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***THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD:*
JANIE CRAWFORD AND THE ATTAINMENT OF INDIVIDUALITY**

For many years, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was dismissed by critics such as our Alain Locke and Sterling Brown for being devoid of 'social content' and displaying a 'lack of militancy'; despite the novel being seen nowadays as a 'proto-feminist book' and a 'pillow book for feminist readers all over the United States', there are still those who dispute its value, in particular in its portrayal of women.¹ Anne L. Rayson, for example, states that 'in *Their Eyes*, as in all of Hurston's novels, women live only for men and are subservient to them'². The black male critic Darwin Turner is similarly damning describing Hurston's work as 'artful, coy, irrational, superficial and shallow'³; Barbara Smith, in her article *Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston*, disagrees; these remarks, she states, 'bear no relationship to the actual quality of Hurston's achievements and result from the fact that Turner is completely insensitive to the sexual political dynamics of Hurston's life and writings.'⁴

¹ Roses E.R. and Randolph E.R., *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, p. 183.

² Ibid. p. 183.

³ Quoted in Hull G.T., Scott P. and Smith B., *But Some of Us are Brave*, p. 178.

⁴ Ibid. p. 178.

So what exactly does Hurston achieve in her novel? Does she, as some are keen to suggest, seek to subvert contemporary views of black women in America by portraying Janie Crawford as an example of how to attain individuality in an oppressive society? Or does her novel, as Richard Wright states, contain ‘no theme, no message [and] no thought’?⁵ In an attempt to answer these questions, Hurston’s novel will be examined; however, it is important first to look a little closer at some of the perceived images of black women in America at that time in order to provide a clearer context for the debate.

In her extensive study of black women in the United States *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks presents a social hierarchy⁶ based on race and sex which she claims was established by white people as far back as slavery. In it she states that white men are ranked first, ‘white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last.’ Most Americans’, she continues, ‘(including black people) acknowledge and accept this hierarchy.’ Nowadays, hooks’ claims may seem somewhat hysterical; however, one would be unable to deny that Hurston wrote her novel in the midst of sexual and racial oppression. Accepting this helps us to appreciate the achievement made by Hurston in producing and having published a

⁵ Quoted in Gates, Henry Louis & Appiah K.A., *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*.

⁶ hooks bell, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, p. 53.

work of *any* sort, let alone one which, it is claimed by some, identifies and embodies many of the problems experienced by black women in America.

The low social status of African-Americans is linked in no small way to the days of slavery, but this is particularly so in the case of black women. If we take Janie's nanny and mother as examples we find this made clear when we discover that they were both raped by white men. The sexual devaluation of black women is, again, a throwback to the days of slavery. In her analysis of rape *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller states that rape 'was an institutionalised crime, part and parcel of white man's subjugation of people for economic and psychological gain.'⁷ But the image of rape is also responsible, in no small part, for the enduring image of the black woman as (and it is an image which permeates a wide range of literature) a sexual object and possession; not as an individual, but as that which is to be owned. In short, it led to a devaluation of black womanhood in general, one which hooks claims 'shaped the social status of all black women once slavery had ended.'⁸ So how can Janie Crawford be said to present a backlash towards these preconceived and deep-seated views of the black woman as property? And how does she obtain a sense of her own individuality in the face of such oppression?

⁷ Brownmiller Susan, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 111.

For many critics, Jamie Crawford is the emblem of female survival; a figurehead in the struggle for female identity. Yet in her early years, spent in the care of her grandmother, she is really devoid of *any* perception of her true identity. She doesn't even have a name: 'Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names.'" (p. 21) Indeed it is not until she's shown a photograph of herself at six years old that she realizes she is black.

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real little dark girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognise that chile as me. (p. 21)

Janie is barely sixteen when Danny instills into her what she believes is the black woman's role in life; a role which encapsulates entirely hooks' racial and sexual hierarchy:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothing but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule of de world so far as Ah can see. (p. 29)

It is this central image of the black woman as mule of the world which Sherley Anne Williams claims 'becomes a metaphor for the roles that Janie repudiates in her quest for self-fulfilment and the belief against which the book implicitly argues.'⁹

⁹ Quoted in the afterword of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* p. 294; see Bibliography.

After witnessing Janie kiss Johnny Taylor, Nanny is sharply reminded of Janie's approaching sexual maturity, and that she will very soon become a target for the sexual advances of men. She insists that Janie marries Logan Killicks, not because she approves of Killicks as a person, but because it is the only way she can see her granddaughter being afforded financial security when she dies. In short, Nanny wants to protect Janie from what she sees as the curse of the black woman. 'Ah've been praying fuh it to be different wid you' (p. 29) 'No trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches Johnny Taylor is usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on.' (p. 27) Janie complies with Nanny's wishes and marries Killicks, and in so doing demonstrates a complete lack of control over her immediate future; she may have attained sexual maturity, but she is a long way from gaining her individuality.

Only two and a half months later, Janie is upset at being in a relationship void of romantic love; Nanny immediately wants to know what is wrong with her:

Whut's de matter, sugar? You ain't non too s pry dis mornin' [.....] you and Logan been fussin'? Lawd I know dat grass-gut, liver-lipted nigger ain't done took and beat mah baby already! (p. 40)

Nanny's use of the word already would appear to indicate that she considers physical violence to be inevitable and very much a part of married life; if she is not being physically abused now, she will be soon. Although he does not actually beat her, Janie is still abused by Killicks and it soon becomes clear that he really wants her

for sex and work. Here, we find Janie on the verge of substituting her subconscious search for individuality for an assigned role as Killicks' property.

When she runs off with Jodi Starks, things initially seem to be improving from Janie. In contrast to Killicks' insistence that she works in the fields, Starks gives Janie the 'high-stool of do nothing'. Nanny, had she still been alive, would have been very proud; she would have viewed Janie's new role as perfect, the complete antithesis of the mule of the world. But it is not Hurston's wish that we view Nanny and Janie's ideals as the same. Nanny's experience of hard labour, beatings and rape at the hands of men would necessarily force her to see Janie's new situation as desirable, but for Janie herself it is not enough. The 'high-stool of do nothing' soon becomes very uncomfortable and it becomes apparent that doing nothing is only a short way from saying nothing:

Mah wife don't know nothin' bout no speech makin'. Ah never married her fir nothing lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home. (p. 69)

Indeed, saying nothing and doing nothing soon makes her feel like she *is* nothing. Janie is gradually withdrawn from society by her husband and is even banned from the mule ceremony which he arranged because he doesn't feel it is suitable for her: he tells her 'you ain't goin' off in all dat mess of commonness'. (p. 94)

And so Janie's search for individuality once again comes to a dead end. From being forced to act against her will by Killicks she now finds herself being forced into doing nothing. She may be spared the hard labour, but she is still dangerously close to being Stark's slave. As Williams notes, 'Janie is Joe's personal possession, 'de mayor's wife'.¹⁰ It is hardly surprising, then, that as soon as her husband dies, Janie, although 'full of pity for the first time in years' (p. 134) finds time to reflect on how new found freedom:

Years ago, she had told herself to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she'd better look. She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the handkerchief on her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. (p. 134-5)

In replacing the young girl with a 'handsome' rather than just an 'older' woman, Houston manages to give a note of optimism to the passage; rather than mourning over wasted years, we are made aware of the 'glory' of a new beginning; a beginning which holds the promise of freedom and the potential for Janie to blossom into self-hood.

It is with this new sense of freedom that Janie embarks on her third marriage to itinerant blues man, Tea Cake Woods; and it is with Teacake that she finally begins

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 295.

to discover her individuality. Until now, Janie has been used to being seen as, at most, an object of sexual desire:

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great Rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unravelling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. (p. 11)

For the first time in her adult life, she has found someone who loves her for who she is not what she is. Tea Cake invites her to join him in some of the activities he enjoys, such as fishing and playing checkers, and it is through shared activities like this that Janie starts to feel like a real person, not an object. Her soul, we read ‘crawled out from its hiding place’, and with it comes her sense of identity.

When she returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake’s death, Janie’s newly acquired sense of herself is evident to those around her and, although now middle aged, she skips through town with all the vitality of the young girl she left in the looking glass, much to the surprise of the townfolk:

What’s dat old 40 year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swinging down her back like some young gal? (p. 10)

After Janie has related her story, even her best friend Phoeby is astonished and envious of the change in her outlook:

“Lawd!” Phoeby breathed out heavily, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you Janie.” “Ah ain’t satisfied with myself no mo”. (p. 284)

So it would appear that a new independent Janie emerges; but what of Rayson’s charge that Janie, like all Hurston’s female characters, is subservient to men? It would be fair to say that for long periods within the novel Janie is indeed subservient, but only outwardly. Her ability to maintain an inner dignity throughout, however, is surely indicative of a certain strength in her personality which has always been present. Furthermore, if we do acknowledge an element of subservience in her, then we must also acknowledge the short yet significant displays of her power over men, whether that be her leaving Killicks, her public humiliation of Starks or even her shooting and killing of Tea Cake.

It would be unrealistic to expect Janie to go through her life with no trouble whatsoever from her men. Hurston did not wish to paint an idealistic picture of the life of an American black woman, indeed it’s Janie’s success at attaining individuality in the face of such adversity which makes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the powerful novel it is. The point is that Janie Crawford, despite being mistreated for a large part of her life, manages to hold on to what she believes deep down is her, and indeed every woman’s right. Namely to be free of oppression from men. And to all those who would tell her that such a state of affairs is just a dream, Janie would surely answer that ‘The dream is the truth.’ (p. 9)

Bibliography

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