

1 A View of Dialect and Folklore in Hurston's their Eyes Were
2 Watching God

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7 **Abstract**

8 After long been rejected by harsh criticism, Alice Walker brings back credit to Zora Neale
9 Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, about a black heroine. Species from the
10 south folklore is portrayed in black dialect echoing traditional literary voice. Our paper
11 targets to analyse the linguistic and cultural diversity in the novel noticed between black
12 dialect and Standard English of the narrator; plus an exposition to folkloric elements spelled
13 out of the Southern black culture accurately reported by the novelist through Janie whose
14 voice represents the actual situation of everyday life. Hurston, as most urban and rural
15 African American writers, defies canonical literature and conventional literary representation;
16 indeed, she succeeds to develop the skill of reproducing the ritualized vernacular contest,
17 stories, games, entertainment and other popular habits. Grounded in a theory of cultural oral
18 legacy, Hurston's novel is duplication of the black culture and dialect which have had an
19 unmistakable influence on American society.

20

21 **Index terms**— folkloric imagery, black dialect, culture, stories.

22 **1 I.**

23 The Novel: their Eyes were Watching God the novel exposes the true identity of a woman living in the 1920s and
24 1930s to trace the development of the African American woman of the time, "Hurston created the character of
25 Janie during a time in which African-American female heroines were uncommon in literature. In 1937 when the
26 novel was originally published, females experienced fewer opportunities than they do today. Hurston chose to
27 portray Janie as a strong, independent woman, unlike most African-American females of the early nineteenth
28 century. Perhaps Hurston characterized Janie as capable and courageous to empower her readers and to show
29 them that opportunities do exist for all women; they just have to embrace them". (Cliffnotes). Hurston seems
30 searching for herself in this novel, through Janie the prominent character who was compelled to marry three
31 times and has no right to be what she is herself. She was obsessed to find true love. After she fails in her first
32 marriage with the farmer Logan Killicks, she meets Joe Starcks who first seems ambitious and open minded.
33 He took her to Eatonville, Florida but soon Janie's life was a jail freed from it at Joe's death. Finally Janie
34 succeeds to know true love with Tea Cake who is twelve years younger than her. They share memorable times
35 working together in the fields of Everglades before the hurricane comes threatening the people's life. Since then
36 Janie has known disruption with Cake who after his attempt to save her from a savage dog he was bitten and
37 became aggressively ill with jealousy till killed by Janie in an attempt to protect herself and after she proves her
38 innocence she turns back home to narrate her story to her best friend Pheoby Watson.

39 **2 II.**

40 **3 South Black Dialect**

41 Hurston masters the rural south black dialect which makes the novel's discourse idiomatic and individual through
42 special use of grammar, vocabulary and tone. The use of black dialect with the narrator's Standard English creates
43 uniqueness to the novel. She challenges to incorporate the standard and the dialect and endeavours to navigate
44 "two distinct narrative traditions -a black oral tradition characterized by active interchange between responsive
45 storytellers and participatory listeners, and a (written) Western literary tradition where, typically, the author
46 composes and the reader reads in isolation from the author -and suggests her interest in infusing the American
47 novel with expressive potentialities derived from Afro-American culture" (Awkward 1990:2)Highly recommended
48 narrated sentences in front of choppy simple spoken utterances like in "Words walking without masters; walking
49 altogether like harmony in a song. 'What she doin coming back here in dem overalls?'" (Chapter 1). The dialect
50 is abundant in the whole novel in many instances like when Janie shows indifferent to the town gossip " "Ah
51 don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth the trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say
52 if you wants to" (Chapter1). Nanny, Janie's grandmother, uses explicitly the dialect when she warns from Men
53 superiority "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," (Chapter2). Also the dialect is used
54 by Jody when he mocks at Janie when she attempts to give few words on the occasion of Jody's new stature
55 as the mayor of the town saying "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife dont know nothin' 'bout no
56 speech-makin'" (Chapter5).

57 Hurston uses particular phonetic spelling to capture the spirit of "Eatonville's Ebonics" to represent the
58 prototype of southerners. The dialect pervades in the novel both in dialogue and narrative creating hunger to
59 read more about these folk people of Eatonville and their speech accurately depicted by Hurston "It was the time
60 for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the T

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63 **5 Colloquialisms**

64 **6 Meanings**

65 Ah been feelin' dat somethin' set for stillbait In other words, she is saying that she's feeling like she's the target
66 of the community disapproval, like a bait on a hook that can't move or wriggle as a worm might do.

67 All them dat's goin' tuh cut de monkey in other words, if everyone has finished acting silly. before de ornery
68 varmit could tack a sailing and boating term, consistent with the strong wind that was blowing during this
69 episode. To a sailor, "tack" means to turn the bow to the wind. The mule wasn't fast enough to turn and run
70 into the wind in pursuit of the children. bucked each other beat and/or challenged each other.

71 cold-cocked her a look looked her straight in the eyes.

72 crazy as a betsy bug a variation of "crazy as a bed bug," an insect of a family (Cimicidae) of wingless,
73 bloodsucking hemipteran insects, especially the species (Cimex lectularius) with a broad, flat reddish-brown
74 body and an unpleasant odor that infests beds, furniture, walls, and so on, is active mainly at night, and may
75 transmit a variety of diseases. dat ole forty year ole 'oman a reference to Janie; the remark, by a woman, about
76 a woman, is made out of spite and envy. Although Janie is 40 years old, she is still an attractive woman, much
77 to the annoyance of the women. Don't keer how big uh lie get told, somebody kin b'lieve it Tea Cake believes
78 that the size of a lie has nothing to do with whether some people will believe it. fetid having a bad smell, as of
79 decay; putrid. flivver a small, cheap automobile, especially an old one.

80 **7 Give it uh poor man's trial**

81 A poor man takes any respectable job he can get and does his best with it.

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83 time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules
84 and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful
85 and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They
86 sat in judgment" (Chapter1 These features are characteristic of regional speech and distinctive dialect, Hurston
87 novel is a writing of oral art dealing with criteria of Negro art to offer what Henry Louis Gates (1988) has called
88 "speakerly Text" to mean "a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition"
89 (181). The following table refers to a glossary of important idiomatic expression in purely black dialect which
90 denotes Hurston's attachment to folk speech used as a technique to sound the black speech, though her novel is
91 intended to be standard but looks exceptional within these chunks of speech. goosing a sudden, playful prod in
92 the backside hard of understandin' Pheoby will want a detailed explanation to be sure that she understands all
93 that Janie says.

94 a huge live oak tree an evergreen oak.

95 in and through Georgy living in and passing through the state of Georgia.

96 kissin' yo' foot acting more like a servant than a husband and an equal knocked up pregnant.
97 a lost ball in de high grass

98 The townspeople love baseball; not only do they like to watch it, but they also like to play it. The field where
99 they play has tall, uncut grass, and fly balls are often lost and the game delayed while both teams search for
100 the ball. Love is lak de sea . . . it's different with every shore Hurston uses the simile to explain that love
101 is different for everyone who experiences it. Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight trading insults, usually in a
102 predictable way, but the insults are based on exaggeration of personal traits and involve derogatory statements
103 about members of each other's family -often, someone's mother. You got me in de go long opening for a proposal
104 of marriage. Janie has captivated Tea Cake, and he will "go long" through life with her.

105 These colloquialisms extracted from the novel give detailed account about people's thoughts and talks and
106 Hurston's heavy use of dialect brings praise to her from the African American poet and novelist Sherley Anne
107 Williams (1978) who says « to characterize her diction solely in terms of exotic 'dialect' spellings is to miss
108 her deftness with language. In the speech of her characters, black voices -whether rural or urban, northern or
109 southern -come alive. Her fidelity to diction, metaphor, and syntax? rings, even across forty years, with an aching
110 familiarity that is a testament to Hurston's skill and to the durability of black speech" "Foreward." p. ix. The
111 figurative language in the whole novel echoes the non-standard dialect representative of black folk language and
112 shows us that Hurston captivates the dialect and celebrates the folk culture to echo the evolving black culture in
113 America.

114 **8 III. Zora Neal Hurston's Introduction to Black Folklore**

115 With the aim to outline the future of African American existence in society, Zora Neale Hurston and many others
116 like Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, in the times of Harlem renaissance between
117 1920s and 1930s, reflected the roots of oral traditions of African slaves in America in the form of stories and fables,
118 music and slave narratives. Hurston's own words about her close contact with the treasure of black heritage are
119 evident when she says: "I was glad when somebody told me, 'you may go and collect Negro folklore'" 1 Hurston
120 as a folklorist finds no difficulty to gather those stories, sayings and songs preserved orally by her people to make
121 it much known to her. Her acquaintance with the black culture enables its stamp in her works exposing a variety
122 of religious, spiritual and sorrowful songs usually performed by slaves, uttered . She admires this heritage when
123 she says "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside
124 influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times
125 to reveal that which the soul lives by." (idem). She considers folklore as the essence of existence defining it as
126 "boiled-down juice of human living" (Hurston 1999). Being an obedient student to the famous anthropologist
127 Franz Boas, Hurston travels to the south of the United States and the Caribbean region to collect the folklore
128 and record the speech of the rural illiterate people of African descendant. This is why "not surprisingly, the novel
129 she reputedly crafted in just seven weeks is laced with legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs and local lore
130 about the weather, plants, and animals of the south" (Garrigues 2003:21).

131 from their mouths often painful -"weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men." (Dubois
132 1903). Telling stories is frequent in black folklore as depicted by Hurston; some stories often tricksters' tales
133 advice people to be more vigilant and less arrogant, and others dealing with animal characters like rabbit, fox,
134 and spider.

135 Signifying or verbal word play is significant marker in black culture. It is a manipulation of figurative language
136 in the form of allegory where the meaning is indirect. In addition to popular games like playing the dozen which
137 is a type of signifying basically relied on an exchange of insults. Through these elements and others, Hurston
138 raises awareness about the availability of black folklore and its influence on American stories. Her novel their
139 Eyes Were Watching God is a sampling of Hurston's glamourous works in supporting a strong movement whose
140 aim is to install the Negro identity as an influential African American one.

141 **9 IV. Folk Tales**

142 The novel itself is a story about storytelling. The main story is told by Janie about her search for love in her
143 fourth relationships with first her nanny and then her three husbands always disappointed by them. Janie's
144 grandmother, being herself a former slave, contributes to the formulation of stories about slavery and civil war;
145 she highlights the issue of sexual inequality hoping that things will change with her granddaughter "Ah been
146 prayin' fulh it tuh be different wid you." (Chapter2). Also, the stories are told by people set in the porch the
147 "porch sitters" near to Joe Starcks' crossroads store, the gathering place for Eatonville's men and women, where
148 Janie admires listening to them in spite of Jody discouragement to her because he considers the folk people as
149 'trashy'; "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had
150 forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people." (Chapter 6). The stories are
151 reported in the form of conversation, related to events or people passing to and fro the porch. The gossips
152 prefer to speak about women passing near to them like talking about a beautiful girl called Daisy Blunt, Daisy is
153 walking a drum tune. You can almost hear it by looking at the way she walks. She is black and she knows that
154 white clothes look good on her, so she wears them for dress up. She's got those big black eyes with plenty shiny
155 white in them that makes them shine like brand new money and she knows what God gave women eyelashes for,

156 too" (Chapter 6). All the rest of the single men have crowded around Daisy by this time. She is parading and
157 blushing at the same time. The novel in a whole is a retelling of the past. Also funny stories are held to entertain
158 about Matt Bonner's mule who is subject of mockery by the folk people teasing their friend who unfriendly treats
159 his animal. The peoples' mockery at Bonner increased at the mule's loss outside the store. The town members
160 also make fun of Bonner and the mule cadaver when the birds eat its carcass. Furthermore, a woman begging
161 more food to her chicken was subject of scorn when Joe gave her small piece of pork.

162 All these stories and the way they are told represent a rhetorical orientation of oral literary tradition crafted
163 by Hurston through different speakerly voices of the interplay between individuals in the Negro community.

164 10 V. Playing the Checkers

165 Playing is usually a feature of folk culture inherited from generations to another. It is exposed in the novel at
166 the meeting of porch sitters gathered around the table for the game but also playing is a leisure time to talk
167 and tease. In chapter 6, Jody asks Janie to bring the checkers to play with Sam "You gettin' too moufy, Janie,"
168 Starks told her. "Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers. Sam Watson, you'se mah fish." This is an
169 idiomatic expression to mean a good catch because Jody has the intention to beat Sam at checkers -that is catch
170 him like a fish on his hook. Playing the checkers is represented again between Janie and her third husband Tea
171 Cake who allowing her to share the game is a sign of independence for the woman and a hint that Cake is the
172 lover she seeks unlike her former two husbands who represent the patriarchal world of Hurston.

173 11 VI.

174 12 Folk Songs

175 In chapter 11, Cake plays the guitar with Janie "Evenin', folks. Thought y'all might lak uh lil music this evenin'
176 so Ah brought long mah box." "Crazy thing!" Janie commented, beaming out with light. Also in chapter 13
177 there are titles of songs as in the following passage "after a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside
178 her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was.
179 Then whoever it was started to singing "Ring de bells of mercy. Call de sinner man home. Her heart all but
180 smothered her? He walked on in with a guitar and a grin. Guitar hanging round his neck wit ».

181 13 Hurston the Folklorist

182 Hurston shows as a prominent folklorist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, proved along the use of rich indigenous
183 dialect for her native rural Florida and the Caribbean. She speaks simply about her folks' ordinary life in that
184 depressed America, she says "We goin' on de muck." "Whut's de muck, and where is it at?" "Oh down in de
185 Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks
186 don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness. We must go dere." (Chapter 13). To
187 succeed her novel, she investigates the folklore in several regions beyond United States to lead Her ethnographic
188 work about black communities. She states her data in her book *Tell My Horse* (1938) and pursue her admiration
189 to her black people weaving the songs, stories, and other colours of folklore "Dat mule uh yourn, Matt. You
190 better go see 'bout him. He's bad off." "Where 'bouts? Did he wade in de lake and uh alligator ketch him?"
191 "Worser'n dat. De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some
192 ohters had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh wash board? Yeah, Matt, dat mule so skinny till de women
193 is usin' his rib bones fuh uh rubboard, and hangin' things out on his hock-bones tuh dry." (chapter 6). Hurston's
194 aim was to present the prototype of the new Negro as no more submissive but rather self assertive and racially
195 conscious. Her mission as an anthropologist was not at all easy especially that "African American folklore had
196 received no scholarly attention before this time, and Hurston appeared to be an ideal researcher, as an African
197 American raised in the Deep South, she understood its traditions. Yet, Hurston soon discovered that collecting
198 the folklore was no easy task" ??Litwin 2010:48). Though the use of dialect in the characters' speech seems
199 difficult, Hurston ventures to use it being aware of its treasure and reflection of reality, "as an anthropologist
200 and a writer, Hurston believed that the jokes, stories, and songs she witnessed needed to be reported exactly as
201 she had heard them. Anything less would misrepresent or dilute their distinctive sound. The author's careful
202 use of Eatonville's regional speech animates her characters while serving, at the same time, to make them more
203 believable. Janie, Joe, Tea Cake, and the others are authentic and vital literary versions of the real porch-sitters
204 of Eatonville" (ibid 54-55).

205 Being a speakerly text, it is a benefit to be read aloud and is recommended in most high colleges of America.
206 Hurston uses folklore as a tool of literature and structured her novel out of this premise to highlight the rich
207 verbal rituals caring less of any political profit nor of financial one, she sinks in a reservoir of tasteful folktales
208 and dialect and underlines the price slavery pays for the sake of civilization. Proud of being the spokeswoman of
209 her own people, she attacks all the negative stereotypes about the Negro, and passionately believes in the merits
210 of folklore.

¹Zora Neale Hurston says, in the Introduction to her volume, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935.



Figure 1: Global

A Lexicon of Janie Dialect

ah = I	dis= this
uh = a	dem= them
mah = my	'cept= except
yuh = you	'scuse= excuse
tuh = to	yo'= your
youse = you are	ole= old
dat = that	git= get
wid = with	mo'= more
kin = can	'cause= because
'bout = about	Lawd= Lord

Figure 2:

meriny skin
a mink skin . . . a coon

hide

never hit us a lick

amiss

No Matt Bonner with

plow lines

pickin' my box

quart of coon-dick

rub board .

.

run our conversation

from grassroots to pine

trees

Say you started tuh

Miccanopy but de mule

...

school out . . . high bush and sweeter berry take more time twelve o'clock whistle Jacksonville is a railroad sounded at regular times during the day.

two hundred dollars
inside her shirt

uh butt-headed cow

uh mite too previous

watchin' de job

like browned-egg-white meringue; a complexion color.
one thing looks pretty much like something else until
both can be studied carefully. No
one can understand what Janie's life was like with Tea
Cake or with Joe until each is
examined carefully.

never beat or spanked the children when they didn't
deserve it.

Plow lines control an animal. Now that the mule is dead,
he will no longer be hitched to
the plow.

playing my guitar.

cheap moonshine or bootleg whiskey

The old-fashioned galvanized or glass washing board was
in common use before

washing machines became economically available

We've gone as far as we can go with this conversation
-from minor matters to larger
issues. Hurston has used other expressions like this to
indicate limits and extremes in
conversations

Miccanopy is a small community northwest of
Eatonville. The man didn't really know
where he was going.

a stubborn animal that won't do what its owner wants
it to do.

In this particular colloquialism, "previous" means "a
little too early."

watching and waiting for Tea Cake to die.

Figure 3:

211 [Litwin ()] *A Reader's Guide to Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. USA: Library of Congress
212 Cataloguing, L Litwin , B . 2010. National Council of Teachers of English (Published by)

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227 [Hurston (ed.) ()] *Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writer's Project: Go Gator and Muddy the*
228 *Water*, Z N Hurston . Pamela Bordelon (ed.) 1999. New York; Norton.