

African-American History
DOCUMENT ANALYSIS
Their eyes were watching God

“ They’s mighty
particular how dese dead
folks goes tuh
judgement.... Look lak dey
think God don’t know
nothin’ ’bout de Jim Crow
law. ”

INTRODUCTION

These words are taken from a book written by Zora Neale Hurston in 1937 while she was in Haiti and published by J.B.Lippincott, Inc. The novel is set in central and southern Florida in the early 20th century; the protagonist is Janie Crawford, an attractive, confident, middle-aged black woman that returns to Eatonville, Florida, after a long absence. The black townspeople gossip about her and speculate about where she has been and what has happened to her young husband, Tea Cake. They take her confidence as aloofness but Janie’s friend Phoeby visits her to find out what has happened. Their conversation frames the story that Janie relates.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama and was the fifth of eight children. Her family moved to Eatonville, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. The university’s literary magazine

published her first story in 1921 and in 1925, after moving to New York, she became a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual, social and artistic explosion centered in Harlem, New York spanning in the 1920s and also known as the "New Negro Movement". Hurston's life in Eatonville and her extensive anthropological research on rural black folklore greatly influenced her writing.

"Their eyes were watching God" was published long after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of postwar prosperity, marked by a sense of freedom and experimentation. But the 1930s brought the depression and an end to the cultural openness that was flourishing. Meanwhile political tension increased within the United States: cultural production was dominated by "social realism", a political style associated with the thought that art should be primarily political and expose social justice in the world. When some critics asked why she chose not to comment on the race problem in her novel, Hurston replied: "Because I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology. 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, white ones and black ones."

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

In particular the words that I choose are pronounced by Janie's husband, Tea Cake while he was helping bury the dead after an hurricane. He notes that simple pine coffins are being provided for white corpses, but nothing for blacks. In fact the burial crew was instructed to make very sure that no whites are accidentally buried with blacks, and vice versa. Tea Cake suggests that because the segregating Jim Crow law does not exist in Heaven, the authorities feel they need to help God recognize who is black and who is white by providing outward signs. In this statement we can clearly see all the hate and grudge that existed at the time between black and white people. First of all, is essential to know that **Jim Crow laws** were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. They have been established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by white Democratic-dominated state legislatures after the Reconstruction period. In practice, Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the states of the Confederate States of America, and were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court's "separate but equal" legal doctrine for facilities for African Americans. The legal principle of "separate, but equal" racial segregation was extended to public facilities and transportation, including the coaches of interstate trains and buses. Facilities for African Americans and Native Americans were consistently inferior and underfunded, compared to the facilities for white Americans. Jim Crow laws sometimes, as in Florida, mandated the segregation of public schools, public places, and public transportation, and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. The U.S. military was already segregated. President Woodrow Wilson, a Southern Democrat, initiated segregation of federal workplaces in 1913.

At this point we are able to understand that Tea Cake ironically considered the pine coffins a mean to help God to differentiate white people in Heaven who should obtain a different and better treatment as they had on earth. These are strong words in terms of racism and inequality because we're no more talking about poor

human bodies but about differences even after death and even in front of a God in which they believed exactly how white people believed, and from which they hoped to receive love, compassion and pity (as the title of the book suggests us).

LANGUAGE

The novel is written in English but there is a strong use of dialect and colloquial language, like in this case, which reiterates that this is a story of a black woman from the South who really wants to communicate her emotions and tell us her story using her own language. In the same way, the narrator is anonymous even though it is easy to detect a distinctly Southern sensibility in the narrator's voice.

SITOGRAPHY

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