

# Think from the Perceptive of Individual -- Race and Gender in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

## 《他们的眼睛望着上帝》中的族裔和性别阐释

YANG Li 杨莉

(新疆大学 外国语学院, 新疆 乌鲁木齐 830046)

(College of Foreign Languages, Xinjiang University, Urumqi, Xinjiang 830046, China)

**摘要:** 本文着重分析了《他们的眼睛望着上帝》中的黑人和白人的角色刻画。佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿以充满了关爱的笔触,从人性的角度,而不是肤色和性别角度,塑造了小说中的黑人、白人、男人和女人,没有任何模式化的刻板形象。本文通过对小说这一特点的分析,指出小说在塑造少数族裔健康的自我认识及世界观方面起到的积极作用。

**关键词:** 佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿;《他们的眼睛望着上帝》;黑人;白人;黑人男性;普世主义者;宽容

**中图分类号:** G1      **文献标识码:** A

I have ceased to think in terms of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, whites and black ones.

-- Zora Neale Hurston (Ford, 1986: 8)

Zora Neale Hurston has been highly acclaimed as a rediscovered foremother of African American writings since the 1970s, when Alice Walker rediscovered her and paid homage by seeking out her unmarked grave, placing a marker on it, and producing a variety of essays of Hurston's work. Her posthumous resurrection makes her works to be noticed once more and are analogized into American literature courses across the United States and also makes her the object of many kinds of critical interpretation. Among her works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* draws most attention.

The focus of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on a woman and its optimistic tone makes it not radical enough and therefore put it at odds with the literati of Protest Literature of the Harlem Renaissance who criticized her of presenting a false picture of peace and prosperity of American black life. And Janie Crawford, the avant-garde woman image as well as the blacks' healthy and pastoral life described in this novel, began the "intellectual lynching" (Washington, 1986: 132) of Zora Neale Hurston. Civil Rights activists declared her a segregationist, wholly naive or unfamiliar with the black plight (Lyons, 1990: 97). Richard Wright, an eminent writer of Harlem Renaissance whose *Native Son* is the key text of protest literature and a friend of Hurston, misinterpreted the

novel as “minstrel technique”(Wright, 1986: 28) to entertain the whites. Under this kind of literary context, this novel sold fewer than five thousand copies before going out of print in the 1930s (Spencer, 1999: 160).

It is true that in this novel readers will fail to find all whites are beasts and all blacks are suffering. Instead, Hurston depicts humans, human regardless their gender and race. She depicts the characters, black or white, man or woman, with compassion and understanding. Mostly the blacks in the novel are racially healthy – “complete, complex and undiminished, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (Walker, 1993: 14). The whites are not demonized. Generalization of them as being cruel racist is not adopted in this writing. As to black men, they are not simply subjected to degradation, assault, or male-bashing. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, black male characters have displayed humanity in their struggle for manhood and selfhood. They have demonstrated that to be human is to make mistakes; but what is more, to be human is to learn from one’s mistakes.

## 1. The Whites

The whites in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are not generalized as cruel racists. Hurston transcends the boundary of race and depicts them on the premise that they are humans who are specific and of differences, not that they are whites.

Janie grows up with the white children of the Washburns, the family her grandmother works for. With no ideas of race and color, she has lived and played and been naughty along with them. In this spirit she is included in a photograph of the group. She looks for herself in the picture and where she is supposed to be seen is only “a real dark little girl with long hair” (Hurston, 1990: 9), whom she doesn’t recognize, in the place she is supposed to be. “Where is me? Ah don’t see me,” (*Their Eyes*, 9) she complains. She has taken the image, perhaps the imprint, of her white companions. It is a little shameful rather than a wrenching or crushing scene: “Everybody laughed” (*Their Eyes*, 9) at her failure to tell herself. Her reaction-- “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored” evokes further laughter (*Their Eyes*, 9). Not social prejudice or personal meanness but affection leads to Janie’s discovery that she is black. There is no trauma of repudiation. Instead what is presented is humor and consolation. “Mis’ Washburn,” the mistress, “uster dress me up in all de clothes her gran’chillun didn’t need no mo” and “put hair ribbon on mah head” (*Their Eyes*, 9).

A harmonious relationship is presented at the very beginning of the novel directly and overtly, which goes against the literary main stream of the Harlem Renaissance – protest literature in which whites are mostly racists and antagonists. The struggle of blacks against whites to achieve justice is “deemed as the major task for serious black fiction writers” (Ellison, 1941: 22). So her contemporary writers like Richard Wright, Sterling Brown and Ralph Ellison feel that she has avoided the more serious and consequential tensions and issues in black life and Richard Wright even thinks that she is pleasing the whites (Wright, 1937: 24-25).

This kind of misunderstanding over Hurston’s work and her political views has already appeared after the publication of *Mules and Men* in 1935. However, she continued to

make “unorthodox and paradoxical” (Wright, 1937: 24-25) assertion on racial issues. At the end of the novel, when Janie is in the court accused of killing Tea Cake, it is the whites that believe and support her all the time. They even try to protect her from the possible attack from the blacks who firmly believe that Janie killed her husband. Hurston explains her motivation of doing so in an interview:

“Many Negroes criticize my book,” she [Hurston] said, as the conversation drifted to literature, “because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem.”

“Well, why didn’t you,” I [interviewer] asked.

“Because,” she replied simply, “I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology. There is where many Negro novelists make their mistakes. They confused art with sociology.”

“But,” I said, “how can you write without being forever conscious of your race and the multitude of injustices which is heaped upon it in our present social order?”

She smiled a bit condescendingly. “You see,” she began benignantly, “I have ceased to think in terms of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, whites and black ones (Ford, 1986: 8).

It is the respect of individual that encourages her to portray whites in a way against the then vogue protest literature. And her thinking “in terms of individual” actually makes her transcend the boundaries of race and gender.

However, white racists do exist and Hurston does not ignore them. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie’s grandmother and mother, Nanny and Leafy are victims of such white figures.

Leafy is the product of rape. And when she is just sixteen and dreams to be a teacher, her teacher, a white man, rapes her. After giving birth to Janie, she runs away and since then no one knows where she is and whether she is alive or not. Nanny is hampered from changing her life because of a slave past and old age. As a slave, she was a victim of both racial and sexual oppression. She was her master’s mistress and when she is freed, she does not shed her slave mentality and thinks that she will never be able to fulfill her dreams of what a woman ought to be and do. So she lives vicariously through her granddaughter Janie. During slavery, she observed and admired how the white woman sat on the porch and led a life of ease. Too old to live that type of life herself, Nanny wants Janie to be able to sit on the porch and do nothing. “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world,” (*Their Eyes*, 14) is the essence of Nanny’s philosophy of life. Despite the fact she is no longer a slave, she has not moved from that position in her thinking. However, Janie totally overthrows this philosophy which is, in fact, Nanny’s absorption of white slave masters’ values. So in the two characters, Leafy and Nanny, and in Janie’s negation of

Nanny's philosophy, Hurston exposes the ugliness of slavery and racism and then knocks it out of blacks' life through Janie's success of fulfilling herself in her own way.

And in the scene after the flood, racism is depicted when the whites and blacks will be buried together. To detect the decomposed corpses, the gravediggers must examine their hair. The whites get pine coffins, while the Negroes get quicklime. It is satirical because the pine coffin may prevent those dead from going to heaven: "They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment. Look lak they think God don't know nothing 'bout de Jim Crow law" (*Their Eyes*, 171). Again racism is mocked at. Here Hurston does not slash it by showing how blacks are illtreated like Richard Wright. Instead she views the cruelty of racists from a by-stander and a judge's view. In her eyes, the blacks are not subjects of the racists' humiliation and unfair treatment. The racist whites, themselves, are subjects of their ungraceful behaviors.

So this description shows that Hurston does not just "make the 'white folks' laugh" (Wright, 1986: 28). She knows the cruelty of slavery and suffering of her folks but still she holds no hatred to the entire white race. For Hurston "black life was more than a response to white injustice. They lived by their own yardstick and measure of their own worth, while rejecting white definitions for their humanity and capabilities" (Hemenway 1991: 38-39). "Thinking in terms of individual" (Ford 1986: 8) makes her tolerant or optimistic in human nature. Her tolerance and optimism echo Walker's definition of womanist: "Committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (Walker 1983: xii). Hurston has taken courage to reach such a stage in one's thinking and loves the world and people including those from her race's enemy. This love towards mankind regardless their colors makes Hurston transcend the boundary of race and near sainthood.

## **2. The Blacks**

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* blacks, like every one, laugh, love, celebrate, sorrow and struggle. Hurston saw black lives as psychologically integral—not just the side of being discriminated and destroyed by the effects of racism and poverty or just reactors to suffering, humiliation and degradation. Among themselves, they have laughter, tears, and loving that are far removed from the white horror (Washington 1972: 68-75). Optimism, loving-self spirit and the way of thinking in the perspective of individual enable these healthy images of blacks.

Everything has two sides. If all the whites were demons, ninety-nine percent of blacks would be victims. The demonization of others is victimization of self to a certain extent. However, this kind of self-victimization is in vogue in 1940s. Richard Wright's bestsellers, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1937); *Native Son* (1940); and *Black Boy* (1945) represented the trend of radical protest literature. Wright's black characters, in contrast to Hurston's, are victimized, haunted people. They were "economically deprived and psychologically crippled" (Washington 1972: 70) and somehow created the impression that black lives were nothing more than being oppressed. Hurston, however, in this novel presents an image of blacks being happy and healthy.

The focus of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Janie's fulfilling her dream and finding her love instead of fighting against racism. Conflicts erupt mainly in Janie's marriage, between her and her husbands and community where she lives. So another side of African Americans' life is represented. Readers can hear the local people's porch talk all the time. They gossip, quarrel, brag and talk pictures. All these life scenes are full of cultural elements. However, they are thought of as triviality and therefore ignored by writers whose eyes are so "fixed on the white world and its way of acting towards blacks that his vision becomes constricted" (Washington 1972: 70) to the "isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a nonspecific white world" (O'Brien 1973: 202). Shifting her eyes from the conflicts between black and whites to that among blacks themselves, Hurston assumes such a stance:

I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are hurt about it.... No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife (Hurston 1979: 152-53).

So in fact Hurston is ignoring the whites who want to humiliate or hurt. "I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife" (Hurston 1979: 152-53). The fantasy and colorfulness of life, especially of her culture guarantee her confidence. Her boredom of the sobbing and weeping pushes her to another way of protecting her own people, that is, to smile and love self. Hurston's writings depicted a comprehension of the complexities of African American life, referenced in ways opposite to the dominant culture's stereotypical views of folk life. Instead of highlighting race as every African American's primary concern, she de-emphasizes it and focuses on the day-to-day life progression of humor, triviality, and work. She "writes down the unwritten doings and sayings of a culture nobody else seemed to give a damn about" (Walker 1979: 3). Hatred toward enemy does not mean the love of one's self. Sometimes it means the ruin of one's own life. Smiling, ignoring and finding something valuable in oneself, according to Hurston are the best way to protect. So here Hurston is promoting the spirit of loving self and loving one's culture. They are ways of brighter life and protection.

### **3. The Black Men**

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's three husbands exist not only as helper or interceptor on her way of self-fulfillment but also as manifestations of Hurston's attitude toward men. In American literature black men are often stereotyped as either Uncle Tom like—obedient, loyal, and always passive or black beast who are often abusers, murderers, sadists and rapists. In this novel, however, the three men are depicted as round characters who are of variety and outcomes of a certain culture. Hurston has made the three men her medium to demonstrate her commitment to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female.

As to Logan and Joe, they are chauvinistic and egocentric. Their chauvinism and

egocentricity, nevertheless, prove futile and are pointed out as the roots of their failure by Janie's discarding of them. Neither Joe nor Logan is depicted as being evil. What they offer is a variety of patriarchal values and passionless lives lacking any sense of creativity. Behind the defects, there is something shining in them. Logan roars to Janie but he never beats her although he threatens to do so. When he thinks that Janie might have a lover outside he cries. No matter what his crying may evoke, sympathy or disgust, one thing is sure that he knows clearly that his life is unhappy. When he attempts to hurt Janie, he hurts himself. Being able to be hurt means there is something soft at the bottom of his heart. Like everyone, he has his own weakness. Readers of this novel will find Logan pitiful rather than hateful.

If Joe were not that materialistic and arbitrary, he would have been a charming man. Smart and eloquent, he wins Janie from Logan. But eloquent as he is, he is not good at communicating with his wife. He knows why she wears a long face, but he just does not want to explain. Hurston does not tell why. There might be two reasons. On one hand, his materialism makes him take himself highly above Janie and thinks that Janie should be grateful to what he has brought to her. On the other hand, Joe is by nature proud. His pride is shown in his not forgiving Janie until his death when she tries to reconcile. On his sick bed, he refuses Janie's care. His pride has been a big obstacle in his way to achieve harmonious relationship with his wife. Under an iron mask is a weak soul. He dies lonely. So again, like Logan, Joe is a tragedy.

Both Logan and Joe are presented as men who try hard to grasp their manhood that in their eyes is based on wealth and social status. This kind of recognition and try distance Janie from them but may easily find identification with a lot people in a culture "where material wealth is the highest measure of self-worth; a culture that defines 'manhood' by the ability to provide economic survival for one's self and family" (Gurrero 1994: 184). They are not portrayed as evil by nature but as the results of a culture domineering by materialism. No hatred and but pity can be found in the images of Logan and Joe.

Different from Logan and Joe, Tea Cake is indifferent to money and social class. However, it doesn't mean that he is perfect. After Janie decides to live with him, he steals Janie's money and leaves stealthily, and then comes back after he lost all in gambling. And in Everglad he flirts relentlessly with a girl called Nunkie. And when Janie is angry, he reassures her that she means nothing to him. He even boxes Janie's jaw in front of others just to show that he can control his wife. All these silly deeds show that Tea Cake is not better than Logan and Joe in every way. Though Tea Cake is the one who finally wins Janie's love, the weakness in his nature presents reader with a human being who is definitely not perfect instead of a male god. Hurston just portrays him as he is and accepted his flaws naturally. This matter-of-fact attitude does not beautify certain people or race but accept everyone as they are and put them under solicitude.

The construction of the three round characters probes into the inner life of black men. Like people of all races and both genders, they are not perfect. And their defects do not result from their skin color or being a man, but from their human nature. Through the three men readers can also find a process of evolvment which is shared by everyone, too. The three black men in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are by no means abusers, murderers, sadists, rapists, and good-for-nothings, which have traditionally been the outcome of

much of the Eurocentric social science research and media presentation exploring the experience of black men. Hurston offers the reader an alternative reading of black masculinity – a reading that is deeply grounded both in the social and historical realities of black people. To understand is to forgive. Hurston's thinking in each individual's perspective endears the black men to herself as well as to the reader. By doing so she is trying to provoke sympathy but not racial sympathy towards not only black men but also human beings who are confused by the reality around them. Logan and Joe are not stereotypes of black men but the stereotypes of men who are driven by the pursuit of possession and success, and view their wives as servants or trophies for display. Even now readers will find Logan and Joe around them.

#### 4. Summary

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston refused to permit race or racism to define the existence of blacks. She exemplified racial pride, a particular character trait that puzzled her very critical and race conscious peers. When Africa and all things African aroused her interest, the educated African Americans focused on proving that they could master a European curriculum. Just as Alice Walker says, "Zora was before her time" (Walker 1993: 17). And Hurston also refuses the generalization of whites as racists. She treats them as different individuals. The black men are also subjects of her universal love. They are depicted as human instead of the black men stereotyped as someone evil. Always Hurston stands firmly in the perspective of individuals.

Racial problems are what people have to pay for racial diversity in many multicultural and multiethnic places. Stereotype is one of the causes of the racial conflicts. Literature consists of the shared knowledge, beliefs and assumptions of the people concerned, can serve as the reference system in which the participants engage in interaction, or establish certain psychological orientation for the reader to be willing to follow the hints of the speaker (Hickey: 2001). Novels about the interaction between different races, which is full of stereotypes, will serve as a negative psychological suggestion. If the novel by a writer from a marginalized group is featured by self-victimizing, readers of his group are likely to be pessimistic about life and angry towards the people of the dominant group. On the other hand, if a writer of a dominant racial background depicts the minorities as inferior, racial discrimination and hatred will result. Besides, a healthy literary image with strong personality will encourage the people of the vulnerable group to change their life and society.

The "conditions of human language uses as these are determined by the context of society" (Mey: 1993). The emergence of Black Protest Literature was determined by the social context of the 1930s' America. It conveyed the anger of Blacks, prompted empathy, spurred action and therefore better the condition of African Americans indirectly. A novel "absolutely free of Uncle Tom, Absolutely unlimbered of the clumsy formality, defiance and apology of a Minority Cause" (Ferguson, 1937: 276) like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, will always serve as positive psychological influence over the vulnerable groups and enable them a fair view towards the world. And therefore better the world as well.

## **Bibliography:**

- Ellison, Ralph. "Recent Negro Fiction." *New Masses*, August 5, 1941.
- Ferguson, Otis. "You Can't Hear Their Voices." *The New Public* 92, 1937.
- Ford, Nick Arron. "A Study in Race Relations – A Meeting with Zora Neale Hurston." *Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1986.
- Gurrero, Ed. "The Black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation." *Black Male: Representation of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994.
- Hickey, L. 2001. *The Pragmatics of Translation*, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai.
- Hemenway, Beulah E. "Through the Prism of Africanity: A Preliminary Investigation of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*." *Zora in Florida*. Ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel. Orlando: University of Central Florida, 1991.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." *I Love Myself when I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Ed. Alice Walker. New York: Feminist, 1979.
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.
- Lyons, Mary E. *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner's, 1990.
- Mey, J. L. 2001. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing.
- O'Brien, John ed. *Interview with Black Writers*. New York: Liveright, 1973.
- Spencer, Stephen. "Reading and Rereading the Thirties: Historical and Social Contexts and the Literary Receptions of Pearl S. Buck, Margaret Mitchell, and Zora Neale Hurston." A dissertation submitted to the Division of Research and Advanced Studies of the University of Cincinnati. Michigan: UMI Company, 1999, UMI Number: 9936054.
- Walker, Alice. "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View." *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: the Common Bond*. Ed. Lillie P. Howard. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1993.
- . "Dedication: "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now." *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Ed. Alice Walker. New York: Feminist, 1979.
- . *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1983.
- Washington, Mary Helen. "Zora Neale Hurston's Work." *Black World*, August 1972.



---. "A Woman Half in Shadow." *Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

Wright, Richard. "On the Minstrel Tradition and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1986.

---. "Between Laughter and tears." *New Masses*, October 6, 1937.

[http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wh\\_039700\\_womanism.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wh_039700_womanism.htm):  
<http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/phillips2.1.htm>

**Abstract:** the article focuses on the depiction of whites and blacks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston portrays humans, human regardless their gender and race. She depicts the characters, black or white, man or woman, with compassion and understanding. Being free from generalization and stereotypes, this novel embodies Hurston's Universalist love towards human being and the healthy images of black will serve as an encouragement to all the vulnerable groups as well. Mostly the blacks in the novel are racially healthy. The whites are not demonized.

**Key words:** Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, whites, blacks, black men, Universalist, tolerance

收稿日期: 2007-12-25

作者简介: 杨莉 (1979- ), 女, 硕士, 新疆呼图壁县人, 新疆大学外语学院讲师, 从事英语语言文学。