
Self Realization in a Hard World by Zora Neale Hurston

Self-Realization in a Hard World

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's journey exemplifies the struggles African American women faced in exchange for their personal happiness and wishes in the 20th century in order to find their true identity.

African Americans have dealt with racism; primarily, women have dealt with sexism. African American women were restricted through male dominance or through parents who believed in male dominance values. African American women married to their guardian or parents' choice because of these values; specifically, their parents often wished to marry them off to men with high social status in hopes of social advancement.

With that context, the author, Zora Neale Hurston, portrays Janie's character going through a series of events including a few marriages which lead her to finally realize and accept the independent and expressive person she realizes herself to be at the end of the novel.

Nanny, Janie's grandmother, was the only guardian that Janie ever had. She raises Janie and wishes the best for her. Nanny's hopes for Janie are influenced by the fact that Nanny was a former slave and gave birth to Leafy, Janie's mother, who was later raped by her white schoolteacher at the age of 17. Leafy became an alcoholic and abandoned Janie when she was young. Nanny wanted Janie to have a peaceful and prosperous life in comparison to Leafy's or her own life. Consequently, Nanny tried to find an acceptable man for Janie against her will by completely ignoring her wishes after she saw Janie kiss Johnny Taylor. Nanny vows to get her granddaughter married to a wealthy man who can provide for Janie and take her far away from the life that Nanny and Leafy had. Nanny viewed Johnny Taylor as someone who used Janie for his personal pleasures and then leave her just like how Nanny and Leafy had been used by the men in their lives. Nanny says, "Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection. Ah ain't getting' ole, honey. Ah'm done ole... Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life... You ain't got nobody but me. Neither can you stand alone by yo'self. De thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin' thing." (Hurston 15) Nanny's tone expresses her concern for Janie's safety based on her experiences of abuse through slavery.

For Nanny, it is all about creating a higher place in society which she is spending her last days doing for Janie as she states, "Neither can you stand alone by yo'self." which explains Nanny's belief in male dominance. She is saying that a woman cannot survive without the help of a man and assigning traditional gender roles of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers. This view binds Janie in a marriage that traps her will to be independent and capable. She wants Janie to have the freedom that she never had which was a middle class life with financial stability. Due to Nanny's wish, Janie forcefully entered a marriage with a respected farmer named Logan Killicks and expressed her unhappiness to Nanny: "Well, if he do all dat whut you come in heah wid uh face long as mah arm for?" Nanny said. "Cause you told me Ah wuz gointer love him, and, and Ah don't. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah would do it." Janie replied Nanny responded, "You come head wid yo' mouf full uh foolishness

on uh busy day. Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me 'bout love." (Hurstun 23) Janie is forced into a loveless marriage and is drawn into marriage at Nanny's request with false reassurance that marriage will lead to love just so that she is financially stable with Logan Killicks. For Nanny, this marriage was a respectable act; however, it tarnished Janie's view of happiness and her search for her individuality.

Janie's first husband, Logan Killicks, treated her like his possession. The way he treated his mule was how he treated Janie. He continuously put her to work and never allowed her to have a say in anything. From her marriage with Logan Killicks, she begins to realize that what Nanny promised was incorrect. Their marriage never led to love. In the novel, the narrator states, "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurstun 25). Janie became lifeless as becoming the wife of a farmer simply transformed her into an obedient animal who does his farm work: "Looka heah, LilBit, help me out some. Cut up dese seed taters fuh me. Ah got tuh step off a piece... Ah aims tuh run two plows, and dis man Ah', talkin' 'bout is got uh mule all gentled upso even uh woman kin handle 'im." (Hurstun 27) Nanny did not have running a mule in mind for Janie when she married her off to Logan. Janie never volunteered to help Logan out with his farm, but, he didn't ask and signed her up to work for him because she became his property after marriage. As per Nanny's wishes, Janie gained protection from the cruel, racist, and sexist world, but dragged herself into a world where she did not want to belong.

Due to this and after Nanny's death, she had to take her future in her own hands because this was a life that she never had choose to live and would not continue to bear. Her marriage to Logan Killicks transformed her into a responsible woman who learned that her future could only be handled by herself and no other. After marrying him, she self-realizes that there's more that she wants. She is not okay with just being an asset to his farm and being treated like a mule. Janie sees him as a barrier to her vision of true love, often reminiscing her experiences under the blossoming pear tree and imagining her life in the search for true love and identity. She had always had doubts about her marriage with Logan but silenced her voice and wishes in order to cooperate with her grandmother who was traumatized by her own experiences only to find herself struggling more with another man.

Within Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie's journey mainly took her through racism and sexism which is primarily what African American women faced in exchange for their happiness in the 20th century. For every relationship, she struggled to find her voice because every time, it was silenced. Janie's search for self-realization came after she continued to grow as a person from her experiences while trying to find her happiness and especially, her true identity which she could be comfortable with. Her relationships with others marked a special meaning in her life leading up to self-realization of being an African American woman in her community.