



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2025; 7(2): 914-916
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 18-09-2025
Accepted: 21-10-2025

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Nature as Reflector in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i2m.574>

Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores how Nature is not just the background scenery rather an active reflection of Janie's desires and emotional growth. The natural world acts as a mirror and catalyst for the transformation in the life of Janie. The whole novel is a series of events that ultimately draws full circle of her life. Her life seems a corollary with the natural world. Just as nature moves through different seasons of growth, flourishing, decay and renewal, Janie's journey reflects stages of struggle and awakening. This paper is an effort to trace how fate and external forces shape Janie's journey with nature as reflector. Her pursuit of true love leads her through three marriages, each defining her growth and self-discovery. The novel suggests that life's journey is guided by the interplay between human determination and the uncontrollable forces of nature, ultimately leading to self-actualization. Different natural elements drive the plot and reflect Janie's trajectory. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also presents nature as nurturer that also provides solace to the characters. The novelist has beautifully drawn an all environment capsule in the novel.

Keywords: Nature, catalyst, transformation, self-actualisation, trajectory, corollary

Introduction

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's life unfolds in close connection with the natural world, making her experiences almost a corollary of nature's cycles. Writers across ages and cultures have treated Nature as an all-encompassing phenomenon. Nature moves through seasons of growth, flourishing, decay, and renewal, similarly Janie's journey reflects similar stages of awakening, struggle, and rebirth. Nature has living presence and it is Janie's pathway into womanhood. The story opens as, "Janie saw her life a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches." (16) The novel demonstrates that destiny and chance overpower any individual choice that Janie makes. The interesting and unique quality of the novel is the depiction of characters in accordance with Nature as if the writer presents delusion that nature supersedes the life and guides as well as governs the events. Janie's life is completely ruled by the things outside her control. The novel traces Janie's life, initially as quest for true love and then her exploits in pursuit of this goal. She is robbed of her innocence in her early two marriages. But she gains her womanhood and maturity during this period. So her adulthood is defined by her suffering and using that wisdom to achieve her goal of life as, "From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" (18)

The pear tree becomes a symbol of her natural awakening to desire and harmony. It is under this tree's blossoms that she first understands the possibility of fulfilment, making nature the starting point of her self-discovery. Hurston bring in Nature for all aspects from physical to spiritual, and from emotional to philosophical. Each relationship she enters afterward is measured against this ideal of natural balance. She tries hard to do things in her own way but the narrator clearly sees that it's better to leave things the way they are. Janie too has been done and undone by others but she finds her reflections in nature. As Wordsworth talks about Lucy, Janie too adepts to nature and learns from the environment. Nature is the nurturer and the reflector. Poets across ages have talked how Nature is direct guide for mankind and also the one to give back what is in our thought. Samuel Taylor Coleridge has expressed similar thought as:

"O Lady! we receive but what we give,

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And in our life alone does Nature live:

Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!"

This could be seen in the character of Janie. The novel moves in tune with environment be it storm or blooming season. As the bees interact with the tree's blossoms, Janie attains perfection in nature's simple beauty, which is captured in Hurston's imaginative description. This energy, passionate interaction, and blissful harmony are ideals that Janie chases throughout the novel. Throughout the novel, Janie is confronted with antagonistic forces like Hurricane: Nany, Logon and Jody's doctrine, Mrs. Turner's racism, the sexism of Eatonville's men etc. Janie in due course of life have learnt that she could not defeat these forces, but bear them and try to survive them. When hurricane strikes, it is human against God, against Nature. It also shows that Nature's fury unites people against terrifying environment. Jody treats himself as demi-God who is the dominating force both in marriage and in the developing environment of Eatonville. His character is shaped by ambition, charisma, and a deep desire for control—traits that position him at the centre of the novel's exploration of power, voice, and identity. Janie elopes with Jody for a loving and life of self-esteem. He does not want partnership but control, believing that leadership justifies a hierarchy in which he stands at the top. He is representative of rigid social order. He silences Janie for speaking in public gatherings, asks her to keep her hair tied and covered. Jody is a symbol of Patriarchal order and controls Janie's appearance, her work, and even her public presence. This kind of suppression is against nature and as a result he is shown as suffering after he slaps his wife for no reason. Janie Crawford's ideal of contentment has been shown in Hurston's imagery of a pear tree, which represents nature's beauty. The pear tree reflects Janie's idealized views of nature, as it demonstrates her naive and romantic character which constantly seeks true love, and her idealism of the harmony in a marriage based upon love as she travels a path of self-discovery throughout the novel. "Oh, to be... a tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world" (14). There are various forces such as cultural forces, environmental forces and circumstances which are sources of pain as the Hurricane is. This relates to the situation of women in the society where they believe that woman and her place is in the home. However hard Janie tries but she has to succumb to what her husband, Joe Starks, says. He always starts by saying, "I God..." and he has forbidden Janie to indulge in work and intellectual things. In her silent rebellion Janie finds that she has been battering against a "rock". This is a strong and beautiful illustration of patriarchal society. She gets from Joe nothing except what money can buy. It has been clearly stated, "man attempting to climb to painless heights from the dunghill." (80)

Another character, Tea Cake, also plays significant role in Janie's life but he is different to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. He adapts to change, accepts uncertainty, and moves fluidly from place to place. Through Janie's experiences with him, including hardship and joy, Janie reaches a deeper understanding of herself. Tea Cake, in contrast to Jody's rigidity, lives with a spontaneity and ease could be seen in the natural world around him. Tea Cake's connection to nature helps Janie reconnect with her own natural desires of freedom, growth, and emotional self. At Everglades, he and Janie become part of a close-knit community that values music, storytelling, hard work, and shared joy. This

environment reflects Tea Cake's worldview where life is something to be lived openly, with laughter and presence. Tea Cake fosters Janie's growth by encouraging her to speak, to make decisions, and to express herself.

As the protagonist sees harmony with nature, she ultimately seeks harmony within herself, as her final husband Tea Cake brings out true love that is deeply rooted in Janie's ideals of marriage. The storm humbles all as Tea Cake silences all when near to his end. Community and intimacy are humanity's refuge against threatening forces. Tea Cake and Janie's relationship is reciprocal; each helps the other to survive. Their bond gives the ultimate answer to Janie's spiritual quest. At one point in the novel, Janie passively accepts the beating at Tea Cake's hands. Right from the beginning she is trying to find her voice whether it was Logan Killicks or Jody but circumstances made her passive. With Jody, Janie's silence symbolizes Jody's dominance. It was not her choice to speak and she succumbs to her situation. But with Tea cake Janie's silence is not her weakness rather her strength, her strength in controlling her new found voice. Now she chooses when to speak or when not to speak. Her new found voice has enabled her develop a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual respect. This strong union helped her to face the hurricane boldly and survive it.

Throughout the novel, it seems to us that individual free will doesn't matter, only Fate or God's will matter. Right from the beginning Janie chooses a path as Nature has for herself but Janie has to leave due to societal oppression of women. This is like storm in peaceful weather and is similar to the situation in which Janie has to leave her choice to that her husband. She doesn't want to marry Logan but has to surrender to Fate. She elopes with Jody listening to her will but again she is not satisfied. In both her marriages she has been restrained and is suppressed like Nature. But with Tea Cake she is living the life merrily like flowing water carelessly. Nature has its course untrimmed and unchanged and so again she has to surrender to God's will and has to kill her own husband whom she loves the most. When Janie and Tea-Cake are struck in the Hurricane, they don't know what to do, so they look to God as he only knows what will happen to them. So we can see throughout the novel, it is Nature which is spinning the whole story. Janie herself is a strong woman but Nature has its own way. Her individual will is somewhere regulated or directed by Natural forces. The title could mean that the book is all about personal and racial independence and is not about following what others tell you. She rejects all the notions that tell what she should do in her life. Not only the Hurricane is there physically but also there are internal forces, beliefs of antagonism that act like storm in the lives of the characters. Antagonism is not presented in particular person rather it is manifested in harmful system of beliefs. Nanny too was the victim of slavery and such elderly women in turn victimise young and budding girls by the way of conditioning. Tea-Cake becomes a personification of all what Janie wants; her dreams become one with Tea-Cake. Tea-Cake arouse the Hurricane of passion in Janie and strokes this desire by maintaining his distance from her. Tea-Cake manipulates his absence to make Janie love him more. No doubt some manifestations of Tea-Cake's character like partying and gambling adds to its attractiveness. Then the Hurricane strikes and created chaos and danger. After the physical storm, an emotional storm is yet to come in Janie's life.

Janie's story involving Tea-Cake follows the outward and inward plot format. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a transition from a happy, blissful married life to widowhood. When Tea-Cake aims a gun at Janie and Janie is forced to kill her own husband, it was not a thrilling escape rather a painful act. Disaster in the form of Hurricane strikes their lives and Tea-Cake's decision before and after the Hurricane condemn him to death. The devastating aspects of nature in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are shown through the hurricane, as natural disasters depict Mother Nature's most destructive elements. Hurston personifies hurricane, by comparing it to a monster that "had left its bed." As Lake Okeechobee breaks through the dikes with two hundred miles per hour winds, the author describes the monster with, "he seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers"(189).

During this funeral of Jody, Janie is trapped by others' expectations. She performs the role of the "mayor's wife" rather than expressing her true feelings. She is only doing what Joe wanted her to do when he was alive and she behaved similarly when he is not there for him. Such a relation is performed only as a façade. This event reflects how Jody controlled Janie and how she lived under social rules instead of personal freedom. Tea Cake's funeral is simple, with far fewer people. It is not about public image or status. Janie is deeply heartbroken. Unlike with Jody, she mourns Tea Cake sincerely because their relationship was based on love, companionship, and equality. This event reflects Janie's maturity and self-awareness. Even though the loss is painful, she honours Tea Cake in a way that feels true to her heart. Zora Neale Hurston has consciously set these two funerals in the novel to demarcate how same thing has different effects on same person.

The novel presents how nature becomes calm and serene after every storm. Janie too passes through so many upheavals and finally sits with her friend Pheoby and comes to her true self during her conversation. The horizon mirrors her longing for freedom and broader possibilities, representing the boundless future she seeks. Like the changing sky, her desires expand and shift with time, pulling her beyond social and marital constraints. The hurricane, however, shows her the destructive side of nature. It teaches Janie that life, like storms, is unpredictable and sometimes merciless. Yet even in destruction, Janie gains wisdom, strength, and a deeper acceptance of human vulnerability. Janie's life can be read as a corollary of nature itself: nurtured by its beauty, tested by its fury, and shaped by its rhythms. Her journey illustrates Hurston's larger message—that human life is inseparably bound to the cycles, symbols, and forces of the natural world. Life's journey, the novel implies, is a blend of human agency and natural unpredictability, leading to personal realization.

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