

Andrea S.

LIT-550

Dr. Robinson

26 August 2018

The Intelligence Buried Within

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, all of the dialogue is written in Black English vernacular. While this may be difficult to ascertain at first - especially without auditory examples of words - it gets easier to understand with time. Hurston pairs this vernacular with her own elevated prose to juxtapose the views of readers, white and otherwise, with the black community in the South. As well as using vernacular, Hurston shows the symbolism of the front porch within the black town of Eatonville in the novel. Both vernacular and the front porch play a major role in the ways that the people of Eatonville and Florida in general interact with each other and how these things further their stories.

At first, it could be easy to see how some would assume the characters in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are unintelligent, based on their vernacular in their speech. This is done on purpose to show the audience their subconscious (and possibly conscious) biases when it comes to not only speech, but people of color as well. One clear example of the intelligence of the community in Hurston's novel is when some gentlemen are sitting on the porch, talking about the nature vs. nurture argument. Sam says, "'Tain't no sich uh thing! Nature tells yuh not tuh fool wid no red-hot stove, and you don't do it neither'" (64). This argument alone suggests that the men speaking have heightened intelligence, simply for having the discussion at all. Walter responds, "'Listen, Sam, if it was nature, nobody wouldn't have tuh look out for babies touchin'

stoves, would they? ‘Cause dey just naturally wouldn’t touch it. But dey sho will. So it’s caution’” (64). The vernacular that is used in the novel is indicative of the ignorant thought that people who speak this way are unintelligent, and shows to disprove that through the conversations the characters have.

The idea of the front porch is something that all literature has in common. In some cultures, this could be translated into the family dinner table; in others, it could be around the fireplace. However, in the South, the community centers around the front porch. Many examples can be seen throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God* of the neighborhood - mostly men - gathering on the porch to play games of checkers, gossip, and watch the happenings of the neighborhood. Janie always wants to be included in these porch talks when she is married to Jody, but rarely gets to partake because of his jealousy and narcissism. The narrator mentions, “When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to” (51). To Janie, the porch meant a place to talk, relax, and get to know her neighbors. However, this is taken from her simply because Jody decided that she did not need to undertake that responsibility as the Mayor’s wife.

The porch also represents a place where Janie is constantly watched and told what to do. While the front porch is a symbol of the neighborhood, it can also be seen as a symbol of her jail. While she minds the store, Jody is allowed to sit on the porch and talk to the neighborhood, while she is held responsible for every portion of Jody’s business. The narrator speaks to Janie’s thoughts about the porch when they say, “Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn’t want her

talking after such trashy people” (53-4). Not only was this a symbol of where her jailer sat, but it was also a status symbol. Those who were invited to sit with the mayor on his porch were of a higher status than the others. However, to the mayor, they were too much beneath Janie for her to have any interactions with.

Towards the end of the book, Janie comes to see the porch in Florida as a place of comfort. After she has killed her third husband, the only place she wants to be is in her little town, surrounded by people she knows, regardless of their opinions of her. When Janie goes back to Florida after Tea Cake’s death, she is sitting on the front porch from which she used to be forbidden, talking to her best friend, Phoeby. Instead of the men taking the brunt of the time and conversation on the front porch, it now seems to be the women who run things. Janie is soaking her feet when she and her friend get to talking about love. Janie is extremely eloquent when she says, ““Ah know all dem sitters-and-talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out whut we been talkin’ ‘bout. Dat’s all right, Phoeby, tell ‘em. Dey gointuh make ‘miration ‘cause mah love didn’t work lak they love, if dey ever had any. Then you must tell ‘em dat love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch...”” (191). Here, Janie seems to take her power back that she lost under Jody’s thumb, and shows the power she gained through the love of Tea Cake.

Both the Black English vernacular and the front porch serve as symbols of the black communities in Florida at the time. Not only are they symbols of racism that they faced, but they are also symbols of the community they built with each other. White characters in the novel speak with the same vernacular, but the color of the black characters are indicative of what the

white people think of them. The love of the community and love for each other is a huge theme in the novel that is displayed through speech and their gathering place: the front porch.

Works Cited

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013.