

## **“Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston**

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's tale?
2. Hurston uses nature — the pear tree, the ocean, the horizon, the hurricane — not only as a plot device but also as metaphor. Describe the ways these function as both. Can you think of others?
3. What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's initial and final sentences in this regard?
4. Many readers consider the novel a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each experience?
5. In the novel, speech is used as a mechanism of control and liberation, especially as Janie struggles to find her voice. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or to remain quiet?
6. Richard Wright, another Harlem Renaissance writer, stated his review of the novel that “Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh.” Do you agree? What was your reaction to the vernacular Hurston used in the novel? Do you believe Hurston's use of vernacular dialect is important to understand the characters' way of life?
7. Who is the narrator? How does the “double-voiced discourse” between the narrator and Janie change throughout the novel and how does that affect the story?
8. Is there a difference between the language of the men and that of Janie or the other women? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
9. What are some ways in which issues of class and money are central to this novel? What attitudes and activities are associated with poverty? What seems to be the novel's attitude toward the seasonal farm workers it portrays?
10. The elaborate burial of the town mule draws from an incident Hurston recounts in “Tell My Horse,” where the Haitian president ordered an elaborate Catholic funeral for his pet goat. Although this scene is comic, how is it also tragic?
11. How does the image of the black woman as “the mule of the world” become a symbol for the roles Janie chooses or refuses to play during her quest?
12. Do you think that the novel can be considered a feminist work? Why or why not?
13. Why is adherence to tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are “different”?
14. The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?
15. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning?
16. Would you say this novel conveys a moral, and if so, is it a clear one?