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## The Analogy Between Mules and Humans in Their Eyes Were Watching God

When Nanny tells her young, naïve granddaughter Janie Crawford, “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see,” (14) she is merely setting the stage for a number of connections between humans and animals that communicate Hurston’s ideas about human relationships. Animals, particularly mules, appear as powerful symbols throughout the novel. Through anecdotes that personify animals and imagery of humans as animals, Hurston connects the two and reinforces Nanny’s belief about the societal position of black women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Hurston’s description of animals as if they possessed human qualities draws parallels to humans in the story and subtly questions the humans’ behavior. The tales of Matt Bonner’s mule serve to establish the mule as a silly, foolish and stubborn personality and create connections between human and mule. With their stories, the townspeople give the mule character and will, as if he has a real personality: “he’s jus’ too mean tuh git fat. He stay poor and rawbony jus’ fuh spite.” (49) They even give the mule a full funeral speech and ceremony as though he was a human, just as important as any in the town. The two funerals for the mule fully establish the connection between human and animal. The ceremony of the buzzards is remarkably similar to the elaborate funeral services of Jody Starks. During his eulogy, Jody refers to the mule as “our most distinguished citizen” and “the dear departed brother.” (57) Though his tone is facetious, Jody is acknowledging the true connection that the citizens have felt with the mule. The formal procedure of the “Parson” (58) of the buzzards and the call-and-response ceremony brings a human quality to the animals. The ceremony also mocks the ridiculous actions of the humans, especially the pompous behavior of Jody and the way that the others in Eatonville cater to him.

Hurston often uses animal imagery when describing humans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to show the subjugation of both American blacks and women, reaffirming Nanny’s beliefs. From the start, the petty black inhabitants of Eatonville are described not as humans but as “mules and other brutes” that “occupied the skins” (1) of citizens. Neither the narrator nor Janie takes these “meatskins” (183) seriously or seems to care much about their cruel gossip. Hurston blames the spiteful talk of the Eatonville porch sitters not on the “tongueless, earless, eyeless” gossipers themselves but on the “bossman,” who uses the sitters as “conveniences.” (1) Hurston passes culpability onto the superiors because she believes her lazy and rude characters are a product of the way that white society has treated them. Similarly, women are generally viewed not as equals to men but as prizes and possessions in *Their Eyes Were*

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Watching God. This is evident from the town's attitude toward Janie and the manners of her first two husbands. It's clear from the way that Janie's first husband Logan talks to her that he sees her as his possession rather than his mate; when calling her to help him, he tells Janie: "you ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh." (30) During her second marriage, even Janie views herself as a prize of her husband; as a rich man's wife, she realizes that "she must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang." (39) Her experiences with these men eventually help Janie to realize that she is truly in love with Tea Cake, who sees her as an equal rather than a pet.

Hurston uses the parallel of mules to show the way Janie is treated by her first two husbands; both Logan Killicks and Jody Starks similarly to the way they treat their mules. Janie and Logan share a straightforward but lifeless marriage. Logan is not cruel or unreasonable to Janie, treating her kindly but firmly and without much affection, as if she were his trustworthy plowing mule. Even Logan's speech toward Janie is reminiscent of a man talking to an animal: "git uh move on yuh, and dat quick." (30) Janie's life with Logan is not very difficult, aside from small chores; she works much harder on the "muck" during her marriage with Tea Cake. However, Janie doesn't feel like a possession or pet with Tea Cake because everything she does with him is out of choice and love, rather than the obligation of her marriage to Logan. Jody Starks, a stranger from Georgia, represents the day to Logan's night. When he sees Janie cutting potatoes for Logan, he is infuriated, telling her, "a pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo-self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." (28) With Jody, Janie is given an important and elevated position, but under all the decoration and façade she is simply Jody's mule, bound to do whatever he tells her. When she finally breaks down over the men's "teasin'" and "devilin'" (53) of Matt Bonner's mule, Janie is thinking not only of "dat poor brute beast," (53) but of all "helpless things," (54) and especially herself, stuck in the store with no chance to tell the men how she really feels about their behavior. Jody buys Matt Bonner's mule for the same reason that he has married Janie: to exert his will over the animal and use it as a symbol of his power and wealth. Unfortunately, though the mule is allowed to run wild and free until its untimely death, Janie is trapped in the store at Joe's bidding until his own death.

Through her use of the mule as a symbol, Hurston gives the townsfolk an air of absurdity while addressing more serious issues about class and relationships. Through animals, she mocks traditional views and challenges the reader to look beyond them, while exploring the roots of these views. This view of the cultural norm makes Janie's eventual love with Tea Cake and victory over traditional women's roles even more satisfying to the reader.

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