THE FUNCTION OF FOLKLORE IN
ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

A Thesis

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by

Carol Anne Noel, B.S.

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Master's Examination Committee:

Patrick B. Mullen
William M. Shipley

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of English
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INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston ranks along with Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison as one of the most innovative and talented black novelists of the Twentieth Century. But unlike Wright and Ellison who have so often shared in the literary lime-light, Hurston, as a black, a woman, and a strong-willed individual, has until recently seldom received the deserved recognition and respect for her myriad abilities as folklorist-anthropologist, and especially as a novelist and artist.

In fact, as a black woman writer during the 1930's and 1940's, Hurston was more often attacked than praised for her work. Because she refused to openly address the "race issue," the major substance of the writing of other blacks at that time, she was accused by critics and fellow black writers of trying to oversimplify Negro life and of trying to paint a "too rosy" picture of black life in the South. One such criticism of her folklore collection Mules and Men accused that there was an "absence of social consciousness in Hurston's storytellers . . . [a] lack of bitterness [which] creates a false image of romantic pastoralism for the black South."1
This same type of criticism was extended to Hurston's 1937 and perhaps her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the critics still being offended "by her lack of bitterness."\(^2\) Her fellow black writers reviewed the novel harshly. In *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Robert Hemenway quotes Richard Wright as complaining ", . . . bitterly about the minstrel image that he claimed she was perpetuating."\(^3\) Wright claimed that "Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears."\(^4\)

Wright and other critics either failed to see or to acknowledge what Hurston sought to show: that there is another authentic side to black existence, apart from the race problem and class struggle and violence, a point acknowledged in the more recent appreciation of Hurston by Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington, Robert Hemenway, and other artists and critics. In his book, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, James Young says the following in defense of Hurston:

Like Hughes at his best, Zora Neale Hurston wrote about Negro folk life because of its own intrinsic value and interest. Radical critics like Richard Wright criticized her harshly for not demonstrating a political and social consciousness in her novels. For them her novels were insignificant. Indeed, she was perhaps less concerned than any other black writer during the period with the conventional problems of the Negro.
Casting aside the problems of race relations, her novels are set entirely within the black community. And despite Wright's scorn, she did discover much of significance. 5

The much of significance that Hurston discovers and preserves in her fiction is the undiminished and unashamed lives of her people--their history and traditions, their shared communal values, their laughter, their beauty.

Hemenway says of Hurston, that "She felt that black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression."6 In her fiction, Hurston sought to capture this "esthetic system" through her celebration of black life and culture in the South and through her portraiture in much of her fiction of the Eatonville community in which she grew up and upon which she draws as the "source of her art."7

Alice Walker refers to Hurston as a "woman before her time," who has only recently (after her death) begun to receive the recognition that she deserves as an artist.8 Much of this recognition has been directed at Hurston's 1937 novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, considered by most to be her best work, and her masterpiece in which her ability as folklorist--to capture "life" in the black community of Eatonville--and her ability as novelist--to present the lives of these characters and the life, quest
and liberation of one black female heroine—come together. In *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing* . . . *And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, Walker offers this brief, but precise statement of how Hurston as novelist and as folklorist work together in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, especially in the presentation of theme and plot. Walker states that "The novelist, the folklorist . . . combine to present the indelible story of one woman, Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods, seeking freedom to be herself—heroic, beautiful, full of feeling and needful of love in the prime of life."³

Much of the recognition and criticism directed toward the novel has taken the feminist approach,⁴ understandably since the liberation of the black female is the major theme and since the central figure of the novel has become a heroine of black literature. Other critics choosing to study the novel have focused on the personality of the artist, considering Hurston a "revolutionary artist," since the book does not conform to what was considered the accepted issue of the time for black writers—the race issue.⁵ Some studies have examined the novel from a purely folkloric standpoint, identifying occurrences of folklore in the novel, and interpreting that folklore only in light of the culture in which it occurs and of which it is a part.

This study will also examine the workings of folklore, but that folklore will be examined in light of the literary
environment in which it occurs. The focus is in essence "... Hurston's capacity for appropriating folklore to the purpose of fiction ..."\(^{12}\) in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Mary Helen Washington describes Hurston's interpretative powers as such: "... Hurston triumphed in the art of taking the imagery, imagination, and experience of black folk and making literature ..."\(^{13}\)

One can take Washington's statement even a step further to say that "the imagery, imagination, and experience of black folk" is literature, and that what Hurston triumphed in was the ability to present that oral culture in written form. In essence, she makes a novel from folk literature. Thus Hurston's expression and interpretation of her folk, their ways, their language in the novel will provide the backbone of this paper.

This study will examine the functional role of folklore in the novel as it is used by Hurston to advance plot and theme, and as it is used to reveal the values, behaviors and aesthetic experience that inform the black culture of which it is a part. The relationship between literature and culture and the role that both play in the development of character personality provide the major impetus for this critical study of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Chapter one of the thesis will examine character type. In her book *Black Portraiture in American Fiction*,
Catherine Starke examines three categories of characters occurring in literature: "stock characters, archetypes, and individuals."\textsuperscript{14} As needed, these terms will be defined in this chapter as Starke defines them; and these character types, as they relate to the uses of folklore, will provide the basis of study and analogy to Hurston's characters in \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}.

Since self-actualization and "becoming," especially that of the main character, provide the major theme of Hurston's novel, Starke develops another principle that is appropriate to character development in the work: Starke states and develops "three interrelated elements useful in examining fictional characterizations: identity, responsibility, relatedness."\textsuperscript{15} Again, these terms will be defined and examined relative to Hurston's characters and her theme. (The sense of relatedness and oneness will also be explored as it relates to life within the black community of Eatonville.)

Chapter two will be a study of language and narrative as they occur in cultural and performance context. This chapter will be an examination of Hurston's celebration of black culture in the novel through the doings and sayings of her characters. It will explore the language and dialect of Hurston's characters and how she draws from "... the verbal ingenuity of [her] folk" with such verbal arts as the "Dozens."\textsuperscript{16} Chapter two will also examine the story-telling abilities that Hurston
attributes to her characters. It will look at the store porch as the "center of the community" and examine culture and the sense of togetherness that is revealed there.

The major point of chapter two will be to examine the symbolic function of the above (language, stories, etc.) in the novel, with this guiding principle from Mary Helen Washington, which relates folklore to theme: "Folk language, folkways, and folk stories work symbolically in the novel as a measure of a character's integrity and freedom" (italics mine). Again, the sense of being a part of the community and belonging is important.

The final chapter will focus on the main character of Their Eyes Were Watching God--Janie, and how folklore and folk culture define and inform her character. It will examine what type of character she is and the roles that she plays in the novel--from a storyteller (narrator of her own story), to a wife in two unsuccessful marriages, the first in which she almost perpetuates her grandmother's black woman as the "mule of the world" image, and the second in which she becomes an object to be adorned and subjected to and at her husband's will, (and both of which separate her from authentic black culture), to a wife in a third marriage, which finally places her in touch with love and her folk culture and which thus brings fulfillment to her life.
Chapter three will also examine Janie in terms of Starke's principle of "individualism." The chapter will examine the role that other folk characters and that folk community (Janie's desire to belong and participate) take in the novel to inform Janie's development and growth, especially since Janie's quest for fulfillment and self-actualization and her liberation are Hurston's subjects in the novel. The purpose of this chapter is in sum to show the relationship of community, the folk, and black culture to Janie's quest for and fulfillment in finding love, meaningful life, and her individualistic self, and thereby to also show how theme and plot and folklore are united in the novel.

At the end of Chapter three, I also wish to briefly examine the impact of Hurston's creation of a black woman heroine in Janie, not only as it affects the development of Janie in the novel, but for the liberation it brought to Hurston and those black and female artists who have followed her. This brief examination will view the novel as a social document that has influenced the works of succeeding black women writers and that has taken its place in Twentieth Century Black literature and in literature at large.
NOTES


2Hemenway, p. xxiv.


4Wright, p. 241.


7Hemenway, p. 20.


11 For an example of a study which focuses on the personality and background of the artist, see Lillie Howard's "Zora Neale Hurston: A Non-Revolutionary Black Artist," Ph.D. Dissertation The University of New Mexico 1975.


15 Starke, p. 22.


17 Washington, p. 15.
CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTER PERSONALITY:
DEFINING SELF IN RELATION TO OTHERS

In her book, Black Portraiture in American Fiction, Catherine Starke makes the following statement about the aesthetic relationship between culture and the creative process of the artist:

Needed here is the newer approach offered by the anthropological-psychological concept of aesthetic experience, which sees the artist as responsible participant in the evolution of culture and his work of art as symbol of some phase of his culture . . . . The creative-critical process, seen as an artist's compulsion to assess his culture and its values, results in an end product, his work of art, that not only symbolizes cultural values but also creates and shapes them. The basic concept of the critical method is the relationship between literature and culture and the function of both in the formation and development of human personality; for it has been shown that culture, society, and personality form a unit so inextricably interrelated that no single component can be examined in isolation of the other two; moreover that culture dominates the others in determining the general as well as the status personality types that may be found in all societies; and finally, that literature and other art forms contain evidence which reflects a culture pattern, its social structure and the motives of the participants in it. ¹

Starke's principles help to establish the importance of cultural context, including folklore, for the study of
literature, which is part of the overall purpose of this paper. As an anthropologist and folklorist, Hurston observed and recorded the behavior patterns, the culture, of her people in the specific situations or contexts in which that behavior occurred. As a child growing up in Eatonville, Hurston was most definitely a part of the evolution of culture represented in her work. And as a novelist, Hurston was able to combine both the anthropological/folkloric recordings and the first hand knowledge of her childhood with her creative and interpretative powers as an artist to recreate culture in a literary environment.

The interrelatedness of literature, culture, and personality that Starke speaks of is readily appropriate to Hurston's creation, development and presentation of character personality and community in Their Eyes Were Watching God. One of Hurston's major purposes for the novel is to "celebrate blackness": to portray the values, thoughts, behaviors and sense of community among her black characters, or as she states it in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, to reveal the "sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down."²

Much of this celebration of blackness and workings of black culture in Their Eyes Were Watching God is revealed through the happenings around the community store porch. The store porch represents what Lawrence Levine in Black Culture and Black Consciousness refers to as a
"cultural self-containment . . . a group whose cultural standards and world view are determined largely by the values of the group itself and are held with a relative lack of self-consciousness."  

In Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, Robert Hemenway gives the following definitive synopsis of the importance and relevance of the store porch to the black community:

It is the center of the community; the totem representing black cultural tradition; it is where the values of the group are manifested in verbal behavior. The store porch, in Zora's language, is 'the center of the world.' To describe the porch's activities she often uses the phrase 'crayon enlargements of life'—'When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice . . . ' The store porch is where 'big picture talkers' use 'a side of the world for a canvas' as they create a portrait of communal values.  

Hemenway significantly provides insight into the all-important role that the store porch plays in Their Eyes Were Watching God to reveal the behaviors and values of the Eatonville community. Also underlying Hemenway's statement are two terms that are important to understanding the cultural environment in which folklore occurs. He introduces the concepts of cultural context—the actual behavior patterns and actions of the people—and performance context—the situations and setting within which those events occur and are made more meaningful.
The store porch is significant in its cultural context, but it becomes even more meaningful when the culture manifest there is placed in a literary environment so that folklore and fiction are appropriated to each other. In a literary context, the store porch is important not only as a portrait of life in the black community; neither does Hurston's celebration of black laughter, values and behavior become the major theme or purpose in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her purpose is instead to show the main character's (Janie's) quest for and initiation into self-fulfillment. The store porch and all of the values depicted there are all-important to the novel because within them lie a major key to Janie's quest. She must identify with and participate in black culture and tradition as represented by the store porch and its characters because they are her connection to the roots and black heritage she must discover in order to obtain and fulfill her own identity. Thus, Janie's search for self-actualization is fulfilled through her relationship to and interaction with values of black culture as represented by the other characters of the novel. It is important to note here, however, that while Janie's relatedness to the other characters and the black roots they represent are essential to the discovery of her identity, they are not essential to the continued development and maintenance of that identity. Hurston presents
Janie as an individual with a strong sense of identity that will continue to grow above and beyond the sometimes static identity of the townspeople.

To illustrate the theory of the relationship between culture, literature and personality in *Black Portraiture In American Fiction*, Starke develops the following concept about personality which is essential to analyzing Janie's development and quest for fulfillment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Starke states that "... personality is never a static quality; it is a process of 'becoming,' a drive toward self-actualization that continues as long as a person is alive." This definition of personality as a process is significant because Hurston's subject throughout the novel is Janie's growth and development. Hurston presents Janie from a six year old child who discovers for the first time that she is black to a forty-year-old-woman who has gone in search of, found and identified herself with the black culture that has helped to shape and define her. Even after Janie's quest for fulfillment and self-autonomy are realized, the process of becoming does not cease. In fact, at the novel's end, Hurston gives the reader the impression that life is about to begin anew for Janie.

It is important again to note that the movement toward self-actualization does not occur in isolation, but rather, it is determined by the relationship that
exists between the character and the other characters in the novel. Starke sheds light on this concept of identification and relationship with others in order to define "self." She calls it "relatedness" and develops it as such:

The concept of self in relation to others varies according to the perception of what self is . . . . A proper sense of relatedness with others means that an individual is neither completely dominant nor submissive, that his behavior approaches a balance between these extremes . . . . Each affects and is affected by the other. As in osmosis, some part of each becomes part of the other; and as a result, neither is precisely what he was prior to the event.

In order to get the full picture of Janie's process of self-actualization, one must examine her "relatedness" to the other characters of the novel (especially those with whom she has direct and personal relationships), and examine the effect they (the characters) have upon her life and her perception of self.

Hurston presents Nanny, Janie's grandmother and a seemingly minor character, as having one of the greatest and lasting effects on Janie's life. Nanny is important because she represents a segment of traditional black culture—namely the heritage of slavery and survival—that Janie must recognize in her search for identity, tied to her search for her black roots.

Hurston gives the following revealing description of Nanny's physiognomy: "Nanny's head and face looked
like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered." This description hints at the painful life Nanny has led. She has been a slave, a slave master's mistress, mother of the master's child, and the object of the jealousy, anger and brutality of the master and his wife. She is forced, out of fear for her life and that of her child, to run away from the master's plantation and the small security she knows. Nanny finds a job as a "Mammy" working for a kind, white family, the Washburns, so that she can provide for her child. Her past is representative of what she wishes to save Janie from, the "nigger woman is de mule uh de world . . . " (p. 29)

Tragically, she cannot save her own daughter from perpetuating this mule image, as the daughter is raped by a school teacher, made pregnant, and after the birth of her daughter, Janie, takes to wandering and drinking. When all hopes of her dream being fulfilled in her daughter are crushed, it falls to Janie to be what Nanny thinks a "woman oughta be and to do." Nanny tells Janie, "Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed" (p. 32).

When one day Nanny awakes to see Janie being "lacerated" with a kiss from Johnny Taylor, a neighborhood
boy, she immediately makes arrangements to marry Janie off to Logan Killicks, an old man who has some money and property. When Janie protests, Nanny tells her that all she wants for Janie is protection against "trashy" boys like Johnny Taylor, whom she accuses would make a "spit cup" out of Janie.

In her search for security for her granddaughter, Nanny ironically tells Janie: "'You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come in queer ways'" (p. 31). In part, Nanny's statement is true. As a people, uprooted from their homeland, brought to a strange land where they were stripped of their freedom and possessions, taken from their families and made to serve at the cruel will of another, black slaves indeed had no roots. Even so, blacks forged a new culture; they gave birth to new families; they formed new values and a new language. They established their own roots.

Janie's search for her black roots begins, but does not end with the heritage of the black slave. Her search is for black culture that is dynamic and ongoing. Nanny's hard, bitter life as a slave has made her the antithesis of the dynamic and energetic life that Janie seeks. What Nanny comes to represent for Janie is static and restrictive culture. The traditional values, based on her experiences as a slave, that Nanny projects onto Janie not only come into conflict with Janie's dream of
marriage, of love, of being a "pear tree in bloom," but make these dreams nearly impossible for Janie to realize. Instead of the love she expects in marriage, she gets an organ, a house, sixty acres of land—items which are important to Nanny's value system, not Janie's. Janie waits "a bloom time, and a green time, and an orange time" for love to begin, but she realizes that "... marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead..." (pp. 43-44)

Later in the novel, after two loveless marriages, Hurston reveals Janie's bitter reaction to Nanny's imposition of these restrictions onto her life:

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of 'people'; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after 'things'... Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon... and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love (pp. 137-138).

One might feel that Janie's hatred for Nanny is justified. In essence, what Nanny has sought to do is to live life over through Janie. In so doing, she has choked Janie's growth and personality, and has refused to allow Janie
to realize her own dreams and aspirations.

Logan Killicks, Janie's first husband, might be viewed as what Starke categorizes as a stock character, which she defines as "those characters, usually minor figures, who sole function is to create atmosphere, to authenticate scene, or to contrast the virtues and vices of other characters . . ."

Janie's physical descriptions of Logan help to delineate him as a stock character. Through her eyes, he is presented as a somewhat grotesque figure. She describes him as looking like an "ole skull head" (p. 28). She hates "' . . . de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides, and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck.'" "' His belly is too big . . . and his toe-nails look lak mule foots.'" She further describes the smell of his feet: "' . . . tain't nothin' in de way of him washin' his feet every even' before he comes tuh bed . . . Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whil'st he is in dere!'" (p. 42)

He is important mainly for the role that he plays in Janie's growth and maturity in her search for womanhood. Janie's childhood ends abruptly, when at sixteen she is forced by her grandmother to marry Logan. After having seen Johnny Taylor kissing Janie, Nanny fears that all of her dreams that she has saved to pass on to her granddaughter—to go to school, to pick "from a higher
bush," to take a "stand on high ground," to be safe from the Johnny Taylor's of the world--are in danger of not being realized.

It is significant to note that Nanny's values and her dreams for Janie are white. For Nanny, these values are motivated by her desire to see Janie have the status and money that have traditionally belonged to whites--like the Washburns, and by her need to protect Janie from a hard life and from the degradation that Nanny and Leafy have suffered. Hurston sets up a dichotomy of white and black value systems that revolves around Janie's search for blackness and that becomes more evident with every significant relationship that Janie develops. On one side, Hurston sets up traditional white values--materialism, desire for power, control, status, etc. These values are most clearly illustrated by Nanny, Logan and Jody. On the other side, Hurston sets up traditional black values--hard labor, love, a sense of community and togetherness. These values are most clearly illustrated in the life of Tea Cake. This dichotomy is sometimes quite complex as values are not always restricted to one side or the other. It is important to keep in mind that Janie must move toward blackness in order to realize and fulfill self, and that necessitates her rejection of false images set up by the white point of view.
Logan is one such image Janie must reject. For Nanny, Logan represents security from the threats of the Johnny Taylor's of the world. To Nanny he is a "good man" because he has property and status, and is well able to take care of her Janie. When Janie complains after her marriage that she doesn't love Logan, Nanny tells her: "'If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road . . . " (p. 41) Logan becomes a representative of those cultural and materialistic values--money, property, status, etc.--that have previously belonged only to white culture. Thus, Nanny is advocating a white value system of materialism, security, and protection, and rejecting and denying traditional black values of marriage and love. She tells Janie: "'Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night'" (p. 41).

To Janie, "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree . . . " (p. 28). He represents death to her spiritual growth. Janie tells Nanny that "'He look like some ole skull-head in de grave yard'" (p. 28). But, she agrees to marry Logan partly to appease Nanny, and mostly because she does a lot of soul searching and finally in her naivete convinces herself that even
though she doesn't love him now, she will once they are married. Her dream of what love and marriage are is vague at this point in her growth, so she makes the only real choice she can make. Hurston reveals Janie's motions in the following passage:

There are years that ask questions and years that answer. Janie had had no chance to know things, so she had to ask. Did marriage compel love? Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? . . . Finally out of Nanny's talk and her own conjectures she made a sort of comfort for herself. Yes, she would love Logan after they were married . . . Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so. Janie felt glad of the thought, for then it wouldn't seem so destructive and mouldly. She wouldn't be lonely anymore (p. 38).

But after waiting through three seasons, Janie finds that "it was not just so: That marriage did not make love."

Logan brings two sets of values to their marriage—a mixture of white and black cultural values. On the one hand, he has property, money, a good house, items generally associated with white materialistic values. On the other hand, he represents values that are associated with, though by no means restricted to black culture. Hurston presents images of him as a hardworking individual. He chops and totes wood; he works in the field and farms behind a mule and plow. Ironically, Logan almost makes Janie fulfill Nanny's image of the black woman as the
mule of the world, from which Nanny thought she had saved Janie. He tells her, "'If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mah first wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood nowhow. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man'" (p. 45). Later he tells Janie that he is going to Lake City to get a second mule, and when she asks why, he tells her that he needs two mules because this year's harvest will be big. He also tells her that the mule is "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im '" (p. 46), making clear his intention of having her work in the fields.

In a sense, Logan is trying to assert authority and power over Janie which he does not have. He provides no answer to the fulfillment of her dream and has no positive role in her movement toward self-identity. Because she does not love him, and because she does not care about the material values he possesses, Logan has no real hold on her. She makes her feelings about him and his money known to Nanny when she says, "'Ah ain't takin' dat ole land tuh heart neither. Ah could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell. Ah feel de same way 'bout Mr. Killicks too'" (p. 42).

Logan knows where he stands with Janie, and he is afraid that someone or something will come to make her leave him. Because one gets the feeling that he does love her, one cannot help but feel sorry for Logan when Janie
"puts words to his held-in fears" (p. 51), especially when Hurston shows the terrible ache these words produce. He hides behind scorn, anger and arrogance, telling Janie, "Heah, Ah just as good as take you out de white folks' kitchen and set you down on yo' royal diasticutis and you take and low-rate me! ... Ah'm too honest and hard-workin' for anybody in yo' family, dat's de reason you don't want me ... " (p. 53)

But Janie is past caring about her marriage; she wants to go again in search of the horizon. The horizon for Janie means people, life; it means what is at the edge of the world waiting for her to discover it; it means the freedom that exists beyond Nanny's restrictive gate and Logan's plow. It means fulfillment. When she meets Jody Starks, who captures her fancy because he speaks for change, she runs off with him. In the end, all her marriage to Logan Killicks meant was the death of her first dream, and the beginning of her womanhood. She rejects his physical grotesqueness and the spiritual and emotional death he brings to her life.

Jody Starks, Janie's second husband provides the impetus for her next stage of development. He speaks for change and chance; she can dream again; she can reach for the horizon and fulfillment. "From now until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (p. 54). But Janie
soon finds that her marriage to Jody is no better than was her marriage to Logan. In his book *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt gives an interesting comparison which quite accurately sums up Janie's marriages to her first two husbands. He says, "What they offer is a variety of death; passionless lives lacking any sense of creativity." Life with them is as it was with Nanny—restrictive. They suppress the creative and passionate spirit that Janie seeks to express in her process of growth.

Jody's white value system is almost immediately revealed in his first appearance. He tells Janie that he is on his way to Eatonville, a black town that he wants to help build and where he wants to be a "big voice." He's been working for white folks all his life, saving money, and now he wants to be like them. When he gets to Eatonville, his authoritatively becomes apparent. He buys up land, builds a "big white house," builds a store, essentially builds up the whole town, roads, lights and all, organizes the people, and manipulates his way into becoming Mr. Mayor Starks.

Jody's white values—his desire to be the man of power, the man in control—are based on a belief in hierachy instead of equality or communality. These values extend not only to material property, but also to Janie. She wants love and a "natural" relationship, but his white value system which takes her out of touch with the
natural process won't allow that love. She wants to associate with the townspeople, but he wants to dress her up, put her in "the white house," sit her on a high chair and have them admire her from afar.

As Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie Crawford and her dreams of the horizon, of love, can no longer thrive. There is an imbalance in their relationship; he is dominant, and she submissive. Janie gets a first taste of the real Jody when she is asked to give a few words of encouragement after he is elected mayor. He says, "... mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (p. 69). Inside Janie experiences a sense of coldness, not because she wants to give a speech but because he has robbed her of her freedom of speech and also because he has demeaned her role as a woman by saying that her place is in the home.

Like Logan, Jody feels that he has done Janie a favor. He tells her that she should be glad to be his wife "...'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (p. 74). Important here is that Jody is trying to impose his white values onto Janie; also important is his assumption that she has to be defined by him and that her very identity depends on him.

Ironically, and perhaps deliberately, by making her a "big woman" and placing her on a pedestal, Jody isolates
her from participation in anybody's society but his own; he forbids Janie to take part in the lives and activities of the other townspeople. He denies her participation in the store porch activities and thus denies her any participation in the black culture and black values that she needs to identify with in order to achieve autonomy. When she wants to join in on the storytelling activities on the porch, he forbids her to indulge:

He didn't want her talking after such trashy people. 'You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' sability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in . . . They's just some puny humans playin' round de toes uh Time' (p. 85).

Again, his values are imposed on Janie. She is his wife, his property, and as such he can and will keep her to himself and for his own pleasure. Ironically, Jody's description of the townspeople as "punny humans playing round de toes of Time" is just as true of himself, if not more so.

In The Negro Personality, Bertram Karon makes the following statements about the psychology of the middle and upper class Negro:

They drive themselves harder, and refuse the compensatory activities of the lower class. They are vulnerable to depressed self-esteem, and have a harder time with the control of anger. This in turn has
a constricting effect on all their emotions. The self-hatred of this group is projected outward and felt as hatred of both whites and of Negroes lower than themselves. . . . They . . . tend to overshoot the mark of conformity to the white ideals . . . Further, lest what they see hurt them, or instigate them to act in such a way as to provoke retaliation, they prefer not to see things as they are, nor to probe too deeply into anything . . .

This passage accurately captures much of the behavior of Jody. He does drive himself to get the town built and the people established in it; he becomes a storekeeper and the town’s mayor. He participates in the activities of the townspeople, though with the excuse that a ceremony is in honor of something he has done, or that as mayor he might be needed to make a speech.

Jody is representative of the black middle class in terms of his acceptance of and conformity to a white point of view. His life is patterned after white materialistic principles—money, property, status. This white point of view can also be seen in Jody’s stereotyping of other blacks, especially lower class blacks. He refers to the community people as "trashy" Negroes, so that one can detect an attitude of hatred. Jody also has problems with his self-esteem—tied to his hatred of blacks lower than himself. He hates them for being what their black skin calls for them to be—black. They represent what he has
repressed and denied within himself. Because he has no true identity, his self-esteem remains low.

He is also prone to frequent outbursts of anger, especially toward Janie because he cannot, as hard as he tries, break her spirit. Jody is the type who changes everything, but don't nothing change him. He prefers not to look too closely at his life and what he actually is until he is made to do so by Janie in the Dozens match, which provides the key turning point in their relationship and the turning point in Janie's life, and hence, the structural turning point of the entire novel. Jody begins to berate Janie more and more in front of the townspeople, making insulting comments about her age and her sagging shape. He does it mostly to draw attention away from himself, because he realizes he is getting old, and he is afraid. He also realizes that Janie is not aging as he is, and in his jealousy he takes his fears and anxieties out on her, "... acting as if he didn't want her to stay young while he grew old" (p. 120).

Janie tells Jody:

'Ah reckon Ah locks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life' (p. 122-123).
This scene serves as a symbolic castration of Jody. Through the use of words, Janie strips Jody of his masculinity and crushes his white value system, for Jody's sense of power, his desire to be the big voice, the man in control, the property owner—is all tied to his sense of masculinity, so that when Janie attacks his masculinity and sexuality, she leaves him with nothing but his pride.

The very presence of an audience, especially those "trashy" Negroes being present to watch his dethroning is even more devastating for Jody. Janie "... had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed..." (p. 123)

Through this attack, through her assertion of self, Janie evens out the balance of their relationship. He is no longer ruler and she obedient servant.

For Janie this means the beginning of the end of her relationship with Jody. Her image of Jody and her hope for their marriage has long ago been shattered. When "The spirit of the marriage leaves the bedroom and takes to living in the parlor" (p. 111), we see the beginning of a new individual. Hurston says, "She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and she suddenly knew how not to mix them" (pp. 112-113).

Jody's death liberates Janie, and she is for the first time free to seek the horizon and true love. His death allows a more mature and free Janie to emerge as portrayed
by Hurston in this passage:

Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass . . . . It had been a long time since she had remembered . . . . She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair (pp. 134-135).

Janie's relationship with Jody has meant the death of her second dream, but it has also marked her maturity into womanhood.

Janie finds love and happiness in a third marriage to her husband Tea Cake. In The Black Novelist, Robert Bone captures the essence of Tea Cake's character and his relationship to Janie in this concise statement: "Easy-going, careless of money, living for the moment, Tea-Cake is an incarnation of the folk culture . . . . it is the folk culture through Tea-Cake which provides the means of her [Janie's] spiritual fulfillment." 11

Quite different from Janie's previous two business-like husbands, Tea Cake is a very free personality, a gambler, an itinerant worker, a blues man; he plays the Dozens and tells "big ole lies." He embodies in his character traditional and cultural practices like those manifested on the store porch (where black communal values are most readily observed through the verbal behaviors of the folk).
Because he is so free-spirited, Tea Cake is what Nanny and Jody would have called a "common, trashy, Negro." Yet, he is the key to Janie's search for fulfillment because through him Janie can finally identify with and participate without restriction in black culture. Tea Cake is the antithesis of the whiteness manifested in the goals of Jody and Nanny. He is instead the embodiment of the blackness, the roots that Janie must move toward in her search for self. When Janie marries Tea Cake, then she is immersing herself in that blackness, and she is thereby fulfilling her quest for self-autonomy and her dream of love.

Important here is the sense of wholeness that her union with Tea Cake brings—not just spiritual fulfillment, but emotional and physical as well. He becomes Janie's "bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (p. 161), hinting at the sexual union between them, but at an emotional and spiritual growth also, since the pear blossom becomes a measure of that growth throughout the novel. A sense of spiritual fulfillment is also achieved because Tea Cake helps put Janie back in touch with nature—as signified by his real name, "Vergible Woods." With him, especially out on the muck, she is freely in touch with her roots. When Janie is in touch with what is natural, she is in touch with herself.
Tea Cake also accepts Janie as his equal, which is important to her perception of self. She absolutely glows when he teaches her how to play checkers. "Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (p. 146). He teaches her how to enjoy life; she picks beans beside him in the fields; she becomes a participant in black culture: she participates in the storytelling contests on the front porch; she watches the gambling sessions; she and the other bean pickers listen to Tea Cake play his guitar. She takes part in all that he is and does—his work, his play, his love.

Spiritual, emotional and physical fulfillment through her relationship with Tea Cake brings Janie to the horizon. She is one with nature, one with spiritual life, and one with herself.
NOTES


5. Starke, p. 21.


8. Starke, p. 23.


CHAPTER TWO

THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF FOLKLORE

Examination of Starke's theory of the interrelatedness and interdependence of culture, literature and personality in relation to Their Eyes Were Watching God would not be complete without examining the all-important and expressive role that black culture, mostly in the form of black folklore plays in the shaping of Hurston's novel--its plot and its characters.

In his essay "American Literature and American Folklore," Hennig Cohen gives the following explanation of the relationship of folklore to literature which provides significant insight into this paper as a study of the "appropriation of folklore to fiction." Cohen says,

Folklore appears in American literature in two ways: passively or actively, transscriptively or functionally ... The need for transcription has passed and most writers have come to realize that mere recordings or imitations of folklore are essentially lifeless ... Writers who are concerned with creating works of art rather than providing transcriptions from life use folklore functionally. Folklore is recognizably present, with all of the appeal and power that it has in its own right, but it is put to work ... to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, and to defend, explain, and raise questions about the nature of the society.
It is the use of folklore in literature "to advance plot" and to "raise questions about the nature of the society"\(^2\) that we will be concerned with here. Because Hurston uses folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to inform character, plot and black culture, we can then view folklore as having taken on a functional role in the novel.

Hurston uses folklore two ways: First, she presents black folklore as having an inherent power and appeal in and of itself (what one might call folklore function). Hurston does this by presenting a transcript of black folk culture; she recreates the "local color" atmosphere; and she presents the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the people and the values upon which the black community is founded. Second, Hurston puts the folklore to work (known as literary function), especially to advance the plot and theme of the novel. The major role of folklore as it advances plot and theme is summed up in the following definitive statement by Mary Helen Washington: "Folk language, folkways, and folk stories work symbolically in the novel as a measure of a character's integrity and freedom."\(^3\)

The above functions of folklore as reflecting cultural and social life in the black community and as advancing the novel's plot will be examined here with much emphasis being given to folk language, folkways, and folk stories as they occur in the novel.
Two key ideas will also be developed in connection to the symbolic function of folklore as a measure of character "integrity and freedom": One is the idea that communication, especially verbal communication, is the key to freedom; the other is the idea that one must know and identify with one's roots in order to achieve personal freedom and thereby to achieve identity.

In Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Lawrence Levine captures the history and the struggle of black in forging and maintaining a distinct, self-contained culture.

Upon the hard rock of racial, social and economic exploitation and injustice black Americans forged and nurtured culture: they formed and maintained kinship networks, made love, raised and socialized children, built a religion, and created a rich expressive culture in which they articulated their feelings and hopes and dreams. 4

Black folklore becomes the vehicle for maintaining and manifesting that rich cultural heritage. It becomes a vehicle for showing the determination and strength of black people to have a way of life uniquely their own. Hurston's folklore collection, Mules and Men, with its seventy folk-tale texts, a series of hoodoo rituals, a glossary of folk speech, an appendix of folk songs, conjure formulas, and root prescriptions . . . interspersed with . . . proverbs, a folk sermon, 5 rhymes, blues, lyrics, and street cries set in sawmill camps, "jooks" and store porches across
the South, is a perfect example of cultural heritage maintained and manifested in the black community. Robert Hemenway says in his introduction to *Mules and Men* that the folklore collection is "... a storehouse of ... revelations, a repository of cultural messages preserved and passed by word of mouth from generation to generation."⁶

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* also serves as a document of black culture and black tradition. Hurston recreates the Southern rural dialect of the folk, the folk sayings, the folk tales and speechmaking around the store porch, the ceremonies and rituals, and other folk items—from the blues tradition to the foodways—that characterize the black community and its rich, expressive culture. In so doing, Hurston accomplishes two things: Her recreation in the novel of the Eatonville and the folk of her childhood again serves as a storehouse of black culture. Hemenway briefly captures the unique cultural heritage of the Negro community and the importance of the store porch in revealing the values of the people. He says,

It [Eatonville] was a rich repository of the oral traditions preserved through slavery into the twentieth century, and as Hurston grew up she listened well to the 'lying sessions' on the front porch of Joe Clarke's general store ... The men and women on the store porch were not a function of time, history, population changes ... their lying sessions were constant verbal rituals contributing order, beauty, and poetry to the community's
life . . . 7 Joe Clarke's store was the 'heart and spring of the town,' the place where people sat around on boxes, benches, and nail kegs,' and 'passed this world and the next one through their mouths.' 8

The second feat accomplished by Hurston is to confirm the role or place of black oral tradition and black folk in the artistic universe. She captures the experiences, the imagination and the poetry that characterize black life and black oral tradition and places them in the context of written discourse. Hurston's affirmation of black oral tradition and the Negro's place in the artistic universe is also a testament of her own creative accomplishments as she takes the Negro imagery, imagination and experience and shapes something new out of them. In essence, she demonstrates her deftness with the language and traditions of her folk by taking their verbal behaviors and shaping them into a novel.

Inherent in black traditional culture are the verbal behaviors of the folk, exhibited mostly by their language, their sayings, their tales, their games, and the nonverbal behaviors, generally inclusive of folk music, foodways and any other behaviors not encompassed by spoken language. Hurston captures both verbal and nonverbal behaviors of folklore in Their Eyes Were Watching God, but her major concern, as is that of most black folk, is with verbal art and verbal ability in its variant forms.
After doing a study and analysis of the speech behaviors of blacks in Oakland, California, Claudia Mitchell Kernan concluded in her book *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community* that "concern with verbal art is a dominant theme in Black culture..." It is this theme of verbal art and language as central to black culture that Hurston affirms throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And through the words, thoughts and behaviors of her characters, Hurston experiences her own love affair with the language.

When reading the novel, one of the first striking features that one might notice is Hurston's skill in recreating Southern rural dialect and idiom through the mouths of her characters. She captures the speech of the characters in verisimilitude to actual black dialect, demonstrating a remarkable talent for being able to hear the sounds in spoken speech and then transcribe those sounds onto the written page as accurately as possible.

Several Black English features are illustrated. Words are spelled as they are traditionally pronounced with a Southern rural accent. "Lord have mercy" becomes "Lawd have mercy" when expressed by Nanny, and "Lord of mercy" becomes "Lawd a 'mussy." "I" becomes "Ah"; "to" becomes "tuh"; words ending in -ing have the g dropped, so that "hearing" becomes "hearin'" and "cutting" becomes "cuttin'." Use of double negatives and "ain't" to replace
a form of "to be" also occur. Jody tells Janie, "'You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow then a hog is got wid a holiday!" (p. 49) The double negative is also important here for the emphasis that it gives to the words of the speaker. Jody wants to win Janie through his emphatic and "eloquently" stated message.

Hurston's ability to recreate dialect provides only part of her deftness with language in the novel. In the words of Sherley Anne Williams, who wrote the forward to Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston

... had the literary intelligence and developed the literary skill to convey the power and beauty of this heard speech ... on the printed page ... In the speech of her characters, black voices--whether rural of urban, northern or southern--come alive. Her fidelity to diction, metaphor, and syntax--whether in direct quotations or in paraphrases of characters' thoughts--rings ... with an aching familiarity that is a testament to Hurston's skill and to the durability of black speech. 10

This deftness and skill with language is displayed through Hurston's recreation of idiom and the vivid and imaginative use of a simile, metaphor and invective that are unique to the language and context of Southern black folk culture.

The poetic and idiomatic quality of the language is illustrated through the speech of the characters. After Phoeby brings Janie a bowl of mulatto rice, Janie says to her: "'Gal, it's too good! you switches a mean fanny
round in a kitchen" (p. 15). In other words, Pheoby is a good cook. In his insecurity about his marriage to Janie, Logan taunts her about her birth, saying "'Considerin' youse born in a carriage thout no top to it'" (p. 51). Knowing the circumstances behind Janie's birth through Nanny's revelations, we can rightly interpret Logan's expression to mean that Janie was born illegitimately.

Hurston's language or that of her characters also indicates the Negro tendency toward hyperbole in speech. This is illustrated by the invective that Nanny issues forth when she thinks that Logan has been mistreating Janie. She says: "'Lawd, Ah know dat grass-gut, liver-lipted nigger ain't done took and beat mah baby already! Ah'll take a stick and salivate 'im!'" (p. 40) It is illustrated by Tea Cake when he tells Janie: "'De girl baby ain't born and her mama is dead, dat can git me tuh spend our money on her'" (p. 181). (Language in the above examples reveals Hurston's ability to create language in verisimilitude; language also takes on a literary function to reveal something about the characters and their values. For example, Tea Cake's declaration to Janie shows his love for her and his utmost sense of responsibility for her as his wife. When read in context this and the other examples take on new meaning.)

Another aspect of verbal folklore, reflective of the values of black culture at all levels, is proverbial
expression, as illustrated by Janie's expressive statement: "'Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' . . . ." (p. 18) Janie's words indicate an ultimate value at the center of the Negro community--to reach self-fulfillment, to live, experience and enjoy life.

Proverbs are employed in other ways. They are often viewed as the "wisdom of the ages," the words of the elderly and wise. In his article, "The Wisdom of Many: Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions," Ray Browne expounds on this principle:

To the most credulous members of society, proverbs and proverbial expression are the accumulated knowledge of the ages, the voice of history; they are tried and true, and as such are pragmatic, unassailable wisdom. Proverbs to these people are so true that to a certain extent, they are the folk exemplification of the words . . . that if one does not remember history he will be doomed to relive it."

Nanny exemplifies the proverbial wisdom of the ages in Their Eyes Were Watching God. In her attempts to protect and seal Janie from the hard and tragic realities that blacks have traditionally suffered in the white world, Nanny issues this proverbial expression: "'De nigger woman is de mule uh de world" (p. 29). Nanny's words serve a threefold purpose: From a personal viewpoint deeply scarred by the hard life of slavery, they express Nanny's "burden" of having to carry the "weight of
life" upon her shoulders. From a historical perspective from within and without literature, they establish the traditional place of black women in society as being at the very bottom of the totem pole, beneath the white male, the white female, and the black male, respectively. Also, by reminding Janie of the tragic circumstances surrounding her birth—Nanny being the object of the slave master's desire, and Nanny's daughter, resulting from that union, being raped and impregnated at age seventeen—Nanny is trying to save Janie from having to relive history and perpetuate the "mule" image.

The dialect renderings, the proverbial and idiomatic expressions, the metaphorical statements that Hurston presents through her characters are testament not only of her own artistry and deftness with language, but equally important, they illustrate and affirm the artistry of the Negro, especially his skill with and his unique knowledge of the verbal art forms that are the basis of black culture.

Expressions like "cut de monkey" can be understood by knowledge of the culture of which they are a part. Only those who have some shared knowledge of the Negro term know that it refers to the verbal contest of "Signifying," of cajoling, teasing, taunting. (In its most basic meaning the expression simply means to "pick on" or tease someone. In a folkloric context, a more
complex meaning emerges.)

In Deep Down in the Jungle, an analysis of Negro folklore in Philadelphia, Roger Abrahams defines Signifying and comments on the toast of "The Signifying Monkey."

According to Abrahams,

Signifying . . . can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation . . . .

Abrahams also give insight on "The Signifying Monkey" and tells how the association between "monkey" and "Negro" came into being. He says that "monkey" was a derogatory term used by certain whites to refer to Negroes because of their "African jungle heritage" and the "casual resemblance of Negro features to that of the monkey family." Interestingly enough, in the context of Afro-American tales, in which the Signifying Monkey appears, the monkey, as a trickster figure, is generally the hero.

One other point made by Abrahams about the person performing the verbal act is important here. Abrahams says that

It would be a mistake to imagine that just because a person launched into a toast, his audience would allow him to finish it. To be sure, he is given a certain amount of
license, but if he has too many pauses or proves to be "lame" in any other way, he'll be edged out of the center of the scene. 14

This latter point is especially relevant to what happens to Tony Taylor in Their Eyes Were Watching God to warrant his using the expression "cut de monkey." At the official opening of the Eatonville store, Tony decides to make a speech to welcome and thank Jody and Janie. But he is constantly cracked upon by his audience for his inefficient verbal ability. When Tony thanks Jody for bringing his land to the town, Lige Moss laughingly retorts, "'Dat'll do Tony . . . Mist' Starks is uh smart man, . . . but de day he comes waggin' down de road wid two hund'ed acres uf land over his shoulder, Ah wants tuh be dere tuh see it!" (pp. 67-68), signifying Tony's ignorance.

Lige continues to taunt, pointing out Tony's lack of knowledge about traditional Afro-American speechmaking:

"Youse way outa jurisdiction. You can't welcome uh man and his wife 'thout you make comparison about Issac and Rebecca at de well, else it don't show de love between'em if you don't" . . . It was sort of pitiful for Tony not to know he couldn't make a speech without saying that (p. 68).

In his attempt to be at the center of verbal behavior and because of his lameness in fulfilling that role, Tony becomes the "monkey" cut or signified upon by his communal audience.
In chapter one, I introduced the terms culture and performance to set the context for verbal behavior that occurs on the store porch. These terms are relevant here to Tony's speech episode since he is performing an act (making a speech) in a specified context (at the store's opening). Culture and performance are concepts essential to understanding Signifying and all other verbal contests and the cultural values that they portray. Before analyzing other forms of verbal contests as they occur in the novel, it is necessary to provide a broader, yet more precise definition of cultural performance and performance context.

In his book *Verbal Art as Performance*, Richard Bauman offers such a definition, which clearly delineates all aspects involved in the performance context. Bauman says,

The term 'performance' has been used to convey a dual sense of artistic action—the doing of folklore—and artistic event—the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting—both of which are basic to developing performance approach . . . We view the act of performance as situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts. Such contexts may be identified at a variety of levels—in terms of settings, for example, the culturally defined places where performance occurs . . . Most important as an organizing principle in the ethnography of performance is the event (or scene) within which performance occurs . . .

Bauman goes on to set the context of cultural performance:
Cultural performances tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community. They are, as a rule, scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bound, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community. 16

It is the latter information on the context of cultural performance that primarily informs this analysis of Their Eyes Were Watching God. The events are the speechmaking at ceremonies, the storytelling or "lying sessions" on the store porch, the courtship and burial rituals, and the Dozens. Joe Clarke's Eatonville store porch and the "muck" of the Everglades provide the main settings. The audience who judge the competence of the performers and the performance are the townspeople of Eatonville and the bean pickers on the muck.

Language as behavior in the above verbal forms and language as communication have several significant implications for the black community. One of the most important is that language provides a key to freedom. Traditionally, in the black culture slaves were denied access to print and were barred from educational institutions, but they had their language, and their freedom was measured by that language. With verbal art--stories, speeches, game situations, song, preaching, etc.--they created a self-contained culture, apart from the white environment which surrounded them--a culture which
reflected and helped to preserve black group values and oral traditions from generation to generation.

The Black folktale is indicative of the preservation of oral tradition and of group values. In the following descriptive passage, Hemenway captures well the necessity of the folktale as a form of communication, preservation and freedom to black people in a strange land:

They [the tales] are the complex communications permitted an oppressed people, their school lessons, their heroic biographies, their physic savings banks, their children's legacies. Black folk tales illustrate how an entire people adapted and survived in the new world experience, how they transformed what they found into a distinctive way of life; they describe the human behavior the group approves, and suggest strategies necessary for the preservation of the group in a hostile environment. 17

Another significant way in which language functions in the black community is as a "controlling device." This occurs especially in contest situations like the Dozens, storytelling, and speechmaking. The object is to be the "man of words," and to be able to manipulate language to one's own ends, as well as to demonstrate one's competence with the language. Akin to the idea of language as a device for control is language used as a sexual device, tied into proof of masculinity.

Finally, the verbal art of black culture has an intrinsic beauty of its own. It reveals the imaginative and artistic impulses of the Negro. It also reveals the
beauty, the rich oral traditions and the values of the culture by which it is informed.

Much of the oral behavior reflecting social and cultural values of the black community occurs as verbal contest. Speechmaking, generally occurring at ceremonial and ritualistic occasions, is one such behavior. The "man of words," in this case, the speechmaker, acts as a performer. Constant interaction with audience is significantly a must, for they judge the competence of the speaker's performance. Another important element of the speechmaker as the man of words is the tendency for the speaker to use what Abrahams calls the "Intrusive I," to express himself in the first person, so as to identify with and elevate his status to that of the "hero" figure. His success and social status in his oral-aural environment are dependent upon the effectiveness of his use of language, thus reflecting the value of the spoken word in black culture. If, in the words of Abrahams, the speaker is a "good talker capable of enlisting the attention and support of an audience . . . ," he is a success.18 He retains high social status. He identifies with the "hero" persona. If, on the other hand, the speaker fails to enlist favorable audience response as to his competence, he has also failed to demonstrate his ability to control language—the device at the center of black survival and the black aesthetic—and is therefore ridiculed and demoted by his audience.
In the novel, Jody Starks and Tony Taylor are examples respectively of the success and failure of the man of words as performer. As has been previously stated, Tony attempts to make his first speech at the official town opening ceremony of Eatonville in order to welcome Jody and Janie. But he fails to enlist favorable response from his audience. They titter at his ignorant comments, constantly interrupt his monologue to remark on his incompetence as a speechmaker, and tell him that he is out of his jurisdiction. Jody, on the other hand, responds to Tony’s welcome speech with all of the eloquence and power needed to charm his audience. His speech is ornate—filled with such metaphors and inflated language as "de right hand of fellowship," "put mah hands tuh de plow," "make dis our town de metropolis uh de state," "us got to incorporate"; he even says "Amen" at the end of the speech indicating his assurance at the power of his words over his audience. The audience denotes their approval and confirms his success as a speechmaker by responding with loud handclapping, and then by moving to elect Jody mayor of Eatonville.

Speechmaking as a verbal art is indicative not only of one's ability to control language and to control audience. It is indicative of one's privilege and freedom to participate in his culture and to share the common experiences of that culture. After Jody finishes his speech and is elected mayor, Tony asks that Janie, now
Mrs. Mayor Starks, give a few words of encouragement. The audience again denotes approval with a burst of applause, but Jody immediately shows his disapproval and denies Janie the privilege, making it clear that she is his wife and her place is in the home, not in making speeches. In so doing, Jody is denying Janie access through language to her culture. He is also affirming that traditionally language exists as a device of control only in a man's world.

Another step up on the totem pole of verbal behavior from speechmaking is the narration of the folktale, often referred to as storytelling or "lying sessions." These tales provide another method for revealing traditional knowledge and values and for sharing those values with the group. Tales also demonstrate the imaginative and artistic verbal abilities of the Negro.

In his book *African Folktales*, Roger Abrahams points out some features to consider when evaluating the Afro-American folktale: The tales have a didactic function; they teach people how to act correctly and how to live. Tales illustrate the power of the word: "This potency of spoken language must be remembered . . . because tales are, in the ears of their hearers, permissible lies . . . neither a record of reality, nor pure fantasy . . . " They make the past become part of the present. Stories are also indicative of shared communal knowledge and identification. They "have specific meaning in the lives
of those who tell them, referring to personal situations and to particular people known by the group.¹⁹

Black humor is also very much a part of storytelling and other forms of verbal behavior. Humor allows those who share a common experience, positive or negative, to laugh at and with each other, and thereby to gain some perspective on their situation. In the words of Levine, Black humor

presupposed a common experience between the joke-teller and the audience. Black humor, too, functioned to foster a sense of particularity and group identification by widening the gap between those within and those outside of the circle of laughter.²⁰

Performance in the manner of delivery is also very important. Not only must the storyteller prove his competence with words, but creativity, originality and spontaneity are a must to enlist the approval of the audience.

Recurring subjects and themes of folktales are courting and marriage, family ties, parental love and care, moral inconstancy, and other items which affected the everyday lives of black folk. Animal figures, especially the trickster, recur most often in folktales.

The mule is one such legendary animal which occurs in Afro-American folk stories. Mule-talkers take center stage in the "lying sessions" on the Eatonville store porch in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Matt Bonner's mule
provided new tales for everyday conversation and entertainment. Stories sprung up "about how poor the brute was; his age; his evil disposition and his latest caper... He was next to the Mayor in prominence, and made better talking" (p. 85). One such story held that the women folk were using the sides of the mule for a washboard. Sam says,

'Yeah, Matt, dat mule so skinny till de women is usin' his rib bones fuh uh rub-board and hangin' things out on his hockbones tuh dry' (p. 83).

Other tales sprang up about

How he pushed open Lindsay's kitchen door and slept in the place one night and fought until they made coffee for his breakfast; how he stuck his head in the Pearsons' window while the family was at the table and Mrs. Pearson mistook him for Rev. Pearson and handed him a plate; ... he got tired of listening to Redmond's long-winded prayer, and went inside the Baptist church and broke up the meeting (pp. 92-93).

The tales about the mule indicate the creativity and spontaneity of the speakers as they "passed around pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see." These tales provide entertainment for the townspeople, allowing them to laugh together and to compete with each other to prove their ability to tell the best "lies." But the tales also serve a didactic purpose. They provide the opportunity to teach Matt Bonner a lesson and to make him an object of ridicule for his frugality.
and mistreatment of the mule. The stories and laughter at Matt Bonner's expense indicate that his behavior is not socially acceptable by the group, thereby placing him outside of the shared communal experience.

Significantly, Janie is also outside of the shared communal experience and community laughter. Though she thinks of tales about the mule, she is forbidden by Jody to indulge in the "lying sessions." By once again denying Janie her freedom of speech, Jody is denying her free identification and participation in the intimate world of black language and black culture. Also, as with the speechmaking, he is denying Janie access into what is traditionally the man's source of power and control.

Language as a "control" device and source of power in the black male community is nowhere better illustrated than in the verbal insult contest of "playing the Dozens." John Dollard, along with Levine and Abrahams, define the Dozens and provide good outlines of the basic rules and components of the game. In "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult," Dollard briefly sets up both the action and the event of the performance situation. He defines the Dozens as

a pattern of interactive insult . . .
guided by well recognized rules which at once permit and govern the emotional expression . . . It is important to note that the Dozens is a collective game. It takes place before a group and usually involves two protagonists. Group response . . . is
crucial . . . With group response comes the possibility of reward for effective slanders and feelings of shame and humiliation if one is bested. 21

Levine further outlines the Dozens as an oral contest, a joking relationship, a ritual of permitted respect in which the winner was recognized on the basis of verbal facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor . . . (If, however,) the losing player breaks the pattern and moves from ritual insult to personal insult [trouble results] . . . The Dozens, then, was a speech act with clearly understood governing principles. They could be violated, of course, but the cost of deviating from the normal pattern was anger, loss of control, and confusion. 22

Abrahams adds a few other important principles in his article "Playing the Dozens." According to him, the Dozens is typically a male ritual participated in by most adolescent males as indication of sexual awakening. (Other studies indicate that the Dozens are played more widely by women than Abrahams realized.) "Significantly," says Abrahams, "This first 'manly' step is done with a traditional manly tool, the power of words." 23

The implications of the Dozens scene between Jody and Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God are great. It was established in chapter one that the scene served as the structural turning point in the lives of Janie and Jody and in the novel as a whole.
Through the recreation of this scene, Hurston defies or rewrites many of the traditional features of the Dozens as outlined by Dollard, Levine and Abrahams. In order to view the contest within its context, it is necessary to rewrite part of that scene here. The contest begins when Janie cuts a plug of tobacco wrong for one of the townsmen. Jody immediately begins to attack Janie, moving from her ineffectiveness as a woman in business to her "impotence" as a woman in general, thereby breaking the rules of the Dozens in moving from ritual insult to personal insult.

Jody begins:

'I god almighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusaleh and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!

Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before.

'Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.'

'Wha-whut's dat you say, Janie? You must be out yo' head... Talkin' any such language as dat.'

'You de one started talkin' under people's clothes. Not me.'

'... 'Taint no use in gettin' all mad, Janie, 'cause Ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is.'

'Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither... Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin
say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' Britches, you look lak de change uh life' (pp. 121-123).

Several things happen in this scene. First, for the first time in the novel, Janie completely enters into the traditionally male world of power and control over words, and in so doing proves her ingenuity and ability not only to handle language, but to control it. She becomes a performer, and she proves her competence. Significantly, Janie comes out of the isolation imposed by Jody and becomes part of the community.

Through verbal contest, she also proves Jody's inability to handle language. She strips him of his "manly tool," the power of words. In so doing, she also strips him of his masculinity, traditionally tied to male control. She strips him of the facade behind which he has been hiding, robbing him of his "illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (p. 123).

Group response plays a significant role in the ritual. For Janie, group response shows the possibility for reward; for Jody, it indicates shame and humiliation. Sam Watson says, "'Great God from Zion! ... Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnigh.'" Lige Moss retorts, "'Ah ruther be shot with tacks than tuh hear dat 'bout mahself'" (p. 123). They praise Janie for her verbal
performance, and they taunt and pity Jody for his inability to perform effectively within the ritual of insult and in his role as a man.

Says Abrahams,

The verbal contests are especially important because they are indulged in by the very ones who are most conscious of their appearance of manliness. Being bested in a verbal battle in front of a group of men has immense potential repercussions because of the terror of disapproval, of being proved ineffectual and therefore effeminate in the eyes of peers.24

Abrahams' words hold true for Jody. He taunts Janie about her "lack of" femininity because he is conscious of his own lack of manliness, although he won't admit it to himself or any one else until Janie makes him face reality. The repercussions of the Dozens for Jody are serious because he breaks the rules of the contest with his personal insults. Anger, confusion and ostracism are his reward.

For Janie, the victor, this verbal act signifies meaningful participation and acceptance into the communal experience. It is her movement toward the integrity and freedom that Mary Helen Washington speaks of:

Those characters whose self-esteem and identity are based on illusion and false values [as are Jody's] are alienated from the black folk community, and conversely, those like Janie herself, who struggle against those self-alienating values toward a deeper sense of community, experience wholeness.25
It is exactly this sense of community and wholeness exhibited by the folkways, folk language and folklife of black culture that Janie moves toward and experiences in her search for fulfillment.
NOTES


13 Abrahams, pp. 143-144.

14 Abrahams, p. 112.


16 Bauman, p. 28.

17 Hemmenway, Introduction, Mules and Men, p. xxii.

18 Abrahams, p. 39.


20 Levine, p. 359.


24 Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle, p. 56.

CHAPTER THREE

JANIE: THE PORTRAIT OF THE BLACK INDIVIDUAL

In Black Portraiture in American Fiction, Catherine Starke offers this definition of "black individuals" as they appear in literature. Starke says that they are

. . . larger-than-life characters embodying in their portraits dominant cultural ideas and conscientious feelings that have persisted deviously in American literature . . . These figures . . . possess senses of identity that are separate and distinct from other characters, the ability to make some significant decisions within the plot structure, and the sense of trans-actional relatedness with other characters.¹

Starke later reiterates that the portraits

. . . depict blacks who have become or are in the process of becoming individuals, each possessing a strong sense of identity, independent responsibility, and reciprocal relatedness with whites. These portraits containing evidence of earlier cultural attitudes toward blacks are classified here as individuals in transition from subservience to self-assertion.²

Starke posits several points that are significant to the study of Their Eyes Were Watching God as a portrait of the black individual. From the opening lines of the novel, Hurston establishes that this is a woman's tale about to
unfold, and that this woman possesses a strong sense of identity and the ability to make important decisions, characteristics which help to establish her as an "individual." Hurston says that while men are forced to watch their dreams sail forever out of reach, "mocked to death by Time," "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. So the beginning of this was a woman . . . " (p. 9) This opening passage is central to the theme of the novel in several respects. It introduces Their Eyes Were Watching God as a novel of female questing in search of dreams, in search of truth, in search of a unique and "right" way of lie, in search of identity and individuality. We know that this is a quest fulfilled as Hurston's protagonist, Janie, relates her story to her friend Phoeby. Janie says, "'Ah been a delegate to de big 'association of life. Yesah! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been . . . " (p. 18) The rest of the novel is the unfolding of Janie's process of growth, of becoming an individual—a process which begins when Janie at six years old discovers for the first time that she is black, which extends through the trial following Tea Cake's death, and which seems to end only because Hurston brings the novel to a close. We do clearly recognize Janie as an individual when she has made the important decisions to reject the racist and sexist
impositions of her first two marriages and to accept the sexual and racial pride and equality that is revealed in the person of Tea Cake.

Thus, the opening passage is also a statement against the racial and sexual oppression that have traditionally and historically been imposed upon the black woman by the dominant white and male society. In her essay "This Infinity of Conscious Pain": Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition," Lorraine Bethel captures very candidly what it means to be black and female in a racist/sexist environment. Bethel says,

Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most hated identities in this racist/sexist country. Whiteness and maleness in this culture have not only been seen as physical identities, but codified into states of being and worldviews. The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms 'thinking like a woman' and 'acting like a nigger,' both based on the premise that there are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most perjorative concept in the white/male world view would be thinking and acting like a 'nigger woman.'

Janie can best be understood in terms of the racist/sexist theme by examining her relationship with Jody and Tea Cake. Tea Cake is representative of positive black culture. He accepts Janie as his equal. He accepts her as black and as woman. Jody represents the very opposite end of the black cultural spectrum. He is both sexist and racist in his behavior toward Janie. His sexist
attitude is revealed when he refuses to let Janie make a speech at the opening ceremony of the town's store. He says to Tony, "'Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home'" (p. 69).

Later, Jody debases the thinking of women by comparing them to "ignorant" animals. He says to Janie: "'Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves!'" (p. 110).

His racist attitude is revealed through the white capitalistic/materialistic value system that he attempts to impose upon Janie and that is exhibited through most of his behavior toward the other townspeople. He buys Janie a spittoon, while the other women spit in tomato cans. He wants to "dress her up" and have her sit quietly on a pedestal: she is the "bell-cow," while the other women are "the gang." He builds a big "white" house for he and Janie to live in, while the houses of the townspeople are made to look like "servant quarters" by comparison. His manhood, his actions are all motivated by his desire to be white. In Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman, Michele Wallace has this to say about black men like Jody, who are trapped in their bid for whiteness.

Wallace states

He acts as though he and the black woman are at war, as though he might win something by her destruction. He uses the debilitating game of sexual superiority as a substitute for establishing something worthwhile . . . That's how he's
kept his place. And just as fast as he can enter the black middle class, he begins to turn white, or what he thinks is white. 4

Wallace's statement most accurately captures both the sexist and racist attitude and behavior that is exhibited in the character of Jody. He is certainly at war with Janie. Jody wants Janie's total submission to not just himself, but to the white values that he purports, and any attempt on her part to rebel against his manliness and his dominance is to him a declaration of war, because she is rebelling against everything that he considers himself to be. But her acceptance or rejection of the white point of view he seeks to impose is only part of a larger issue. Janie's acceptance of Jody's white way of thinking as a way of life would necessitate her rejection of the black values that she must affirm in order to achieve identity. At the heart of Janie's search for identity, for individuality is her search for blackness, for her black roots. She cannot make the choice to repress her identity like Jody has made. He has, as Michele Wallace so accurately states,

    forgotten the hopes and aspirations of the slaves, forgotten what he's been through and all of the lessons of these four hundred years. By so doing he is making a choice: the complete submergence of his cultural identity. 5

Janie does not accept Jody's way of life; instead she
bides her time, hiding her feelings, thoughts and aspirations from him, saving them for another man. One day Jody slaps Janie, and the image of what she once thought him to be shatters. The death of his image acts as the "renting of the veil." She sees him for what he is and for what he has not allowed her to be. It is here that Janie's sense of identity and strength of character begin to emerge. Inwardly, she begins to think, feel and plan for Janie only. As Hurston says, "She had an inside and an outside and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (pp. 112-113). After Jody's death, Janie again goes in search of love and the horizon and in search of that cultural identity which throws off the sexist and racist attitude of Jody and the white/male society that he represents.

It is significant to note that the opening passage of the novel is a statement against and rejection of racist and sexist attitudes, not just for Janie, but for the black woman, and particularly for the novel's author, Zora Neale Hurston. For it is these very attitudes that Hurston came up against from black and white male critics and fellow artists alike, in her presentation and celebration of blackness in her fiction. As a black feminist critic, Lorraine Bethel provides the following intense and extremely well-put statement on the racial and sexual obstacles that Hurston and other black female artists came up against. Bethel says,
Black feminist literary criticism . . . enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievements Black women like Zora Neale Hurston made in establishing artistic and literary traditions of any sort, and to understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both their Black skins and their female bodies . . . . Literary criticism of Hurston's works often attacks her personally for simply conducting herself as what she was: a Black woman.6

Just as Hurston is a black woman artist seeking to express herself through her art work, so Janie is a black woman artist, who, in the words of Mary Helen Washington in her book Black-Eyed Susans, is "yearning for creation, needing form to express herself."7 This expressiveness and creativity seems to elude Janie except in her dreams where she visualizes becoming a blossoming pear tree. Hurston says, "She [Janie] had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her" (p. 25). Janie longs to know people and for them to know her. She wants to immerse herself in the cultural beauty that surrounds her in the expressions of the Eatonville townspeople and the folk on the muck.

Janie's dreams are constantly denied through her sexist and racist relationships with others. Her first dream dies when after her marriage to Logan Killicks, she discovers that marriage does not make love. Her second
dream dies in her marriage to Jody when the "spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor" (p. 111), and when Janie realizes that "she wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (p. 111) because all that he wants from her is her complete submission. Only in her marriage to Tea Cake is she finally able to find and express herself, her love, her blackness, all of which were denied expression in her previous relationships. In fact, Tea Cake encourages Janie's expression of herself and her participation in black culture. He treats her as an equal. He sees her as beautiful, black and woman, thereby lifting the racist/sexist restriction Janie has previously labored against. Tea Cake becomes the bee for her bloom, and the fulfillment of their relationship makes her dream a reality.

Janie becomes an artist in another real sense of the word. Hurston tells us that "Janie [was] full of that oldest human longing--self revelation" (p. 18). Their Eyes Were Watching God, as a story within a story, becomes Janie's form of expression and self revelation, as well as that of Hurston's. That Hurston allows Janie to narrate her own story (or technically, to render it through an authorial voice) is important in two respects. First, it helps to establish Janie as part of the "Black female folk aesthetic" rather than just a product of it. (The second reason, to be discussed later, is that Janie's narration of her story introduces the element of oral folk
tradition into the novel.) In his essay, "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties," Dudley Randall identifies some major points of the Black Aesthetic credo. Randall posits that "In the Black Aesthetic, individualism is frowned upon. Feedback from black people, or the mandates of self-appointed literary commissars, is supposed to guide the poet" and that "... In the Black Aesthetic, Negroes are always beautiful."³

As a perpetrator of the "Black female folk aesthetic," Hurston's position deviates significantly from that posited by Randall. Hurston sought to reveal the beauty of the Negro in her novels through her celebration and presentation of black culture and black values, as they are revealed through the behaviors and language of blacks. For Hurston, black was beautiful (black not necessarily being equated with skin tone), as exemplified by her portrayal of Janie and of the folk who in the words of Robert Hemenway, Hurston portrayed as "inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people: loving drama, appreciating wit, and most of all relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and bodacious company."⁹

But, Hurston sought an honest portraiture of her race, and that did not always mean that the Negro was beautiful. This seemingly contradictory statement becomes clearer when one looks at Hurston's portrayal of Mrs. Turner in Their Eyes Were Watching God. For Mrs. Turner, "white is right" and black is a thing to be hated. Hurston tells
us that Mrs. Turner was "... cruel to those more Negroid than herself in direct ratio to their Negroness" (p. 215). Her hatred of other blacks is reflective of a deeper self-hatred because of her own "black blood." She is a most pathetic figure in her bid to be part of a white culture that won't even acknowledge her as a decent human being. As Hurston says,

Mrs. Turner, like all the other believers had built an altar to the unattainable--Caucasian characteristics for all. Her god would smite her, would hurl her from pinnacles and lose her in deserts. But she would not forsake his altars (p. 216).

Mrs. Turner becomes a "tragic mulatto." Her tragedy lies in the fact that she has no true identity. She completely submerges her black cultural identity and is rejected in her declaration to be accepted by white culture. (Mrs. Turner is important structurally because she takes Jody's place as representative of the black/white racial theme. In the second half of the novel, she, like Jody, represents the middle class black who has white ideals and who hates other, lower class blacks.) Like Jody, she hides behind a facade of whiteness, that when stripped away makes her more deserving of our pity, than our anger or laughter.

Hurston deviates from Randall's definition of the Black Aesthetic in another aspect. According to Randall, "individualism was frowned upon." My first and most natural response to this is that Zora Neale Hurston was
most definitely an individual in the way she lived her life and in the art work that she presented. Her independence showed in her refusal to write on the accepted subject of the time—the race problem. It showed in her refusal to produce art as a response to or a revolution against white oppression. It showed in her determination to preserve and celebrate black culture. The question then becomes: How does Randall or the "Black Aesthetic" define individualism? Ron Karenga elaborates on this principle of individualism in his essay "Black Cultural Nationalism." As a spokesman for proponents of the Black Aesthetic, Karenga posits that

... individualism is a luxury that we cannot afford, moreover, individualism is, in effect, non-existent. For since no one is any more than the context to which he owes his existence, he has no individuality, only personality. Individuality by definition is 'me' in spite of everyone, and personality is 'me' in relation to everyone. The one, a useless isolation and the other an important involvement.10

Even with Karenga's distinction, I am forced to believe that Hurston possessed both individualism and personality, though possibly with the "'me' in relation to everyone" being more dominant, and the "'me' in spite of everyone emerging when that need for fierce independence or instinct for survival arose. This dichotomy of Hurston's character is captured in this comprehensive description by Robert Hemenway:
Personally, Zora Hurston was a complex woman with a high tolerance for contradiction. She could occasionally manipulate people to aid her career, and she was a natural actress who could play many roles. Physically, she was a high-energy person, capable of intense work . . ., possessed of a personal effervescence that frequently overwhelmed. She had an instinct for black culture, of taking white friends to storefront churches, telling down-home stories to those wishing to romanticize black life. Above all, she was a sophisticated writer who was never afraid to be herself. She was flamboyant and yet vulnerable, self-centered and yet kind, a republican conservative and yet an early black nationalist.11

Hurston resolves the conflict of individuality and communality in the character of Janie. Though not as outspoken, robust and "individualistic" as her creator, Janie is nonetheless individualistic defined as "'me' in relation to everyone" and at times "'me' in spite of everyone." Janie is a black nationalist in her own right. She is Hurston's embodiment of "black is beautiful"; black means strength; and black means inner freedom, pride and integrity. It is these characteristics that Janie moves toward in her quest for identity, and her quest is fulfilled only through her participation in and celebration of black culture. Here Janie moves toward community, and her individualism is defined as "'me' in relation to everyone." She rejects the Jody Starks and Mrs. Turners of the world, who present her with false images of blackness. She rejects the white materialistic
values that they represent. She rejects the sexist/racist attitudes of men like Logan and Jody. In fact, she isolates herself from anything that does not represent authentic black values. Here, Janie's sense of individualism is defined by "'me' in spite of everyone." The uniqueness and strength of her character is revealed in her ability to involve herself in black culture and draw from the good of it, while at the same time isolating herself from the negative. She isolates herself from the townspeople at the beginning of the novel after her return to Eatonville, telling her story only to her friend, Phoeby. She has no time for their sexist, jealous, judgmental, arrogant, nosy, "empty" attitudes as reflected in this portrayal by Hurston:

The men noticed her firm buttocks ... the great rope of black hair ... unraveling in the wind ... then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt ... The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day (p. 11).

When Phoeby relays to Janie that she is the object of the townspeople's gossip, Janie can care less. She tells Phoeby, "'If God don't think no mo' 'bout 'em then Ah do, they's a lost ball in de high grass'" (p. 16).

Janie's search for identity, for individualism (for blackness) involves her identification with and
participation in authentic black cultural practices. By allowing Janie to narrate her story to her friend Phoebe, Hurston is placing Janie in the arena of black folk tradition. In her essay, "'This Infinity of Conscious Pain," Lorraine Bethel explains the importance of this to the novel and to Janie's search for her roots through black culture. Bethel says,

In presenting Janie's story as a narrative related by herself to her best Black woman friend, Phoebe, Hurston is able to draw upon the rich oral legacy of Black female storytelling and mythmaking that has its roots in Afro-American culture.¹²

Janie represents the embodiment of black cultural values in other ways as seen in Bethel's continued analysis of Janie's identification with the Black woman's traditional culture. Bethel states:

Janie's narrative in Their Eyes reflects the Black female blues aesthetic—the very direct use to which Black women put language and song in order... to 'transcend the most brutal, painful and personal disasters in daily life and go on fighting—strong and alive.'¹³

Janie becomes somewhat mythic in her ability to overcome disaster—through two loveless marriages to a third in which she is forced to kill the only man that she ever loved. Yet she retains an inner and outer strength. This blues aesthetic as a "new form of self conception" and self expression provides an essential key to understanding
Janie's movement toward Starke's principle of individualism.

In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Levine emphasizes this new way that the blues provided for looking at and responding to the individual self, rather than the larger culture. Levine states that:

"The blues was the most highly personalized music that Afro-Americans developed. . . . in blues it was the singer who responded to himself or herself either verbally or on an accompanying instrument." 14

Levine elaborates further on the content of the blues by stating that

"The persona of the individual performer entirely dominated the song which centered upon the singer's own feelings, experiences, fears, dreams, acquaintances, idiosyncrasies." 15

Levine's latter point on the individual performer reflects Janie's individual performance. She dominates her own story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her narration is centered upon her feelings, her fears, dreams, experiences acquaintances, and the obstacles that are presented her in her quest for identity.

The blues aesthetic, as defined by Bethel, captures the essence of Janie's growth experience. Her relationships with others become obstacles that must be overcome or "transcended" not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually in her search for fulfillment, tied to her search for love. Throughout the novel, that search is
alluded to metaphorically as Janie's desire to be "a pear tree--any tree in bloom" (p. 28). The pear tree imagery becomes a measure of her emotional and spiritual growth through her three marriages. And, in the words of Hemenway, the pear tree experience "comes to represent the organic union Janie searches for throughout her life . . . "16 Logan represents the desecration of the pear tree. At first, she sees Jody as a "bee for her bloom," but later, Hurston says, "She [Janie] wasn't petal-open with him anymore" (p. 111). Tea Cake actually becomes the bee to Janie's blossom--"a pear tree blossom in the spring" (p. 161). Hurston captures Janie's dream for love--organic union--and fulfillment as a blossoming pear tree in this epiphanic moment that Janie experiences. Hurston writes:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the painting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation (p. 24).

This revelation becomes the guiding principle of Janie's search for love and life. The union described is at once a sexual, spiritual transcendence and offers new knowledge and a new world view of life--of what it means
to be a whole and complete individual, physically, emotionally and spiritually. It is significant that Hurston uses natural imagery—a pear tree in bloom, "dust bearing bees," etc.—to describe Janie's experience, because it sets up the three-fold union that exists between man and nature and God—a relationship which takes us back to the sacred world view of black slaves, and which thereby connects Janie's pear tree experience with her search for cultural roots, and by implication, with her cultural identity. Levine explores this sacred world view. He asserts that "for the most part when they [slaves] looked upon the cosmos they saw man, nature, and God as a unity; distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole." 17 Levine further explores the application of that religious consciousness to the lives of the slaves in this comprehensive and illuminating passage. He states that in the African cultures life was not random or accidental or haphazard. Events were meaningful; they had causes which man could divine, understand, and profit from. Human beings could "read" the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because man was part of, not alien to, the natural order of things . . . It was crucially necessary to understand the world because one was part of it, inexorably linked to it. Survival and happiness and health depended upon being able to read the signs that existed everywhere, to understand the visions that recurrently visited one, to commune with the spirits that filled the world: the spirit of the Supreme Being . . . the spirits of all the matter that filled the universe—trees, animals, rivers . . . the
spirits of contemporary human beings; the spirits of ancestors who linked the living with the unseen world.18

These are the spiritual truths that Janie must understand and express if she is to achieve the vision of the blossoming pear tree that has been set before her and if she is to achieve selfhood and individualism and the fullness of life that the tree imagery represents. Significantly, throughout the novel, whenever Janie is out of touch with the natural process, her view of love on the horizon, of being a pear tree in bloom are also out of reach. She becomes like men in the opening passage of the novel, whose dreams "sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight," only out of reach. Because of the harmony that exists among man and nature and God, when Janie is out of harmony with nature, she is also out of harmony with God and her fellow man; and if she is out of touch with her fellow man, she is necessarily out of touch with the black culture that defines her identity, and she is by implication out of touch with her individual self.

A classic example in the novel of this three-part harmony is the mule burial and surrealistic buzzard scene. Two ceremonies take place at the mule "drag-out," one provided by the townspeople, the other by the buzzards. Both reflect a sense of "order" that exists in death.
The townspeople "mocked everything human in death" (p. 95); Jody gives a eulogy for the mule; the women get mock happy. The ceremony provided by the buzzards as they wait to eat the carcass of the mule, indicates that there is unity and order in the animal world, as well as in the "real" world. Hurston portrays this order through the ritualized actions of the buzzards.

They [the buzzards] wanted to begin, but the Parson wasn't there, . . . The flock had to wait the white-headed leader . . . decorum demanded that he sit oblivious until he was notified . . . He finally lit on the ground and walked around the body to see if it were really dead. Peered into its nose and mouth . . . leaped upon it and bowed, and the others danced a response (pp. 96-97).

The next part of the ceremony is characterized by a call and response refrain with the Parson asking, "'What killed this man?'" and the chorus responding, "'Bare, bare fat'; the Parson asking, "'Who'll stand his funeral?'" and the response: "'We!!'" This official ceremony ends as the Parson "picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on" (p. 97).

This scene is important for its denotation of the natural order that exists in the animal realm, but in keeping with Levine's description of the slaves sacred world view and the three-fold oneness that must exist for "survival and happiness and health," the scene is most significant because Janie's survival and happiness are at
stake since she is on the outside of the festivities. Jody refuses to allow her to go to the burial, even though she was the first person to express compassion for the mule. She is not part of the ceremony and is therefore out of touch with that natural and spiritual union that is essential for her achievement of identity. Because she cannot participate with the townspeople, she is also out of touch with black culture.

Nanny, Logan and Jody become obstacles that Janie must recognize and overcome if she is ever to realize that wholistic vision of being a blossoming pear tree. Nanny's restriction to Janie's vision is represented in the limited world view that defines Nanny. After her pear tree revelation, Janie has these thoughts:

Where were the singing bees for her?
Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made (p. 25).

Life as Janie wants and needs to experience it exists somewhere down the road, but not in the restricted area of Nanny's house or her way of thinking. The horizon and individuality are on the other side of the gate. Janie's innocence and her search for individuality clash with Nanny's age-old and tragic slave experience and her desire that Janie have protection from the very blackness that
Janie seeks for fulfillment. After Jody's death, Janie reflects back on her relationship with Nanny and admits for the first time that she hated her grandmother, who had taken her dream to experiment with and experience life, to go in "search of people"—and had submerged that dream beneath a warped sense of life as being fulfilled when one possessed "things."

Nanny defines fulfillment and security as going after things, an attitude also exemplified by Logan and Jody, and she defines black and female as "the mule of the world." Janie has to rise against these restrictive and negative definitions of blackness in favor of true blackness and authentic black culture. This is what her stay on the muck and her relationship with Tea Cake represent. Tea Cake is the embodiment of the blues aesthetic and other cultural practices. He is in touch with the natural process of life. He is an itinerant worker; he moves from place to place making his living off the land, playing his guitar, gambling; he is in essence a free-spirited individual. With him, Janie retreats from the white/male sexist attitudes of Nanny, Logan and Jody into the "blackness" portrayed by Tea Cake and the muck community. With Tea Cake, Janie realizes the wholistic vision, physical, emotional and spiritual. She becomes the petal-open blossom and he becomes the bee. Together, they achieve the organic union that Janie has sought for. The representation of the "muck" symbolically becomes the
"black roots" that help to define Janie as a self-assertive and strong individual.

It remains to say that Hurston has created in Janie a black female heroine; a protagonist who dared to be black and female and who dared to be optimistic and youthful enough to "experiment with life and try out its possibilities"—a quality which according to Mary Burgher, in her essay "Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women," permeates Hurston's autobiography. Burgher states:

Dust Tracks is permeated with images of agony and urgency, yet Hurston never loses, until very near her death, the desire to experiment with life and try out its possibilities... Throughout the first half of her story she sees and defines herself as a symbol of the Black woman-child who accepts adult responsibility, yet remains forever youthful in her optimism and her curiosity about life. 19

Hurston illustrates this optimism, youthfulness and freshness through Janie's story—from a six year old child, who begins her cultural education when she shockingly realizes she is black—to a sixteen year old woman-child who is forced into marriage and adulthood through pressure from her grandmother—to a forty-year-old-woman/dreamer, who, through much pain, agony and heartaches, has found fulfillment in life.

Janie assumes heroic proportions also because through the creation of such a strong, black and female character,
Hurston is openly defying the white/male racist and sexist attitudes that seek to impose upon Janie's life in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and that did impose upon Hurston's life and work. As Alice Walker says, Hurston belonged to an "... America [that] does not support or honor us as human beings, let alone as blacks, women, or artists." In her essay on Hurston, Bethel also captures what she calls the "infinity of conscious pain" involved in being black and female and artist, and the great strength and courage it took for Hurston to take the stance that she did as a black female artist.

Hurston gives much of this courage and strength to her protagonist as seen by Janie's movement toward Blackness and selfhood and away from white and male definitions of Black womanhood, as imposed by related characters (namely, Nanny, Logan and Jody). Mary Helen Washington provides this concise statement in which she defines Janie's heroic stature in terms of this movement toward blackness and self-identity. Washington says

Janie assumes this heroic stature by her struggles for self-definition, for autonomy, for liberation from the illusions that others have tried to make her live by ... Moreover, she is always the aware voice, consciously undergoing the most severe tests of autonomy.

Not only does Janie constantly undergo these tests that Washington speaks of, but she also overcomes them, which provides the strength of her character. Janie
assumes almost "mythic" proportions in her realization of self. In spite of and because of her struggles and tests in her search for autonomy, especially her killing of Tea Cake, we see Janie as a strong individual at the end of the novel, who has been to the horizon and back, who has found out what living is all about, and who can sit back and make comparisons, who in the words of Catherine Starke has almost assumed that status of being a "larger-than-life" character. This strength is revealed in the following closing conscious thoughts and reflections of Janie as the novel ends:

Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much for life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see (p. 286).

Although, Janie possesses great strength, she is saved from perpetuating the myth of the superwoman as defined by Michele Wallace in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. Wallace presents this mythical image of the black woman:

It is a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and for heavy distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact stronger emotionally than most men . . . she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.25
Granting, Janie does become a woman of great strength, and does tolerate a lot of pain and misery in her search for individualism, but her pain and sufferings, her quest for cultural identity are too real, too true to life, especially the Black woman-identification that Janie shares with Hurston and all other black women in the struggle to assert the black woman self, and in their quest to be themselves: black, beautiful and female individuals in their own right. Because she is a believable character, capable of deep emotions, fears and hurt, and loneliness (by which I mean, she is capable of being and standing alone), of being an individual, we cannot classify Janie as a superwoman.

Hurston presented Janie for what she was—a heroic black woman, and the earliest to appear in the Afro-American literary tradition. As such, Hurston set a precedent for succeeding Twentieth Century black and women artists to follow the vision and the road that she paved—to create strong black female individuals and to stand as strong black female artists in their own right.

One has to view Hurston herself as a strong black female individual. As an artist, she experienced the "cosmic loneliness"; she dreamed the dreams and saw the vision for those who were to follow. She endured the harsh criticisms with courage and strength to create a literature which served as a rich repository for black culture and black folklore and which gave rise to the
strength of the black female character.

Hurston's final vision and the guiding force behind her writing is summed up from a feminist and black point of view in this passage by Bethel. The vision provides

... the concept that when Black women come to each other as Black woman-identified women, we are at the end of our pilgrimage to know and be ourselves. Then and not before, we know peace and love and what goes with these things.

Hurston set forth the vision for those who were black, female, and artist; she set it forth for any who would catch the vision and work together to make it a total reality.
NOTES


2Starke, p. 171.

3Lorraine Bethel, "'This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition," in All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982), p. 178.


5Wallace, p. 124.

6Bethel, pp. 178-179.


11Hemenway, p. 5.


15 Levine, p. 222.

16 Hemenway, p. 233.

17 Levine, p. 32.

18 Levine, p. 58.


21 Bethel, p. 184.


24 Bethel, p. 187.
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