

# Burdens from Men and the Wisdom of Women: Marriage and Feminism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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## *Abstract*

*Janie Crawford, the strong and independent female heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, marries three different men. This essay focuses on Janie's marriages to Joe Starks and Tea Cake and the enduring question from feminists critics of whether or not Janie finds her voice. Through Janie's story and her marriages, Hurston offers an essential insight into the experience and wisdom of African-American women and their relationships with their community, the world, and themselves.*

The heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford, is bold and unafraid, a woman who makes decisions and independently pursues her own idea of what love should be. Feminist theorists have long seen her as a "feminist who simply walks away from her first loveless marriage, plays the dozens with her second husband, and shoots her third" (West 14). This view, though, oversimplifies Janie's marriages. Janie is first married to Logan Killicks, leaves him to marry Joe Starks, and after Joe dies, marries Tea Cake. During her marriages, she endures treatment from her husbands that she had no idea they are capable of when she first marries them. Focusing on her second marriage to Joe Starks and her third marriage to Tea Cake reveals the way these men pass on the burdens they are carrying to Janie, leaving her to deal with the aftermath of their flaws and the emotions they refuse to manage. Some of these burdens, especially the burden of jealousy and violence that Tea Cake passes to Janie when he beats her, have presented feminists with dilemmas. Does Janie find her own voice throughout the novel? How can feminists explain Janie's marriage to Tea Cake and her silence after he beats her?

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published in 1938, any questions of feminism, evaluations of the romantic relationships in the novel, or male violence depicted, were virtually ignored. Reviewers such as W. A. Hunton disparaged Hurston for not explicitly confronting racial issues, declaring that she "fail[ed] to perceive that the prison of color merely stands in the shadow of the prison of class" (Hunton, *Their Eyes* 72). By discounting Janie's story, Hunton and other African-American male critics not only ignored the physical and mental abuse Janie suffers, but they also corroborated the belief that feminist issues did not matter. In her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith calls attention to this issue, saying that "when black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics" (134). Smith and other Black feminist theorists have brought to light many complex and nuanced viewpoints on Janie's journey. Smith argues that "literature by women provides *essential* insights into female experience" (133). Through Janie's story and her marriages, Hurston offers an essential insight into the experience of African-American women and their relationships with men.

Janie describes her “conscious life” as beginning on a beautiful spring afternoon watching the pear tree in her backyard bloom (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 10). As she watches the bees flying between the flowers, she has an epiphany and realizes, “So this was a marriage!” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 11). She begins to question and search for answers, wishing she, too, could be a “tree in bloom” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 11). While this moment begins Janie’s search for love and represents her discovery of her own sexuality, it also represents a search for springtime, for the ability to be fully alive, wrestle with life, find her own freedom, and make her own choices. At this moment, she sees everything about the pear tree in bloom as beautiful and radiant, without noticing the dirt, dust, and decay that is also part of the natural world.

After Janie has this epiphany, she has a key conversation with her grandmother, Nanny, who attempts to instill some caution into Janie’s independent and searching spirit by sharing her wisdom with Janie. Nanny discovers Janie, who has been awakened with the desire for love, kissing a boy that Nanny considers lazy and irresponsible (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 12). Realizing that Janie is growing up, Nanny decides it is time to tell her that she has arranged for Janie to marry Logan Killicks, who will give Janie the safety and security that she and her daughter—Janie’s mother—never experienced. When Janie expresses her dismay over this marriage, Nanny attempts to explain her reasons, saying, “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 14). Nanny knows through experience that not only do white men have dominant control over the world she lives in, but that they cast whatever loads they wish onto Black men. While Black men are forced to carry these loads, they in turn pass on their burdens to their women. Nanny also sees the ways black women have an increased burden passed on to them, though, by the men in their lives. These burdens are sometimes physical burdens, such as when Tea Cake beats Janie. Another burden is the emotional burdens passed on to their wives, such as when Joe verbally abuses Janie because of his own insecurities. Janie inherits pain and betrayal from the burdens her husbands pass on to her.

In her essay, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” Patricia Hill Collins explains that many African-American women experience two ways of knowing something: knowledge and wisdom (758). Collins offers her theory that “living life as Black women requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women’s survival. African-American women give such wisdom high credence in assessing knowledge” (758). After experiencing a situation that brings knowledge, the bare facts of that knowledge are then turned into a greater wisdom. Nanny has gained this kind of wisdom through observing and experiencing her world and wants to convey her wisdom about race and gender to Janie. Nanny does not want Janie to become a worn-down, overworked mule, so her answer is to arrange a marriage for Janie to Logan Killicks--the most prosperous man in their community, who she believes will give Janie a comfortable and better life.

Janie first discovers the weight of the burdens Black men pass to Black women during her marriage to Joe Starks. Marrying Joe Starks initially gives Janie a way to escape the unhappy marriage to Logan that Nanny had thrust upon her. At first she tried to create a life with Logan for her grandmother’s sake, believing her grandmother that she would eventually love Logan (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 21). She soon realizes, however, that marriage does not automatically create love. When Joe Starks appears and offers a new life and a chance for love, Janie decides to simply leave Logan.

While Joe does not fully exemplify the “sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” that Janie is searching for, he does offer a chance at a “far horizon,” so Janie takes it (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 29). Instead of a marriage that represents springtime, though, Joe silences her by giving her no chance to express her own voice, invalidating her desire to place their marriage before his love of being the mayor, criticizing her for little mistakes, demanding that she cover her hair by wearing head rags, and shaming her when she wants to go to the funeral of Matt Bonner’s mule (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 43, 46, 49, 55, 60). Jennifer Jordan analyzes how the novel “skillfully expose[s], through its delineation of Janie’s marriage to Joe Starks, the devaluation and aloneness of the middle-class woman whose sole purpose is to serve as an ornament and symbol of her husband’s social status” (108). Joe sees Janie as an extension of himself and does not allow her any freedom, self-expression, or goals separate from his plans for her.

After years of Joe belittling and controlling Janie, she comes to a crisis that causes her to emotionally disassociate herself from her marriage. One night Joe slaps her when the dinner Janie makes him is not up to his standards and in that moment, she realizes that her image of the man she thought she had married has shattered. She feels that she “ha[s] an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 72). According to Tracy L. Bealer, “Janie’s response to Joe’s verbal and physical abuse proves that masculinist domination provokes sensory detachment in women in a way that makes emotional and physical love impossible” (317). In order to survive Joe’s sense of male superiority and his abuse, Janie separates her inner and outer selves. M. Genevieve West calls this division of Janie’s self a “coping strategy for dealing with gender oppression and domestic violence” (23). Joe’s abuse effectively kills any love Janie had left for him. Part of Janie feels like a “shadow of herself,” and this is the part that now goes through the motions of her outward life with Joe, while another part of her detaches and tries to “mak[e] summertime out of lonesomeness” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 77). The burdens of his expectations and selfishness have pounded her down until she is completely spent. She feels alone and abandoned by Joe, so she finds a metaphorical space where she can make her own summertime. She does not have the springtime she thought she might find with Joe, so she searches for something else.

She begins gaining the courage to disagree with Joe and speaking up when he criticizes her. When Joe humiliates her by calling her old in front of the patrons of their store, instead of placating him, Janie finds her own voice. Dianne F. Sadoff declares that this is the moment when Janie “acquires the power to speak” (17). She turns his words around and gives them back to him when she exclaims, “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (Hurston 79). Joe dies soon after. Sadoff argues that “Narrative structure implies that Janie’s learning to speak out, her willingness to use her tongue as a weapon against masculine domination, kills [Joe]” (17). While Sadoff’s view could be seen as reaching too far in her analysis, Janie has certainly overcome her fear of Joe and learned to voice her own opinion. Janie sends “her face to Joe’s funeral, and herself went frolicking with the springtime across the world” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 88). Her heart has already grieved because her marriage to Joe has died a long time ago; she is now free to live for herself and make her own choices. She burns all her head rags, wears her hair down, and declares that “she would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 89). Having already begun to extricate herself from the burdens Joe placed on her even before his death, she is now free to be her true self.

Despite doing her best to choose freedom and love, Janie again experiences a man passing on burdens to her through her marriage to Tea Cake. At first, Janie expresses indifference to the

many men who show romantic interest during the six months after Joe's death. She also tells her best friend Pheoby that she "jus' loves dis freedom" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 93). However, immediately after expressing how much she loves her freedom, she meets and quickly marries Tea Cake, who she believes "could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree in the spring" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 106). He brings her happiness and love, but also displays some concerning behavior, such as stealing Janie's two hundred dollars (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 118). Sadoff comments that Tea Cake's actions cause "the reader [to] distrust Tea Cake almost as soon as he and Janie settle down" (21). Tea Cake later becomes consumed with jealousy when Mrs. Turner tries to convince Janie to abandon Tea Cake to be with her brother. Even though Janie has no interest in this brother, Tea Cake has a "brainstorm" and slaps Janie several times (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 147). Hurston is explicit that Tea Cake beating Janie is "not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (147). Sadoff believes that "as jealousy becomes an issue in [Tea Cake] and Janie's marriage, Tea Cake begins physically to abuse his wife and so to resemble [Joe] Starks, the manipulator of male power and privilege" (Sadoff 21). Tea Cake is carrying burdens of jealousy and fear because he is insecure about his worth to Janie. He buys into the belief that by physically dominating her, he can control her and his fears will be erased.

For feminists, Tea Cake's jealousy and violence are the most problematic aspects of Janie's marriage to him. Jordan relates that "Janie's marriage to Tea Cake is paradoxically interpreted by various critics either as a continuation of male domination that is overcome through Janie's killing of Tea Cake or as a marriage of true and equal minds in which Janie arrives at self-expression and self-esteem" (109). Feminist critics are left with few other interpretations of Janie and Tea Cake's marriage other than seeing Tea Cake as an abusive misogynist or passing over Tea Cake's abuse of Janie to offer an overly idealized view of their marriage. Bealer seems to offer a slightly more nuanced view when she argues that "it is not love itself that is pathological in the novel, but rather the racist fictions that Tea Cake imports that in turn activate a latent sexism that causes him to abuse Janie" (319). While Bealer acknowledges Tea Cake's treatment of Janie as abusive, she blames the "racist fictions" of those like Mrs. Turner who believe that Black individuals with lighter skin are superior to those with darker skin, as the cause of Tea Cake's abuse. This view, however, implies an excuse for the abuse any man inflicts on a woman if there is any racist "cause" to be blamed for his actions. Bealer's argument also does not consider the fact that Tea Cake makes a choice to beat Janie to ease his own male insecurities. Tea Cake chooses not to control his emotions and instead uses the masculine rationalization that beating her will prove his ownership of her and assuage his fears. By making this choice, he sets aside love in favor of control over Janie.

Mary Jane Lupton also points out that any interpretation of Janie and Tea Cake's marriage must consider that the violent death of Tea Cake ends their intense relationship. When Lake Okechobee floods, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog infected with rabies (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 166). The rabies causes Tea Cake to hallucinate and he attempts to shoot Janie. In self-defense, Janie shoots and kills him (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 183). As Lupton illuminates, "literary love affairs seem to end in abandonment...or in death...In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, the unheard of happens. Rather than sacrificing herself at the altar of love, Janie shoots the rabid Tea Cake to save her own life—instinctively, without premeditation" (49). Hurston makes a fascinating choice to not give her lovers an ending that results in both their deaths or in Janie sacrificing her life for Tea Cake. His death leaves Janie free and alone again, but could also be seen as Hurston ensuring that Tea Cake does not die as a hero. Perhaps Hurston did not write a heroic death for Tea Cake because he

physically abused and attempted to control Janie, which tainted his status as the perfect love of Janie's life. Tea Cake's death comes through Janie shooting him to protect herself from also getting the rabies infection he had contracted. He does not die protecting Janie; she must kill him to protect herself. Janie chooses herself and her own life instead of a literary death beside him. In the end, Janie regains her freedom from Tea Cake's burdens of violence and domination by saving her own life.

Feminist critics not only have varied interpretations of Janie's marriages; they also differ widely on whether or not they believe Janie finds her voice by the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Jordan insists that Janie "never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole. As the novel ends, Janie chooses isolation and contemplation, not solidarity and action" (108). Jordan's critique blames Janie, who is grieving when she returns to Eatonville, for not being part of the community of women that "made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 2). This gossiping group of women is not offering a safe place or true community to Janie. Jordan also discounts Janie's friendship with Pheoby as not representing *enough* of a community.

In contrast, many feminist critics believe that Janie does find her voice during the course of the novel. Bealer affirms that "Janie does learn to assert her own will and subjectivity throughout the course of the novel" but "she must constantly combat the pervasive hierarchies that make black women vulnerable to oppression" (312). Bealer believes Janie finds her voice while acknowledging Janie's struggle against male superiority and violence. The marital conflicts Janie is subjected to do not negate the times Janie finds her voice, however, they simply reflect the battle against the combination of racist and sexist domination that black women, then and now, have had to combat. Sadoff also believes Janie "acquires the power to speak, ... finds her voice and so learns to tell stories and create metaphors" (17). Since the novel is framed by Janie telling her story to Pheoby, the entire narrative reflects how Janie is making sense of her story and finding her voice as she tells it to her friend.

Literary critics and feminist theorists often see whether or not Janie finds her voice as an either/or issue—either Janie finds her voice or she does not. However, life is never that clear cut. Women of Janie's time and modern women alike grapple with finding their voices, losing them, then regaining them. Hurston wanted to show African-American women as real and complex. In her essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston expressed her frustration that publishers avoided works about black men and women's romantic relationships out of their belief that no one wanted to read works written by or about African-Americans unless they centered around racial issues (55). Hurston wanted to depict the realistic ways that black men and women "can and do experience discovery of the numerous subtle faces as a foundation for a great and selfless love, and the diverse nuances that go to destroy that love as with others" (Hurston, "What White Publishers" 56). Hurston believed that in order for white people to believe that black people had the same emotions and intelligence that they did, they had to see accurate portrayals of black couples' relationships—even ones that were complex and problematic. While critics were disapproving of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for not dealing with racial tensions, they misunderstood that Hurston was trying to combat racism by showing that black men and women and their relationships are just as difficult, complicated, beautiful, and intense as white men and women's.

At the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as Janie finishes telling her story to Pheoby, she says, “you must tell ‘em dat love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 191). The individual differences of each kind of love, which Janie has learned through all of her marriages, are exactly what Hurston explained she wanted to portray in “What White Publishers Won’t Print.” This ending also reveals that Hurston includes and anticipates the values that later Black feminist theorists would detail. Janie shares her concrete experience with Pheoby, which Patricia Hill Collins proclaims as the wisdom that is essential for Black women (Collins 759). Also, through telling her story to Pheoby, Janie displays the tradition of oral story-telling that Collins points to as “invok[ing] the relationships and connectedness provided by use of dialogue” (764). Janie has gained the wisdom that love is not a grindstone, treating all things underneath its grinding action as the same, as things to wear down equally. Instead, she sees love as being like the sea—different for each couple that experiences it. Unlike the blossoming pear tree that Janie set out to look for, she finds that love is like the ocean, ever varied, unpredictable, yet having an equal capacity for destruction and healing. Janie’s story offers empowerment to women through its wisdom and its accurate reflection of the sorrow, pain, injustice, hope, and freedom that women, black and white, experience. Her story affirms women and offers them hope to find, keep, or regain their own voices.

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