

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston infuses the setting, characters, and dialogue of the novel with southern folklore and anthropological research. Also, events in the novel mirror some circumstances and events in her life. Hurston's bold statement, "I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive," captures the defiant confidence we encounter in the maturing main character, Janie Mae Crawford.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Students will present the three most important things they learned from the Audio Guide. Discuss Carla Kaplan's argument that Hurston "depicted black difference."

Read Handout One: Zora Neale Hurston: A Brief Biography aloud in class. Distribute Reader's Guide essays, "Zora Neale Hurston, 1891–1960," "Hurston and Her Other Works," and "Hurston's Death . . . and Resurrection." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. Groups will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

Writing Exercise

Write an essay about a significant event or moment that changed your view of the world. Describe your experience through images or word pictures.

Homework

Read Chapter 1. Why would Hurston use Southern black idiom to tell her story? Ask students to think about Kaplan's comment as they read.

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Jazz Age of the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance marked the artistic, political, and cultural birth of the “New Negro” in literature and art. This renaissance relied upon its deep roots, including the oral traditions of storytelling and folktales. These traditions corresponded to a variety of musical styles: Negro spirituals, blues, and jazz. In Hurston’s prose, the old and new converged into the dynamic, vibrant language of Janie, Pheoby, and the Eatonville townspeople.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. After listening to the Audio Guide, your students should be able to identify several revolutionary aspects of the novel. How is this evident as early as Chapter 1? What aspects of the novel derive from a tradition of oral storytelling?

Play clips of music from the 1930s. Ask students to take notes as they listen and to identify patterns in the music. Can your students articulate the similarities between the rhythms of the novel and the jazz styles of the 1930s?

Writing Exercise

Read the Reader’s Guide essays “Harlem Renaissance: The Era,” “Harlem Renaissance: Hurston’s Circle,” and Handout Two: The Harlem Renaissance. Using these essays, students should write a few paragraphs about Hurston’s relationship to her era.

Homework

Read Chapters 2–3. Ask students to consider how Janie’s point of view affects the way this story is told. Why does she begin her narrative with the pear tree? How is Janie’s growth reflected in the way the story is told?

3

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with an unidentified third-person narrator who remains outside the story. This anonymous, omniscient narrator immediately creates interest by declaring: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead.” The first page also contains one of several allusions to the book’s title: “the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment”; however, the narration changes when Janie tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson.

Discussion Activities

How can an omniscient narrator tell the story at the same time that the novel’s heroine, Janie, also tells her story? Do these voices reflect different parts of Janie, or does the omniscient narrator reveal another force in Janie’s universe?

Janie is judged throughout the novel. In the first chapter, who judges her, and why? How does Janie respond?

Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does our audience (especially friends) affect what we reveal or conceal?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one secondary character who has appeared so far: Nanny, Logan, Pheoby, the Eatonville townspeople, Johnny Taylor, or Janie’s mother, and rewrite the novel’s beginning from the perspective of this character. Use this exercise to reflect on how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. Why did Hurston choose Janie as the heroine instead of another character? Ask students to provide a dramatic presentation of the re-told story.

Homework

Read Chapter 4. Five significant characters have been introduced: Janie, Pheoby, Nanny, Logan, and Joe. Have students list what motivates each of these characters.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Discussion Activities

How do Logan and Joe reveal different sides of Janie? What are their motivations? To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two attributes related?

Writing Exercise

In Chapter 3, our protagonist, Janie, wanders back and forth to the pear tree, “wondering and thinking” as she tries to adjust to her arranged marriage. She struggles with words, inheriting a “deepness” from her Nanny. Although Janie fails to find any “bloom” in this marriage, she discovers that “she knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind.” Like her Nanny, Janie’s “basin of mind” finds words in the sights and sounds of nature.

Review the first four chapters, documenting moments when Janie finds meaning in nature. What other natural phenomena guide Janie on her journey? Students should write about the way the sun reflects Janie’s emotional state.

Homework

Read Chapters 5–6. Ask students to pay attention to the street lamp in Chapter 5. How does the text suggest that this is more than an ordinary street lamp? How might such references to light be symbolic?

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Janie reads natural phenomena as indicators of her internal landscape. As a result, Hurston’s writing is thick with language that draws us beyond the literal descriptions of people, places, and events. Janie uses simile to describe her life “like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone.”

Discussion Activities

Divide your class into groups. Review Chapters 1–6 and list examples of figurative language. Pay special attention to the novel’s first page. How are these descriptions used figuratively: the road, ships, trees, the sun, eyes, time, God, dreams, judgment, speech, silence, and mules?

To verify student findings, list each group’s images on the board. Ideally, a lively debate will take place as some students may propose examples that might be taken literally.

To expand the discussion, use this unit to look at specific types of figurative language such as simile, metaphor, or personification.

Writing Exercise

Whether individually or within the same groups, ask students to find several instances when an image recurs figuratively. What deeper meaning does this repetition suggest?

Homework

Read Chapters 7–9. How does Janie’s voice change?

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Use this class period to mark the development of three major symbols in the novel: the pear tree, the street lamp, and the mule.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Divide your class into groups. Ask them to outline the literal elements of the pear tree, the street lamp, or the mule before they discuss possible symbolic meanings. Have them present their ideas to the class and, if possible, develop them in a short essay.

The Pear Tree

Listen again to the The Big Read Audio Guide as Ruby Dee reads the “pear tree” passage from Chapter 2. Do you agree with Carla Kaplan’s and Azar Nafisi’s interpretations of this symbol? Janie has now journeyed through two unsatisfying marriages; notice when she does (or does not) remember the pear tree. For what is she searching? Do you think she will find it?

The Street Lamp

What does the street lamp in Chapter 5 communicate about the ideals of the Eatonville townspeople? Does it exemplify a control over nature that empowers the community? Why does Mrs. Bogle sing “Jesus, the light of the world” when the lamp is lit? What does Joe mean when he says: “And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp—wick let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine”?

The Mule

In Chapter 6, Bonner’s yellow mule stimulates the Eatonville men to “mule-talk.” How does this deepen the meaning of the mule, both literally and symbolically? How does Hurston capture the musical, imaginative talk of the townspeople in this scene? This talk also reflects “playing the dozens.” If you have time, students can research the history and evolution of “playing the dozens.”



Homework

Read Chapters 10–12. What are the most significant changes in Janie after she meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods?



7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Many readers consider this novel a *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. As Janie's external journey takes her through southern Florida and her three marriages, she finds her voice and learns to use it. In order to trace the development of Janie's character, use this lesson to explore Janie's transformation at two major turning points: her confrontation with Joe Starks (Chapters 7–8) and her meeting with Tea Cake (Chapter 10).

Discussion Activities

Have students map Janie's development from the young woman under the pear tree to her life as Mrs. Killicks, Mrs. Starks, and Mrs. Woods. How has she changed? How has she remained the same?

Writing Exercise

Have students write two pages to respond to one of these topics. Have them refer to the text to support their conclusions.

1. After Joe's funeral in Chapter 9, Janie faces her hatred of Nanny, who "pinched the horizon." Although she sees "mislove" around her, she finds a "jewel" within. What factors allow Janie to rediscover herself? Does her newfound freedom relate to her ownership of property? How does Janie define freedom in her new life?
2. How does Janie feel when she first meets Tea Cake? How is it significant that he teaches her to play checkers? Notice the return of the pear tree symbol. What does Janie mean when she says Tea Cake is "a glance from God" and has "done taught me de maiden language all over"?

Homework

Read Chapters 13–16. Reflect upon Janie's new life with Tea Cake. Why does her "soul [crawl] out from its hiding place"?

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

Hurston has made deliberate choices about how to structure and pace the series of events to demonstrate one black woman's experience in Florida. In this lesson, map the events of the story to begin to assess the artistry of her storytelling. The discussion of two major turning points from Lesson 7 should prepare your students for these activities.

Discussion Activities

In small groups, students will map a timeline of the novel's major events. Define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. How does Hurston build the drama? Groups should present their timelines to the class, discussing any discrepancies along the way.

Show students the first or last fifteen minutes of *Oprah Winfrey Presents: Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005). What important plot points are omitted? How does the pacing of the plot differ from a novel to a film? How are these choices complicated when a screenwriter is adapting a novel for film? This analysis can be expanded by watching the entire film (113 minutes).

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write their own conclusion to the novel, based on what they have read thus far. Remind them that Janie narrates her story to Pheoby. Have students use at least one image or symbol to reach a happy, tragic, or ambiguous ending.

Homework

Read Chapters 17–20. Ask students to consider the following questions: Why do you think Hurston chose her title? If you were required to change it, what title would you choose? What themes does your title suggest?

9

Lesson 9

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



This complex novel possesses many themes, but here are three to begin class discussion.

A Woman's Voice

1. What do Bret Lott, Azar Nafisi, and Alice Walker say about Janie's developing voice? Do students agree? Ask them to give supporting examples from the novel.
2. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or remain quiet?
3. How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's story? What is Janie's final advice to her best friend?

Race

1. In the Audio Guide, Carla Kaplan, Robert Hemenway, and Alice Walker discuss Hurston's folk voice and complex characters. Assess the accuracy of their opinions with evidence from the novel.
2. The novel's only explicit reference to Jim Crow laws appears in Chapter 19, when Tea Cake is forced at gunpoint to clear the hurricane wreckage and bury the dead. See Handout Three for details on Jim Crow laws. What role does Jim Crow play in the novel?
3. Why are white people omitted until the last chapters? How might this reflect Hurston's literary goals?

Religion

1. Voodoo and Catholicism influenced Hurston. How would you describe Hurston's idea of religion in the novel?
2. What might be the meaning of the novel's title? In what ways do the characters see and hear God? Does He answer their questioning?
3. In Chapter 16 Janie muses about the pious Mrs. Turner's idols and altars. The narrator says that "Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood." What does this mean?



Homework

Students should begin working on their essays. See the Essay Topics. Turn in outlines at the next class.

10

Lesson 10

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

What elevates a novel to greatness? Ask students to list ten characteristics of a great novel. Ask students to identify ten reasons why *Their Eyes Were Watching God* might be considered a great American novel. Share these qualities with the class. Write all contributions on the blackboard, discuss them, and allow students to vote for their top five characteristics.

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Hurston employ, and why would she use a novel to express this voice? What does her voice reveal about her generation? Is it still relevant? If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a fictional novel rather than a speech or essay?

Writing Exercise

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist them with their outlines, ideas, and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things that they should look for in a well-written essay.

Homework

For the next class, students will turn in their essays and present their paper topics and interpretations to the class. Celebrate by participating in a Big Read community event.

Zora Neale Hurston: A Brief Biography

Now lauded as the intellectual and spiritual foremother to a generation of black and women writers, Zora Neale Hurston's books were all out of print when she died in poverty and obscurity in 1960.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston and her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Her mother's death and father's remarriage led the outspoken Hurston to leave home at fourteen and become a wardrobe girl in an all-white traveling Gilbert and Sullivan operetta troupe.

She completed her education at Howard University in Washington, DC, while supporting herself at a variety of jobs from manicurist to maid. Heeding her mother's encouragement to "jump at de sun," she arrived in New York in January 1925 with \$1.50 in her pocket. Two years later, Hurston had not only published four short stories, but also become one of the most popular and flamboyant artists of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance.

As the only black scholar at Barnard College, Hurston studied with the pioneering anthropologist Dr. Franz Boas. His encouragement, combined with a stipend of \$200 a month and a car from patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, allowed Hurston to complete much of her anthropological work in the American South. Her lifelong fascination with collecting, recording, and broadcasting the daily idiomatic communication of Negroes informed her seven books and dozens of stories, articles, plays, and essays.

Her ambition also led to tension in her romantic relationships. Hurston married and divorced three husbands and, at age forty-four, fell in love with Percy Punter, who was twenty-three. When he asked her to forsake her career to marry him, she refused because she "had things clawing inside [her] that must be said." She fled to Haiti as an attempt to "smother [her] feelings" for him. She wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks "to embalm all the tenderness of [her] passion for him."

Despite the novel's 1937 publication, Hurston's lifelong struggle for financial security continued throughout the 1940s. Once, she even pawned her typewriter. The largest royalty any of her books ever earned was \$943.75. Since most were published during the Depression, she paid her bills through story and essay sales, advances on the books, and two Works Progress Administration jobs with the Federal Writers' Project.

In the 1950s Hurston remained devoted to writing, but white publishers rejected her books, in part because black literature was no longer considered marketable. Other complications followed, and her health seriously declined. Her anticommunist essays and denunciation of school integration increasingly alienated her from other black writers. After a stroke in 1959, Hurston reluctantly entered a welfare home, where she died penniless on January 28, 1960. Her grave remained unmarked until novelist Alice Walker erected a gravestone in 1973.



The Harlem Renaissance

Their Eyes Were Watching God was published in 1937, several years after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. But the novel should be read with the context of the “New Negro” in mind, since Hurston was an influential member of the Harlem literati.

Thousands of African Americans migrated north at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “between 1910 and 1920 New York’s black population increased by 66 percent, Chicago’s by 148 percent, and Philadelphia’s by 500 percent. Detroit experienced an amazing growth rate of 611 percent.” This exodus heightened black intellectual output in cities like New York and Chicago. While new industry (like Henry Ford’s automotive factories) supplied jobs to these new arrivals, artists within these communities gave voice to the new challenges of the African-American experience. Ralph Ellison captures this journey in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. In this story, the main character migrates from his boyhood south to New York City. An educated young man’s dreams transform as urban life brings betrayal and racial strife.

Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, became the center for African-American artists from 1910 to 1930. These artists produced an astounding array of internationally acclaimed works. Harlem Renaissance literary greats included poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, writer Richard Wright, and political thinker W.E.B. DuBois. At the same time, a host of musicians would make an indelible mark on the evolution of American

music. These artists included Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and Bessie Smith. Since racial prejudice dominated mainstream America, some artists, like actress and dancer Josephine Baker, met with more success in Europe. International audiences also provided artists with an opportunity to experiment more freely with their art form.

While American society was still segregated, artistic collaborations between blacks and whites would provide a foundation for improving interracial relations. Zora Neale Hurston, a trained anthropologist as well as novelist, called whites supporting this artistic movement “Negrotarian.” Jazz musicians from New Orleans to New York to California overcame racial differences to embrace potent musical collaborations. Literary works, plays, paintings, and political commentary provided all Americans with new, positive, and realistically complex images of the African American. As a result, there was great debate within African-American communities as to what would properly represent the race. W.E.B. DuBois rejected Bessie Smith’s music as inappropriate. Richard Wright and Alain Locke criticized Hurston’s use of language as failing African Americans by representing them as uneducated. The gusto and triumph of the Harlem Renaissance was fed precisely by tensions that forced artists to come to terms with new definitions of race made possible in and through a variety of art forms.



Jim Crow

Despite some legal changes after the Civil War, former slaves and their children had little assurance in the South that their freedoms would be recognized. When Hurston was a child in the 1890s, a system of laws and regulations commonly referred to as Jim Crow emerged. Most of the laws separated such public facilities as parks, schools, hotels, transportation, water fountains, and restrooms into “Whites Only” and “Colored.” Race-mixing laws deemed all marriages between white and black both void and illegal.

The term “Jim Crow” probably originated in 1830, when a white minstrel show performer first blackened his face and sang the lyrics to the song “Jump Jim Crow.” At first the term was no more derogatory than black, colored, or Negro, but soon it became a slur. Although using violence to subjugate blacks was nothing new in the South, its character changed under Jim Crow. Brutal acts and mob violence were common. Torture became a public spectacle. Railroad companies sold tickets to lynchings. Some white families brought their children to witness such violence, and body parts of dead victims were sold as souvenirs.

Hurston and Jim Crow

Hurston’s lifetime spans the Jim Crow era almost exactly. She often said in her autobiography and letters that she was “sick” of the “Race question,” and she tried to avoid it in her fiction. Nevertheless, Hurston was often the object of discrimination.

In the 1944 *Negro Digest*, Hurston published “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience,” describing an experience that took place in New York, not the South. Hurston needed medical

treatment that she could not afford. For over a year, she had been suffering from digestive problems. In 1931, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston’s godmother, arranged for her to see a white doctor. But when Hurston arrived at the specialist’s office in Brooklyn, an embarrassed receptionist took her to a private examination room, a room with soiled towels, dirty laundry, and one chair.

To avoid the Jim Crow coaches during her southern folklore-collecting travels, Hurston and her brother John agreed that she should buy a car. The coaches were often poorly ventilated and dangerous for women traveling alone. In February 1927, she bought a used car for \$300 (with payments of \$26.80 a month), which she soon dubbed “Sassy Susie.”

In white motels and restaurants, Hurston could not escape the “aggressive intolerance” from white faces. Even when Hurston traveled with the famous white novelist Fannie Hurst, both women resorted to tricks to procure equal treatment for Hurston. Hurst records one occasion when she announced to the waiter, “The Princess Zora and I wish a table.” Hurston’s African attire inspired him to believe her, so he quickly seated them at the best table. But no tricks would allow white hotels to place Hurston anywhere other than servants’ quarters. To avoid this disgrace, sometimes she would sleep in the car if a colored hotel room could not be found.

Source: Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

