenager; however, the realization that she made caused her to become mature in concepts concerning life and love.

Janie also experiences deaths of two husbands, both of which she mourns in a different way. Because Tea Cake was the love of her life, she took his death the most serious. Another definition from Sharpe’s *In the Wake* connects the way in which she laid Jody and Tea Cake to rest. The definition is as follows: “Grief, celebration, memory and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking feasting and other observances incidental to this,” (Sharpe 11). Both funerals were a celebration; however, the funeral of Jody was lavished and she put on a façade to seem that she was mourning his death; however, she finally felt a sense of freedom. Jody had degraded her and put her on display to claim her as property. He, like society today, used Janie’s beauty as a black woman with white features as a trophy to show off to other black men that they could not have her.

The funeral of Tea Cake was, also, elegant; however, Janie did not need to put on a façade of grief because it was what she was feeling in that moment. The love that Tea Cake gave her was shown through the celebration of his life. Janie had on overalls because she had put everything into reciprocating what Tea Cake had given to her. The wake that Janie was experiencing at this time was the grief of losing a loved one.

Additionally, Sharpe touches on the inability for blacks, especially women, to be completely human. After returning to Eatonville from burying Tea Cake, Janie, as a widow, is not even able to grieve as a human being. She is supposed to fit the picture that society had formed of her instead. Her own fellow black women sit and judge her.

"What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on? – Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in? – Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? – What dat ole forty year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal? – Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? – Thought she was going to marry? – Where he left *her*? – What he done wid all her money? – Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs – Why she don’t stay in her class? – " (Hurston 2).

Janie is able to thrive through the wake because she finally found someone who fulfilled her “pear tree love” dream. She does not mind the gossip that occurs about her and the way that she was forced to return to her home town. She is content. This parallels the way in which society forces certain images on black women, but these women are forced to develop the strength and resilience to say that they do not have to conform to the expectations of society.

The excerpt from the book also connects to Lorde’s *Age, Race, Class and Sex*. In the piece, it says, “Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all,” (Lorde 2). This connects the way in which Janie was able to move through social classes through her marriages. Janie began at the home of a white middle-class family, married to Logan who was a part of the middle class, then, married Jody, who was a part of the upper class, and finally, married Tea Cake, who was a part of the lower class with virtually no money. She is criticized by women for having that ability. However, those gossiping women do not realize that she brought her own morality through those changes. Regardless of the class that she was in for that time period, she brought along roots and knew her own personal value regardless of the way her husbands treated her. Society teaches that those in lower classes, are low in value; however, Lorde opposes that saying that those of various classes bring different perspectives. The barriers that are created by society are meaningless, but still continue to play a part in the way we treat each other.

Throughout the book, those of the lower class are depicted as being more moral as opposed to those of higher classes. The relationship between Jody Starks and Janie is a clear depiction of this. Jody wants a submissive wife who he can control. Jody shows virtually no respect to Janie as his wife. Janie tries to do what she can in order to please. This shows how he is disrespectful to the woman who would change for him. His morals contrast those of Janie. However, this may prove to be true for the novel; however, in society, those of lower classes and those of higher classes may have the same moral standing. This agree with Lorde’s proposition that the barriers between classes are insignificant.

Additional to Janie’s struggle through class, she struggles with her place as a woman in society and her marriages. Gender equality is something that Janie demands within her relationships. Janie wanted to work, but it was in the way that her husbands made her work that she resented them. With Logan, he treated her like property. He wanted her to work because he was just property. Jody treated her with control. He wanted her to work in the sotre in the front because she was his trophy wife. With Tea Cake, it was different. He allowed her to work with him in the fields. Janie liked the choice that he gave her without demand. He treated her as his equal. These men, Jody and Logan, took advantage of her womanhood and her race. Logan made her work hard because that’s the life he envisioned for his black wife. Jody wanted her to be submissive because that’s the life he pictured for his black wife. A white woman would not be able to be treated with such disrespect; however, because Janie is black, it is socially acceptable for her husbands to condescend her. This issue remains prevalent in society. The level of disrespect that black women tolerate by our own black men is horrible.

During the hurricane, Janie and Tea Cake stay in the Everglade because they do not believe in the severity that the natives predicted. They both survive; however, Tea Cake is bit by a rabid dog. This causes him to become delusion and threaten the safety of Janie. Janie’s only option left is to shoot the love of her life. This hurts her deeply. She is arrested and tried in the court because they put the law over her own safety.

Melissa Harris Perry’s *Sister Citizen* explicitly compares the hurricane of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and that of New Orleans, Louisiana. She points out many similarities between the two hurricanes. In the book, Janie’s suffering is put on a platform for others to see. Her suffering is tried in court when she is arrested for shooting Tea Cake. Both the blacks and whites gather in the courtroom awaiting her fate. She is unable to grieve in peace because the system has realized the necessity in which she was forced to kill her husband. Similarly, the suffering of black women who survived Hurricane Katrina was put in media as a way to gain support. Pictures were taken of these women in their weakest point physically for the gain of the governmental system. This showed the exploitation of the suffering at the expense of those in higher places. The desperate and immediate needs of these women were being ignored, which was similar to the way in which people of the town ignored Janie’s immediate need to grieve.

Even though Hurston’s novel was written in 1937, it still posed parallels to a hurricane in the twenty-first century. This shows the plight of black women has not changed much since the writing of this novel. This returns to the discussion of black women’s inability to be fully human. These black women are being treated as tokens of display for a way that would not benefit them personally. At the same time, these women are being treated as refugees in their own home. The media depicted them as women who cannot find a place to reside after the disaster while the government has places for these women, but refuse to give them adequate assistance. This parallels in the way the women gossip about Janie after she returns instead of asking Janie how she is and if they can be of assistance in any way. The suffering of black women is looked at like such a regular situation that society does not realize that it has the ability to change their situations.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* addresses issues that remain relevant and prevalent to black women. Even though this book is eighty years old, the plight for the equality of black women remains, which is why courses centered around black women need to exist. If there was no need for them, there would be equality. Until then, these courses remain a necessity.