It Ends Where It All Started: Mobility and Circularity in Their Eyes Were Watching God

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Abstract

Mobility is central to Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching Go. It deploys how Janie, the heroine, trapped in racist and sexist environments, tries to construct her racial and gender identity through different marriages. From constructivist and psychoanalytic approaches, this article explores mobility as a means of identity construction for a heroine whose idealization of life and lack of realism lead her to suffer a moral, psychological and spiritual trauma, thereby, a crisis of identity. Then it shows the dynamic nature of the construction of identity as Janie is obliged to start afresh when she discovers that her men cannot help her achieve her goal. In so doing, she wears a new identity on each occasion. Her return to the house of her childhood following the failure of her different marriages provides, thus, her mobility with a circular or spiral character while revealing as a utopian project.

Keywords: mobility, circularity, constructivism, psychoanalysis, identity, utopia, realism.
Introduction

Journey […], though at times touching the political and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey. The female character in the works of Black women is in a state of becoming ‘part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness.’ (in Davies, 1994, 131)

One of the major themes in African American literature is mobility. It encompasses African Americans’ experience as a constant struggle for self-assertion and identification. As such, it evolves as a journey by the protagonist(s) to overcome their difficulties as “abject” in white and, in the context of this paper, male dominant culture(s). If in some cases the protagonists reach their goals, examples of failure to attain them also abound to mitigate this collective desire for freedom and individuality. Sometimes, the “travelers,” willingly or not, end where they start, making their trip a spiral or circular undertaking. Zora Neal Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God pictures such spiral. It dramatizes a young heroine’s romantic vision about life. Unfortunately, though her experience as a wife at the hands of different men forges her personal and psychological character, she finally discovers that life is not as romantic as she fantasizes. By killing her husband at the end of the narrative, she finds herself, so to speak, back to the square one, still idealizing life. In this novel, the mobility and the circularity it covers are both internal and physical and deploy from victimization to consciousness or from constructed subject to self-dependent one. They combine to make of Janie, “de mule uh de world.” (29) The present essay surveys this change as it characterizes the protagonist’s path toward independence. Based firstly on a constructivist approach, it inspects mobility as a process through which Janie draws on her life experience to (re)construct her gender and racial identity. Then, from a psychoanalytic perspective, it shows how Janie’s different crises of identity – with various changes in her experience and status – force her to come back to where she started, demonstrating the dynamic nature of her construction of her identity. Finally, because Janie lacks realism, her quest becomes a utopian undertaking.

Mobility and Identity Construction

Janie, Hurston’s heroine, constructs her identity through her mobility in complex and destructing environments. This mobility carefully defines the narrative structure and invites the reader to follow the heroine in her “errand” and her psychological distress. Interestingly, Janie is described as a protagonist in complete disarray. Her mobility reflects the movement of people wandering to find a meaning to their complex existence. Like these people, for Janie, only leaving her unbearable situation can offer her a peaceful life. Mobility, therefore, represents for her a means of evasion and of realization of her dreams. Placed in the context of American dream, it intends to claim her part of this dream. Her constant change of place symbolically reveals that her dream is deferred.

On the whole, Janie is the embodiment of the “problematic hero” as coined by Lucien Goldman (1964). For Goldman, indeed, the problematic hero is one who undergoes a crisis of identity because he evolves in an environment that is itself in crisis. His crisis, thus, arises from his impossibility to construct an independent self in this environment that seriously conditions and imposes a line of conduct on its inhabitants, thereby a specific identity. In this
circumstance, the hero is compelled to change strategy in his effort to construct his identity. And part of this strategy is provided by his constant mobility to escape physical, spiritual, and psychological confinement.

In fact, Janie is a problematic heroine because she lives in a community that is the home of acute crises that reduce the black man to nothingness and invisibility. Throughout her whole life, she strives to construct her “self” by challenging prejudices against her and ideologies that consider her as a colonial “other,” someone to be silenced, civilized, educated, and imposed standards of living. As a black, Janie is made to experience racism and its detrimental effects. Her racial otherness is coupled with a sexist one. She is often reminded or her experience teaches her that as a female character, there are limits that she cannot or must not cross. By passing from one husband to another, Janie is taken for a sexual object, a victim of patriarchal ideology. These men frustrate all her womanly aspirations and dreams. Finally, her search for a free self through her mobility makes her crisis more severe and her quest more difficult and painful.

In the novel, mobility is essentially psychological and internal though it covers a geographical dimension. Here, the story is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who knows it and invites the reader to sympathize with the heroine. In capitalist terms, like a commercial item, Janie is handed over by her men after using her. In other words, she goes with another man after a first one has used her or when she discovers that the latter cannot help her realize her dream. Successively, these men impose on Janie their vision of the world. Her search for freedom, in this context, takes a psychological aspect. But since these men do not live in the same place, Janie is obliged to follow them where they live; which provides her mobility with a geographical dimension.

Obviously, Janie’s fantasy about love and life clouds her horizon to the extent that her sorrow becomes more painful and makes her mobility unsatisfactory. The horizon she does not reach is nothing but her ideal of life as a young girl who dreams of having a peaceful family with a handsome, adorable and loving husband, and good children. But very soon, she is disappointed when she confesses that she does not love Logan Killicks with whom she gets married: “Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck […] His belly is too big to, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots. And ’tain’t nothin’ in de way of him washin’ his feet every evenin’ before he comes tuh bed.” (42)

An insightful inspection of Janie’s background helps understand her attitude. As an illegitimate child – she was conceived following a raping of her mother and was later left to her grand-mother after her mother sank into alcoholism – life is very demanding. For her, every day and every deed are challenges. Thenceforth, her construction of her identity consists of a permanent struggle to achieve self-respect. This is why she develops a platonic vision of love and an idealistic conception of the family. However, beyond the mere act of achieving her goal, Janie’s union with her men is a means for her to face her bastardy.

In trying to construct her “self,” Janie develops a constructivist attitude. Her experiences make her learn about her abjectness. They teach her that she is not a girl just like the other young girls of her community. We can therefore argue that she learns through practice. This makes her discover that life is not a matter of getting married or a matter of dream, but rather something containing a whole range of surprises, disappointments, and uncertainties that only daily experience allows to discover: “She hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman.” (44) In her posture, Janie discovers an aspect of
the woman’s lot and also the intricacies of marriage that every girl must try to master before committing herself to it. Besides, the fact that her father is unknown defines her lack of identity. In any human society, indeed, apart from the child’s being named after his father, expressions such as “he is/walks/speaks/acts/etc. like his father” help trace the child’s filial identity and also provide the child with a social identity. As such, the child’s acts and the subsequent identities they generate are judged according to what his parents are or have been. Unfortunately, since Janie’s father is unknown, she cannot claim such filial and social identity. For her to exist and be considered, she must chart her own path and create her own norms by particularly challenging the (patriarchal) standards of her community. Her different marriages are therefore indicative of an internal crisis of identity she cannot control or that she barely overcomes since sometimes, she has been happy, particularly with Tea Cake, before their visions of life come to conflict each other.

Janie’s misfortune as a bastard child brings to the fore the problematic of the mulatto figure. Often born to a white “unknown” father and a black mother, the mulatto is rejected by both white and black communities. Thus, since her mother was raped, Janie’s father cannot assume his fatherly responsibility, exemplifying the mulatto’s situation. Throughout the novel, Janie’s ardent lust for identity is sharpened by this lack of fatherly authority to guide her first steps and provide her with assurance, social identity and a psychological balance. To compensate for this lack, she undertakes a long process of identity construction that leads her to wander in search of a true love.

By getting married, Janie gets rid of her identity as a bastard and wears a new one. In other words, through marriage, Janie constructs a new identity for herself. A peaceful family, a loving and handsome husband, and good children become, therefore, the markers of this new identity she so earnestly desires. Unfortunately, her first try with Logan Killicks is disappointing because she does not love him. This disappointment reveals as the first step in the circularity of her mobility.

After leaving Logan Killicks, Janie knows that she must continue her journey. Luckily, perhaps, she encounters Joe Starks on his way to Florida. After a long conversation, Joe decides to stay for two weeks in the region. From that day, they frequently see each other till Joe tells Janie about his desire to marry her:

‘Janie, if you think Ah aims to tole you off and make a dog outa you, youse wrong. Ah wants to make a wife outa you.’
‘You mean dat, Joe’?
‘De day you puts yo’ hand in mine, Ah wouldn’t let de sun go down on us single. Ah’m uh man wid principles. You ain’t never knewed what it was to be treated lak a lady and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh. Call me Jody lak you do sometime.’
‘Jody,’ she smiled up at him. (50)

For Janie who sees marriage as a meaning for her life as a woman, that Joe Starks wants to marry her is more than a joy. It comes as an achievement of a horizon she could not reach when she got married to Logan Killicks. And because she is looking for newness, her utterance “Jody” followed by a smile, expresses both her surprise and her happiness. Indeed, Janie is surprised because her first marriage results in a failure and hearing another man promise to make her happy is not any assurance. However, as she fantasizes about life and family, Joe’s proposal is an opportunity. It actualizes her internal dream that was deferred, her identity that was frustrated during her first marriage.
Very soon after they got married in Eatonville (55), Janie starts experiencing a crisis of identity in the form of a sexist oppression. In fact, the people of Eatonville want to make Joe Starks their mayor and they want Janie to make a public speech. Obviously, this invitation sounds as a sign of recognition to Janie. But beyond its political aspect, it questions the woman’s place in the public and the private spheres. Indeed, one of the feminists’ protests is the woman’s confinement in the private sphere of the family where she cares for children and old persons. For them, the woman must get out of this confinement and appear in the public sphere of politics and other areas hitherto considered as man’s privilege. Because these people of Eatonville are not all women claiming speech for their gender, we cannot assume that their invitation to Janie is a feminist endeavor. Nevertheless, it has something feminist when we consider the heroine’s role as a female character in this public sphere of politics. It shows that this sphere is no longer man’s privilege. Through their invitation, then, there is an implicit organization to fight for the woman’s rights even though the text is completely mute on it.

At this level, Hurston’s text reflects Hazel V. Carby’s perception of the objective of black women’s writing that was driven by the women’s movement at the turn of 19th century. For this critic, at that period, “organizing to fight meant also write to organize.” (1987, 97) Indeed, faced with sexist and racist oppression, many black female writers such as Frances Harper, Fanny Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, and Hallie Q. Brown were at the forefront of the struggle for the progress of the black women. Hurston’s novel can therefore be read as a continuation of this struggle undertaken by these women prior to her generation. Following in Carby’s steps, the invitation of the people of Eatonville is a response to the black women’s call for organization to fight against their exclusion. As for Hurston herself, one can say that through the experience of her heroine, she seeks to organize black women as a racial and a gender group. In other words, she writes to sensitise black women on their denial from the public arena. As a consequence, they will undertake the necessary action to overcome this exclusion.

This double sensitization is all the more understandable as their invitation conflicts with Joe’s sexist attitude: “Mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She is uh woman and her place is in de home.” (69) For Joe, as a woman, Janie must remain in the private sphere. Thus, the fact that the people of Eatonville want to see her in the public sphere constitutes a challenge to his manhood and beyond him, defiance to patriarchal ideology and the subsequent social order it helps establish in their community. This is why he abruptly and vehemently argues that he never married Janie to give her this privilege of making a public speech.

From then on, the couple enters into a conflicting spiral that would later lead to complete misunderstanding and quarrel. The more years pass, the more this conflict intensifies and the bridge between them widens. Joe even refuses to eat what Janie cooks (126). Any attempt from Janie to assert herself is seen by him as a disobedience to his maleness and consequently, he smothers it. In turn, Janie sees Joe’s attitude as an obstacle to her blossoming and decides to protest. Progressively, the enthusiasm that fastened them to get married makes room for an atmosphere of mutual repulsion and negligence as the narrative reveals:

The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again […] The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. (111)
Another illustration of Joe’s sexist behavior relates to the fact that after his refusal to let Janie make a public speech, his attitudes toward her turn into injunctions. Particularly, they become master/slave, dominant/dominated or colonizer/colonized relations. Any failure from Janie to respect this hierarchical pattern is an occasion for Joe to use violence to make her see sense. For instance, following one of Janie’s dishes where “the bread didn’t rise, and the fish wasn’t quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped [her] until she had a ringing sound in her ears.” (112) This act and many other instances of violence against the heroine are expressive of a patriarchal supremacy that Joe is not ready to negotiate.

Joe Starks is the embodiment of racist America’s emasculation of the black man. Indeed, at the height of American racism, the black man lost his male identity and often deserted his family as an act of self-reclusion and self-denial. As such, he not only denied his own identity but he also could not help his offspring construct theirs. Sometimes, when the black man did not desert his family, he imposed on it violence as a response to the frustrations he experienced from white racist world. Though Joe Starks’s situation differs from that of that type of black male, it exemplifies it in some way. Unable to oppose white oppression, Janie becomes an easy prey on which he shows that he still has a touch of male dignity.

When Janie realizes that their misunderstanding has reached a point of no return, she decides to counter attack by taking refuge in silence as a means of resistance: “Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along.” (90) By choosing to retreat into silence, Janie tries to draw lessons from her previous experience with Logan Killicks. Face to Joe’s brutality, her silence might be interpreted as fear. Yet, it reveals as a sure and powerful means of resistance when Joe discovers that he has lost his maleness to which he is so attached:

Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul’s daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. (123)

By challenging Joe’s maleness, Janie deconstructs the master/slave, dominant/dominated or colonizer/colonized paradigm. Ironically, her silence illustrates a postcolonial desire to claim a voice in a male dominant culture. In this context, she becomes a postcolonial subject. Her quest is akin to that of a subject whose individuality and autonomy allow him to possess his whole “self.” Since she cannot convince Joe to look in the same direction as her and that she strongly wants to construct a free self, which has always conflicted with Joe’s self-centeredness and male ego, Janie decides to make her way, trying to forget him: “Mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods – come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn’t value.” (118) When Joe dies later, Janie feels this as a freedom as she confesses to her friend: “‘Tain’t dat Ah worries over Joe’s death, Pheoby. Ah jus’ loves dis freedom.” (143) It is not that Joe’s death sets Janie free and provides her with the identity she has been looking for ever since. The freedom she hints at is what that allows her to feel some kind of moral and spiritual peace in a new climate free of dispute, negligence, quarrel and submission. Though she has not yet reached her goal, at least, male oppression has disappeared with Joe’s death.
After Joe’s death, Janie continues her way and meets with Tea Cake with whom she gets married in Jacksonville (175). With the latter, she starts a new marital experience. Also, this marriage is a new opportunity to construct her identity as an accomplished woman. At the beginning, Tea Cake offers her what she has been running after: love and romanticism. With him, her ideal of love and family life ever since unreachable is now within reach. To paraphrase Frances Smith Foster, with Tea Cake, every following day is for Janie “a brighter coming day,” (1990) that is to say a sure step toward her ultimate goal. Thus, most of Tea Cake’s deeds intend to make Janie come closer to this goal. They help her character and individuality blossom. She becomes not only a human being but a woman. On the whole, Tea Cake makes Janie feel the plenitude of life as he brings her wherever she can dream:

Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea Cake and Janie gone to a dance. Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie’s yard and seeding the garden for her. Chopping down that tree she never did like by the dining room window. All those signs of possession. Tea Cake in a borrowed car teaching Janie to drive. Tea Cake and Janie playing checkers; playing coo-can; playing Florida flip on the store porch all afternoon as if nobody else was there. Day after day and week after week. (166-167)

An interesting characteristic of Tea Cake’s involvement in Janie’s psychological and emotional development is his use of the blues. By playing piano and singing the blues, Tea Cake implicitly partakes in Janie’s construction of her identity and her will to possess her wholeness and the plenitude of her being:

Then Tea Cake went to the piano without so much as asking and began playing blues and singing, and throwing grins over his shoulder. The sounds lulled Janie to soft slumber and she woke up with Tea Cake combing her and scratching the dandruff from her scalp. It made her more comfortable and drowsy. (156)

That Hurston uses the blues in the above passage is very instructive. It aims to insist on the important role of this music among African Americans. More specifically, it seeks to underline its therapeutic feature under which both the singer and the listener become whole through sharing of their joys and sorrows. Thus, in the same way the blues helps the singer relate his own experience or that of his community or his race, the listener can reflect on his. The blues becomes therefore a place of introspection, of internal or spiritual recollection to ponder on one’s human and social condition.

Through the scene about Tea Cake playing and singing blues, Hurston gives her text this therapeutic feature that invites her reader to share Janie’s sorrow and sadness and sympathize with her. Tea Cake’s blues appears as a healing melody to soothe Janie’s trauma caused by so many trials. It embarks her in a sort of dream to such an extent that she is ready to spiritually evade with Tea Cake, the player and singer: “‘Tea Cake, where you git uh comb from to be combin’ mah hair wid?’” (156) Then she adds: “Whut good do combin’ mah hair do you? It’s mah comfortable, not yourn.” (157) Janie’s questions to Tea Cake are very revealing as she cannot realize what she is living. She cannot believe her husband combing her hair and singing to her, which is a sign of a great love. Through the notes of his piano and certainly his melodic voice, Tea Cake provides Janie with the necessary catharsis to forget her bad memories and reflect only on the present and the future. This pushes her out of
hesitation and she surrenders to her husband through a passionate, intense, and inordinate love (159). With time, she gets transfigured and becomes more confident and trustful to him.

But their complicity is later stopped by a mad dog that bites Tea Cake (246). Progressively, Tea Cake’s behavior changes and he becomes threatening for Janie. Indeed, upon advice from the doctor, Janie and Tea Cake must sleep separately till Tea Cake recovers from the dog’s bite. Unfortunately, Tea Cake cannot stand this and despite Janie’s attempt to convince him, he threatens her with a pistol (272). The struggle that ensues between them ends tragically by Tea Cake’s death after he receives a bullet (273). Though this murder is accidental as Janie’s lawyer brilliantly and successfully demonstrates it during the trial (279), it draws attention. In fact, that Janie fights against Tea Cake is a human instinct of defense when one is faced with danger. But in the case in point, it is a refusal by the heroine to die like a coward insofar as throughout the narrative, she has made of life and love, her ultimate goal. Thenceforth, pretending that she purposely kills Tea Cake who has given a meaning to her life and has brought her closer to this goal might sound strange, even silly. From that point of view, we might say that this murder is the result of a succession of frustrations and trials of which Janie has been victim all her life. Unluckily, in trying to defend herself, she has behaved so clumsily as to kill her husband.

Throughout the novel, Janie undertakes a difficult and painful trip in search of a true love and a good family life. But as if she had been cursed since her birth, her different marriages do not help her reach her goal. This failure forces her to return to where she started, revealing the utopian side of her journey.

**Return to Point Zero: Utopia and Lack of Realism**

This part of my argumentation focuses on the main reason(s) why Janie’s quest results in a failure whereas her objective is, however, within reach through her marriage with Tea Cake. To achieve this, I will draw on psychoanalytic approach to scrutinize Janie’s mental or psychosomatic distress and the lessons she cannot draw from the situations she is faced with because of her obsession for family life. My coinage of the “return to point zero” does not aim to show a total failure from Janie because she does not possess qualities to succeed a marriage or assume marital life. This would posit her to the status of nothingness and lead to think that she is really an abject. I rather intend to insist on the fact that the heroine’s impossibility to achieve her goal essentially relates to her lack of objectivity that is necessary in human undertaking. Thus, the return to point zero signifies a lack of realism, which makes Janie’s quest a utopian objective.

Outstandingly, Janie’s behavior exemplifies Sigmund Freud’s “phenomena of transference”:

Transference is a concept that refers to our natural tendency to respond to certain situations in unique, predetermined ways – predetermined by much earlier, formative experiences usually within the context of the primary attachment relationship. These patterns, deeply ingrained, arise sometimes unexpectedly and unhelpfully – in psychoanalysis, we would say that old reactions constitute the core of a person’s problem, and that he or she needs to understand them well in order to be able to make more useful choices. Transference is what is transferred to new situations from previous situations. As a result, a person’s relationship to lovers and friends, as well as
any other relationship, including his psychoanalyst, includes elements from his or her earliest relationships. (http://www.apsa.org/content/psychoanalytic-theory-approaches)

Freud goes further as to argue that transference leads to see others not objectively but rather “transfer” onto them qualities so that we cannot but idealize them. As such, we elevate them and expect more of them than mere humans. It turns out that as long as we fail to understand that those we idealize are just human beings, we will continue to see them as divine creatures on which we can lean to make our dreams become true. This is where all Janie’s trauma factor lies. Thinking that she can attain ideal life through marriage, she transfers onto each of her men, exceptional qualities she expects can help her achieve this goal. Thus, when she does not find these qualities in them, her psychosomatic affliction becomes more devastating and causes her search to be unrealizable.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, the tropes of utopia and lack of realism are recurrent. They characterize Janie’s quest and demonstrate her incapability to realize that to reach her goal, she must also mind people around her rather than consider only her personal interests. Her return to where her dreams started without being able to attain her horizon might be read as the price of her being at the same time too illusionist, negligent, and unrealistic. Veiled by her idealism and ensnared by her internal desires that conflict with the social reality of her community, she completely forgets that she evolves in a world of contradictions and controversies for self-assertion, and where male chauvinism always seek to keep the female character under its yoke.

Janie’s psychological distress shows a gradation in her acts and thereby, her quest. This gradation is parcelled by the type of relations she has respectively with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake. It starts with a lack of love for Logan Killicks. Then, it continues with a confrontation with Joe Starks when he wants to confine her in the private sphere of the family. Finally, it reaches its climax with her assassination of Tea Cake as a response to so many frustrations and privations. In this gradation, each of Janie’s relations entraps her even though they individually permit her to discover who she is and prompt her to try to (re)construct her traumatized and fragmented self. We might say that Janie’s men use marriage as a bait to make her perpetrate acts that eventually destroy her. For example, at the beginning of their marriage, Logan Killicks loves Janie. But when he realizes that she does not return his love, he changes his attitude toward her and even promises to destroy her spirit: “Aw you know Ah’m gwine chop de wood fuh yuh. Even if you is stingy as you can be wid me. Yo’ Grandma and me myself done spoilt yuh now, and Ah reckon Ah have tuh keep on wid it.” (45) Joe Starks, too, shows himself loving and comprehensible with Janie. But he finally turns into a brutal and egoistic husband as Sherley Ann Williams skillfully summarizes in the foreword of the novel:

Joe provides Janie with the “front porch” existence of Nanny’s dreams, but in doing so, he isolates her from direct participation in any life except his own. His stranglehold on her life and definition of self is symbolized in his prohibition against her participation in the tale-tellings, mock flirtations, and other comic activities that center around or emanate from the porch of his general store. Despite his own pleasure in these sessions, he charges that the people who gather at them are “trashy,” and Janie is Mrs. Mayor Starks.” (xiii)
Though Tea Cake is the one with whom Janie feels the plenitude of love and marriage, he turns out to be as sexist as Logan Killicks and Joe Starks; which makes Janie accidentally kill him (273). As it can be seen, at the beginning of their marriage, each of Janie’s men is adorable before their relationships become conflicting situations. In so doing, they seem to use the same strategy: they first lead her to trust them. Then once she falls in their trap, they traumatize her, knowing that she cannot escape or that she can hardly do so. Any of her attempts to get her freedom reveals as a tragic experience. Also, since anytime Janie is unable to see the trickery and that she lacks subtleties, she ends up a completely fragmented being and is compelled to return back to the home of her family.

Like in the first section of this paper, in this second section, Hurston’s narrative structure deploys constructivism. Janie learns through practice that the type of life she has dreamed of all her life is not achievable. She blindly and hastily involves in marriages which destroy not only her whole soul but stop her dreams. However, the intention of her men is not firstly meant to make her perpetrate such acts as divorce or murder. Though their different behaviors are illustrative of male chauvinism mainly with Joe Starks and at a lesser degree Tea Cake, the real motivation demonstrates the patriarchal ideology underlining marriage and Janie’s failure to understand the traps of this institution and the uncertainties of life.

Because life has been too demanding to her due to her difficult childhood, Janie too is very demanding to herself, her men and people around her. This pushes her to adopt an unrealistic attitude. She transfers the requirements of the physical world and her inner desires onto the others, looking for them to help her compensate for her lack and accomplish her dream. In this quest, she fails to understand that a realistic behavior commends her to adjust to the situations she is faced with.

Janie’s marriages and consequently her mobility at the hands of her men constitute for her a search for protective spaces; which is an interesting motive in African American literature. For Carole Boyce Davis, “escape for Black women/men has necessarily involved the seeking out of protective spaces, or concealment at some points, as the logic of “underground railroad” implies and particularly the darkness of night during which time freedom/fight was often undertaken.” (132) Historically, the “underground railroad,” a set of distorted and secret roots in swamps and forests, was a very successful means of escape among slaves at the time of slavery. Often with the help of anti-slavery activists, slaves used these roots to flee slavery and sick protection in free states. The “underground railroad” image to which Davis refers is this desire to enjoy freedom outside the daily toil and exploitation of plantations often under the lashes of masters and overseers.

When we consider Janie’s entire life from childhood to her separation with her men – through divorce or after a murder – her escape or her search for a protective space can be interpreted at two different levels which might seem contradictory but actually aim at the same objective. Firstly, by getting married, Janie wants to flee celibacy that is viewed as a dishonor for her as a girl and also for her family. Marriage, therefore, is expected to provide her with a social shelter or protection. Secondly, her divorce and her murder clearly evidence her continuous desire to escape domination from her men. In this context, marriage might represent a threat. It can serve as a metaphor to allude to the violence and ill-treatment slaves experienced during slavery. Thus, in the same way slaves were silenced and denied of their rights, Janie’s men impose on her such deprivation and silence. Viewed from this angle, this second aspect of marriage seems to contradict the first one. Everything happens as if Janie wants to get married and at the same time she does not want to. But put together, both aspects indicate her difficulty to find this shelter or protective space she is looking for. For Janie to
find this protective space, she needs moral and psychological strengths likely to help her resist the downward structure in which she occupies the lower position whereas man occupies the upper one.

In an escape for a protective space such as in Janie’s case, the escapee needs lucidity and total control of all his senses. Only this state of being can help him achieve this ultimate goal by making better choices. Unfortunately, throughout her mobility, Janie lacks these strengths and is totally out of control of her psychological senses. She suffers because she cannot channel her innermost emotions and also because she is too prone to dream rather than face life with realism. Accurately, Janie’s lack of realism in a world that needs realism, adjustment and adaptation causes her experience to be dramatic and painful. Her blind desire for love and family that turns out to be difficult for her to achieve leads to her loss. Finally, she returns to where she started after discovering that platonic love does not exist even though she pretends to be happy and reconciled with herself and with her spirit: “Now, dat’s how everything wuz, Pheoby, jus’ lak Ah told yuh. So Ah’m back home again and Ah’m satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparison.” (284) By drawing the consequences of her mobility and particularly her failure, Janie discovers that her struggle has been just a dream, a farther and unattainable horizon. Now, she wants to lean on her previous mistakes as step-stones for her future life.

In addition, by being too demanding to people around her and unable to conform to the realities of life, Janie unwillingly turns out to be egoistic to the extent that she appeals to God to make Tea Cake love no other girl but her: “God, please suh, don’t let him love anybody else but me. Maybe Ah’m is uh fool, Lawd, lak dey say, but Lawd, Ah been no lonesome, and Ah been waitin’, Jesus. Ah done waited uh long time.” (180) At first sight, Janie’s prayer to God highlights the woman’s desire to possess her man for her alone and the jealousy that can overwhelm her when she suspects the latter to woo another woman. However, when we carry the analysis farther, especially when we link it to Janie’s search for a protective space, this prayer reveals her anxiety and fear. In fact, Janie is so attached to marriage as a shelter, a response to her traumatic existence and a means for her to gain a social identity that the single idea that her man may want another woman haunts and even produces a destructive effect on her. In a word, Janie’s prayer is more than a simple plea to God to deprive Tea Cake of any want to love another woman. It encapsulates all the problematic about her inner anguish and her difficulty to adapt to social realities that are frequently submitted to human needs.

The lack of realism in Janie’s journey to a protective space first manifests in her refusal to stay with Logan Killicks because she does not love him. Yet, he could probably offer her the life she is looking for. Unfortunately, she cannot understand that in a love affair, only devotion, mutual understanding, tenderness, and sacrifice are important. Sometimes, we need to conform to social realities as they come out. As Janie cannot apprehend life in the same way as the other people of her community, she becomes a victim all along her life. While her men consider marriage as a tool to imprison women, Janie views it as a whole accomplishment and an end. Her divorce and her murder, therefore, bring to light this contradictory vision between her and her men about love and life and beyond them, the other people of her community. As a response to her people’s misunderstanding of her attitude, Janie asks her friend Pheoby to explain them what love means to her:

Dat’s all right, Pheoby, tell ’em. Dey gointuh make ’migration ’cause mah love didn’t work lak they love, if dey had any. Then you must tell ’em dat love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it
touch. 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 every shore. (284)

Interestingly, the metaphors of the “grindstone dat’s de same everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch” or of the moving sea that “takes its shape from de shore it meets” in the above citation illustrate both the destructive or overwhelming and the illusive nature of love. For, at the very moment when Janie believes she has it within reach, it crushes her and diverts her toward other unexpected and more devastating realities. The gradation in her acts vis-à-vis her men, which I developed earlier in this section, is a perfect illustration of this reality. Clearly enough, for Janie, her people cannot understand her because they have not undergone the same trials as her. Consequently, they can have any kind of judgment and gossip when it comes to appreciate her behavior and acts. Her use of this double metaphor indicates her realizing that she has made a mistake by offering more than what she has expected to receive in return.

Already, when Nanny, Janie’s grandmother, wants to protect her by encouraging her to get married to Logan Killicks, Janie’s assertion that she “wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (43) foreshadows her perception of love differently from her people and mainly the constant search for a protective space that would characterize all her journey throughout the novel. Like in the metaphors of the grindstone and the moving sea, that of the pear tree here provides both shade that protects and “sweet” fruits (the pears) that feed. Thus, sitting under this tree offers protection and food. Through this metaphor, Janie wants to insist on the double objective of marriage: social protection for the woman and tenderness, happiness that provide her with self-assurance and self-confidence.

Based on her misfortune and her failure, Janie discovers that it is illusory to think that she can receive the type of love she offers. As a consequence, she is ready to give advice to others so that they avoid being entrapped as she has been:

Let ’em consulate theirselves wid talk. ’Course, talking’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. And listenin’ tuh dat kind uh talk is jus’ lak openin’ yo’ mouth and lettin’ de moon shine down yo’ throat. It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theirselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out abou livin’ fuh theirselves. (285)

Janie’s advice here reinforces the constructivist feature of my argumentation. To her, one cannot be whole and complete in a love affair unless one experiences it through practice. Since she has spent her whole life to construct her identity through trials, she can easily talk about love and marriage than the other members of her community. She quite recognizes that she has lived much for others than for herself. By loving her men and wanting them to share her dreams and her vision of life, she has sacrificed her personal interests and received nothing in compensation. Presumably, if she has to start life again, she would live much for herself. Seeing those who have never experienced what love is like, she can but only advice them to try to live for themselves rather than for others.
Conclusion

_Their Eyes Were Watching God_ is an interesting text both in its exploration of racial as well as gender identity. By dramatizing Janie’s quest for love and marriage as a protective space and a completion of her life, this novel reveals as Hurston’s masterpiece. In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate how the heroine’s life is like a journey through wilderness, in search of what she can never achieve. Through her odyssey, Janie proves to be the spokeswoman of all those black women who are silenced in sexist and racist environments and fight for their rights as females and Blacks. From constructivist and psychoanalytic approaches, I showed that Janie’s quest is characterized by circularity and finally ends as a utopian undertaking when she returns to where her dreams started following her failure to attain her objective. I therefore demonstrated that Janie’s tragedy occurs through practice. She discovers the meaning of life through her life with different husbands. Subsequently, I inspected her mental distress as an aftermath of her victimization at the hands of malicious, egoistic, and brutal men and also as part of the adverse effects of marriage. But because she is not realistic enough to realize that marriage does not necessarily provide love, her tragedy turns out to be more tragic and destructive. Finally, Janie’s experience stands as a lesson in that it invites to be realistic in life mainly when it comes to decision making.

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