

## THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, by Zora Neale Hurston

### Big Read Discussion Questions

#### Set 1

1. Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's tale?
2. Hurston uses nature like the pear tree, the ocean, the horizon, the hurricane not only as a plot device but also as metaphor. Describe the ways these function as both. Can you think of others?
3. The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?
4. Many readers consider the novel a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each experience?
5. In the novel, speech is used as a mechanism of control and liberation, especially as Janie struggles to find her voice. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or to remain quiet?
6. Is there a difference between the language of the men and that of Janie or the other women? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
7. The elaborate burial of the town mule draws from an incident Hurston recounts in *Tell My Horse*, where the Haitian president ordered an elaborate Catholic funeral for his pet goat. Although this scene is comic, how is it also tragic?
8. Little of Hurston's work was published during the Harlem Renaissance, yet her ability to tell witty stories and to stir controversy made her a favorite guest at elite

Harlem parties. Identify several passages of wit and humor in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

9. How does the image of the black woman as "the mule of the world" become a symbol for the roles Janie chooses or refuses to play during her quest?
10. What do the names of Janie's husbands Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods tell us about their characters and their relationships with Janie?
11. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning?
12. Re-read the last three pages of the novel. How do the imagery and tone connect with other moments in the novel? Does Janie's story end in triumph, despair, or a mixture of both?

## **Set II**

### Discussion Questions

1. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What is the nature of that God and of their watching? Do any of them question God?
2. What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?
3. How does Janie's journey—from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades—represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions? What elements of individual action and communal life characterize that immersion?

4. To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice?

5. What are the differences between the language of the men and that of Janie and the other women? How do the differences in language reflect the two groups' approaches to life, power, relationships, and self-realization? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?

6. In what ways does Janie conform to or diverge from the assumptions that underlie the men's attitudes toward women? How would you explain Hurston's depiction of violence toward women? Does the novel substantiate Janie's statement that "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business"?

7. What is the importance in the novel of the "signifyin'" and "playin' de dozens" on the front porch of Joe's store and elsewhere? What purpose do these stories, traded insults, exaggerations, and boasts have in the lives of these people? How does Janie counter them with her conjuring?

8. Why is adherence to received tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?

9. After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her." Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others?

10. How important is Hurston's use of vernacular dialect to our understanding of Janie and the other characters and their way of life? What do speech patterns reveal about the quality of these lives and the nature of these communities? In what ways are "their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon" of these people?