

Their Eyes Were Watching God

A Study Guide



Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through **discussion based inquiry**. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Chapters 1 – 5

Discussion questions:

- What did Nanny want to be free of in her life? What does freedom mean for Nanny?
- What does Janie want to be free of? What does freedom mean for Janie?
- What do you think Janie's expectations are for her life with Joe?
- What do you think Joe's expectations for Janie's life with him are?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 1: “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board... Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.”

Chapter 1: “Most of dese zigaboos is so het up over yo’ business till they liable to hurry theyself... darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked.”

Chapter 2: “Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old... easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and blackness.”

Chapter 4: “When Janie had finished indoors she sat down in the barn with the potatoes... The memory of Nanny was still powerful and strong.”

[We Googled it so you don’t have to: “For me the sugar tit is the saddest recipe in the soul food cannon: Take a clean and unstarched white handkerchief. Drop it in a pot of simmering sugar water. With strong clean hands, wring it till it doesn’t drip. Make sure the cloth is still warm. Fold the cloth and twist it into a thick coil. Hand it to a howling baby whose mama has gone – often to work. Sugar tit.” p. 21, from *Soul Food Love: Healthy Recipes Inspired by One Hundred Years of Cooking in a Black Family* by Alice Randall and Caroline Randall Williams. 2015. Random House USA.]

Chapter 4: “Janie turned from the door without answering, and stood still in the middle of the floor without knowing it... Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them.”

Chapter 5: “And now we’ll listen tuh uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks.’ ... A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely.”

Chapter 5: “Janie soon began to feel the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities... and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down.”

Exercises

Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Ann Shadd:

Share with your students the resources on Zora Neale Hurston and her life (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- Do you think there are parallels between Zora Neale Hurston's and Janie's childhood?
- What are some important insights that you think an author who had a life like Hurston's can offer that other authors might not be able to capture?

Mary Ann Shadd was the first African-Canadian publisher – resources are available about her at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- What was Mary Ann Shadd able to do because she came to Canada that she could not in the United States?
- What challenges did Mary Ann Shadd face as a publisher in Canada?
- How do you think the generation of which Mary Ann Shadd was a member paved the way for Zora Neale Hurston?

Black communities in the U.S. and Canada:

Eatonville was one of the United States' first all-Black towns, and still exists today. Too often through the 20th century, when Black neighbourhoods were part of a larger city, they were neglected or even destroyed. Black settlements also exist in Canada, including in Southwest Ontario in Buxton. They were often opposed and faced many challenges.

Share with your students the resources on **Black communities in Canada and the U.S.** (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- What advantages do you think black communities gave to the people who grew up in them?
- What challenges do you think people who grew up in black communities faced?
- What do you think made Black communities successful?
- What do you think endangered them?
- In the late 19th and early 20th century, what advantages do you think having an all-Black town gave to its residents?
- In the late 19th and early 20th century, do you think there were disadvantages to living in an all-Black town? If so, why? If not, explain why not.
- What are some differences between the way that Black communities were settled or organized in the United States versus in Canada?

Chapters 6 – 9

Discussion questions:

- Do you think Joe tries to be mindful of Janie's wishes in his own way, or do you think he is selfish?
- Do you think Janie is right that you've got to have power to free something, and that freeing things makes you powerful?
- Do you think that Joe is more worried about what Janie wants or what she ought to want?
- What do you think finally convinces Janie to start sticking up for herself?
- In the end, what do you think Janie and Joe meant to one another?
- Do you think the men in the town are really concerned about Janie's ability to get by?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 6: "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule... She was there for *him* to look at, not those others."

Chapter 6: "She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself... Hambo said, 'Yo' wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed that befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts.'"

Chapter 6: "Joe returned to the store full of pleasure and good humor but he didn't want Janie to notice... Her heart said, 'Even so, but you don't have to cry about it.'"

Chapter 6: "'You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin' Ah see!'... He was longing for peace but on his own terms."

Chapter 7: "The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul... So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store."

Chapter 8: "So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with huge square toes who lived way in the West... then she studied his dead face for a long time."

Chapter 9: "Janie found out very soon that her widowhood and property was a great challenge in South Florida... 'Let 'em say whut dey wants tuh, Pheoby. To my thinkin' mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer'n grief.'"

Exercises

A search for personal freedom:

Janie, having freed herself from a marriage that was imposed upon her, is now in one that she chose. But has she freed herself? The search for Janie's conception of freedom and a good life are at the heart of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and understanding the importance of freedom for unconventional people who might not find happiness in other ways.

Share with your students some of the resources from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on **What it means to be free**.

- Do you think that Janie is freer with Joe than she was with Logan?
- Do you think that the way that Joe shuts up Janie and hides her makes her less free, or has she freely decided to do it as a way to stay with him?
- Do you think Janie becomes more free when she stands up to Joe?
- Do you think Janie is free when she is widowed?

Ask your students what they think it means to be able to set someone or something free? Is that something different from finding freedom for yourself? If so, how? (Refer to the resources.)

Chapters 10 – 16

Discussion questions:

- How many examples of expectations that the people of Eatonville have for Janie can you think of?
- Why did the town “get mad”?
- Do the people in the ’Glades “get mad” when Tea Cake and Janie do the wrong thing?
- How much do you think reputation matters in Eatonville?
- How much do you think reputation matters in the ’Glades?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 11: “Umph! Umph! Umph! Ah betcha you don’t never go tuh de lookin’ glass and enjoy yo’ eyes yo’self.’ . . . However, before she went to bed she took a good look at her mouth, eyes and hair.”

Chapter 12: “The next morning Pheoby picked her way over to Janie’s house like a hen to a neighbor’s garden. . . Ah felt like de world wuz cryin’ extry and Ah ain’t read de common news yet.”

Chapter 13: “Therefore Janie drank her coffee and sankled on back to her room without asking her landlady anything. . . It’ll be because she got me in de same way you got me – so Ah can’t help mahself.”

Chapter 13: “Janie was painting on iodine and crying. . . So her soul crawled out from its hiding place.”

Chapter 14: “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet, the unauthorized center of the ‘job.’ . . . But outside of the two jook, everything on that job went on around those two.”

Chapter 15: “Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable – Caucasian characteristics for all. . . Before they realized it the sun was cooler and the crowds came pouring onto the muck again.”

Exercises

A search for personal freedom, continued:

Returning to the exercise from the last section of the book:

- Do you think Janie is free once she meets Tea Cake?
- Do you think Janie is free when she marries Tea Cake?
- Do you think Tea Cake's insistence that they earn everything they decide to spend, in spite of Janie's wealth, has anything to do with freedom?
- Janie and Tea Cake are living in the Jim Crow South. Does this seem to affect them? Why or why not?
- If you thought Janie was more free the first time she was widowed, do you think that is true when she is widowed a second time?
- What do you think are the challenges to finding freedom in a close-knit, small town? What are the advantages? Do you think people in a small town have to move to remake themselves?
- What do you think are the challenges to finding freedom in a big city? What are the advantages? Do you think people in a big city have to move to remake themselves?

Chapters 17–20 and Conclusion

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think Tea Cake and Janie didn't want to leave the farm to go inland?
- Why do you think the other people in the Everglades who stayed behind didn't want to leave?
- Why do you think Janie is happy to let Pheoby tell her story?
- Do you think Janie's adventures are over?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 18: "Since Tea Cake and Janie had friended with the Bahaman workers in the 'Glades... 'It's liable tuh fair off by tuhmorrer. Ah wouldn't leave if Ah wuz you.'"

Chapter 18: "It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed... They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."

Chapter 19: "Tea Cake went out and wandered around. Saw the hand of horror on everything... They calmed each other about his absence then Tea Cake brought up another matter."

Chapter 19: "The court set and Janie saw the judge who had put on a great robe to listen about her and Tea Cake... the kind white friends who had realized her feelings and thank them. So the sun went down."

Chapter 20: "Janie stirred her strong feet in the pan of water. The tiredness was gone so she dried them off on the towel... 'Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselve'."

Exercises

Solidarity?

When Janie's darkest hour comes, she finds that her Black friends are against her, while the white spectators at the courthouse are on her side. Zora Neale Hurston wrote several times about the problems she saw with assuming racial solidarity in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks On A Road*.

Share with your students the excerpts from *Dust Tracks On A Road* (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- Why do you think Zora Neale Hurston did not assume that Black people would stick together?
- What is a common theme between the excerpts and what happens to Janie?
- Do you think that for Hurston, the lack of solidarity made the community less meaningful?
- Do you think you need solidarity to have a community, or do you think that people can have disagreements, even important ones, and still be a community?

Coastal disasters in Canada:

Janie and Tea Cake experience the Okechobee Hurricane of 1928 in Florida, the United States' second worst natural disaster. Canada has also experienced coastal disasters, though of course they have become less serious since methods for predicting the weather and warning the areas likely to be affected have been developed.

Share with your students the resources on the Okechobee Hurricane, the 1929 Grand Banks Tsunami, and the 1775 Independence Earthquake in Newfoundland, available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- What are some similarities and some differences between the three events?
- What changes do you think have been made to preparations for storms and events like these?
- Where do we still see devastation after natural disasters similar to what was experienced in Florida in 1928 and in Canada in 1775 and 1929? Why do you think the damage has not been reduced in these areas?

Final assignment/essay questions:

Do you think that, in the end, Janie finds her own form of freedom? Do you think she finds her own form of happiness? What do they look like, and how are they different from what others expected?

What effect does violence have on each of Janie's marriages? In each case, what is her response? Does the response change as violence changes? If so, why?

Their Eyes Were Watching God is remarkable in some ways simply because of the small role that race plays in the story. Why do you think the story is told with so little emphasis on race? Explain how more emphasis on race would have added to or detracted from the story.

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A Study Guide

Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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