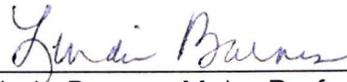


CLAIMING AND RECREATING: THE CHANGING FORMS
OF MYTH IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

EILEEN CHRISTINE O'GRADY

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Eileen Christine O'Grady entitled "Claiming and Recreating: The Changing Forms of Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

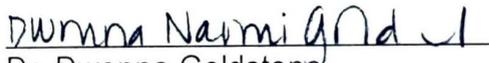


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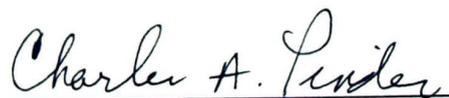


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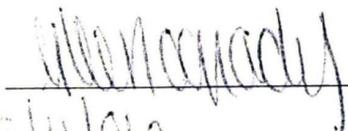


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Claiming and Recreating: The Changing Forms of Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's

Their Eyes Were Watching God

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Eileen Christine O'Grady

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Susan Marie O'Grady, who has supported me throughout my life and my academic career. Her own determination has been an inspiration for me, and without her encouragement, I would not be where I am today.

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Statement of Critical Principals and Influences

On my second reading of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, I began to notice the multitude of natural images woven throughout the text, specifically the blossoming pear tree that consistently appears in Janie's narrative. After marking each passage in which the tree appeared, I became aware of its significance, although I questioned what the organic image symbolized. In order to determine what the trees represented, I turned to texts that contained legendary trees, such as the book of Genesis, the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, and John S Mbiti's exploration of natural elements in his book, African Religions & Philosophy. When reading these works, I discovered that the images within Hurston's novel could be interpreted in various ways by means of comparison.

I began to understand how biblical trees operated in Their Eyes Were Watching God while reading Glenda B. Weathers' essay, "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison." Weathers equates the pear tree with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and contends that the knowledge Janie receives from the tree is imperative for her personal growth. She also expands the tree image beyond Janie so that its symbolism is reflected onto additional characters. When taking into account that other characters could be affected by the implications within the pear tree, I was able to broaden my perception of the image's connotations.

As I read the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo and Mbiti's descriptions of sacred African trees, I was able to draw substantial connections between

Hurston's novel and each of these texts. While comparing these mythological trees to Janie's pear tree, I relied on a New Critical approach to study the natural images. I found several passages where Janie resembles a tree and used them to link Hurston's work with the myth of Daphne and Apollo where Daphne is turned into a tree in order to protect her. Mbiti's illustrations of natural elements within African religions allowed me to examine the tree images in several ways. I was able to view the pear tree as a sanctuary for Janie, as the source of life, and as a destroyer of life. Although the Greek, African, and biblical myths helped me to build a foundation for my analysis of the trees that appear within Their Eyes Were Watching God, I knew that I lacked a unifying structure for my argument.

In the introduction of Tina Barr's essay "'Queen of the Niggerati' and the Nile: The Isis-Osiris Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," she mentions Hurston's early encounters with mythology in order to support her argument. This information led me to investigate Hurston's life, where I found that she was writing Their Eyes Were Watching God while she documented Vodou, a syncretic religion containing African, Christian, and native beliefs. After gaining a thorough understanding of the syncretism within this religion, I realized that the layered structure of Vodou mirrored the connections I had drawn between Hurston's tree images. By asserting that Hurston was aware of and intimate with syncretism, I was able to bring together each of the established tree myths and Hurston's trees in the novel.

Claiming and Recreating: The Changing Forms of Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God

"I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms." – Zora Neale Hurston

I. Zora's Journey to Janie

When Zora Neale Hurston was in the fifth grade, two women visiting from the North were so impressed with the young girl's reading ability that they gave her a box of books that included Grimm's fairy tales, Greek and Roman myths, and Norse legends. Hurston became fascinated with the myths that she found in these books and those that she heard during the "lying sessions" that took place on the front porch of Joe Clarke's general store in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida (Hemenway 12). In her autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road, the influence of these stories is apparent when she discusses how during playtime she would make up names for ordinary objects such as "Reverend Door Knob" who presided over marriages and funerals for other members of the community that included a corn shuck, a bar of scented soap, and sewing spools (Hemenway 15). While Hurston's early interest in these tales was apparent in these childhood games, it wasn't until she went to Barnard College in 1925 that she found a way to merge her creativity with her admiration of myth and folklore by studying anthropology.

During her time at Barnard, Hurston realized that the stories she heard throughout her life were an asset in revealing African-American traditions and beliefs. She also discovered that the community of Eatonville had created their own oral literature through the stories that were told on the town's front porches. In Robert Hemenway's biography of Hurston, he emphasizes that she saw the

social sciences as an “opportunity to confront her culture both emotionally and analytically” (22). Anxious to begin her work, Hurston began going out on field expositions and traveled throughout the American South and the Caribbean for the next decade (Werner 5). Since Hurston was accepted as both an observer and a participant in the societies that she documented, her work was particularly effective in uncovering local folklore. While gathering materials in Haiti for what would later become Tell My Horse, Hurston wrote her most acclaimed novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. In this text, Hurston utilizes several ideas she studied in her fieldwork and proves the potential of using syncretic myth to craft an original experience.

Since the idea of syncretism is crucial in understanding Vodou, the religion that Hurston studied while writing Their Eyes Were Watching God, her use of syncretic myth in the novel can be viewed as a natural integration of her anthropological studies into her creative work. Although Hurston studied Hoodoo in New Orleans and incorporated her findings into her first book of folklore, Mules and Men, she felt that Vodou was “a more sympathetic magic” and found that it was “as formal as a Catholic church anywhere” (Hemenway 246). The complex religion that she found in Haiti originated in the West African kingdom of Benin and was brought to the West Indies by slaves during colonization. It was later Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries and was also influenced by native Caribbean religions (McAlister 1). Vodou provided Hurston with a concrete example of syncretism, which proved that separate beliefs and traditions could be blended to create a new whole.

The impact of Hurston's studies in Haiti is apparent in the natural imagery that permeates throughout Their Eyes Were Watching God. When describing the Vodou faith, Hurston says, "...[it] is a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water, and other natural forces" (Hemenway 249). The novel begins with Hurston's worship of water as the reader sees "ships at a distance" that contain men's wishes (1). She blends the image of the sea with a mysticism that gives the body of water the power to bring the wishes ashore, and also to let them "sail forever on the horizon" (1). While this metaphor is used in relation to "men," the reader is consistently provided depictions of nature in relation to the protagonist, Janie (1). The importance of these images is apparent when Hemenway notes that "the novel's effect depends largely on the organic metaphors used to represent Janie's emotional life" (233). Though Hemenway primarily focuses on the relationship between Janie and the recurring symbol of a blossoming pear tree, Hurston also characterizes Janie and her grandmother, Nanny, as trees.

In the second chapter, after Janie, Phoeby, and the town of Eatonville have been introduced, Hurston immerses the reader in the novel through a series of tree images. As the chapter opens, Janie is depicted as a magnificent tree, wise with age and experience (8). Just after Janie, who is thinking back on her life, decides where she should begin telling her story, the reader is presented with the blossoming pear tree, which the young Janie sees as a mystical entity containing secrets waiting to be unlocked (12). Janie later compares her grandmother, Nanny, to a decrepit tree that lacks limbs or leaves. Since Hurston

was both an anthropologist and a novelist, various myths about trees may underlie these images. Hurston must have been introduced to mythological trees during her studies, as they “were worshiped, given special status, and made the subject of myths in almost every culture” (Dunworth 179). Hurston’s perception of trees in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is closely related to the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, Biblical representations of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the sacred trees of African mythology. Each of these myths helps the reader in distinguishing the underlying themes within the text, and the myths serve as a whole to construct an original tree myth founded upon syncretism.

II. Greek Mythology: Janie and Nanny as Trees

The first tree that appears in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is appropriately attributed to Janie. Before the protagonist expresses any trouble to her friend, Phoeby, of not knowing where to begin her story, the narrator provides a starting place for her: “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (Hurston 8). This passage offers a godlike image of Janie as a large, powerful, and wise being that surpasses the descriptions given to her by the Eatonville community in the first chapter of the novel. In that portion of the text, Janie passes by a group of her neighbors and the men only see her buttocks, hair, and breasts, while the women focus on her “faded shirt and muddy overalls” (2). When Janie appears as a tree, she is transformed from a woman soaking her tired feet on the front porch to a goddess that is preparing to enlighten a

friend. At this moment, Janie's may allude to the mythological character, Daphne, who is turned into a laurel tree for her own protection.

While there is an obvious connection between the metamorphosis of both characters, when considering additional aspects of the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, the reader Janie's character from a new perspective. In Daphne's tale, Eros, the God of love, pierces Apollo with an arrow in retaliation for being insulted (Barthell 47). After striking Apollo with the tip of an arrow that inspires love, he flings an arrow at Daphne, and upon its penetration, she repels all love (Barthell 47). As Edward Barthell, Jr. says in his book Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Greece, "The result was inevitable: Apollo saw Daphne and yearned to take her into his arms, but she saw him and fled" (47). As Apollo pursues Daphne, she prays for her father to save her from Apollo's grasp, and she is turned into a laurel tree (47). From this moment on, Daphne refuses all suitors and "wish[es] to enjoy perpetual virginity" (Parada 2). At the point in Their Eyes Were Watching God when the narrator says that Janie sees her life like a tree, she has already lived through three marriages that she is about to describe to Phoeby. She has experienced relationships that lacked love and also found one that fulfilled her desires. Now that Janie has been satisfied, the reader is given the sense that she takes pleasure in being alone. There is evidence of Janie's enjoyment in solitude in the first chapter of the novel where a crowd of people gossip about her, putting her down and questioning where she has been (2). Janie knows that they have her "up in they mouth," but "she kept walking straight on to her gate" (5, 2). She doesn't want to be the center of attention where she

could easily gain the attraction of the men because, although she is not a virgin in the traditional sense, Janie, like Daphne, is content with herself and does not need a suitor in order to retain her happiness.

Another similarity between Daphne's and Janie's transformation is that they are both described as evergreen trees and have "dawn and doom" within their branches (Hurston 8). In the myth of Daphne and Apollo, after Daphne morphs into a tree, Apollo "decreed that her leaves should always be green" (Barthell 47). He then tore a branch from the laurel tree, placed it on the crown of his head, and claimed Daphne's tree as his own (Parada 3). Daphne's escape and her evergreen foliage seem to represent perpetual freedom, yet finally Apollo seems to possess her. He takes her limb, crowns himself with her foliage and lays claim to her. For Janie, who sees herself as a tree "in leaf" instead of a barren plant, there are also joys and sorrows hidden within her branches (8).

On the first page of the novel, Janie is described as coming back to Eatonville after burying "not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet," but the "sudden dead." As if coming home from a funeral was not a bad enough start for Janie, it is noted several times that the community of Eatonville "sat in judgment" of her while inventing stories about what happened to her while she was away (1-3). Just before the narrator shows how Janie sees "her life like a great tree," Janie tells Phoeby that Tea Cake, her third husband, is the man who died (7). Even though the only details given about Janie until this point in the novel are distressing, Janie still sees her life like a tree in a perpetual state of green, with not just "doom," but also "dawn" within its branches (8).

While there is an apparent likeness in Janie and Daphne because they are both female characters depicted as trees, there are additional similarities in their leaves that never die and their branches that hold the good and bad stories of each of their lives.

Once the image of Janie as a tree is set aside, the character moves into her story, and Hurston uses the technique from Daphne's myth of attributing the physical qualities of a tree to one of her characters. In this specific instance, Nanny, Janie's grandmother, appears in the organic form. After Nanny sees Johnny Taylor "lacerating" Janie with a kiss, Nanny's head and face are depicted as "the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm" (12). Nanny takes on the traits of a tree that is worn and has been beaten by time and weather. Since the narrator of the story has turned from omniscient/unknown to omniscient/Janie, the reader can relate Janie's vision of her tree to the description of Nanny as a tree.

While Janie is not quite as old as her grandmother when she tells her story, her tree is shown possessing strength, while Nanny's is described as the "foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered" (12). This description enhances the reader's understanding of Nanny's difficult life working on a plantation while raising her significantly named daughter, Leafy, and her granddaughter, Janie. Even though it is past the time of slavery, Nanny continues to see "de nigger woman [as] de mule uh de world" and the black man as powerless (14). Nanny's image as a weak and broken tree is solidified when she says to Janie that "us colored folks is branches without roots" (16). Nanny

cannot see that she does have roots, but she has been used so much that she appears to the reader as a maimed tree lacking branches.

Although Nanny's tree-like qualities show her weakness, she also holds a great amount of power in her voice, which can be seen as the "roots" and "foundation" that are essential in producing a healthy tree. Hemenway asserts that when Nanny's speech enters the novel, "her voice seizes control of Janie's narrative, just as she seized control of the events Janie narrates" (183). Nanny takes control of Janie's life at this moment and marries her off to Logan Killicks in order to save her granddaughter from the sexual exploitation that she and her daughter suffered through, both having being raped as young women. Nanny's power is evident, as Janie does not disobey her grandmother until after she is dead.

Through her depiction of Janie as a "great tree in leaf" and of Nanny as "the standing roots of some old tree," Hurston creates a sense of character by comparing the women to nature. In describing the characters as trees, Hurston borrows elements of the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo to strengthen her work, but makes it hers by using the technique to add dimension to her characters. These organic images also aid in setting the tone for the novel, which remains tranquil regardless of the events that transpire. By the time the second chapter is finished, Hurston establishes the framework for her own tree myth by drawing upon ancient mythology to portray her characters and using the natural elements to establish the novel's general mood.

III. Biblical Mythology: Janie's Quest For Knowledge

When Janie begins the story of her journey, the central image of the blossoming pear tree that she focuses on throughout her life and that catapults her into womanhood appears. In her essay, "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison," Glenda B. Weathers recognizes the pear tree from Hurston's novel as a tree that "posit[s] knowledge of both good and evil" and is equated with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden (201). While Weathers provides an insightful analysis on the symbolism of the pear tree, which will be discussed later, one might expand on her analysis by tracing the vital intertextual connections between the tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the legendary tree in the book of Genesis.

In order to clarify the correlation between the trees, it is helpful to begin with the primary appearance of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the book of Genesis, God places Adam in the Garden "to till and care for it," and tells him, "You may eat from every tree in the garden, but not from the tree of knowledge of good and evil; for the day that you eat from it, you will certainly die" (Davidson 32). In his commentary on this passage, Robert Davidson notes that Adam is not put in the garden just to tend to it, but to "learn the lesson of living responsibly" (34). He also comments that "knowledge" is representative of moral, intellectual, and sexual experience, and that "man is being warned that he is subject to certain limitations" (34-5). After Eve is created to appease man's loneliness, the serpent deceives her into eating the fruit that hangs from the Tree

of Knowledge. She sees that the fruit is "pleasing to the eye and tempting to contemplate," picks a piece, and eats it (Davidson 39). Davidson comments on these lines by pointing out that Eve "struggle[s] between innocence and temptation" (39). Janie experiences each of the phases that Adam and Eve encounter while they are in the Garden of Eden. Although she is not warned by Nanny to avoid the pear tree, Janie's curiosity compels her to taste the fruit from the tree, and she is forced from her garden. When Janie leaves the garden, she comes to know both good and evil in all of their forms.

The influence from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is brought into perspective when looking at Janie's first encounters with the pear tree. Clearly, Janie is initially drawn to the tree for its sexual nature, as Janie is attracted to the pear tree while it is in bloom, the peak of its sexuality: "It had called her to come and gaze on its mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf buds; from the leaf buds to snowy virginity of bloom" (10). The tree causes something to stir inside Janie, something that she cannot understand because she is still innocent. Janie believes that she has discovered the cause of her wondering on her third day of visiting the pear tree. As she watches a bee pollinate one of the tree's blooms and sees "the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace," she thinks that the scene before her represents marriage. Janie is anxious to experience the union that she witnesses between the bee and the blossoms, and she waits impatiently at her front gate "for the world to be made" (11). The character's first experience with the pear tree parallels the connotations of sexual

experience that are associated with Eve's attraction to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

Janie and Eve are similar not only because they are both tempted by the mystery of their trees, but also because they choose to experience what the tree has to offer. Although a snake does not deceive her, Janie's thoughts betray her in the assumption that finding marriage will be as easy as a bee finding a bloom. While waiting at her front gate, a boy named Johnny Taylor walks up the road, and Janie sees him as a "glorious being" that she once believed was "shiftless" (12). When Johnny comes to greet her, the teenagers kiss: an image symbolizing Eve picking and eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. After Nanny catches Janie kissing Johnny, the narrator says, "That was the end of her childhood" (12). Just as Adam and Eve lose their innocence in eating the forbidden fruit, Janie loses her innocence in kissing Johnny Taylor.

After Janie's intimate moment with Johnny Taylor, Nanny expels Janie from her Garden of Eden and forces her into the knowledge of good and evil. While Janie is eager to experience the marriage she sees in her image of the pear tree, her grandmother is not willing to set her own vision for Janie aside. In her essay, Weathers recognizes the incongruity between each character's perception of the pear tree when she states, "With her limited perspective, Nanny interprets the pear tree as a tree of death and shame, whereas the sexually conscious Janie sees the tree's life-affirming nature" (3). This idea is represented in Nanny's lecture to Janie after she sees Johnny Taylor "lacerating" her granddaughter with a kiss (Hurst 12). Janie tries to argue that she "didn't

mean nothin' bad by the kiss," and Nanny answers, "Dat's what makes me skeered. You don't mean no harm. You don't even know where harm is at" (13). After this, Nanny tells Janie that she wants her to get married as soon as possible. When Janie protests, Nanny says that she wanted Janie to "pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry" (13). Weathers notes that this statement is a "subtle allusion to the tree of knowledge," but it is important to see that the bush Nanny refers to relates to her vision of a tree, not Janie's. Because Janie must now metaphorically "pick" from Nanny's idea of a tree, she is forced into knowledge and marriage and banished from her Garden of Eden.

No matter how fiercely Janie protests, Nanny insists that her granddaughter marry Logan Killicks. Nanny is adamant about Janie's future because she believes Killicks is a sweeter berry, yet her actions thrust Janie into learning the knowledge of evil. Janie's negative reaction to Nanny's proposal is expected, and the narrator emphasizes her despair when saying, "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn't know how to tell Nanny that. She merely hunched over and pouted at the floor" (14). In the days before Janie's marriage, she comes to accept her fate, thinking that her union with Killicks will make love. The thought that "husbands and wives always loved each other" comforts Janie, and she resigns herself to the marriage (21). In his article, "The Life of Women: Zora Neale Hurston and Female Autobiography," James Krasner acknowledges that Janie's image of marriage within the pear tree has "led her astray" (120). Krasner goes on to say that Killicks equates marriage to money, and much like Janie, trusts that love will naturally generate from their

arrangement (120). After two and a half months with Killicks, Janie realizes that she was wrong in her assumptions about love. When expressing her misery to Nanny, she says, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (24). Once Janie understands that she and Killicks will never love one another, she has completed the first lesson of responsibility brought forth by her pear tree of knowledge and can leave Killicks to pursue her vision.

Janie's desire to know and experience festers within her, but since Nanny tells her to give the marriage some time, she does. Only after Nanny dies does Janie begin to "stand around the gate and expect things" like she did after her first revelation under the pear tree (25). One day when Killicks is away from home, Joe Starks comes down the road and impresses her with his stylish dress and his high-class mannerisms. Janie resists his advances for a while because "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon" (29). Though he does not fit with her image of the tree, eventually she leaves with Joe and becomes his wife. While Janie is married to Joe, she loses her vision of the pear tree and succumbs to unhappiness, thus resigning herself to the knowledge of evil.

In her article, "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in Their Eyes Were Watching God," Missy Dehn Kubitschek responds to Janie's acceptance of her life with Joe by stating, "Her failure of courage and imagination results in an insistence both public and private that the marriage is a success" (110). Even though this observation may seem callous, it is completely

accurate. At sixteen Janie had more confidence in her vision of the pear tree, and she was able to leave Killicks. Now that she has pushed the image from her mind, she is powerless and cannot leave her present marriage. Kubitschek's description of Janie's "complete separation of concrete reality from her vision of the pear tree" supports this argument (110). Janie's lack of determination in her marriage to Joe causes her to forget the blissful image of the pear tree and accept the knowledge of evil.

Janie regains her conviction once she sees that she is no longer "petal-open" with her husband, and she begins to resist his insults and power over her (71). After a heated argument where Joe slaps Janie, she rediscovers her pear tree image while thinking about what has gone wrong with her marriage. In this moment Janie realizes, "She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (72). Krasner explains the relationship's collapse in terms of Janie's vision by saying that "attempting to adorn [Joe] with her own gilded-up vision" causes the marriage to fail (122). At this point in the novel, Janie's knowledge has shifted from sexual to intellectual. She knows that love requires more than marriage or physical attraction: it requires self-confidence and strength of mind. Through her experiences, Janie's understanding of her pear tree image transforms itself from a vague definition of marriage and becomes an accumulation of love of self and love of another.

Janie's new approach to her pear tree vision affects both her thoughts and her actions. At first, she is quiet and doesn't react to any of Joe's abuses, but

her silence does not last long. She stands up for herself on the front porch of the store one day and tells him in front of a crowd, "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change of life" (79). Joe never recovers from her insult, and it seems that her comment directly leads to his death. The narrator's insight on Janie's feelings during Joe's funeral supports Kubitschek's remark that his death liberates her (110). Although Janie is dressed in black and appears to be mournful, "inside, the expensive black folds were resurrection and life" (88). After the funeral, she lets her hair down and runs the store her own way. Kubitschek sees her renewed poise as an "acceptance of existential responsibility [that] makes her truly, as opposed to nominally, free" (Kubitschek 110). Now that Janie has gained control of every aspect of her life, part of her pear tree vision is fulfilled, and she is free to seek and know the love that she desired in her original vision.

For a while, Janie is content with her new knowledge and life without Joe, but she soon finds the fulfillment represented in her pear tree image. Several men in Eatonville and the neighboring cities pursue Janie, but she does not succumb to their advances (91). During this time, the narrator says, "Six months of wearing black passed and not one suitor had ever gained the house porch. Janie talked and laughed in the store at times, but never seemed to want to go further" (91). Although it appears that Janie has fulfilled her pear tree vision through her independence, she still has the "sav[ed] up feelings for some man she had never seen" (72). Once Tea Cake enters Janie's store, his sweet name

alone becomes the sign of her pear tree, and the reader knows that her feelings are ready to be released.

In regards to Janie and Tea Cake's friendship, Weathers states, "Early in their relationship Janie realizes that Tea Cake wants her to be a player in the game" (5). Tea Cake shows that he wants to be Janie's partner instead of her master. Not only does he play checkers with Janie, but he also helps her prepare meals, takes her fishing, and does planting for her (101-10). Kubitschek responds to this aspect of their relationship, noting that "by abandoning traditional limitations, they approach the joyous harmony of Janie's vision" (110). Janie tries to resist Tea Cake at first, but finds that "she couldn't make him look just like any other man to her" (106). The only image Janie can summon of Tea Cake parallels her pear tree image: "He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (106). From this point on, the reader is aware of Janie's feelings and can sense that her dream of the pear tree is about to be satisfied.

After Janie leaves Eatonville, she is finally able to experience the knowledge of good, something she has sought throughout her life in her vision of the pear tree. In the Everglades, Janie and Tea Cake find happiness in the routine of everyday life where they work in the fields together, eat together, and enjoy dances with their community (133-54). It seems that their delight will last forever, but just as Janie seems settled in her image of the pear tree and has experienced pleasure, a hurricane comes and tears her vision apart. The storm expels Janie from her new Garden of Eden and when she and Tea Cake return,

nothing is as it was. Tea Cake falls ill from a bite given to him by a rabid dog, and Janie begins looking up towards God, wishing she had drowned in the flood caused by the hurricane (177-8). This is the first time Janie moves outside of her pear tree vision when looking for guidance, and when the narrator says, "to kill her through Tea Cake was too much to bear," it is an indication of Janie's punishment from God for tasting the fruit from her pear tree (178). Although the price Janie pays for her knowledge of good is cruel, Weathers puts the penalty into perspective when she states, "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil standing in Nanny's garden could not be avoided if Janie were ever to experience a genuine life" (5). Once Janie has tasted the good from the fulfillment of her vision and the evil from her previous marriages and from Tea Cake's death, her eyes are open and she comes to accept all of her knowledge and experience, even Tea Cake's death.

IV. African Mythology: Trees as the Creators and Destroyers of Life

While the mythological trees associated with Daphne and the book of Genesis help to reveal how these plants function within Hurston's novel, African myths about trees may also underlie Hurston's tree imagery. In relation to Hurston's specific mythological interests, Tina Barr writes, "She used myth to magnify and elevate the power of her own culture's inherited knowledge, and as a consequence she was especially interested in myths which were African in origin" (102). There are two fundamental African conceptions of trees within African mythology, notes John S. Mbiti (51). Mbiti expresses one African

perception of trees by stating that the Herero tribe believes in a "tree of life" "the source from which all life emanates." The Nuer and Sandawe tribes hold a similar idea; they believe that man was created from a tree (51). The second African conception mentioned by Mbiti is that trees are used as shrines and sanctuaries for animals and people in the Akamba, Gikuyu, and Barundi tribes (73). Both of these African conceptions of mythological trees are present in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

In Hurston's novel, several trees signify human life, either as a source of or a physical representation for life, which relates to the African belief in an actual tree of life. Mbiti's book provides a specific example of how an African tribe saw themselves as one particular tree's offspring. When describing this myth Mbiti states, "Among the Nuer, it is believed that a tamarind tree...was the one from whose branches men fell off. It was God Who created them, making them different in skin colour, abilities to run and bodily strength" (94). While the fact that the present-day Janie perceives her life like a tree has been previously discussed and is clearly an example of where Hurston uses trees to represent life, when looking at sixteen-year-old Janie, the same correlation can be made. Before Janie has her kiss with Johnny Taylor, the narrator says, "She had glossy leaves and bursting buds..." (11). In this passage, Hurston's depiction of Janie as a tree parallels the African belief that man was created from and hence partakes the qualities of a tree.

In accordance with this same African conception of trees, Hurston describes trees as a source of life, and she alters this idea so that the destruction

of life is symbolized when trees are disfigured. When Janie is still in a state of innocence, she wishes that she could turn into a tree in order to experience the vision she has while sitting under the pear tree (11). In this moment she says to herself, "Oh to be a pear tree – any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing the beginning of the world" (11). Although the bees are "singing the beginning of the world," the tree in bloom is the cause of their singing. In contrast to this blissful image, other tree imagery in the novel shows the annihilation of life. When Nanny is depicted as "the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm," Hurston amends the African tree of life into an image that represents both giving and taking of life. Nanny, who raises Janie and essentially gives her life, is seen as a mangled version of the pear tree. This image signals the action of desecrating Janie's vision of life and the pear tree by forcing her to marry Logan Killicks. Nanny's weathered roots also symbolize her own metaphoric death of self through her years of hard work and her literal death through illness.

This alteration of the African myth of the tree of life into an image of desolation is also seen during the time that Janie is married to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. When the narrator first describes Logan's house, it appears as "a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been" (21). Since the house is literally absent of life and is perceived as a "stump," the connection between the destruction of the tree and the dissolution of life is easy to notice. When Janie moves to Eatonville with Joe, this same idea is present, but it is harder to distinguish. The disfigured trees in this representation

of the destruction of life are presented as the lumber that Joe orders to build his store. The wood is stacked under "the big live oak tree" as to create a model for what the lumber once was (40). After the store is built, the structure becomes Joe's pulpit to ridicule Janie, and it cages her until Joe's death. While Hurston draws upon sacred trees in African mythology, she adds her own skill and imagination when using distorted trees to show where life is depleted.

Hurston's novel also contains a parallel to the African perception of mythological trees as a place of refuge and worship in the pear tree. This idea of the tree as a shelter and a haven for Janie is incorporated in the depiction of the pear tree throughout the novel. When Janie initially discovers the pear tree in bloom, she spends every minute she can underneath it (10). After Nanny tells her that she has to marry Logan Killicks, the narrator says, "She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking" (21). From the first minute Janie sees the tree, it becomes her sanctuary and she holds onto its image throughout her life. Because Janie frequently returns to this image and evaluates her life in relation to the pear tree, it transforms from a sanctuary to an object with divine connotations. Hurston extracts elements from the mythology of African culture in order to enhance her fiction and create a tree myth of her own.

V. A Tradition of Reclamation

In 1934, one year prior to the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston wrote a short story titled "The Fire and the Cloud" that focuses on "a dead and ascending Moses" (Hemenway 256). The idea for this story

developed into Hurston's third novel, Moses, Man of the Mountain, where the biblical figure is presented as Egyptian rather than Hebrew. Hemenway comments on Hurston's decision to transform Moses' identity by saying, "Hurston attempts nothing less than to kidnap Moses from Judeo-Christian tradition, claiming that his true birthright is African and that his true constituency is Afro-American" (257). Much like the method of adapting Greek, biblical, and African tree myths in her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, in this text, Hurston reclaims the Moses narrative and recreates it to reflect African-American traditions.

In her anthropological work, Mules and Men, Hurston displays this action of appropriating a variety of myths for a particular need through a sermon given by a traveling preacher. The homily is based on the biblical creation myth in Genesis 2:21, but it reflects the oral traditions of the rural black community (Wall 170). Throughout the speech, the preacher exclaims, "Behold de rib," and compels his listeners by explaining woman's place in society. He proclaims that God did not take the rib from Adam's head, foot, or back, but from his side, which "places de woman beside us" (Wall 170). In the portion of her essay explicating this sermon, Cheryl Wall states, "Its rhythm and imagery place "Behold de Rib" squarely in the tradition of black American preaching, but its message is anomalous" (171). Although Hurston documents an actual speech that displays how the African-American community interprets the Biblical creation myth, she alters it to reflect her position on equality for women.

While as a writer of fiction and as an anthropologist, Hurston often resurrected myths, her most acclaimed novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, does not require an understanding of the mythological trees from Biblical, Greek, and African texts in order function as its own myth. Yet connections drawn between the trees in each of these texts and the trees that appear in the novel help to uncover its syncretic nature. Many critics assert that Hurston *has* crafted her own myth in this novel: a legend that will spread throughout American culture, telling the story of Janie's quest for knowledge, independence, and love (Krasner 117). The last lines of dialogue presented in the novel show what lesson Hurston wants to teach her readers. In this passage Janie tells Phoeby, "Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go to God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (192). It seems fitting that Janie's advice is the last expression she utters since she has already completed these two tasks. When she went to the pear tree, she went to God, and when she left with Tea Cake, she found out about living for herself. The only thing left for Janie to do is sit on her front porch and retell her story, sharing her wisdom with the world.

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Werner, Craig. "Zora Neale Hurston." The Scribner Writers Series. 1991 ed. Literature Resource Center. APSU Lib System. 18 Mar. 2006.

Annotated Bibliography

Barr, Tina. "'Queen of the Niggerati' and the Nile: The Isis-Osiris Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Journal of Modern Literature. 25.3 (2002): 101-113. Project Muse. APSU Lib. System. 2 Dec. 2005. <<http://www.muse.jhu.edu>>. Barr's insightful essay focuses on Hurston's use of myth within her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. She discusses the writer's early influences, such as Greek and Norse tales, and the African myth of Isis and Osiris in relation to the characters and natural imagery that appears in the highly acclaimed work. Barr uses a feminist approach, arguing that Hurston's "mythical subtext subverts the apparent social myth of female weakness" and allows Janie to achieve her dream of a perfect marriage (104). Barr solidifies her argument by equating the pear tree in the novel to sacred marriage and self-transformation. The essay also draws original connections between the themes presented in the book and otherwise minor organic elements.

Barthell, Edward E. Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Greece. Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1971. In this important book, Barthell provides genealogical links between each of the Gods and Goddesses in ancient Greece and in-depth explanations of common Greek myths. In his description of the Peneius, the god of the river Thessaly, Barthell explores the myth of Peneius's daughter, Daphne. While Barthell tells the tale of Daphne and Apollo, no extensive analysis is provided, which may be helpful in fully understanding the underlying themes in the story.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. "Their Eyes Were Watching God: Hurston and the Speakerly Text." Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Ed. K.A. Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Amistad, 1993. 154-203. In this important article, Gates, Jr. discusses Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God as a "speakerly text;" a type of work that represents the African-American oral tradition. He points to the text's "narrative strategy" that focuses on emphasizes oral speech (165). Gates, Jr. also argues that Janie's quest in the novel is also a quest for an authentic black voice. This in-depth analysis of the linguistic elements in Hurston's text helps to link specific speech patterns in the novel to African-American oral traditions.

Genesis 1-11. Robert Davidson, gen. ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 1973.

Davidson's edition of the book of Genesis contains commentary on each section, which is an asset in understanding the underlying themes in the religious text. In his observations on Gen.2: 8-17, where the Garden of Eden is described, Davison explains that Adam was not solely put in the garden to "till and care for it," he was also placed there to learn about living responsibly under a higher power (34). He goes on to discuss the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, noting that knowledge may have had a number of meanings beyond sexual experience and could also refer to moral and intellectual experience.

Hemenway, Robert E. Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980. This biography is imperative in understanding Hurston's

life and works. Hemenway presents the writer's life in chronological order and focuses on each of the works that were produced during the distinct time periods he divides her life into. His objective perspective of Hurston's works relies on quotations from the author herself and from a multitude of outside sources. Hemenway's approach allows the reader to form their own conclusions regarding the author's influences and the meanings embedded in each of her texts. In a particularly valuable section of the biography, Hemenway focuses on the natural imagery in Hurston's most successful novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. He parallels these images to Janie's growth of self and provides specific examples within the novel to support his ideas.

Krasner, James. "The Life of Women: Zora Neale Hurston and Female Autobiography." Black American Literature Forum. 23.1 (1989): 113-126. JSTOR. APSU Lib. System. 2 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

Krasner's essay is notable because of its innovative understanding of the pear tree image that appears throughout the novel. He argues that the plot of the story is structured around the tree image and that Hurston presents a series of unconnected slides rather than a unified narrative. Krasner believes that the pear tree is originally equated to marriage and that later, the tree is equated to change. At the end of the essay, he asserts that this definition changes again to signify marriage and love and that once this designation is set in place, Janie is able to fulfill her vision of the pear tree.

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Black American Literature Forum. 17.3 (1983): 109-115. JSTOR. APSU Lib. System. 2 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.jstor.org>>

In this interesting article, Kubitschek explores the image of the pear tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She explains that Janie and Tea Cake need to switch gender roles in order to attain the transcendence that lies within the pear tree image. Kubitschek argues that the tree represents human life and that the seasonal change of the tree corresponds to Janie's time of life. She goes on to state that through Janie's quest, she tries to harmonize her daily life with her image of the pear tree.

Mbiti, John S. African Religions & Philosophy. New York: Praeger. 1970. Mbiti's book contains a wide-range of African traditions and beliefs, specifically those from the pre-colonial period. He emphasizes the "unity of African religions and philosophy" so that they can be viewed as a whole, while pinpointing beliefs from individual tribes or communities (xii). In a fascinating Chapter titled, "God & Nature," Mbiti discusses God in relation to natural elements such as plants, the sky, and rain. This portion of the book explains the Herero tribe's tree of life and the Nuer and Sandawe belief that man originated from a tree. While Mbiti also explores a myth that resembles the Biblical tree of life, he does not address the possible Christian influence in this fable.

McAlister, Elizabeth a. "Vodou." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 2006.

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<<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9075734>>. This article is beneficial when seeking a primary understanding of the Vodou religion. McAlister begins by explaining the origins of Vodou in West Africa and goes on to explain the beliefs of the religion's follower such as the lwa, or spirits, that are at the center of Vodou. She also discusses the rites that are performed by priests and priestesses during ceremonies where believers drink, sing, and dance in a trancelike state.

Parada, Carlos. "Daphne I." Greek Mythology Link. 1997. Greek Mythology Link. 8 Dec. 2005. <<http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/Daphne1.html>>.

Parada's website provides a detailed account of the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo with several links to individual pages containing information on specific names and texts. He explains the myth in simple terms and provides supplemental quotes from Ovid's Metamorphoses. The passages Parada chooses consist of character dialogue, which allows the reader to experience the myth firsthand. Parada's site also features a genealogical breakdown of Daphne's descendants and well-known artwork depicting the goddess.

Wall, Cheryl A. Women of the Harlem Renaissance. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. In this interesting book, Cheryl Wall explores the issues of gender and race in the works of several female writers from the Harlem Renaissance. In her Chapter devoted to Zora Neale Hurston, Wall asserts that Hurston created her own "literary language" through her emphasis on

"verbal ability in black expressive culture" (141). She also explores Hurston's work as an anthropologist, which helps to show how Hurston became a part of the communities that she documented and the role that this played in her novels. Wall explains Hurston's process of claiming elements from these cultures and making them her own so that they reflect her feminist beliefs.

Weathers, Glenda. "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison." African American Review. 39.1 (2005): 210-212. Literature Resource Center. APSU Lib System. 2 Dec. 2005. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>. This essay by Weathers is extremely valuable in understanding how Biblical trees operate in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Morrison's Beloved. She begins by asserting that the tree images that appear in each of the novels contain knowledge of both good and evil. She goes on to explain that it is imperative that the characters taste the fruit from these trees in order to gain the knowledge necessary for personal growth. When addressing Hurston's text specifically, Weathers equates the pear tree to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and emerging sexuality. The essay also discusses the idea that Janie's outer landscape reveals her inner reality and proves that when Janie feels a certain way, it is reflected in her surroundings.

Werner, Craig. "Zora Neale Hurston." The Scribner Writers Series. 1991 ed.

Literature Resource Center. APSU Lib System. 18 Mar. 2006.

<<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>. In this valuable article, Werner briefly covers Hurston's life and works while investigating major themes in a selection of her novels and anthropological works. When commenting on Their Eyes Were Watching God, he makes note of Babylonian, Greek, and Egyptian myths that aid in understanding Janie's experiences. With regard to the natural imagery that appears in the novel, Werner asserts that the recurring pear tree represents the growth of Janie's consciousness.