
In Search of Voice

As the old adage goes, it is not what one says, but how they say it that matters most. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the novel's protagonist, Janie Crawford, is immersed in a journey to establish her voice and, consequently, shape her own identity. Throughout a series of failed relationships, Janie finds herself constantly struggling against domineering male figures who attempt to define her by subjugating her to a role of silence and subservience. Janie finally achieves a strong sense of self by finding the ability to control her voice and articulate herself openly and with confidence. Through the course of the novel, Hurston illustrates the duality of Janie's voice - the oppressiveness of her silence and the liberation she feels when she reclaims her voice - and parallels this to her self-growth and maturation. Moreover, Hurston manipulates the narrative structure to reinforce this process of self-discovery.

At the outset of the novel, Janie's silence defines her as a passive individual as she struggles to harness her own voice amidst the influence of those around her. In one instance, Nanny decides that Janie will be married off to Logan Killicks, and while "the vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree ... Janie didn't know how to tell Nanny. She merely hunched over and pouted at the floor" (14). In using only the third person narration to convey Janie's inner thoughts, Hurston effectively highlights her lack of a voice in such a defining moment. Rather than voicing her true desires, Janie simply resigns herself to the fate that Nanny has set forth for her. Although Logan desecrates the pear tree, and with that Janie's growing awareness of her sexuality, she cannot find it within her to defy Nanny's will. So, in this sense, she has no voice, instead choosing to allow the voice of others to dominate her own.

Hurston further demonstrates Janie's passive, timid nature through the portrayal of Janie's relationship with Jody, her second husband, and the stronghold he exerts over her every action. From his insistence that Janie constantly keep her hair covered to his unwillingness to allow her to engage in even a simple game of checkers with other men, he keeps her voiceless and unable to act on her own thoughts and desires. In one particular instance, upon Jody being elected mayor of Eatonville, the townspeople ask Janie to make a speech, to which Jody quickly responds "... mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin' ... she's uh woman and her place is in de home" (43). In Jody's presence, Janie clearly has no voice and hence is unable to establish an identity that reflects qualities which are uniquely hers. She is defined in terms of Jody, not her own individuality. He objectifies Janie time and again, yet her only response is to remain silent. By exercising virtually complete control over Janie's use of her voice, Jody reinforces the submissiveness that characterizes Janie's typical response early in the novel as "no matter what Jody did, she said nothing" (76). Yet, it is Janie's marriage to Jody which also comes to mark a turning point in her own maturation.

Janie's individuality and self-growth become evident once she learns to challenge Jody's authoritative ways. During Jody's subsequent physical demise, she finally asserts herself to him as he lay on his deathbed, saying, "All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice - dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you" (87). Finally expressing her inner feelings to Jody, Janie creates a voice for herself that reflects a growing sense of defiance toward Jody's control over her actions. The years of repressed emotion and forced silence are

no more as in this moment of blunt honesty, Janie transcends her passive nature to assert a new, defiant identity. Ironically, out of Jody's death comes Janie's rebirth and revival of self that allows her to finally establish her own voice and defy others' attempts to shape her definition of self.

As Janie's relationship with Jody comes to an end, her subsequent involvement with Tea Cake, Janie's third husband and first true love, marks the dawn of a transformation in her character wherein she develops a sense of self-awareness and independence. Tea Cake breathes life into Janie's own voice, as evidenced in a conversation with Phoeby in which Janie asserts, "He done taught me de maiden language all over" (115). In stark contrast to the domineering, suppressive fashion in which Jody engaged Janie, Tea Cake interacts with her in a way that reflects his genuine respect for and acceptance of her voice. It is clear that he views her as an equal in their relationship rather than a subordinate as she had grown accustomed to previously. More importantly, however, Tea Cake does not try to overshadow or define Janie's voice, instead embracing her individuality by encouraging her own self-expression, even imploring her in one instance to "have de nerve tuh say whut you mean" (109). In helping Janie gain a new self-awareness, Tea Cake furthers her personal growth by forcing her to look within and define in her own terms what it is she truly desires. It is Tea Cake that guides Janie onto the road to self-discovery, but her journey does not culminate with him.

Hurston completes Janie's maturation process by conveying the manner by which she comes to conceptualize her own voice. Not only is this illustrated in how Janie deals with silence, but also through a gradual shift in the narrative structure of the novel. As noted by Henry Louis Gates in the novel's afterword, Hurston emphasizes Janie's transformation "from object to subject" through the way in which "the narrative of the novel shifts from third to a blend of first and third person ... signifying this awareness of self in Janie" (197). As Janie's journey progresses, the narrative structure takes on even greater importance in terms of how it symbolically reflects on her growth. Namely, in the courtroom scene following Tea Cake's death, Janie's first person dialogue is noticeably absent and instead replaced by even more narration: "She tried to make them see how terrible it was ... and when she was through she hushed" (187). Janie's silence, rather than signifying a sense of passivity as in the beginning of the novel, allows Hurston to reinforce her growth as an individual by showing her control of her voice. In this instance, it is not the act of being able to speak that empowers Janie, but rather the ability to remain silent as it reflects how, now, only she decides when she will be heard. Thus, Hurston manipulates the significance associated with silence by defining it in two contradictory terms, highlighting its duality first as an oppressor and now as a symbol of empowerment.

Throughout the course of the novel, Hurston uses Janie's search for voice as a parallel to her search for an identity. In the beginning of her journey, Janie allows the will of others to become her own as her passivity prevents her from articulating her true thoughts and emotions. Early on, Janie is transformed into an object by Jody rather than being viewed as his equal, so it is not until Tea Cake helps her to uncover her repressed voice that she begins to shape her own identity. The Janie that Hurston depicts by the end of the novel is a striking contrast to the one seen at the outset. She is now able to express with clarity and incisiveness her innermost thoughts and feelings, as in her closing conversation with Phoeby, and in doing so finally achieves the sense of spiritual fulfillment for which she yearns.