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Perception and Identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston unflinchingly explores the tension between external perceptions and individual identity. For much of the piece, Janie's behavior is dictated by others' perceptions and expectations of her: Nanny forces her to marry, Starks does all he can to mold her into the ideal "Mayor's wife," and the townspeople pelt her with their own grudges and jealousies. Even as Janie bends under the weight of these myriad oppressions, however, she quietly develops and learns to live within an unshakable core of selfhood built largely upon the endurance of her dreams ("For women, the dream is the truth..." [1]). This piece will examine the impact of external perceptions on Janie, and trace Janie's development as an individual in spite of—and, to varying degrees, because of—that impact. Moreover, the paper will briefly contrast Starks' and Janie's divergent attitudes toward and reactions to external perceptions.

The first glimpse the reader gets of Janie in the novel comes through the eyes of the envious townspeople ("They saw her come before sundown.[...]They sat in judgement" [1]), who make "burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs" (2). These questions and laughs, however, are "words running without masters": though they derive some illusory allure by "walking all together like harmony in a song" (2), they contain no substance, and have no real thought behind them. For if, as Plato might have it, reason and truth are accepted as masters of speech, then a "word without a master" has no obligation to either. Indeed, the words of the townspeople are not motivated by some vow of honesty, but by "envy they had stored up from other times" (2). Thus, the townspeople's appraisals of Janie serve less

to characterize Janie herself than to reveal the shallow selfishness of the townspeople; the townspeople, in other words, are unreliable in their characterization of Janie.

Nonetheless, the pressure exerted upon Janie by others' perceptions—and by the social conventions those perceptions often reflect and uphold—propels the novel's primary internal conflict: Janie's quest for "that oldest human longing—self-realization" (7) in a world which tries at every turn to define her, to appropriate her identity for its, the world's, own purposes. The pear tree vision sets in motion Janie's pursuit of pure, natural love, which remains her chief quest throughout the piece. At the same time, the vision precipitates Janie's kissing Johnny Taylor, and in turn Nanny's forcing Janie to marry Killicks. As she lectures Janie, Nanny's eyes "diffuse and melt Janie, the room, and the world into one comprehension." Like the townspeople, Nanny has come to believe that the external world exists solely to confirm her own understandings, passions, etc. And because Nanny's understanding of the world does not permit Janie to "stand alone by herself" (15), and reduces marriage to a loveless practicality ("love is the prong all us colored women gets hung up on" [23]), Janie is crammed awkwardly and painfully into Killicks' world, which "desecrates the pear tree" (14).

But even as Janie's external situation closes in to suffocate her, the purity of her longing for "pear tree love" endures. Nanny herself vigorously defends a dream's ability to endure: "... nothin' can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low til you can rob 'em of they will" (16). The narrator offers an even bolder vindication of dreams on the novel's opening page: "For women, the dream is the truth, and they act and do things accordingly" (1). When Janie discovers by way of Killicks that "marriage [does] not make love[,] her first dream [is]

dead, so she [becomes] a woman” (25). Given the foregoing description of women’s dreams, though, the dream can only die externally; having “become a woman,” Janie has gained the ability to store the dream inside herself as an abiding, unchangeable truth. Perhaps she lays it in her heart beside the things she “knows” that “no one had ever told her” (25), and in this way begins to assemble a core of selfhood that cannot be touched by Nanny’s oppression, nor by any other external pressure.

Joe Starks, on the other hand, whose dreams are forever tied up in external designations (being a man, he is at the mercy of “ships at a distance” [1]), possesses no such invulnerable “core of selfhood.” Everything Starks does is a calculated effort toward shaping others’ perceptions of him, and he succeeds in establishing himself as an undisputed authority figure. In the process, however, he becomes enslaved to the image of himself he has installed in the people’s minds (“They [the townspeople] bowed down to him...because he was all these things, but then again he was all these things because the town bowed down” [50]). That is to say, because Joe derives his own self-worth from the manner in which he is perceived by others, he is perpetually obligated to act in accordance with others’ perceptions, at the expense of his autonomy and freedom.

As far as Janie is concerned, the duties Joe’s power forces upon her keep her and Joe “in some way we ain’t natural wid one ‘nother” (46). The “privileges” of authority become “the rock she [is] battered against,” and Joe’s interminable obsession with power and control “takes the bloom off things” (43). Hurston repeatedly employs metaphors of distance to describe Janie’s reaction to Joe’s authority: Janie “feels far away from things and lonely,” and she laments that

she “[can’t] get but so close to the people in spirit” (46). Such metaphors reflect the distance Janie feels within her own self: the growing disparity between her dream-self (i.e. her aforementioned “core of selfhood”) and her immediate external environment. This disparity furthers Janie’s maturity as a woman of dreams: she admits that Starks “never was the flesh and blood image of her dreams” (a woman’s dreams, according to the passage quoted above, do not require a flesh and blood image), and she learns to discriminate between and separate her “inside and [her] outside” (72). She perfects the art of forbearance, until she “receive[s] all things with the stolidness of the earth, which soaks up urine and refuse with the same indifference” (77).

So, both Starks and Janie become victims of the superficial social obligations with which authority saddles them, but Starks is a far more willing victim than Janie. Valuing others’ perceptions as he does, Starks is driven to bitterness when the assets which allowed him to sustain an appearance of authority—most notably, his physical features—begin to deteriorate. Janie, on the other hand, finds her invulnerable dream-self amidst the frustration and confinement engendered by social conventions and external perceptions, and her core of independent selfhood grows stronger.

Tea Cake alleviates the dissonance between Janie’s dreams and her reality; he serves as an outlet by which Janie’s long-repressed dreams find external expression. The love between Tea Cake and Janie is never contingent upon superficial affectations. On the contrary, it takes the form of an unspoken yet mutually understood joke that hangs between them (“[Janie] was in favor of the story that was making [Tea Cake] laugh before she even heard it” [94]). Because he lacks a selfish agenda, Tea Cake’s perception does not restrict Janie like those of Nanny, the

townspeople, and Starks, but rather complements and catalyzes Janie's own dreams, as well as her individuality. Tea Cake looks "like the love thoughts of women"—presumably, then, his very physical appearance rekindles Janie's own "love thoughts."

Thus, Tea Cake may well be the "flesh and blood image of [Janie's] dreams." Still, flesh and blood are fickle and temporary, and when Tea Cake gets rabies, his "flesh and blood image" morphs into that of a salivating, hungry dog. Another "flesh and blood image" falls off the shelf of Janie's heart; the brutality of reality, coupled with Janie's "self-crushing love" (128) for Tea Cake, forces Janie to kill the man who looks like "the love thoughts of women." So, in the end, only the love thoughts themselves, the dreams and memories that are secretly real, remain--"the kiss of [TC's] memory mak[ing] pictures of love and light against the wall" (193).

The perceptions of others, then, often oppress and confine: Nanny's stubborn "comprehension" of the world pushes Janie into a loveless marriage; Starks' obsession with authority compels him to enslave both himself and Janie to the perceptions of the townspeople; the townspeople's perceptions of Janie reduce her to a caricature of the people's own jealousies and grudges. Tea Cake's perception of Janie, though, allows Janie to flourish, and catalyzes her efforts toward happiness and "self-realization." For her part, Janie is only half-concerned with others' various perceptions of her, for her own identity is firmly rooted in the eternal truth of dreams.