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The Oppressed African American Female Voice in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Sweat"

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**The Oppressed African American Female Voice in
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Sweat"**

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolk too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do.

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston moved to New York from Alabama in 1925, where her work contributed to the growing trends of the Harlem Renaissance; her literary work had a major impact on African American culture. In *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Robert E. Hemenway discusses how Hurston was part of the "New Negroes," which was a group made up of African American people "who made it clear that they would not accept a subordinate role in American society" (9). In this vein, Hurston wrote her short story, "Sweat" (1926), and her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), to represent the African American female voice. In *Zora Neale Hurston: The Breath of Her Voice*, Ayana I. Karanja examines how Hurston "wanted to talk about Black women. She always believed it was important that a woman speak for herself and interpret events in her life as she lived them" (50). During Hurston's lifetime, the voices of African American women were often suppressed by the intersecting forces of racism and sexism. Hurston's literary work portrayed gender struggles of her time in American society during the twentieth century.

Many scholars, like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argue that Hurston and her work had been the primary influence on some of the most accomplished African American women writers, like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. In Gates' "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text," he

discusses how Hurston used herself, as a narrator and through her characters, to embody the African American tradition in literature, and how she used her characters to embrace their voices and identities using the spoken word: “The narrative voice Hurston created, and her legacy to Afro-American fiction, is a lyrical and disembodied yet individual voice, from which emerges a singular longing and utterance, a transcendent, ultimately racial self, extending far beyond the merely individual” (183). With Hurston’s legacy and influence, she was able to establish what it meant to be an African American woman and author.

Hurston uses her novels and short stories to represent the oppressed voice of African American women. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores the different experiences of the protagonist, Janie Crawford, and her journey to find her voice as she endures three different marriages: to Logan Killicks, who was an older farm owner; to Joe Starks, who was a political figure; and to Tea Cake Woods, who was young gambler and Janie’s true love. Hurston uses Janie’s marriages to demonstrate how overcoming objectification led women to discover their own voice and independence. Through her literature, Hurston exposes how many African American women were oppressed by men.

With Janie’s experiences, she overcomes obstacles in each of her marriages to find her own voice. With her first marriage to Logan Killicks, Logan becomes demanding and controlling over Janie, forcing her to work on the farm for him as well as being a housewife. Janie’s second husband, Joe Starks, oppresses Janie throughout their marriage as he believed women position was in the house silent. There is consensus about these marriages and their meanings in the scholarship; scholars like Yvonne Johnson and Maria Jacobs Racine acknowledge the use of silence and silencing displayed throughout Janie’s marriages. With Janie’s third husband, Tea Cake Woods: he becomes insecure about Janie’s loyalty to him and his own dark skin and low-

class status and beats her. The scholarship on voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has overlooked Tea Cake's abuse towards Janie. This is a crucial moment to reflect on because this is where Janie gives all her rights away to her voice by remaining silent and moving on, and Tea Cake claims his dominance in their relationship. I am adding that this abuse shouldn't be so easy to forget, and all readers must better understand it, especially scholars who claim to support gender empowerment, even though Hurston mentions it only briefly in the novel. Scholars also argue that Janie finds her voice during her final moments in her marriage to her second husband, Joe Starks; however, I believe that it is when she kills Tea Cake and goes to trial that she finally is able to find her true authentic voice. This is when Janie uses her voice to defend herself against being killed by Tea Cake. After killing Tea Cake, Janie is convicted and tried for murder. In the courtroom, the African American community, people Janie trusted, come to watch, and testify against Janie. Janie is abandoned by those who fostered her, and is supported by unfamiliar, white faces. During the trial, Janie both matures and shows control over her voice, when she explains to the jury in her own voice the story of the life and the love she shared with Tea Cake. By expressing her own voice in court, Janie finally develops how to use her voice.

Comparing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Hurston's earlier story "Sweat" also helps to emphasize both the importance of Janie's self-defensive violence and her journey to voice. In "Sweat," oppression of women in the African American community is demonstrated through the abusive marriage of Delia and Sykes Jones. Hurston allowed her readers to see a comparison amongst the main characters as Delia from "Sweat" serves as a predecessor of Janie Crawford from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and how they both overcame female inequality and oppressive marriages. It is through Delia that one witnesses a voice that has already been in motion, rather than observing a journey like Janie's to finding her voice. Delia is a woman of

long suffering and patience when dealing with her abusive husband. After years of torture, Sykes gets his karma. Sykes is bitten by a snake, and Delia chooses not to help change his fate, and lets him die. One sees a similar fate in relation to animals, as Tea Cake from Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contracts rabies from a rabid dog, forcing Janie to kill him in self-defense. "Sweat" allows readers to understand that Hurston used Tea Cake's death as an indirect result of his abuse to Janie. Hurston makes vengeance known in "Sweat" when Sykes dies, but not so much in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when Tea Cake dies.

Literature Review: Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

When conducting research on Zora Neale Hurston and her work, specifically on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it was evident that there were themes in the novel that were key tools to scholarly critics who were engaged in Hurston's work. Two themes of importance in the scholarship on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were voice and marriage, and how these themes interacted with each other. I found sources by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Barbara Johnson, and a great number of others. With their academic work, these critics helped readers understand the idea of how Hurston used her novels and short stories to represent the oppressed voice of African American women.

The scholarship on voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* falls into two categories. The first group had similar interests in close reading Hurston's rhetoric. This group includes Deborah Clarke, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Barbara Johnson. In her work, "The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Deborah Clarke acknowledges that Hurston used her own voice throughout her work and that Hurston's "accomplishment is nothing less than redefining African American rhetoric, rendering it verbal and visual" (611). Hurston's voice was one that fought for and celebrated African American women, a voice that

permanently encouraged other strong women to use their own voice to stand up for equality, including some of the most profound African American women. Deborah Clarke's work surrounding the importance of African American women was like the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Barbara Johnson, as they all developed similar forms and approaches to studying and discussing African American literary history.

Like Deborah Clarke, Gates also recognized voice in Hurston's work, but through Gates, one learns how to understand and acknowledge the individual presence of the African American tradition, and why one should celebrate the voice of African American women as well as understanding the importance of the oppressed background of this particular "voice." Gates recognizes that Hurston used her narrators and her characters to embody the African American tradition in literature and her characters to embrace their voices and identities using the spoken word. Gates argues that Hurston's novel is the first example in the tradition of a "speakerly text." Gates explains how "the speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features" (Gates 181). Gates is allowing his readers to understand that the narrator of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* uses the "black oral voice" to form oral narration that is found in African American literature and traditions.

Like Gates, Barbara Johnson focuses on voice, but rather the change of voice through the character Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Here, it was evident how the theme of voice and the theme of marriage collide into each other. Janie's changes occurred through and after each of her marriages with three different men, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods. With Janie Crawford's changes came strength, both vocally and physically. Johnson explores

and uncovers the ways in which metaphor and metonymy were used as rhetorical devices to support the development of Janie's voice. Johnson identifies this voice but focuses on the shift of voice throughout the novel.

Barbara Johnson pays close attention to specific passages from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as focusing on the figurative language. Johnson emphasizes how changes within Janie happen internally and externally: "Janie's acquisition of power of voice thus grows not out of her identity but out of her division into inside and outside" (Johnson 163). Barbara Johnson looks at the crucial turning points of Janie's marriage to Joe and within herself. She began to speak out, defending herself, gaining a "voice" for her inner self. Johnson explains how these passages help create scenes that allow readers to understand how Janie thought about the "inside state" (163) of her marriage. Janie was not about to be completely submissive to Joe without her voice being heard. Clarke, Gates, and Johnson all developed similar forms and approaches in their work. Each author discusses the importance of "voice," but each took their own approach and view of voice. For Clarke and Gates, both authors recognize the individual presence of "black bodies" and "African American tradition" shown through voice in Hurston's work, and why one should celebrate this voice and understand the importance of the background of this particular "voice."

Another group of critics focus on the theme of oppression found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This group includes Yvonne Johnson, Maria Jacobs Racine, and Dylan Williams. Each author in the second group discussed the oppression of society and male domination shown through the marriages Janie endures. Responding to this oppression, Janie was able to gain a voice of her own and develop her own identity. Hurston gave a character who came out stronger than before and surer of her own identity and voice. Yvonne Johnson based her work around

allowing readers to understand the historical connections between African American female authors and their work. Yvonne Johnson discussed how “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the first self-conscious effort by an American ethnic writer not only to subvert patriarchal discourse but also to give voice to women of color” (Johnson 44). With Yvonne Johnson’s critical view on Hurston’s work, one can acknowledge the literary traditions, which goes beyond the set of boundaries for Janie as a character and for women in this community.

Like Yvonne Johnson, Maria Jacobs Racine also acknowledges the oppression of women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but she also emphasizes the importance of silence in addition to voice. Racine notes that “for women, silence has crossed every racial and cultural boundary; and silence characterizes Hurston’s Janie, who spends the first forty years of her life learning to achieve her voice against the opposition of men and, sometimes, against the opposition of other women” (283). One can see how powerful the idea of being silenced and silencing is to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as through each of Janie’s marriages, it was the man who dominated and spoke for the relationship. Racine argues that the development of the male voice seems to be parallel to the development of Janie’s own voice. The men in Janie’s life have voices that they use against her, and it is by her relationships with these men that Janie’s voice gets stronger. Janie becomes more self-confident with each relationship she endures. In an oppressive society, Janie goes through three marriages, each marking a stage in her journey in learning about living and loving.

Then similar to Racine’s conception, one can see how Dylan Williams discusses the realities of oppression and objection as a means of experience daily for African Americans and other minority groups: “Janie’s marriages are limiting in the same ways that society was limiting for a black woman” (193). Williams looks further into how Janie is oppressed by one of her husbands,

Joe, and how he objectifies Janie by thinking of her only in terms of the value she brings to them; he does not actually see Janie as a person. The scholarship has been helpful with establishing Janie's journey to finding her own voice but has left out important analysis on Tea Cake beating Janie. Janie's voice disappears after the beating, and I believe this is something that must be discussed and acknowledged as a crucial part of Janie's journey.

Janie's Journey to Voice

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is initially oppressed through marriage and prevented from sustaining her full potential. Janie is oppressed and silenced throughout the novel by her three husbands, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods, as these marriages left her suffocated. Janie's marriages served as crucial points in her life as she searched for self-discovery. Janie becomes independent and powerful as she learns to speak for herself in her own, unique voice.

When Janie was just entering adolescence, she visualized her life like a blooming pear tree. In Chapter Two, Hurston describes how "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was the branches" (10). As Janie would sit below the tree, she would dream about herself blooming, as she longed for passion and love. To help fulfill this passion, Janie kissed a boy named Johnny Taylor. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, sees Janie kiss Johnny: "That brought her wide awake. She bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss... That was the end of her childhood" (14-15). Nanny tells Janie she is a woman now that she has kissed Johnny Taylor and marries her off to Logan Killicks, a man who is twice her age. Logan owned his own property on a farm and was a well-known respected man throughout his community. After Janie criticizes Logan, Nanny slaps Janie: "She slapped the girl's face

violently, and forced her head back so that their eyes met in struggle” (17). Nanny regrets slapping Janie and tells Janie her life story in slavery so that Janie can understand why marriage is so important: “You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do” (19). Nanny addressed to Janie about what it was like to be African Americans and always suppressed by white people. She told Janie that she never had a voice, or a chance to say what she believed in. She wanted Janie to marry Logan so that she could have this voice that Nanny never had; Nanny’s dream of a better life for Janie only ends up limiting her independence. However, Janie did not sexually desire Logan. Logan ruined the passion and image of Janie’s blooming future, like the pear tree.

After a year into their unhappy marriage, Logan became demanding and controlling over Janie, forcing her to work on the farm for him as well as being a housewife. Janie realizes that her marriage with Logan isn’t what she had hoped it would be. It was evident that through this control Logan suppressed Janie’s voice through physical labor and force: “If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside” (31). Logan tries to impose masculine roles upon Janie, and this does not seem right to her. However, Janie is strong enough to stand up for herself and loudly uses her voice when Logan makes these demands. In Chapter Four, when Logan expects Janie to chop wood, Janie replies that “Ah’m just as stiff as you is stout. If you can stand not to chop and tote wood Ah reckon you can stand not to git no dinner. ’Scuse mah freezolity, Mist’ Killicks, but Ah don’t mean to chop de first chip” (31). Logan then asserts that Janie has been spoiled rotten by both himself and Nanny. Once Janie utilizes her own voice in the relationship to discuss her dissatisfaction, she then acts and leaves Logan to pursue Joe Starks, a sophisticated man: “Janie pulled back a long time

because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance” (35). After Logan, Janie has developed high expectations as to what marriage should be. Janie knows what she wants in life, her horizon of independence. With Joe’s big dreams, Janie feels that she has a chance for love and opportunity to come again. To her, Joe “spoke for” a new opportunity to find equality and happiness. Janie marries Joe for his ambitious attitude and determination: he is a representation of Janie’s desires and aspirations. By marrying Joe, Janie could have the opportunity to create her own identity as Joe takes her to a horizon she has never seen before. Janie wants to experience the world around her, and she hopes that Joe can accommodate her on her new path of life.

Janie is then oppressed by her second husband Joe as he believes women shouldn’t have a voice. Rather, Joe objectifies Janie by viewing her only in terms of her value. Joe is a confident political figure in their town, Eatonville, who eventually takes his place as mayor. In Chapter Five, one sees how Joe objectifies Janie when she was asked to make a speech, as the mayor’s wife, and Joe replied for her with, ““Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in the home”” (43). Joe disregards Janie’s voice and cuts Janie off before she could speak for herself, not even giving her a chance to decide if she wanted to make a speech or not. We see through the narrator that Janie objects to Joe speaking for her: “Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn’t too easy. She had never thought of making a speech, and didn’t know if she cared to make one at all. It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off the things. But anyway, she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold” (43). Joe proves that he

does not see Janie as an equal. The voice Janie had vigorously gained at the end of her marriage to Logan, was officially gone.

In his “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” Gates explains that the novel repeatedly “figures the opposition between women and men as that between the identity of dream and truth as a figure for desire (women) and the objectification and personification of desire onto objects over which one has no control (men)” (188). Joe is a man who is well known and respected in his town, but Janie is not able to have the freedom she wanted with Joe: whatever he did, she would have no say. Women were confined by men as objects of desire, and Hurston allows one to understand how Joe viewed Janie as a “trophy” and not a human being. In Chapter Four, one sees how Joe doesn’t view Janie as an equal and oppresses her when he calls Janie “A pretty doll-baby” who is “made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self” (34). Joe prefers Janie to stay at home and never work, and to just be served by others and shown off to the townspeople. As a “doll-baby,” Janie does not talk at all.

In “Up From the Muck: Voice and Agency as a Means to Liberation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Williams discusses how “Janie’s marriages are limiting in the same ways that society was limiting for a black woman” (193). In Chapter Six, one witnesses Joe and Janie get into an argument in public. During this argument, Joe has an outburst where he asserts his belief in male superiority, or his own superiority that had been shown to readers continuously throughout his marriage to Janie. Joe explains how “Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t know none theirselves” (Hurston 71). Prior to this statement, Janie had discussed how Joe loved to tell her what to do but she couldn’t tell him “Nuthin” (70). Joe is cruel to Janie and another man to stomp out all her free will. To Joe, there was no given reason why he should ever listen to his wife, Janie, or any other woman.

In Chapter Six, Hurston effectively conveyed the struggle of control and the roles of gender in a relationship. About the store argument, the narrator reflects it was “Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best as she could, but it didn’t do her any good” (71). Janie understood that Joe didn’t feel any need to know her as a person. During her marriage to Joe, Janie was never able to talk or act like she did normally, but she began to think for herself. Joe would use his power to boost his social reputation and to retain the control in the relationship. These beliefs are strongly held by Joe, as he believes women “see ten things and don’t understand one” (71). Men could provide their dominance by disrespecting women, who were deemed as the less intelligent and more delicate ones in the relationship.

Again, in Chapter Seven, one sees how Janie’s marriage to Joe is limiting when Hurston describes the suffering that Janie endures in her marriage to Joe: “The years took all the fight out of Janie’s face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Joe did, she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave some. She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels” (76). Joe wants Janie to play the beautiful, obedient, submissive wife role. Janie learns how to silence her voice and to use it when needed to save her marriage. With no voice, Janie felt that there was no escape, no true way to live without Joe. This leaves Janie feeling “beaten down” and like a “rut in the road.” In a way, Hurston uses this as a metaphor to express the effects of the toxic concepts of gender. Joe believes that women shouldn’t have a voice and that their place is in the home.

In Barbara Johnson’s “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Johnson focuses on Janie, and how she changes internally and externally. These changes occurred through and after each of her relationships with men. With Janie’s changes comes both

vocal and physical strength. An example one can examine of Janie's change is when Janie's marriage ends with Joe's death. While Joe is on his deathbed, Janie is finally able to speak her truth to him: "And now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain't tried tuh pacify *nobody* but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice" (103). Even on the verge of death, Joe still tries to control Janie; Joe forbids Janie from entering his room and refuses her care. As Joe is dying, he wants Janie to suffer from guilt from when she stood up against him in front of the townspeople many years prior. After Joe's assertion, Janie no longer allows Joe to continue to control and manipulate her. Janie had married Joe for his ambition and his future success (what she thought she needed), but what she really needed was equality to be happy. Joe treated Janie like a trophy wife or rather an accessory to his success. Joe isolated Janie from her community social life, and never allowed for her to speak for herself. Joe's control over Janie encouraged her strength. She uses her voice to overpower his. When Joe dies, Janie's youth is gone, but she is finally free of Joe's control.

Through Janie's marriages to Logan and Joe, Hurston exposed how many African American women were oppressed by men and based on their gender and what they believed was their role to society, silent. Gates conveys how Hurston used Janie's marriage to demonstrate how overcoming objectification led women to find their own voice and independence. Gates then discusses how "Unlike Joe, who wanted to be seen as the deliverer of light, Tea Cake is the 'Glance of God' that reflects upon Janie, who in turn reflects her own inner light back upon him" (191). In Chapter Eleven, readers are introduced to Tea Cake Woods who was different from most men, he made Janie feel seen and heard: "She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear

tree blossom in the spring” (126). With Tea Cake being twelve years younger than Janie, Janie tried to resist her attraction to Tea Cake, but the desires Janie once longed for in her previous marriages, Tea Cake satisfied.

Towards the end of the novel, however, readers understand that Janie’s marriage to Tea Cake is far from perfect. Scholarship on voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has overlooked Tea Cake’s abuse towards Janie. In Chapter Seventeen, Mrs. Turner, their neighbor, suggests to Janie that she should go out with Mrs. Turner’s brother, as she believes his lighter skin is a better match for her than Tea Cake’s darker skin. In response, Tea Cake becomes apprehensive of Janie’s independence and beats her. “Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (172). Tea Cake “whipped” Janie to declare his control in their marriage. In response to this act of abuse, the townspeople gossiped about it as the men became envious of Tea Cake’s power over Janie.

Janie continues to express her love for Tea Cake and determines it is better to remain silent, even after he beats her. In Chapter Eighteen, during a deadly hurricane, Tea Cake refuses to leave the muck area: “Dat ain’t nothin’. You ain’t seen da bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now. Man, de money’s too good on the muck It’s liable tuh fair off by tuhorrer. Ah wouldn’t leave if Ah wuz you” (182). This shows readers how much pride Tea Cake has in his own physical strength as he is eating and dancing while others are fleeing to safety. This also reveals how Janie has no strength to use her voice to overrule Tea Cake’s decision, but she also does not attempt to use her own voice. She only chooses to have trust in Tea Cake.

In Maria Racine's article, "Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," she overlooks yet recognizes that throughout the course of the novel, the evolution of the male voices seems to parallel the evolution of Janie's: "Increasingly, Janie's men have voices, and her voice develops as her relationships improve" (283). The development of the male voice seems to be parallel to the development of Janie's own voice. In an oppressive society, Janie goes through three marriages, each marking a stage in her journey in learning about living and loving. Janie's voice disappearing after the beating by Tea Cake has been overlooked by Racine and other scholars, but a comparison to an earlier story "Sweat," can help us better understand how Hurston was using this apparent silence in the development of Janie's voice.

"Sweat" and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Hurston originally published her short story "Sweat" in the African American literary journal, *Fire!!*, during the Harlem Renaissance in 1926. According to *Britannica*, "The idea for the experimental apolitical African American literary journal was conceived in Washington, D.C., by poet Langston Hughes and writer and graphic artist Richard Nugent. The two, along with an editorial board comprising Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, John Davis, and Aaron Douglas, selected the brilliant young critic and novelist Wallace Henry Thurman to edit the publication." With this journal, Hurston was able to spread and celebrate African American culture throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Sweat" were both powerful stories written by Zora Neale Hurston to discuss and portray the lives of African American women in the early twentieth century. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was a larger and more complex piece of work by Hurston, but both stories focused on women who wanted better lives for themselves but had to confront difficult struggles. In "The Porch Couldn't Talk

for Looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" Deborah Clarke discussed how "Delia, the protagonist of 'Sweat' prefigures Janie in her use of visual metaphors to reevaluate her marriage" (603). Hurston allowed her readers to see a comparison amongst the main characters, as Delia from "Sweat" serves as a predecessor for Janie Crawford from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

To look at this comparison, one would have to examine the use of voice in the story "Sweat"; however, "Sweat" does not use voice as a motif the way *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does. The idea of voice is presented at specific moments of "Sweat" not throughout the whole story. As a reader of "Sweat," we are introduced to Delia the moment she becomes stronger. To readers, Delia was a strong woman from the beginning and had always had a voice but used it as a defense mechanism towards her abusive husband, Sykes; unlike Janie, who had a voice that was already there but was not used to the full extent that it could've been used for. After being in an abusive marriage for years, Delia demonstrates how a woman can transition from being inferior to becoming superior. Delia's voice appears when Sykes returns home and calls Delia a hypocrite for working after church on Sunday, which leads into him threatening her. At the beginning of the story, Sykes attempts to scare Delia as he tricks her into believing his whip is a snake, demonstrating his dominance over her. It becomes obvious that Sykes has been previously abusive towards Delia, and out of love she didn't show much confrontation. Delia makes it clear here that she married him for love, and that she throughout their marriage only acted out of love.

After years of torture, Sykes gets his karma. The snake that he brought into their home to use to chase Delia out so he can occupy the house with another woman bites and kills him. Delia hears brutal cries and screams; she then sees Sykes pull a stick from the window to beat the

snake with. By the time Sykes was bitten by the snake, Delia chose not to help change his fate. Delia reacts with “Well, Ah done de bes’ Ah could. If things ain’t right, Gawd knows taint mah fault” (Hurstun 126). Although she felt an immense amount of pity listening to Sykes cry out and knowing that it was too late to save him, she remains hidden and waits for him to die, understanding that he knew that she knew what was happening to him. Delia could’ve used her voice to answer Sykes calls, save him, and scare the snake away, but she doesn’t. Her silence speaks for her own revenge on Sykes. The snake attack was an embodiment of all Sykes’ unethical behavior towards Delia. Sykes, like the snake, was a great cause of suffering for Delia and eventually Sykes was destroyed by his own evil. Things ended badly for Delia and Sykes when Sykes died, which was the case for Janie and Tea Cake too. One saw a similar fate in relation to animals, as Tea Cake from Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contracted rabies.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and “Sweat,” Zora Neale Hurston uses animals as the inescapable fate for her male characters, Tea Cake, and Sykes, even when the women characters do not verbally express their disapproval of the men’s actions. Tea Cake gets bitten by a dog as a form of revenge for his abuse towards Janie, like the abuse Sykes inflicted on Delia. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, after Tea Cake beats Janie, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog during the storm. Tea Cake is also then infected with rabies, and he becomes delusional and a vicious, animal-like version of himself. After Tea Cake’s rabid dog accident, it left Janie in a position of power in relation to Tea Cake as she developed into her new role as his caretaker. Tea Cake becomes convinced that Janie was unfaithful and would try to shoot her with his pistol; Janie “saw the ferocious look in his eyes and went mad with fear” (216). Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake with a rifle to save her own life, as he was coming at her with a pistol: “The fiend in him

must kill and Janie was the only thing living he saw. The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to see its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie's head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as she crashed forward in her arms" (216). Tea Cake's pistol and Janie's rifle fire simultaneously. Janie catches Tea Cake and watches him die, wishing the dog had bitten her instead. When Tea Cake got rabies, he lost his sense of command over himself and Janie. Tea Cake thought of himself as a man more powerful than God, and he was wrong. In both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Sweat," one saw how both Janie and Delia established control over what happened to Tea Cake and Sykes, in both cases leading to the men's deaths.

Janie shows a triumph over Tea Cake's violence and her community when she is stood trial for the murder of Tea Cake and in moments like this, Maria Racine was able to see how "Janie's consciousness and the narrator's consciousness fuse into one, which may explain the reason that the reader does not hear Janie's speech at a crucial moment near the end of the novel, during her trial for murder" (283). During the trial, Janie both matures and shows control over her voice, when she explains to the jury in her own voice the story of the life and love she share with Tea Cake. By expressing her own voice in court, Janie reveals that she finally develops an understanding of her own voice and when and how to use her voice.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's voice appeared throughout her marriages, creating a stronger woman. Janie's voice was found over time throughout the novel as she overcame her husbands' attempts to silence her. One could see how the use of "voice" was developed further in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Hurston rather than "Sweat," because one saw character development through using one's voice to lead to independence. "Sweat" does not use the idea of voice as a motif—there are not mentions of tongues and speech like in *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God. However, through Delia, Hurston gives us a character whose voice was already profound and apparent rather than having to find her voice. Hurston found her way to that somewhere between 1926 and 1937, so it shows that this is an important part of what she wanted to say in 1937. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is initially oppressed through marriage and prevented from sustaining her full potential. Janie is oppressed and silenced throughout the novel by her three husbands, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods, as these marriages left her suffocated. Hurston ends her novel on Chapter Twenty with Janie's self-awareness and inner peace reflecting on her time with Tea Cake: "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around her waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (227). Despite the sadness Janie finds living in her memories, she finds peace knowing as that with his love and absence she has found herself. During this time women had minimal respect from men and society and were often oppressed. Through Janie and Delia, readers are given two different women who go through similar experiences of being oppressed by their husbands, and how they both individually deal with their situations and use their own voice. As Delia and Janie triumph at the end of their stories, so too does Zora Neale Hurston and all African American women with them.

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