



THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

By Zora Neale Hurston

JOURNAL PROMPTS – Respond to one prompt weekly in a detailed, comprehensive one or two page typed essay. Use specific references from the novel to support your position. Journal entries will be due each Friday. Late journals will be accepted with a 25% penalty for each late day.

1. What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?
2. Write a comprehensive essay on the use of figurative language throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Include examples and in-depth analysis of each.
3. How does Janie's journey--from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades--represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions? What elements of individual action and communal life characterize that immersion? **[CH]**
4. To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice?
5. Compare and contrast the characters of Joe Starks and Tea Cake. Consider their personalities, motivations and relationships. What kind of character is each man? What motivates each of them? What kind of relationship do they have with Janie and the people around them? How are their views on life similar or different?
6. In what ways does Janie conform to or diverge from the assumptions that underlie the men's attitudes toward women? How would you explain Hurston's depiction of violence toward women? Does the novel substantiate Janie's statement that "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business"? **[CH]**
7. What is the importance in the novel of the "signifyin'" and "playin' de dozens" on the front porch of Joe's store and elsewhere? What purpose do these stories, traded insults, exaggerations, and boasts have in the lives of these people? How does Janie counter them with her conjuring?

8. Why is adherence to received tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?
9. After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "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." Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others?
10. Compare *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which also contains references to African American folklore. Explore the references to superstition, magic, slavery, depiction of the white man, God, the Devil, dialect, etc. Compare and contrast the two novels, using examples from the text to support your response. [CH]
11. Hurston uses nature – the pear tree, the ocean, the horizon, the hurricane – not only as plot device but also as metaphor. How do they function as both?
12. The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?
13. Many readers consider the novel a coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each?
14. Discuss the following quote by W.E.B. DuBois: "There is in this world no such force as the force of a person determined to rise. The human soul cannot be permanently chained." Explain how this relates to Janie's life. Use specific examples of struggles, defeats and victories.
15. How important is Hurston's use of vernacular dialect to our understanding of Janie and the other characters and their way of life? What do speech patterns reveal about the quality of these lives and the nature of these communities? [CH]
16. What are the differences between the language of the men and that of Janie and the other women? How do the differences in language reflect the two groups' approaches to life, power, relationships, and self-realization? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
17. The elaborate burial of the town mule draws from an incident Hurston recounts in *Tell My Horse*, where the Haitian president ordered an elaborate Catholic funeral for his pet goat. Although this scene is comic, how is it also tragic?. How does the image of the black woman as "the mule of the world" become a symbol for the roles Janie chooses or refuses to play during her quest? [CH]

18. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning? What was Zora Neale Hurston's motivation to use this as the title of her novel? Does it work? Is it an appropriate title? Explain. [CH]
20. How do the imagery and tone of the last few pages of the novel connect with other moments in the novel? Does Janie's story end in triumph, despair, or a mixture of both?
21. In her marriage to Jody, Janie is dominated by his power. At several points, however, it is obvious that he feels threatened by her. Why does Jody need to be in control of everyone around him? How does Janie threaten Jody and his sense of control?
22. As the title indicates, God plays a huge role in the novel, but this God is not really the Judeo-Christian god. If this is true, what is God in the novel and how is this force related to nature? Discuss the connections between spirituality and nature (the sun, moon, sky, sea, horizon), citing examples throughout the novel. [CH]
24. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is concerned with issues of speech and how speech is both a mechanism or (function of) control and a vehicle of liberation. Yet Janie remains silent during key moments in her life. Discuss the role of silence in the book and how that role changes throughout the novel. [CH]
25. Explain the symbolism of (a) Janie's hair, (b) the pear tree and the horizon, and/or (c) the hurricane. You may choose to write on one or all three, but you must trace the status of these symbols throughout the novel and discuss appropriate examples for each.
26. After years of polite submission to her male counterparts, Janie gains her voice in Chapters 7 and 8. Prior to her defiance of Joe, Janie observes the way Daisy, Mrs. Bogle, and Mrs. Robbins are treated by the men. These three Eatonville women provide caricatures—quick, stereotyped sketches—of what it means to be a black woman in this small Florida town. In what ways do these caricatures highlight a larger disrespect toward women? How do they show Janie's increasing difficulty with the way men judge women? [CH]
- 27.
28. In 1937, the novelist Richard Wright (*Native Son*) reviewed *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He argued: "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes 'the white folks' laugh...The novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." How would you answer his criticism? [CH]
29. What is the relationship between Janie's silent voice and her cloistered hair? What happens to Janie after "she tore off [her] kerchief... and let down her plentiful hair" (Chapter 8)? How does her hair reflect her womanhood? [CH]

30. Compare Janie with Delia from Hurston's short story "Sweat." "Sweat" is one of the few stories Hurston published during the Harlem Renaissance. How do both stories demonstrate Hurston's use of black idiom? **[CH]**

Their Eyes Were Watching God | Sample Essay Outlines

Topic #1

Throughout her life, Janie has to fight what is expected of her by other people. Follow her life in the novel, and comment on how she battles these perceptions.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *The people with whom Janie lived tried to restrict her to an understood, stereotypical role, but Janie was able to free herself from these accepted roles.*

II. Nanny

- A. Thinks a woman should be safe
- B. Encourages Janie to marry for convenience
- C. Is satisfied with Janie's life, though Janie herself is not

III. Logan