

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Lexile 580L

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel by author Zora Neale Hurston. It was published in 1937. It became Hurston's most popular work. Hurston was African American. She was part of the **Harlem Renaissance**. This was an important cultural and artistic movement. It took place in Harlem in the 1920s. Harlem was a neighborhood in New York City. It had mostly African American residents. Many people in the 1970s enjoyed the novel and Hurston's other writings.

Background

Their Eyes Were Watching God is about a character named Janie Starks. Janie is an African American living in a small town in Florida called Eatonville. It is an all-black community. Other parts of Florida and much of the United States are **overtly** racist in the 1930s. Something that is overt is out in the open and not a secret. At this time, it was dangerous for African Americans to speak freely. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, was a slave. Janie's world views have been shaped by slavery and racism. Janie's life is also limited by racism.

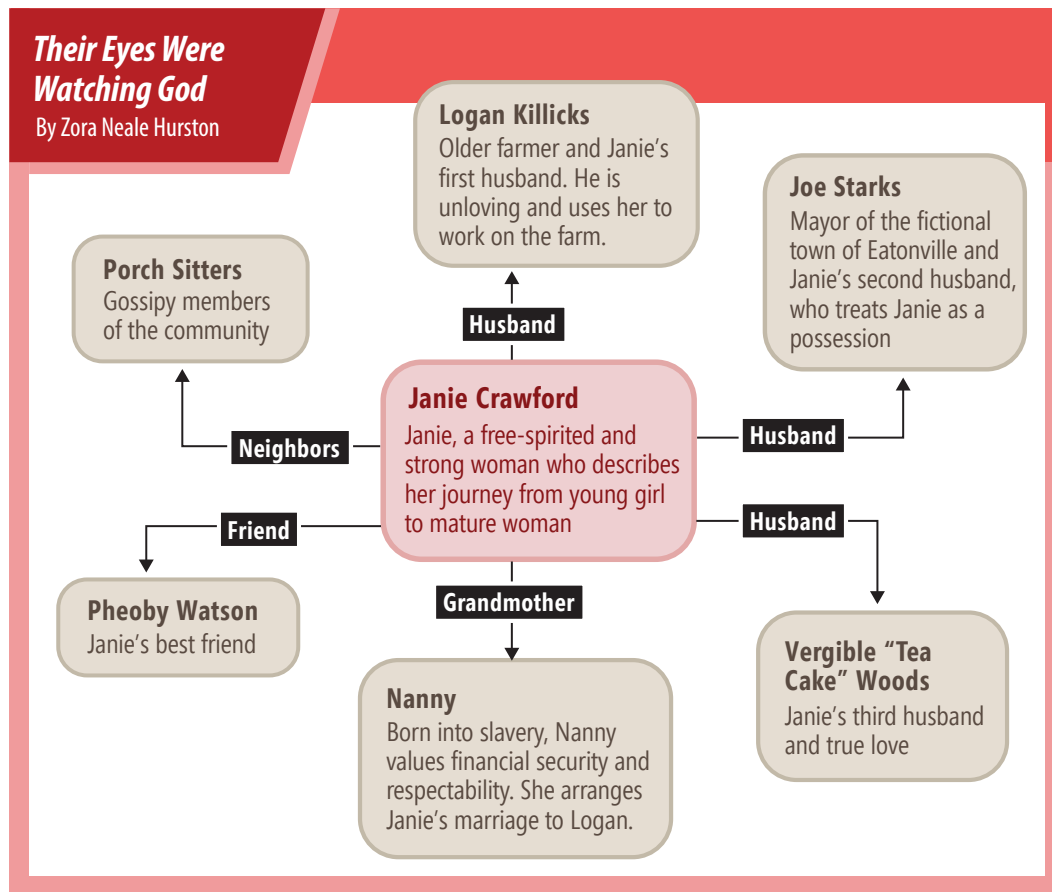
Plot

Janie is raised mostly by her grandmother. Janie's mother ran away when Janie was young. Janie and her grandmother are very close. Nanny tells Janie about the hardships she faced during her life. Her grandmother hopes that Janie will have a better life. Nanny thinks Janie should get married as quickly as possible. Janie does not want to. But she listens to her grandmother.

Janie marries a man named Logan Killicks. Logan is older than Janie. He is a farmer and is not romantic. She does not really love him. This marriage does not last long. After this, Janie marries a man named Joe Starks. He is a leader in the community. Janie is married to him for about twenty years. But she is not very happy in this relationship, either. Finally, Janie meets a man named Tea Cake. Janie falls in love with him. She is finally truly happy. The book follows Janie's life for forty years. She learns and grows because of her different experiences and relationships.

Later Popularity

Hurston published the book in 1937. It received mixed reviews from **critics**. Critics are people who give their opinion about books. Some fellow African Americans did not like the book. Some people thought the book was not serious enough. They thought that Janie's story was not



Brief description of the main characters from the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

meaningful. They also thought Hurston's book was not respectful to its black characters. The book went out of print. Hurston died in 1960 before the book became very popular.

In the 1970s, an African American author named Alice Walker published a magazine article, or true story, about Hurston. Walker thought Hurston was an important author. Walker wanted more people to read Hurston's book. Walker **promoted**, or talked about, Hurston's work. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became very popular. It became famous because of Walker. Eventually students in schools were even reading the book. People who enjoyed the book thought it told an important story. It told about an African American woman's life during a time when African American women's stories were often ignored. The television personality Oprah Winfrey enjoyed the book. She helped turn the book into a movie. In 2005, the movie *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was released. People around the world continue to read and be influenced by Hurston's novel.

Bibliography

Books

Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. J. B. Lippincott, 1937. This is the novel that Hurston wrote.

Websites

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“Introduction.” *EDSITEment!* <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/their-eyes-were-watching-god-folk-speech-and-figurative-language>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2017. Gives basic information about the Hurston, her novel, and the novel’s plot.

“Plot Overview.” *SparkNotes*. <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/eyes/summary.html>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2017. Reviews the plot of the novel.

■ By Elizabeth Mohn

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COMPREHENSION TEST

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which of these did Jamie experience herself?
 - A. racism
 - B. slavery
 - C. being famous
 - D. running away
 2. With whom does Janie find true happiness?
 - A. Nanny
 - B. Logan Killicks
 - C. Joe Starks
 - D. Tea Cake
 3. When did *Their Eyes Were Watching God* **first** become very popular?
 - A. the 1930s
 - B. the 1960s
 - C. the 1970s
 - D. the 2000s
-

Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

4. Something that is _____ is out in the open and not a secret.
5. _____ are people who give their opinion about books.

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