

WHGC - Western Heritage in a Global Context
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*.

As always, take a look at the Faculty Guide, which has many good ideas/exercises from past years sections of WHGC.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

This is another great book that should be read aloud; the rendering of this dialect can seem condescending, but as an anthropologist, Hurston was probably most concerned about conveying the flavor of the way that rural people spoke.

1. Students will be primed from sparknotes.com to discuss all the symbolism and imagery of the book (Janie's hair; the flowering tree; mules, mules and more mules) — for the unjaded, this can be a really useful discussion. Likewise, a review of the main characters and their primary physical and personality traits is a good way to warm up the class to discussing the book.
2. Role of storytelling in Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*; consider the tradition/importance of being a good storyteller in both Hurston and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.
3. Class, race and feminism: what role did class and race play in the fight for women's rights?
4. Hurston's story occurs in a kind of vacuum, in that for much of the story, no whites appear at all and white/black relations are not a primary theme – or are they? Consider the role of internalized racism within the all-black communities where the story takes place. (Examples: Mrs. Turner; the obsession of some with being “bright” or “high yellow” — Janie's hair, again). Find some additional examples.
5. If you have students amenable to discussing this, have them visit/ revisit some of the literature/films that were influenced by Hurston's work, e.g. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (film and book), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, or Julie Dash's film “Daughters of the Dust”. Students could take a look at these artists and their work over the weekend and discuss them on Monday or the section day (Wednesday).
6. Again, context is useful, so you could bring in a discussion of the Harlem Renaissance and Hurston's part in this important cultural movement. I always find it interesting that Hurston was somewhat marginalized by her peers due to her less-than-PC portrayal of African American life.
7. The Florida connection is a natural jumping off point for discussion as well. Some of the students may have been to the annual Zora Neale Hurston festival in Eatonville, or visited one of the historically black towns that were founded in Florida following the Civil War (see link, below).
8. Men don't get a really good showing in Hurston's book, or for that matter, in many of the books by contemporary African-American women. How are the relationships between men and women portrayed? Is Tea Cake's ill treatment of Janie, for instance, an example of “things”

rolling downhill, i.e. frustration over discrimination being taken out on those more helpless than oneself?

9. How do Janie's ideas about freedom change as she moves through her life? How is this unfolding of understanding portrayed in the book (symbols again)? Have students pick out quotes or examples to illustrate.

A few internet sources, natch:

Harlem Renaissance

<http://www.fatherryan.org/harlemrenaissance/>

Zora Neale Hurston

<http://i.am/zora>

Historically Black Towns in Florida

<http://www.soulofamerica.com/towns/fltowns.html>