

The Subtle Use of Foreshadowing in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston uses foreshadowing in several different ways, some obvious and some quite subtle, in order to evoke particular emotions from the reader. In some instances, Hurston uses foreshadowing to add foreboding and suspense to her story. In other situations, Hurston's subtle use of foreshadowing emphasizes the perceptions of her main character, Janie, and allows the reader to be affected on a more personal level. A particularly striking use of this technique occurs early in Janie's relationship with each of her husbands. The three different modes of transportation offered by each man inconspicuously hint at the type of relationship Janie has with each husband, which allows the reader to prepare for the next phase of Janie's self-discovery.

After Janie is married to Logan Killicks, the wagon ride to his home is described as uncomfortable, lackluster, and lonesome, qualities that are also true of the marriage itself. Hurston writes, "[N]obody put anything on the seat of Logan's wagon to make it ride glorious on the way to his house. It was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been" (21-22). The marriage between Janie and Logan is not a love match; the arrangement is made by Nanny, Janie's grandmother, as an old woman's attempt to protect her granddaughter before she dies. As the quotation implies, no one made Janie's transition into being a wife any easier for her; there is no thought for her comfort after the wedding itself. Nanny does not ever concern herself with Janie's feelings, especially her desire for love. She only wants to see her granddaughter wed to a black man with some property and money. Janie does not want to disappoint Nanny, so she naively hopes that love will follow after the wedding is over and agrees to wed the moderately successful black farmer who is much older than she. Once married, Janie realizes that her hope of love may never be realized with Logan Killicks, and she certainly does not care about the material things he has to offer. In a conversation with her grandmother after being married for only eight weeks, Janie states, "Ah could throw ten acres of [Logan's land] over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell. Ah feel de same way 'bout Mr. Killicks too. Some folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of 'em" (Hurston 23-24). The seasons change and Janie still hopes for love, but Logan seems less enamored of her than he had been in the

beginning of their marriage; he loses the fascination he had for touching her hair and he does not want to cut wood for her anymore. Janie is lonesome and unhappy in this “uncomfortable wagon” that is her marriage. However, she is strong enough to stand up for herself when Logan wants her to become a farmhand for him as well as a homemaker. She bluntly states, “Youse mad ‘cause Ah don’t fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain’t done me no favor by marryin’ me....Ah don’t thank yuh for it” (Hurston 31). This is the beginning of the end to her first marriage. Janie realizes “[t]he familiar people and things had failed her....[S]he knew now that marriage did not make love” (Hurston 25).

Not only does Hurston use foreshadowing effectively to hint at the new couple’s relationship, but she also incorporates symbolism as well. Being in Logan’s wagon is described as “a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods,” which, since the wagon foreshadows the relationship, implies the marriage is like a lifeless stump too (Hurston 22). This stump, a dead thing chopped down in its prime, is in stark contrast to the blooming pear tree that represents vitality, beauty, and sexual fulfillment to Janie (Hurston 11). Hurston includes this symbolism within the foreshadowing statements to intensify the reader’s awareness of the desolation Janie experiences while married to Logan.

Still a teenager, Janie is full of dreams of far-off places and hopes to experience love and happiness. These facts and the state of her marriage to Logan, “who wanted to use Janie as if she were just another mule on his farm,” make her susceptible to Joe Starks’s flattery (Ashmawi 203). Hurston writes, “they managed to meet...and talk about when he would be a big ruler of things with her reaping the benefits...Janie pulled back...because he did not represent...pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon...for change and chance” (29). The reader becomes aware that this may not be a perfect match for Janie and has a greater understanding as to why Janie abandons Logan for the chance to explore a new place with an ambitious man who wants to share his dream with her. Unfortunately, Joe’s idea of “benefits” is different from Janie’s perception of the term, but Janie and the reader will not know this until after they are married.

Hurston’s subtle use of foreshadowing also prepares the reader for the relationship Janie shares with Joe. Hurston states, “Joe Starks was waiting for her with a hired rig. He...helped her to the seat beside him. With him on it, it sat like some high, ruling chair” (32). This example of foreshadowing perfectly describes Janie’s role as the future Mrs. Mayor Starks, submitting to his authority: “Having taken her away from Logan to protect her from overwork, [Joe] treats her as a possession that, as such, contributes to the respect others pay him. And since [Joe] cannot afford to lose that respect, Janie must maintain herself above the others” (McCredie 27). At the grand opening of their store in the new city of Eatonville, Joe “told [Janie] to dress up and stand in the store all evening...he didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (Hurston 41). As Bealer states, “Joe feels he must consistently emphasize her class difference, and in so doing reinforce his own mastery” (317). In telling Janie to overdress for the occasion, Joe “helps” to place her in the “high, ruling chair” above the other townswomen, making Janie easy to admire but difficult to interact with. Alienating her further, Joe dismisses Janie’s voice in the town from the beginning. When asked to give

a few words of encouragement as Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie never gets the opportunity to respond. Joe quickly says, “[M]ah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’....She’s uh woman and her place is in de home,” effectively ensuring that his voice would be the only important one from the perspective of the citizens of Eatonville (Hurst 43). Joe puts her up on a pedestal as a prized possession, and he restricts her ability to interact with the townspeople. However, Joe does want Janie to work in the store, a job that she hates, to allow him the freedom to work as the mayor and promote the town to black people who live nearby: “[Joe’s] desire to embody authority in all aspects of his life, public and private, mandates that Janie *not* work outside the domestic sphere in order to bolster his pose of economic superiority, but ironically requires her *to work* in his store in a way that stifles her voice and body. He [also] strictly policies her appearance” (Bealer 317, emphasis in the original). Janie is ordered to wear a head rag while in the store because Joe does not want any other man to be able to admire her long, silky hair. This is just one of the ways that he treats her like a possession, without thought for her own desires.

When Joe asks her if she likes being Mrs. Mayor Starks, she says, “Ah feels lak Ah’m jus’ markin’ time. Hope it soon gits over” (Hurst 46). Janie mistakenly believes that her life with Joe will be better, less “strained,” once the town is established, but Joe’s ambitions are never satisfied and he is a domineering man hungry for power. That night she starts to feel “far away from things and lonely,” and she begins to see the disadvantages of being with Joe in the “high, ruling chair” (Hurst 46).

Janie is married for seven years before she realizes that “the spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor” (Hurst 71). The relationship exists only for appearance’s sake, like the “hired rig” that is only meant to impress Janie and the inhabitants of the newly formed town when they arrive. By the time Janie is thirty-five, Hurst writes, “She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels,” and Joe Starks is the driver of the rig with the wheels that beat her down (76). Her marriage to Mayor Starks is like being in the “high, ruling chair” over the citizens of Eatonville, but she is being ruled by a driver who wants total submission.

As Joe grows older, he becomes even more critical of Janie’s appearance and actions. Janie defends herself once, in front of all the men in the store, and Joe is devastated and furious. A short while later, Joe dies and Janie attends the funeral with a solemn face: “Inside the expensive black folds were resurrection and life....[Janie] sent her face to Joe’s funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world” (Hurst 88). Janie feels alive again. As she explains to her best friend, “Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine....sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me...Git up on uh high chair and sit dere....So Ah got up on de high stool...[and] Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere” (Hurst 114). Of Janie’s living a life confined by the expectations of others, Wolff states: “[B]oth of [Janie’s] husbands and her grandmother have imposed a role on Janie, in telling her what she should be [and]...She is expected to conform to it” (31). When her marriage ends with Joe’s death, Janie is able to step down from the “high, ruling chair” in which Joe had positioned her and take control over her own destiny.

Hurston also subtly foreshadows Janie's relationship with Vergible Woods, known as Tea Cake, through the mode of transportation he uses to pick her up from the train station: a car, an old station wagon. This foreshadows the comfortable but exciting and slightly dangerous relationship Janie shares with Tea Cake. From the first day they meet, Janie feels "as if she had known him all her life" (Hurston 99). She could easily laugh with him, and she is thrilled that he wants to teach her to play checkers so they can play together. She is attracted to Tea Cake and excited to spend time with him. Janie thinks Tea Cake "looks like the love thoughts of women" and, in contrast to her first impressions of Joe, Janie believes "[Tea Cake] could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (Hurston 106). She is excited to finally meet the "bee" for her "bloom."

Janie and Tea Cake go everywhere together: hunting, dancing, baseball games, and cinemas. Wolff writes, "Tea Cake gives Janie the world. . . . He offers her experience" (31). Like a car, it is a relationship in motion; Janie is finally able to go places and meet people while being with a man who makes her happy. Traveling in a car, especially a used car, can be risky, which adds an element of danger. This is similar to Janie's relationship with Tea Cake, too. Her love for him makes her vulnerable, and there are risk factors to be considered. Janie must overcome doubts about Tea Cake's motives for being with her; as a wealthy widow, she has become a target for some money-seeking men, and she has to take a leap of faith that Tea Cake truly loves her. Janie decides to trust Tea Cake and tells her friend, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game" (Hurston 114). So Janie and Tea Cake experience a relationship that is comfortable, exciting, adventurous, and a little risky, just like a trip in a slightly used car.

The relationships that Janie experiences and her perception of who she is and what she wants in her life improve as the novel progresses. As Peoples states, "Janie develops through loving and leaving each of her husbands at the required moment; these acts thus allow the self-expression that leads to self-actualization" (187). Similarly, just as the relationships improve, the mode of transportation offered by each man improves, too. With Logan, the wagon, the relationship is crude and uncomfortable. With Joe, the hired rig, the relationship is all about unequal power, status symbols, and a wealthy lifestyle. With Teacake, the car, the relationship is exciting, comfortable, and racy. Also, the means of transportation serve as symbols for what each man has to offer to Janie. The primitive wagon is the means of transport for the landowning farmer; land is not important to Janie. The hired rig is the chosen vehicle for the man who wants to impress others, caring about status symbols that mean nothing to Janie. The used car that Tea Cake buys is chosen for the comfort it will provide for her, but is not pretentious at all. Normally, Tea Cake walks to his destinations, but he wants to make it convenient for Janie to travel with him wherever he goes, and since this is also what Janie desires most, the car suits them both.

Another similarity between the marital relationships and the modes of transportation has to do with the fact that two of the vehicles require a beast of burden to pull the couple to their location and one does not. According to Dilbeck, "[O]nce Jody dies and Janie is free to do as she pleases, there are no further references to mules; Janie is free of her 'load,' no longer required to bear the expectations of men or others. . . . she belongs to no one but herself" (103). Hurston foreshadows what Janie's

marital relationships will be like with the modes of transportation each man offers, and incorporates the symbolism of the beast of burden, or mule, which is introduced to the reader by Nanny when she tells Janie, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). The two husbands, Logan and Joe, who treat Janie like a beast of burden and a submissive possession take Janie to their destinations in wheeled conveyances that require beasts of burden to pull them, possibly using mules for the task, although Hurston does not mention the animals specifically. However, Hurston does specify that no beast of burden is necessary when Janie begins her life with Tea Cake. The car he buys for her to travel in foreshadows what their relationship will be and symbolizes the liberation Janie experiences while she is with him. Janie does work while she is with him, “but not for Tea Cake, *with* him; not to earn more money or to possess more, but to be with Tea Cake, to love more” (McCredie 27, emphasis in the original).

Although Hurston uses foreshadowing to increase the sense of foreboding towards the climactic happenings of the novel, the subtle instances are also important, but for different reasons. The subtle use of foreshadowing effectively provides depth to the story, a cohesion of sorts, while preparing the reader for the lifestyle changes to come for the main character, Janie. As a result, the reader has a better understanding of the three most important relationships of Janie’s life and how they each guided her to a better understanding of herself during her quest for self-fulfillment.

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