

Discussion Questions on Zora Neale Hurston

Choose one of the topics below for small group work. Discuss the question and take notes on your conclusions. Appoint a spokesperson for your group (somebody who hasn't played this role before) who will report the results of your discussion to the class.

1. **The power of voice.** Pick a speech or passage of dialogue that made a strong impression on you. Dividing up roles necessary, read the passage out loud. Why do you think the author chose to use dialect, and what is its effect? To help answer the question, "translate" the passage as best you can into formal, standard English. Then compare and contrast the two passages.
2. **The power of drama.** The exchange between Janie and Jody pages 81-82 is a powerful one, capping their relationship and immediately preceding Jody's death. Why do you think Janie confronts Jody in this way? What do we learn about both speakers through this dialogue? What do we learn about Janie's core beliefs? You may want to pair off and read this dialogue aloud.
3. **A Novel of Education.** *Their Eyes* may be read as the story of Janie's education. What factors are crucial in her education? What values become important to her? What does she learn from her experience? What lessons can you apply to your own life from the story of Janie's?
4. **Strategies for survival.** What were the strategies, attitudes, and beliefs that sustained Janie in dealing with hardship and suffering? Make a list. Then make a similar list concerning either Frederick Douglass or Elie Wiesel in their autobiographical works. Which of these resources do you think might be most important to you in meeting the challenges you yourselves face?
5. **Politics and the novel.**
 - A. Some critics have criticized *Their Eyes* as not sufficiently political, yet there are some quotes that certainly have political implications. Discuss the following quotes and add some others if they occur to you:
 - i. "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (p. 14).
 - ii. "...Joe Starks is too exact wid folks. All he got he done made it offa de rest of us" (p. 46).
 - iii. "Dis sittin' de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody" (p. 83).
 - iv. "The Little Emperor of the cross-roads was leaving Orange County as he had come—with the out-stretched hand of power" (p. 84).
 - B. How would a Marxist interpret the personalities, events, and conditions recounted in the novel? Draw on your knowledge of Marx's emphasis on economics, class struggle, labor as the chief source of value, and the concept of alienation.
6. **Feminism in the Novel.** This book has influenced and inspired a new generation of black women authors. In spite of this, some critics have attacked the book as insufficiently feminist in its orientation. Certain critics cite Janie's toleration of an exploitive relationship and her silence in the courtroom scene as evidence for their point of view. Discuss and debate this question.

WHGC Discussion Questions *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chapters 1-9)

1. How do you respond to the use of the language in this book? What does it “add”?
2. Just from the title, what kind of message do you expect the novel to give?
3. Neale Hurston makes extensive use of imagery and metaphor from the start. Consider the first lines of the novel. Why are they significant?

“Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.”

4. What is the significance of the porch sitters? (Pgs. 1-2).
5. The pear tree (pg. 10) seems to have a special meaning for Janie. She would like “to be a pear tree, or any tree in bloom.” Why?
6. Focusing on three people close to Janie: her grandmother, Logan, and Starks, decide what their different hopes and fears are in regards to Janie as well as their expectations of her. Also: What do these people have in common? What images of marriage do we get from their comments?

Grandmother	pgs. 14, 22
Logan Killick	pg. 29
Joe Starks	pgs. 28, 41, 43

WHGC Discussion Questions *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chapters 10-20)

1. What makes Janie “tick”? What are her expectations from life and how do these develop?

Her desire to live life at its fullest	pgs. 10, 85, 107
Her grandmother’s life	pg. 108
Her courage to defend herself	pgs. 30, 74, 175

2. Describe her relationship with Tea Cake and their love pgs. 109, 122, 158

3. What role does the community play in the novel?

4. Hair is used as an image in the following description. What is its significance?

“Her hair is not what you might call straight, It’s negro hair, but it’s got a kind of white flavor. Like the piece of string out of a ham. It’s not ham at all, but it’s been around ham and got the flavor” (pg. 64)

The author makes a point about Janie’s black “rope” of hair. What does it signify? How does this relate to Mrs. Turner’s feelings of superiority”? (pgs. 134-35)

5. How do you interpret Janie’s trial? (pg.179).
6. What role does religion play, if any? Focus on Janie’s idea about God (pgs. 169, 183).
7. How can you relate this novel to the main theme of HOPE?