

## Understanding the Blues Aesthetic in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Writer

Title

Abstract Component

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) exemplifies and expands the notion

of a Blues aesthetic through the female protagonist's quest for self-revelation, detailing the complexities

of music, self, and other within a socio-historical African American context. As Amiri Baraka asserts,

"[The Blues aesthetic] arises as a late nineteenth-century / early twentieth-century secular thrust of

Textual Support- Direct Quotation

African-American musical culture, whose oldest musical and lyrical heritage was Africa but whose

In-Text Citation- Just Page # since I included writer in intro.

changing contemporary expression summed up their lives and history in the West" (101). Though viewed

as separate from a Black aesthetic, it is still "one aspect of the overall African American aesthetic"

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(Baraka 101). Hurston indirectly explicates this notion, stating, "It was like a flute song forgotten in

another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard had nothing to do

with her ears" (14). Hurston's "flute song" is congruent with a Blues aesthetic because it harkens back to

Notice how I breakdown the textual support in my explanation

something that was "forgotten in another existence," while maintaining a contemporary context. The

singing and production of musical sound in the narrative and the writing of this text primarily focus on

reflecting and experiencing sound rather than passively hearing it. Published in 1937, Hurston's text is

recognized as a fundamental precursor to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance. In dialogue with the musical

Comparative Context

Writer

Title

Abstract Component

research of Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies the Blues

aesthetic and expands the potential limitations of a "secular thrust" of modernist texts written by African

American writers, delineating the evolution of American music.

### [Theory into Practice | Understanding Locke Through Hurston's Text]

Topic Sentence

A In correspondence with the work of Alain Locke in *The Negro and His Music* (1936), Hurston's

text underscores the movements of American music history through her characters. For both Locke and

Elaboration

Hurston, Negro characteristics of expression in the United States are embedded in the tainted, historically

Introduction to the Quotation

Direct Quotation

traumatic foundation of institutionalized slavery. Locke asserts that, "Negro music is the closest approach

Comparative Analysis

America has to a folk music.”<sup>1</sup> Similar to Locke’s “three streams of musical expression to follow and explore,” Hurston provides three generations of women to follow and explore through the life of Janie.

Explanation

Hurston’s emphasis on female characters and matriarchal identity is symbolic on three levels. It underscores the role of physical production (parturition), ideological production (the heritage of historical trauma), and more abstractly, musical production. The trope of three remains consistent throughout Hurston’s narrative, explicitly numbering the generations and marriages, but implicitly creating a

Tie Back to the Thesis

religious undertone.<sup>2</sup> While each generation, like three movements in one composition, haunts the next, each marriage takes Janie closer to a life filled with music, passion, and tragedy, epitomizing the Blues aesthetic.

Introduction to Quotation

Textual Support

In ‘The Characteristics of Negro Expression’ (1934), Hurston states, “There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry” (5). Each generation of women in Hurston’s text is both perpetuated toward a new

Explanation

freedom; but restricted by a corrupt system. Nanny, “freed” from the institution of slavery and with a newborn daughter, becomes an indentured domestic servant (Hurston 22). Leafy, “free” to receive an education, becomes dependent on alcohol and escapism after being traumatically raped and presumably

In-Text Citation for Summary Reference

beaten by her school teacher (Hurston 26). Janie, “free” to live a life of (relative) safety through marriage, finds a restrictive loneliness in two marriages. Though each woman, a segment of history, symbolically

In-Text Citation for Summary Reference

adds a verse, the chorus harkens back to the conception of the African American in the United States. In

Introduction to the Quotation

Direct Quotation

regard to the rhythm of their lives, the three women are “walking together like harmony in a song”

Explanation

(Hurston 2). Though they are in relation to one another, as a whole unit, there is an asymmetrical

composition that contradicts the positive connotations of harmonic design. This text should be read as one

Tie Back to Thesis

composition of three movements, each differing, but collective as well. Though tied together through the

<sup>1</sup> This echoes the statements of W.E.B DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and James Weldon Johnson in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).

<sup>2</sup> In the Christian doctrine, God is comprised of three interlocked members: God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost.

traumatic heritage of racial and gendered oppression, they each face a different facet of the overarching, collective oppression in American society.

### [Three Women | Three Ages of Music]

Topic Sentence

B & C Despite the corruption and traumatization perpetuated by institutionalized forms of power

(slavery, education, and marriage), each woman's birth and life align with a period of music "all of folk origin – direct or remote" (Locke 9). Nanny's lifetime (probably born between 1830-1850) represents

Elaboration

'The Age of Sorrow Songs.' Though not directly mentioned, this connotation is developed through

Introduction

Textual Support

Hurston's descriptions of Nanny. She writes, "Nanny half sung, half sobbed a running chant-prayer over the head of the weeping girl" (Hurston 20).<sup>3</sup> Similar to the sorrow songs, Nanny's life is a sort of

Explanation

"running chant-prayer," which survives through multiple abuses. Like the sorrow songs, that "lived through the contempt of the slave-owners," Nanny survives the wrath of Master Robert's wife when

Comparative Analysis

Leafy is born with mixed race features (Locke 29). She carries on against the odds to secure potential futures for her daughter and grand-daughter. Leafy's lifetime (commenced in 1865) corresponds with

Introduction

'The Age(s) of Minstrelsy.' Similar to the songs/performances of this age, Leafy's life, though "free," is impacted by the "limitations [that] chattel slavery set" (Locke 43). Like the swift decline of minstrelsy

Quotation

due to "counterfeit imitation by white actors," Leafy's decline ensues after she is abused and raped by her school teacher. Though Janie results from the encounter, Leafy turns away and fades out of the picture.

Explanation

Therefore, Nanny and her sorrow-song cultural upbringing raises Janie. Locke emphasizes, "Not until ragtime and jazz had opened the way, did the spirituals come into their full heritage and complete

Introduction

Quotation

appreciation" (69). In much the same way, Janie's life (eventually and temporarily) upholds Nanny's notions of freedom and security albeit in a more improvised fashion. Janie's lifetime, beginning in 1882,

Explanation

encompasses the transition from 'The Age of Ragtime' (1895-1918) to 'The Jazz Age' (1918-1926). So, through Janie, in the ages of ragtime and jazz, a new level of freedom through reciprocal love and musical

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<sup>3</sup> Congruent with the sorrow song descriptions of DuBois, Nanny's "running chant-prayer" is "veiled and half-articulate" (182). As DuBois states, "Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences" (183).

culture allows the spirituals (Janie's maternal line) to come into their full heritage. Therefore, Locke, through his evaluation of musical development, and Hurston, through her creation of a literary masterpiece, culminate in "the greatest and most fundamental of all musical forces- emotional creation" (Locke 19).

Tie Back to Thesis

### [Music as the True Human Spirit]

C Janie's journey to "a true music" and to self-revelation is encoded within didactic parables revolving around the idea of ships on the ocean (a reference to the slave industry) and a creation myth. In the opening lines, Hurston expresses, "Ships at the distance have every man's wish on board... 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" (1). Therefore, it is the women who carry the heritage of wishes. "Women remember everything they don't want to forget;" and Janie, a woman, carries the narrative forward. The musical spaces in her life amplify the memories that the reader assumes she wants to remember. In the creation myth, "When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed" (Hurston 121). Similar to the literary and musical force of "emotional creation," Hurston depicts emotional destruction. The myth continues, "So, they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud" (Hurston 121). Despite the oppression of the human spark with mud, the "shine and song" remained resilient. This theme carries throughout Hurston's text, inherently exemplifying DuBois' notion that there "is no truer exponent of the pure human spirit" and that true American music originated from the voice of the Negro slave (15). Hurston's work, like that of her predecessors, seeks to uplift "the pure human spirit" through the evolution of American folklore and the evolution of music. In Hurston's creation myth, Janie, mud-covered, of mankind, is made from "stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over" (121). Again, there is a "simple oasis of faith" that has "a little spark, shine, and a song." The "true American music" and "the pure human spirit" are combined in "wild sweet melodies" like the "alto chant of bees" when Janie first understands what marriage *could* be. As Locke states, "Negro music is the closest approach

America has to a folk music, and so Negro music is almost as important for the musical culture of America as it is for the spiritual life of the Negro" (1). Despite the dichotomous divide between the Blues and the Spirituals, Hurston's text breaks the dividing lines and demonstrates a composition of complex and intermingling production demonstrating the range of the Blues aesthetic.

### [Introduction to Sound | Foreshadowing Tea Cake]

Though all three women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indirectly frame musical eras with their lifetimes, they are not musicians themselves. Unlike later female protagonists in literary productions,<sup>4</sup> Janie is not a singer of the Blues nor a performer of music. On the contrary, it is Tea Cake, Janie's last husband, who introduces music to Janie's day-to-day life. Hurston's employment of sound in the text is subtle. However, the keen reader will realize that Tea Cake's entrance is foreshadowed and connoted by Janie's experience at the age of sixteen beneath the pear trees listening to the erotic music of blossoms and singing bees. The narrator interjects, "With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! ... Where were the singing bees for her?" (Hurston 15). This is the first section in which music is linked to Janie's personal thoughts. In the pear tree vignette, it states, "She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the painting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her" (Hurston 15). Janie's first conceptualization of "marriage" is one of erotic encounter between blossoms and visiting bees that produce an "alto chant" that gives rise to an "inaudible voice." Though this vision is crushed in her first and second marriage, an abundance of music and sound returns when she meets Tea Cake. Locke explains, "[The] Blues are not a part of the original folk-saga; but are a later product of the same folk spirit, being often a 'one-man affair originating typically as the expression of a single singer's feelings'" (41). Carrying on with the dialogue between Locke's framework and Hurston's characterizations, Tea Cake is the "one-man affair" that is "not part of the original folk-saga," indirectly encompassed by the timeframes of the lives of Nanny, Leafy, and Janie.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Ursa, in Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) or Willie, in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

Within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there are five main spaces where sound exists: (1) under the pear tree, (2) when Nanny decides Janie must get married, (3) when Starks lights the street lamp, (4) whenever Tea Cake is around Janie, and (5) when the hurricane is approaching. The first and fourth sections of sound resonate with reciprocal beauty. The second and third sections resonate with a distanced, impersonal, uni-directional tone. The last instance of sound/music brings with it awe, tragedy, and power. While the sounds beneath the pear tree fill Janie with optimism and hope for love and marriage, the scene is juxtaposed with the ostracizing sounds and dismay of Nanny's discovery of Janie kissing Johnnie Taylor. Nanny is described as "closing her eyes and nodding a slow, weary affirmation many times before giving it voice" (Hurstun 17). When Nanny finds her voice, she beats Janie; and then, in remorse, tells her the story of her existence, detailing the birth of Janie's mother and Janie. Nanny's decision that she must marry for protection, lacks reciprocity, excluding Janie's control and distancing her from choice. Throughout Janie's first marriage and Nanny's death, the narrative proceeds without any reference to music or sound, until the lighting of the street lamp in Eatonville. Hurstun underscores that the townspeople "chanted a traditional prayer-poem" as they lit the street lamp. They were singing, "We'll walk in de light, de beautiful light / Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright / Shine all around us by day and by night / Jesus, the light of the world... All of the people took it up and sung it over and over until it was wrung dry, and no further innovations of tone and tempo were conceivable" (61). Though significantly better than her first marriage, Janie is still isolated in her marriage to Joe Starks (due to the limiting decorum of a mayor's wife). Similar to the "over and over" singing of the townspeople, the mundanity of running the store and being there "for *him* to look at," dries out the relationship between Joe and Janie until there are "no further innovations of tone [or] tempo conceivable" (Hurstun 61, 73). In both instances, Janie's position is marginalized. She is not permitted to control, influence, or have power over the sounds present in her life.

### [Tea Cake as a Blues Character]

Locke's description of the secular qualities of the Blues and secular work songs manifest in the character qualities of Tea Cake. Like the Blues, Tea Cake relies on "direct improvisation" and emulates

“the elemental force of life itself” (28-29). Janie’s early interactions with Tea Cake further forge this connection between Tea Cake and the Blues. Hurston explains,

[Janie] heard somebody humming like they were feeling for pitch and looked towards the door.

Tea Cake stood there mimicking the tuning of a guitar. He frowned and struggled with the pegs of his imaginary instrument watching her out of the corner of his eye with that secret joke playing over his face. Finally, she smiled, and he sung middle C, put his guitar under his arm. (134-135)

It is Janie’s first opportunity to decide whether she wants the music in her life. Continuing the trope of three, music forms the third component of the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake. When Tea Cake first enters Janie’s house, “[He] went to the piano without so much as asking and began playing the blues and singing, and throwing grins over his shoulder” (Hurston 136). In order to take Janie to Florida, Tea Cake sells his guitar or “box” (Hurston 136). After leaving with her money and spending it once they arrive in Florida, Tea Cake returns with a new guitar. It states, “After a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was. Then whoever it was started to singing ‘Ring de bells of mercy. Call de sinner man home.’ Her heart all but smothered her” (Hurston 161). Janie deepest emotions are typically related to musical terms or sound imagery. From the pear trees, the “alto chant” of bees, and the early joys of prospective love and marriage, to guitar music “feeling blue like she was,” there is a reciprocal hailing in Janie’s longings and feelings. The call-and-response style of jazz is emulated through literary means in Janie’s longing “call” for a reciprocal love that defies conventionality and Tea Cake’s “response.”

### [Artificial Blues Versus *the* Blues]

In *The Negro and His Music*, Locke differentiates between the Blues and the artificial Blues. “The predominant Blues mood,” he states, “is a lament beginning in a sentimental expression of grief or hard luck, sometimes ending on an intensification of the same mood” (43). Within this definition, Hurston’s text exemplifies the mood of the Blues as the narrative begins and ends in a “sentimental expression of grief” with the loss of Tea Cake. It is through the flashback narrative, framed through the conversation between Janie and Pheoby, that the reader learns the full story, which culminates in “an

intensification of the same mood of lament.” Different from the Blues, the artificial Blues are marked by “fixed stereotypes” such as “making mirth of one’s sorrows’ and ‘laughing the blues away’” (Locke 44). Hurston includes both the Blues and the artificial Blues in the narrative.

The best portrayals of artificial Blues performances take place on the “muck” when Janie and Tea Cake move to the ‘Glades. The “muck” becomes both a physical and symbolic space for the “mingled people” to collect and form a culturally diverse space of music and all that comes with it.<sup>5</sup> Hurston writes, “All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love” (176). She continues, “The way [Tea Cake] would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night” (Hurston 177). The “muck,” or the cabins and fields where seasonal workers come and go, becomes the ultimate jook and Janie’s personal ‘Garden of Eden.’ It becomes a physical space where people of all backgrounds come together in the working class and produce music together. The class distinctions and the issues with “mingled folks” seem transcended by the existence of music and common work.

Hurston’s sensory descriptions of Nature on the muck reflect both Romantic and Realist views, collapsing the binary between the positive and negative role of Nature in the lives of humans. Similar to the pairing of deep emotion with music in the text, Hurston also pairs Nature with sound imagery and polarized results. As the hurricane approached, “Everything in the world had a strong rattle, sharp and short like Stew Beef vibrating the drum head... Gabriel was playing the deep tones in the center of the drum... Louder and higher and lower and wider the sound and motion spread, mounting, sinking, darkening” (Hurston 210). Even the descriptions of animals create a text of sound, a grand, terrifying, and tragic musical composition of “scurrying rabbits,” the rattle of “rattlesnakes,” “snorts of big animals, like deer,” “the muted voice of a panther,” “a thousand buzzards flying overhead,” and the “long-distance talk between the trees and the rain” (Hurston 207). This Garden of Eden archetypal setting as Gabriel plays

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<sup>5</sup> Also called a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 7) or a space of ‘transculturation’ (Donovan 25).



the drum reinforces the notion of the limitations of human choice and the universality of musical productions. Humans, like Janie, are free to choose lovers (Tea Cake), but Nature and the Watcher determine who will be lost. This connection of passionate choice in love juxtaposed with the uncontrollable loss comprises the Blues Aesthetic.

However, there are oppositions to Janie's 'Garden-of-Eden' and Hurston's literary techniques. Mis' Turner's critique on the muck entails, "And dey makes me tired. Always laughin'! Dey laughs too much and dey laughs too loud. Always singin' ol' nigger songs!" (Hurston 189). In a critical review, "Between Laughter and Tears" (1937), Richard Wright denounces Hurston's literary techniques, stating, Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. (1)

While the artificial Blues and the fixed stereotypes might be more explicitly noticeable in Hurston's text, Wright overlooks Hurston's more subtle and overarching Blues aesthetic, which underscores the paradoxical realms of lost love and a 'true' Blues framework. Wright goes on to say, "The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought" (1). Wright and Locke provided negative reviews on the basis of "oversimplification." On the contrary, contemporary reviews tend to be positive. Zadie Smith says, "Zora Neale Hurston has gone from being a well-kept, well-loved secret amongst black women of my mother's generation, to an entire literary industry- biographies and Oprah and African-American literature departments all pay homage to her life and work as avatars of black woman-ness" (3). While Wright and Locke, critics in 1937 and 1938, fixated negatively on the role of the artificial Blues and "oversimplification" in the text, and Smith, in 2009, focused positively on the theme of black woman-ness, both ends of the critical spectrum overlook the crucial role of the overarching Blues aesthetic.

### [The Blues Style in Literary Form]

Hurston integrates both literary description of the Blues (in her explicit references) and also uses the same styles of the Blues music in the characteristics of the text. With the rise of modernity and the

development of technology, trends in the musical world interspersed with writing styles creating hybrid and innovative texts. The transition from sorrow songs and the Blues to ragtime and jazz, brought forth a Blues aesthetic in modernist texts. The transitions from Nanny (time of slave songs) to Leafy (time of the Minstrels), and Leafy (time of Minstrels) to Janie (the precursor to ragtime and jazz) elicit this aesthetic. The “off-beat” rhythm of ragtime surfaced in “off-beat,” untraditional, unique characters. For Hurston, these off-beat characters or modernist emblems are characterized in the personas of Janie and Tea Cake. Further, modern ideas were paired with music in metaphorical and allegorical designs. Janie says, “Dey all use ter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names” (Hurston 12). Hurston molds Janie into a character that is relatable to the feelings and desires of the modern woman. Just as “many people done named [Janie] different names,” Janie also represents all different types of women through her longing for self-revelation, “that oldest human longing” (Hurston 9). Through this framing of Janie, her relationship to music carries a universal quality as well.

Therefore, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates the mood and socio-historical development of the Blues into a literary form. The challenges of conveying music in literature or literature in music is that there is no longer, contrary to the vantage points of Wright and Locke regarding this novel, a simplification within the composition. Defying a one-stance view of Nature and music, Hurston’s text complicates a simple binary understanding of the relation between self and other, black and white, as well as between the connotative quality of Nature and musical production. Though it would be easy to write off this text as a metaphor for the devil-powers of artificial Blues music (you play the Blues, you will get rabies and die), the message is more complex and tangled. While the end result is traumatic and devastating, it is the vivacious quality of music and the Blues that provided Janie two years of true love, escape, and revelation (a vantage-point she would have never otherwise had). Though Amiri Baraka underscores “the secular nature” of the Blues aesthetic, Hurston’s frame history and link between love, self, God, and the Blues, further develops the scope of the Blues aesthetic into a both secular and non-secular spirituality.

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