

Name: _____

***THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* CRITICAL LENS ESSAY**

DUE: 22 MAY 2017

For your essay for this unit, you will analyze the text through a lens. This means that you will approach the text from a specific angle. This narrows what you are looking for in the text as and after you read.

We will be using one of three main lenses to view *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

- Feminist and Gender Criticism
- Economic Determinist/Marxist Criticism
- Critical Race Theory

As we read the last chapters of the book, keep the following prompts in mind, gathering quotations as you go.

- **Feminist and Gender Criticism**

- This novel was forgotten for a long time, in many ways it was pushed out of public view by political, often male, literary figures. But it was revived in the 1970's by a growing feminist movement. Please describe *why* this novel appeals to feminists. What qualities does Janie exude that make her a feminist hero? What techniques and aspects does Hurston use to make this novel appeal to feminists?
- Self-Actualization is the realization of one's true potential and person. It is, in a sense, being who we were meant to be, living up to our potential. In many ways, Hurston's novel is one about self-actualization. Please discuss this in relation to the book. Does Janie realize her true potential? How is this represented in the novel? What obstacles and experiences does she have to endure to get there? What, specifically, is her "true potential?"
- In what ways do men and women reinforce their traditional roles and break out of them? How does gender constrain and give power both to men and women in this text?

- **Economic Determinist/Marxist Criticism**

- Janie is married off to Logan to improve her class and to avoid the rape that her mother and grandmother suffered. Then, she further ascends the social ladder with Joe. However, in many ways her life is limited by her life as the mayor's wife. When she marries Tea Cake, how does her class change? Why is this significant? Does her class change help or hinder her self-actualization. What is this text saying about the relationship between class and happiness?
- What class distinctions are present in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? How does the economic situation of characters impact what happens to them in this text?
- This text exists in the world of sharecropping, Jim Crow laws, and the recent legacies of slavery. The economic limitations of these institutions are still being dealt with in 2017. How does this impact the world of this text? Does Hurston ignore these factors, and if so, why?

- **Critical Race Theory**

- Discuss the importance of Janie's journey in the novel - from West Florida, to Eatonville, and then to the Everglades - in relation to the concept of racial culture in Hurston's book. While this book has been praised by feminists, Janie's journey through the distinct black cultures of the South can be analyzed through a racial and cultural lens. Please dissect this journey through such a lens.
- Janie and her mother were both conceived by the rape committed by white men. Janie's light skin is admired and even "worshipped" by Mrs. Turner. How does race play into this text? Knowing that ethnic phenotypes exist based on ancestry, but that racial identity is socially constructed and not inherent or biological, what is this text saying about race and power?

You will pick one of these lenses to "look through", focusing on the questions and priorities that your lens cares about.

Remember that analyzing through a lens does not seek to figure out what the author "meant" in writing their book. Rather, it seeks to *make meaning* looking at a work from a particular perspective.

These are not the only lenses. If you want to research a different lens and write through that perspective, you can do so as long as you meet with me and show that you have thoroughly researched the lens. Examples of additional lenses:

- Archetypal
- Reader-Response
- Psychological/Psychoanalytic
- Queer Theory
- Post-Colonialism