

Article

Quest for Love and Self-identity—An Interpretation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from the Perspective of Lacan's Theory on Desire

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Abstract: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a classic in African American literature written by African American female writer Zora Neale Hurston. Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker once stated that there was no book more important to her than this one. By depicting Janie's process of awakening, from an innocent girl to a mature and independent woman with feminist consciousness, the novel tells the story of an African American girl's journey of desire-pursuing. Desire is deemed as the essence of a human being by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. According to his theory of desire, human yearnings consist of three levels: need, demand, and desire. As the highest level of the three, desire is often unsatisfied and therefore keeps motivating the actions of human beings. Based on Lacan's theory on desire, this paper focuses on the desire of the protagonist Janie, trying to answer questions such as: What is Janie's desire? What's the relationship between Janie's desire and other characters' desires? Through analyzing symbolism in the novel, Janie's desire or quest for self-identity and love will be revealed.

Keywords: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Lacan's theory on desire; Janie; journey; awakening

1. Introduction

Their Eyes Were Watching God was a classic African American novel by Zora Neale Hurston. It remained obscure for decades after its publication in 1937. Unlike mainstream African American literature at the time, in which the cruel treatment of black people by white people was highlighted, the novel focused on a black female's quest for love. The novel tells the story of Janie, a black girl who learns about herself and grows into a self-actualized and free woman through her marriages. When the feminist movement arose in 1970s in America, the novel was re-discovered and favored by critics as a forerunner of feminism in African American literature. Alice Walker, a well-known contemporary African American novelist and Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Color Purple*, once commented, "There is no book more important to me than this one."

Bloom (2009) commented, "Hurston's Janie is now necessarily a paradigm for women, of whatever race, heroically attempting to assert their own individuality in contexts that continue to resent and fear any consciousness that is not male" (p. 8). Given the novel's special role in American literature and the bright image of Janie as a new woman, it is valuable to delve into more details about the protagonist and conduct an analysis of her inner world.

2. Literature Review

Research on this novel was mainly carried out by approaching the topic from the perspectives of female identity, black vernacular English, liberation and domination, female identity

and rebirth, fantasy and reality, masculinity and female images. Jang (2005) claimed that Hurston created a truly heroic female protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who rejected the traditional roles of black women as “the mule of the world”. Choi (2009) explored the deconstructional identities of African-American female and pointed out that Hurston creates a visionary myth through the figure of Janie, who sets out on quest to fulfill the promise of the pear tree, her Tree of Life. An (2016) argued that the dissolution of Janie’s various “homes” and the difficulty of sustaining a home show a subtle and yet powerful critique of the US racial order from the post-Reconstruction period to the 1930’s.

However, the number of researches focusing on the psychoanalysis of the characters and their desires is very limited. Searching CNKI, China’s biggest repertoire of academic papers, only includes several dissertations analyzing Janie based on Lacan’s theory on desire. Luo (2017) corresponded Janie’s three marriages with three levels of human longing proposed by Lacan: need, demand, and desire. He argued that the marriage was a process of desire fulfillment in searching for self and voice of Janie. Ma (2014) and Mu (2015) did thorough research on the novel by applying Lacan’s Mirror Theory. Most studies focus on the awakening of Janie through plot and thematic analysis. In this study, the inner world of Janie as a human will be explored from the perspective of Lacan’s theory of desire. By focusing on the symbolic images employed by the writer in the novel, Janie’s desire is made clear stepwise. Moreover, by studying the wax and wane of desires of major characters, it is easy to map out Janie’s journey of desire pursuit.

The main idea of Lacan’s theory of desire is that human longing consists of three levels: need, demand, and desire. Need is the biological longing for individual requirements and material comfort; demand is the need for love and belonging, which can be partially satisfied through language; desire is the surplus produced by the articulation of need in demand. However, demand can only be partially satisfied by speech. This is because there are discrepancies between what one says and feels (Lacan, 1977/2001, Translator’s note).

This paper will explore Janie’s desire and its relationship with the desire of other characters of the novel. Thereby offering a new perspective on Janie’s search for love and self-identity.

3. Janie’s Quest for Love and Self-identity

According to Lacan (1977/2001), the most common way of expressing desire is through a metaphor (p. 197). Zhu (2007) pointed out that metaphor is the base of symbolism, and symbolism is the system of metaphor. Both symbolism and metaphor are implicational, presenting meaning or concepts by employing explicit and tangible objects. In this part, by examining eight symbols used by the writer in the novel and revealing the implication of each symbol, we will try to reveal what Janie is pursuing throughout her life.

3.1 Pear tree and bee

In Janie’s eyes, the pear tree blossom represents femininity. The bees represent masculinity, and bees gathering honey from the pear tree symbolize a sexual relationship between males and females. The pear tree flowers are beautiful, charming the bees flying around. As a young girl with no father and mother, Janie developed an obsession with marriage and dreamed of finding her singing bee and true love. “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arches to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and fronting with delight. So this was a marriage” (Hurston, 1990, pp. 10-11). These lines show Janie’s desire for love and her fixation on marriage to obtain it.

3.2 Apron

The apron is a symbol of Janie's first marriage to Logan. Under Nanny's arrangement, Janie married Logan with the expectation that she might fall in love with him after some time. However, Logan knew nothing about love. He only expected Janie to wear an apron and help him on the farm, working like a mule. This made Janie feel disillusioned, and "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurstun, 1990, p. 24). The apron symbolizes the prison set up by Logan to confine Janie. When Janie met Joe, she felt the urge to leave Logan. She threw the apron away into a bush and left with Joe. The apron represents Logan's desire to extinguish Janie's longing for love. Janie throwing the apron away when leaving Logan's house symbolizes her newfound desire for freedom.

3.3 Hair rags

Janie had long and beautiful hair. However, Joe asked Janie to put rags on her hair after seeing other men fondling her hair in the store. For Joe, Janie is his private possession, and the hair rags symbolize Joe's desire to impose patriarchal constraints on Janie's freedom. When Joe died, Janie took the hair rags off and burnt all of them. The burning of the hair rags meant that Janie temporarily achieved her desire of freedom in her second marriage.

3.4 The sea

"The sea" is often used by feminist novels to symbolize love and freedom, like in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the sea represents Janie's desire for love. According to Lacan (1977/2001), people's actions are driven by their desire, and a desire continues to affect the person until it is fulfilled (p. 127). Janie's three marriages were driven by her desire for true love which means respect, equality, and care for each other. Sailing on the sea of love, she finally found it when she said to Pheoby "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with each shore" (Hurstun, 1990, p. 182).

3.5 Road

"Road" appeared 43 times in the novel. When Janie felt disappointed in her life, she stared at the road as if looking forward to change. For example, in chapter two, Janie wondered, "Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place (in Logan's house) nor in grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road" (Hurstun, 1990, p. 11). As a girl 16 years old, Janie began to awake physically and mentally. She likes to lean over the gate and look forward in an attempt to know what her future husband would be like. The symbol of "road" represents Janie's desire for love and change.

In the novel, her "savior" Joe came to her from the road; they ran together on the road; Tea Cake came to Eatonville by railroad. The symbol of "road" represents the future and the possibility of changing Janie's life. Road also symbolizes Janie's desire to be liberated from the confinements of life and embark on a new journey.

3.6 Overall

After leaving Eatonville, Janie discarded her identity as a wife of the mayor. She followed Tea Cake to the marsh in Florida to work there. The overall she wore symbolizes her winning freedom and equality. When she wore dresses, her husband Joe had stifled her voice and involvement in the community. She had had enough. Wearing the overalls and associating with laborers indicates that Janie had fulfilled her longing for love and self-identity in the third marriage.

3.7 Voice

Voice is regarded as an important symbol of social identity by feminists. Having a voice means breaking the bonds of a patriarchal society. According to Lacan (1977/2001), desire derives from a lack of something (p. 200). Voice is what Janie lacks in the novel, and therefore voice became a symbol of Janie's desire for self-identity, freedom, and equality. Janie was too young to know what she demanded in her first marriage and how to express her demand. She longed for love but got disillusionment. In the second marriage, she submitted to Joe's loud voice and lost her voice. Doing so resulted in Janie being neglected by her family and the black community. The third marriage reminded Janie of her ability and the urge to express herself. She regained her voice and self-identity. Through the pursuit of her voice, Janie became mature and aware of her desires and how to express them.

By displaying Janie as a free girl, Zora Neale Hurston makes it possible for her to jump from "Need" level to "Demand" level. If she were a slave, she would have to stay on the "Need" level because freedom and material security are not yet satisfied. The author was a pioneer in the sense that she tried to explore the question of what black people would pursue if they were free. From the above-mentioned symbols, it is safe to say that Janie is looking for love and self-identity. However, she does not know her desire at first. In the process of her three marriages, by fighting the patriarchal bonds, she awakened and realized she wanted a free and independent self on an equal footing with men.

4. Relationship Between Janie's Desire and Other Characters' Desires

Lacan (1977/2001) proposed the maxim "Desire is of the Other" (p. 201). This means that desire is essentially a desire for recognition from other people. On the other hand, it means that desire is for the thing that one supposes other people lack as well. Janie's pursuit of love and self-identity arises as she and other Afro-American's lack of it. Her desire is the collective desire of all the black people around her, particularly black females who lack the courage to defend their desires.

4.1 Janie and Nanny

Janie, as mixed-blood grew up without a father and mother. Her grandmother, Nanny, who used to be a slave, brought her up. Having suffered a lot, Nanny considered herself a "cracked plate". Her biggest wish is to provide education and security for Janie so that Janie would have a better life than her. When Janie turned 16, Nanny married her to a middle-aged man with 60 acres of land. She believed that having property would provide Janie with security. For Janie, Nanny is the "Other" who projected her desire for security on Janie and forced Janie to act on her desire. As a young girl, Janie had not figured out how to defend her desire. She did as Nanny wished to get recognition from her in the hope of getting love from marriage. Later, Janie discarded the desire imposed on her by Nanny and went to live based on her own desire.

4.2 Janie and Pheoby

The novel takes the form of Janie telling her story to her best friend, Pheoby. For Pheoby, Janie is the "Other". On hearing the stories of Janie after leaving Eatonville, Pheoby said, "Lawd! Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin'" (Hurston, 1990, pp. 182-183). Inspired by Janie's courage to pursue her desire, Pheoby felt she had grown higher and would ask her husband to take her fishing. In this way, the "Other"—Janie's desire became her own desire. Meanwhile, by sharing her story with Pheoby, Janie hoped Pheoby to tell her story

to more black people and awaken them. In this way, Janie's desire would become the desire of the whole black community.

4.3 Janie and Logan

Logan Killicks was Janie's first husband. His major concern is achieving material abundance. In their marriage, Janie's desire for love and self-identity was despised by Logan. He expected Janie to work like a mule. When he couldn't control Janie, he insulted her by intentionally mentioning the shame for Janie's family. Janie had no idea who her father was because Janie's mother was raped and disappeared after giving birth. At this stage, Janie did not know her desire. However, she was aware Logan could not fulfill it, and therefore she chose to defend her desire by running away.

4.4 Janie and Joe

Janie went into her marriage with Joe with high hopes. Although he might not be her sun and bee, he represented change and opportunity. She thought he would bring her a different future. In Janie's second marriage, she owned property and enjoyed high social status. Her first level of desire "Need" was now satisfied. However, Joe was too obsessed with wealth accumulation and his power. Janie's desire for love and involvement in the community was defied. The marriage was characterized by the expansion of Joe's desire for control on one hand and Janie's dwindling self-identity on the other. Janie was like a caged bird that had been deprived of her voice. Their conflicts reached a climax when one day, Janie fought back. When Joe laughed at Janie by saying she was no longer a young girl in front of people, Janie asked him to take down his trousers and see what kind of old-man he had turned into. By revealing Joe's frailty in masculinity in front of the public, Janie delivered a fatal blow to Joe's vanity. Moreover, in this marriage, Janie learned to defend her desire by fighting back.

4.5 Janie and Tea Cake

Janie regarded Tea Cake as "son of the Evening Sun". Even though they differed in age and status, Tea Cake respected Janie's wishes and desires. He tried his best to give her what he could. In their relationship, Janie experienced love for the first time. "He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom...Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (Hurstun, 1990, pp. 101-102). It seems that Tea Cake was Janie's dream of love. Although their life together was unstable and difficult, Janie felt happy in his presence. Their working, fishing, hunting, and playing chess offered Janie equal status with men. Their desires matched and were reconcilable.

However, Tea Cake, living in a patriarchal society had a deep-rooted attitude of male chauvinism. The love he gave Janie disguised his need to control her. Tea Cake expected Janie's obedience and loyalty as well. Now, Janie, as an independent woman with her own voice, could not give it to him. One year when a hurricane hit their workplace, Janie fell into the water and was threatened by a mad dog. While trying to save Janie, Tea Cake was bitten by the dog and contracted hydrophobia. The doctor asked Janie to stay away from Tea Cake, which made him think that Janie was leaving him. He felt cheated and tried to shoot Janie in madness, but was shot dead by Janie with a gun in defense. By shooting Tea Cake, Janie was set free from his attempts to control her and gained her freedom. Her third marriage led Janie to fulfill her desire for love and self-identity.

4.6 Discussion

In *The Adoration of Real Women*, Barbara Welt wrote that the public requires women to have four main qualities—piety, chastity, obedience, and meekness. The Cult of True Womanhood, an ideology developed in the United States in the nineteenth century, considered white women who exhibited the qualities of domesticity, piety, purity, and

submissiveness to be true women. African American women were not considered eligible for true womanhood.

African American females were oppressed by both white people and black males, thereby occupying the lowest position on the social ladder. Nanny told Janie, "So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston, 1990, p. 14). As Hooks said, "Black men may be victimized by racism, but through sexism they act as exploiters and oppressors of women (p. 88). White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people" (Hooks, 1981, p. 123).

Even though the black men in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were victims of racism, they all held sexist attitudes towards Janie. They desired to dominate their wife. African American females were treated as properties with no desire or emotion. However, Janie grew from an obedient, innocent girl into an independent and brave woman with a clear sense of self-identity through three marriages. She did not fit into the image of a stereotypical African American female as envisioned by the patriarchal society she lived in. By pursuing her desire, the character of Janie is a hero who inspired the black community as well as the feminist movement in the United States.

5. Conclusion

This paper tries to interpret the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from the perspective of Lacan's theory on desire. By focusing on the symbols used in the novel, Janie's desire for love and self-identity is revealed. Her desire derived from deprivation and a lack of freedom and respect. Through three marriages, Janie's desire gradually awakened. Janie's desire was eventually fulfilled by defending her desire courageously in her third marriage. According to Lacan (1977/2001), desire is also "Other" people's desire (p. 201). Janie's pursuit of love and self-identity arises from her lack of them, as well as the lack of them in other Afro-American's. Her desire is the collective desire of the black people around her who lacked the courage to pursue their desires.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, God was the white people for black people. For black women, however, God also included their husbands. The black women in the story hoped to be saved by God, as did Janie, who longed for a free life with each of her husbands. However, the men could not save her. Through her story, Zora Neale Hurston makes it evident that achieving equal status between men and women was impossible when she wrote her novel. Black women could not fully achieve their desires by relying on men. Only by relying on themselves and resisting attempts by men to control them a woman could achieve real self-realization and freedom.

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