

Literary Analysis Paper #4

*Their Eyes Were*

*Watching God*



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Our emotions are the single most human characteristics that we possess, making them nearly impossible to encapsulate. The oppression that some of us might face may seem so great that a limitless lexicon still won't suffice in order to convey our feelings. Similarly, the eternal feeling of love, an intangible force that drives many of us in our actions sometimes will never receive the justice it deserves through concrete diction. Rather, sometimes the only way to convey such internal feelings is by externalizing it in our environment. Zora Neil Hurston does this in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She does this on every level, ranging from very broad and general symbols that can be tweaked to different situations, to very specific images that convey an in depth and singular message. This range allows Hurston to work her metaphors through each situation on almost every sentence, while still flooding the novel with sensory detail. This integration between symbolism and nature is essential in bringing the book to life. Using ever-lasting images of the sun, trees, and animals as analogies allow the reader to fully visualize the beauty in the ambience of Hurston's novel. These extended metaphors serve the dual purpose of fascinating imagery, while adding to the diverse and dynamic tone of the book.

Hurston primarily employed her metaphors through timeless and broad images such as the sun and others that contributed to the overall setting in the book. This is one of the easiest ways to not only establish the southern environment, but also hint towards Janie's moods and the atmosphere in each scene. "It was a spring afternoon in Western Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree."(Hurston 27) This line specifically refers to when Janie first encounters Johnny Taylor and has her sexual awakening. Along with establishing the environment, references to spring and blossomings allude to the rebirth of Janie's character and personality. These same exact references of the seasons are so general however, that they can be

tweaked to fit almost any tone throughout the whole book. “Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town to the sun. So Janie had another day.”(Hurstun 69) This sentence is now referring to later on in the book, when Janie is trapped in her stagnant relationship with Joe Starks. Rather than embracing the beautiful image of the sun or the season, as done previously, Hurston instead showcases words such as “another” and “everyday” in order to hone in on the repetitious cycle of Janie’s relationship. Thus, Zora Neil Hurston is able to effortlessly shift the tone of the book while still painting the picture of the environment for the reader.

Metaphors are also used in this manner by Hurston on a narrower level in the form of trees and sensory images specific to that point in the book. This blend of general images that are distinct to the atmosphere give the reader a deeper level of understanding of the novel, while still retaining the relatability that everyday symbols can provide for people. The most notable example of this would be Hurston’s esoteric employment of agriculture throughout her literary work. “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 panting breath of the breeze.”(Hurstun 28) Every sensory detail, every adjective was carefully chosen to fit alongside the vibe of that moment in the book. This complex imagery adds to the broad strokes Zora had painted earlier by giving exact images that were special to that plot point. The bees embraced the idea of pollination and lust, the pear tree alludes the shape of the pear to a sense of femininity. Also, the alto chant of the breeze combined with the “panting breath” of the breeze creates a magical and youthful atmosphere for Janie’s awakening. Accordingly, Hurston had the freedom in choosing very different metaphors in other points of the book. “The bed was no longer a daisy-field for Joe and her to play in. It was just a place for her to sleep when she got tired. She wasn’t petal-open with

him anymore.”(Hurstun 91) The author’s use of negation in these lines allow her to describe the horrid state of her marriage with Jody. Instead of using a tree, Hurston now uses daisy-fields and flowers to describe the ideal bedroom for two lovers. The reader can then fully grasp the drastic turn for the worst that Jody and Janie’s relationship had taken.

Some metaphors in the book ended up so narrow, that rather than serving to protect the setting of the book they became razor focused in deliverance of a message. These metaphors are imperative in giving off the feelings that Hurston wants to convey, which simply can’t be expressed in words. This is very much the case with Hurston’s use of the mule in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The mule is very useful in acting as a related figure to Janie’s situation. Hurston uses the mule very specifically as an analogous figure to Janie and her marriages.

“He stay poor and raw bony just to work some. Skeered he’ll have to work some.(Hurstun 70) This sentence is very relatable to Janie’s terrible relationship with Logan. Similar to the mule, Janie was neglected and forced to work on a consistent basis. He owner of the mule even sounds very much like Logan when describing how the mule acts. Just as how Logan thinks Janie uses her womanhood to get out of doing work, Matt believes the mule is simply emaciated out of sloth. This situation changes greatly however. Janie then proceeds to go with Joe almost being forced to, and although it seems to be promising at first she soon realizes the cancerous relationship that she has trapped herself in.”Didn’t buy ‘im fuh no work. I god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let ‘im rest.”(Hurstun 76) Joe bought the mule from Matt in order to let the mule rest. He believed the mule was not fit to be working fields as the beast that it is. This booms of symbolism with Janie. When running off with Joe, Janie had been confined to the aspects of life that Joe deemed appropriate for her as a woman. In reality however, Janie is the same hybrid

beast that is so capable and productive as long as it is fed and treated with caring. The mule is the perfect animal to carry out arduous tasks, but inappropriate caring for it and treating it like a “varmint” or an object ultimately ends up as its demise. In the same manner, the combined factors of Janie being a woman, but also very outgoing in society make her mistreated by a majority of the men in the novel.

Words are the colors of the author’s canvass. Rather than looking for words to describe certain situation’s, they turn to be their most effective when they paint the vivid image of the book into the reader’s mind. This is why Hurston’s employment of imagery ultimately was so effective. The diction wasn’t chosen by attempting to exactly describe Janie’s dynamic and specific emotions. Rather, the sensory details at all levels were infused with esoteric metaphors so that with each sentence, the reader gained a better understanding of Janie’s plight. The broad strokes of generic symbols was the perfect foundation for Hurston to begin her symbolic artistry, with the overall setting remaining true to the Southern landscape, but being tweaked to fit each scene. More in depth were the individual imagery that Hurston used in each point of the book. These metaphors proved the most versatile, in shading the tiniest details to give life to each atmosphere Hurston had set. Lastly, the standalone symbols that Hurston used, such as the mule simply gave the best understanding possible of Janie’s situation. Rather than contributing to the setting, this metaphor adds to the in-depth analysis of Janie’s disastrous conditions living as a woman. All of these layers come together in the most beautiful way possible in order to create a work of art that is truly meant to be appreciated.