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‘Your sister in the ’gator and the ’gator in your
sister’: Judgement in Zora Neale Hurston’s
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Glenda R. Carpio

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever in the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so their skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They sat in judgment.¹

Thus read the opening four paragraphs of Zora Neale Hurston's best-known and widely acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Published in 1937, the novel was harshly criticized by Hurston's contemporaries and all but ignored when Hurston went into obscurity in the early 1950s. By now, however, the

fact that Alice Walker's influential essay, 'In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,' published in *Ms.* in 1975, led to a renaissance in Hurston scholarship and to a full reappraisal of her novel, has become literary lore. Since then, the novel has been repeatedly claimed as an African-American feminist classic. But just what kind of a feminist text is it? There is such an abundant amount of criticism on the novel and on Hurston's work overall – much of which romanticizes the novel and undervalues Hurston's complex, sometimes contradictory, but risk-taking artistry and research – that asking this seemingly simple question of the novel is in order.

Staging Janie Crawford's 'ripening from a vibrant, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman with her finger on the trigger of her own destiny',² the novel embraces a particular feminist perspective from its opening two paragraphs. The heightened lyrical language of the first, with its implied references to journeying and destiny, places the narrative in the realm of the epic while that of the second suggests a turn to a different, because female, narrative. The third paragraph re-enforces the shift since it opens in an explicitly gendered Biblical mode: 'So the beginning of this was a woman ...' But here, the novel shifts again to a terrain largely obfuscated by Janie's narrative of emancipation: that Janie blooms *despite* gender violence, and that Hurston intertwines Janie's narrative of resilience and agency to a multilayered discourse on judgement. This discourse takes a philosophical-religious form, as implied by the novel's title and dramatized through the hurricane at the end of the novel, and a sociopolitical aspect, as staged most explicitly by the novel's court scene towards the end. In this way, Hurston avoids a facile sentimentalism of transcendence.

The third and fourth paragraphs, both of which end with the word judgement, introduce this multilayered discourse. If the people on the porch judge Janie as she returns to Eatonville according to their fantasies and frustrations, what or whom do the dead judge? Their God? Death's sudden grip upon them? And what is the relationship that Hurston implicitly draws by aligning these two forms of judgement? The fourth paragraph is less about Janie than about the people, about their use of Janie as a screen upon which to project their own desire for power. Besides her beauty, the characteristic that most distinguishes Janie is her ability to desire and attain that which is beyond mere survival, that which is beyond 'the horizon'. Her second husband, Joe Starks, seems to embody this when he appears before her gate, and later, when he makes himself the mayor of the all-black town of Eatonville, he comes to represent power realized for the people. He does not have to wait for 'the sun and the bossman' to be gone to feel powerful

because he *is* the bossman. But the effect upon the people is not unmitigated admiration: 'It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not' (45). Hurston's witty language, never merely decorative, is here curiously gendered feminine even though the passage refers to Sparks and his success. But the association reveals a key conflict in the novel. Sparks gives the people pause because he, unlike them, has miraculously achieved the independence and power associated with white people. But Janie stops them in their tracks. If it is 'bad enough' for a black man to live beyond the horizon imposed by inequalities of race and class, intertwined as they are, a woman who wants to realize herself as a desiring subject is worse. She is aberrant: 'your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister'. And yet, she is also coveted because of it.

When Janie returns to Eatonville, the people see only the outward manifestation of her fulfillment. The men 'noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt' (2). The women, full of envy, judge 'the faded shirt and muddy overalls' that Janie wears and save the image as 'a weapon against her strength', hoping 'that she might fall to their level some day' (2). Janie's crime is twofold: she, like Starks, desires to *live*, even thrive and not merely survive. But unlike Starks, she sees emotional fulfillment as a crucial part of real living. The other aspect of her crime, less ponderous but not insignificant, is that, after Starks dies, she flauntingly breaks conventions of gender, class, and age by marrying Tea Cake, a man who is not only much younger than her but also poor. And so, the porch judges: 'Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? –What dat ole forty year ole' oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? ...' (2).

While the language and solemnity differ, 'Mouth-Almighty,' as Janie calls the people on the porch, echoes the judgement bestowed upon Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850) as Hester exits the prison door. Hester, like Janie, has broken sexual mores for which the women in the crowd, specifically the older ones, judge her harshly and yet the (male) narrator describes her as a tall, beautiful, powerful woman with 'dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam'.³ Both Hester and Janie are no longer virginal maidens when they commit their crimes – while Janie is widowed, Hester is presumed to be so – but are judged for acting as if

women could be unfettered sexual actors and independent desiring subjects. If the judgement of the people on the porch, like that of the Puritan crowd that witnesses Hester's exit from the prison, has to do with harnessing feminine sexuality, what of the judgement of the dead? Its presence in the opening paragraphs of Hurston's novel signals a realm of meaning not particularly concerned with gender. And yet, the fact that it is wedged between paragraphs that are decidedly focused on feminist issues should make us curious.

One way to pursue this line of enquiry is to further explore the connections between Hawthorne and Hurston. In her excellent essay, 'Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism', Nina Baym shows not only that in *The Scarlet Letter* 'oppression or rejection of women, rather than surrender to them' leads to 'male downfall' but also that at its centre is Hester Prynne's consciousness through which we explore the 'recalcitrant reality of human nature' and meditate on what it would take to reconstruct the social system to create 'better forms of human intimacy', especially across differences of gender.⁴ Hurston's novel operates similarly, as it too places its concerns with gender inequality within a broad context that questions humanity's relationship to the divine.⁵ The 'sudden dead' with 'their eyes flung wide open in judgment' silently question that connection. As critics have noted, the hurricane that takes their lives is both a natural disaster and 'a symbolic event', that is 'almost on the order of the Biblical Flood'.⁶ It operates as a catalyst that brings into sharp relief conflicts of gender and race while also adding a sense of scale in which humanity's struggles with power become small, though not immaterial, by comparison to the power that the natural world has over humanity.

The epic-like qualities of the novel reinforce this reading. As Mary Jane Lupton notes, the novel is, like epic poetry, based on oral narrative (it is a mix of third-person narrative and free indirect discourse), and 'patterned on the journey and on the tensions created between the call to adventure and the return to the homeland'.⁷ Within this broad scale, humans figure as both the microcosm of the natural world and of the divine and as tiny entities. 'She didn't read books,' the narrator states, 'so she didn't know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop. Man attempting to climb to painless heights from his dung hill' (72). The hurricane exposes the conflicts at the level of the 'dung hill'. The biggest challenge to Janie as questing heroine arises when she is forced to kill Tea Cake, the love of her dreams who nevertheless is uncomfortable with her financial independence, gambles away her money and hits her when he becomes insecure in her affection. While saving Janie from drowning during the hurricane, he is bitten

and infected by a rabid dog that, to Janie, seems to embody 'pure hate' (158). Two weeks later, when he attempts to kill her, she defends her life against his. Despite love then, Janie must fight Tea Cake whose aggression is both inherent and reinforced by his infection. Does this reflect the 'recalcitrant reality of human nature'? Is human intimacy, especially between socially unequal subjects, bound to be compromised by conflict? The hurricane also brings to the fore racial tensions that, for the majority of the novel, remain off stage. In the aftermath of the hurricane, white guards force miserable, 'sullen men, black and white' to segregate the bodies of the dead, even though it is difficult to distinguish race among the bloated bodies, so that the white can get proper burial while the black get dumped in a hole (162). The deep irony is not lost to Tea Cake who exclaims, 'look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law' (163). The hurricane, understood in the novel as a manifestation of God, does not of course discriminate; it in fact wreaks havoc among men and women, black and white and animals and humans alike. People can only wonder at that higher power, straining their eyes 'against crude walls and their souls', as they face the storm, 'asking if He mean[s] to measure their puny might against His' and later, when they perish, they stare in 'wide open' judgement of that might, a last act of agency (151).

The novel's scale suggests that the social problems the hurricane highlights may be embedded in human nature, which at its core desires power and control precisely because it does not have any in the face of the divine. But the novel is also rooted in the social and the political – in the specific manifestation of that desire for power in conflicts of gender, race, and class – and offers Janie, as a questing heroine, as an actor who wants to reconstruct the social system, who wants to make the 'dream the truth'. She returns to the people that so harshly judge her, as Hester also returns to the Puritan community that imprisoned her, in order to share what she discovered through her journey and thus effect social change. While often romanticized in the novel's post-1975 reception, that journey entails a great deal of hardship – not only is she forced to kill her love, Janie must also stand trial for his death in front of an all white, all male jury and, though she is acquitted, she must weather the virulent judgement of the black community that witnesses the trial and believe her guilty nonetheless. The novel hardly gives the questing heroine a conventional happy ending. Rather than obscure this fact, we should see it as a mark of Hurston's unconventional but incisive vision, which in the process of claiming her as a proto-feminist black icon has been rendered opaque.⁸ As Lupton notes, 'Hurston critics tend either to ignore the disturbing fact of the

shooting or glide over it in summary, as if to shoot one's dreamed-for lover were some minor chord in an otherwise romantic symphony' (49).

Hurston was anything but predictable. A brief look at what she was reading in 1934 can attest to that. In a letter to a critic in 1934, she lists the following as her favourite books: 'George Eliot, *Adam Bede*; Darrell Figgis, *The Return of the Hero*; Anatole France, *Penguin Island*; Fannie Hurst, *Back Streets*; James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*; Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*; Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*; Robert Nathan, *Jonah*'.⁹ Hurston has certainly proven a slippery subject of criticism. While she embraced her Southern roots, she also spent considerable time in New York (where she lived on and off from 1925 through 1940) and abroad (the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica and Honduras), a fact that is often obfuscated by the settings of most of her fiction. She was trained as an anthropologist and folklorist at Barnard College and Columbia University, where she was admitted in 1925, and where she studied under Franz Boaz and Ruth Benedict, as well as with fellow anthropology student Margaret Mead. But, while critics have acknowledged the effect of her fieldwork on her fiction (i.e. that she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* after a trip to the American South where she collected folktales and songs while on fellowship from Barnard and during a Guggenheim research trip in Haiti; that she based the hurricane on her research on the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane; that she collected one of the first non-commercial recordings of a song about the hurricane, 'God Rode on a Mighty Storm' with Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, and Alan Lomax) the fullness of that effect is only now being explored.¹⁰ Her politics were often surprising. She thought Reconstruction was a deplorable period, favoured Booker T. Washington over W. E. B. Du Bois even decades after Washington's death, and opposed the New Deal. In 1954, she opposed the US Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* because she did not see it as a productive way of combatting Jim Crow. Owing to her complex and varied political views, Ernest Mitchell remarks, Hurston has been assigned 'a bewildering array of affiliations: republican, libertarian, radical democrat, reactionary conservative, black cultural nationalist, anti-authoritarian feminist, and woman-hating protofascist'.¹¹ As Mitchell puts it, 'the woman who once called herself "Everybody's Zora" has been made all things to all men (often wrongly), and the ongoing controversy has paid little attention to the full corpus of her political writings'.¹²

Hurston published four novels, over fifty short stories, essays and plays, but she is often discussed only in the context of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Perhaps for this reason, her feminist practices have been curiously

oversimplified. She was quite capable of highlighting male oppression of women, as is clear from an early and brilliant story, 'Sweat' (1926), in which a woman kills her abusive husband. But, she also explored more ambiguous aspects of femininity through the women characters in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) who wrestle with opposing impulses of loyalty and rebellion against male figures. These novels, unlike *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, also focus on male protagonists. With similar nuance, Hurston depicts marital strife (in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, even divorce), laying bare the often contradictory and self-destructive aspects of the players involved. These texts, like 'Monkey Junk,' the recently rediscovered short story, challenge a simplistic feminist mantle. At the centre of the story are the foibles of a Southern migrant to the North who is undone not by urban life, as one might expect, but by feminine guile during a divorce. A satire, rendered in broad comic modes, the story focuses on the fact that a woman is able to use her sexuality to get her way, first with her husband and, after milking him for his money and cheating on him, in court.¹³ If one were to define feminist writing as that which represents only heroic figures of transcendence, Hurston's oeuvre as a whole would not classify. And neither would *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But Hurston boldly explored the many facets of women's lives, including those who were flawed and those with imperfect or unclear allegiances and trajectories with a joyous sense of humour and a willingness to experiment with form even at the risk of producing uneven results or becoming the object of scorn. Hurston's contribution to a feminist legacy might just be her fearless embrace of the freedom to explore that complexity, both in her own life as well as in the lives of her protagonists.