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AP Literature and Composition

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Layers of Literature

Literature has an incredible amount of potential. It also has many layers in its content. It is important to try and unlock that potential by peeling off those layers and reading a book deeper than its surface level to find its true meaning. The meaning of a book is interpreted differently by everyone who reads it, depending on what they are noticing and what they are making connections to. In his work, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas C. Foster introduces readers to different methods of interpreting even seemingly obsolete details in literature, making them truly analyze and think more critically about the works they are reading. His various methods of analyzing and theories can be applied to newer pieces of literature and to classic novels such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Foster argues that names are an important part of characterization and that they carry a specific message that the author wants to convey about the story (Foster, 53). Hurston uses this exact technique when she names Janie's husbands. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, was an older farmer whom Janie was forced to marry for his status and wealth. His last name references his old age and the extreme difference of almost forty years between his age and Janie's. It also symbolizes the death of romantic potential that Janie felt their marriage had in the beginning. Early in their marriage, Janie hoped that she will learn to love Logan, but was disappointed when their marriage failed. To Janie, Joe Starks first symbolized freedom from her marriage with

Logan; he represented thrill and romance to her. As her marriage with Joe progressed, Hurston revealed a new side of Joe. His new intentions became unpleasantly clear—*stark*, even—as he grew superficial and materialistic, focused on living like the whites. Janie’s next and final husband, Tea Cake, was just as sweet as his name suggests. He was not rich or in a high social position; he was plain and simple, just like the treat.

Janie was a young woman when she married sixty-year-old Logan Killicks. She had romantic perceptions and aspirations about what marriage could mean. Her thoughts about her marriage, and romance in general, were still childlike and optimistic. After being married with Logan for a while, she realized that she did not love him and that she felt no connection between them. When Janie left Logan, she left behind some of her youthful preconceptions about marriage—she matured. Logan had taken away an innocent part of her youth. Foster argues that an old character who strips a young female virgin of her youth can be classified as a vampire (Foster, 19). However, he claims that vampires in literature do not always have appear in this type of scenario, rather that they just need to drain something of value from another character and cannot thrive without them. Logan used Janie to do the work that he could not do because of his old age, sometimes working her to the point of exhaustion. To Logan, losing Janie meant losing another hand to make work go by quicker. Joe Starks is another great example of vampirism. While he was mayor of Eatonville, he told Janie what to do, restricting her from interacting with the “common people.” He forced Janie to be the perfect “mayor’s wife,” and in doing so, he drained Janie of her ability to stand up for herself. Without a perfect wife by his side, Joe thought that he would not be respected by the people of Eatonville. Therefore, he got his confidence and strength from how he made Janie look and act. Janie was insulted and beat for

stepping out of “her place.” Both Joe and Logan were drained when Janie left them. The last scene featuring Logan describes him on the floor, weeping as Janie walks out on him (Hurstun, 32). When Janie left Joe, not speaking to him for an entire month, he suffered the ultimate drainage. Joe dies without Janie in his life.

First there was darkness, then there was light—well, a streetlight. When Joe brought the first and only streetlamp to Eatonville, he thought quite highly of himself for it. Joe’s situation, a biblical allusion to the creation of light, supports Foster’s theory that biblical references are frequently found in many different kinds of literature. Joe told the townspeople who have come to see the streetlamp to “gaze on it,” stressing the importance of the lamp and his own importance for putting it in town. His comparison of himself to God is also evident when he asks for a prayer to be said in thanks for the streetlamp, standing by proudly as the townspeople sang,

“We’ll walk in de light, de beautiful light

Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright

Shine all around us by day and by night

Jesus, the light of the world” (Hurstun, 46)

It becomes clear that Joe considers this act of bringing a streetlamp to Eatonville comparable to that of God’s when He created light (Genesis 1:3). Biblical allusion is also present in how, later in the book, the oncoming hurricane (and subsequent flood) is described by Hurstun. “By morning, Gabriel was plating the deep tones in the center of the drum” (Hurstun, 158). Gabriel is an angel who delivers God’s messages, this particular message being a warning. The hurricane that Gabriel warned about caused a huge flood to occur, obviously referencing God’s flood that He made to destroy and cleanse the Earth. These biblical allusions that Hurstun creates help

readers gain an understanding of situations in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by referencing them to situations in the Bible.

Janie and Tea Cake survive just such a flood. This already begins to connect to another one of Foster's theories—a character is symbolically reborn when they have an encounter with water, such as surviving a flood or even falling in a pond (Foster, 152). In the Bible, humanity itself is reborn after the flood destroys the Earth. God chooses Noah and his family, who are faithful and devoted, to survive over other humans who had become sinful and disobedient. After Janie and Tea Cake survive the flood, their characters shift dramatically as well. In the chaos of the flood, Tea Cake was bitten by a rabid dog and contracts rabies weeks later. Sick and delusional, he became a different man. He no longer was sweet and kind toward Janie; he became hostile and paranoid. One day, convinced that she was cheating on him, he fired a pistol at Janie. Hurt and scared, Janie was then forced to kill Tea Cake for her own safety. After she was found not guilty for killing him, Janie returned to Eatonville a new woman. She was older than when she originally left the town, more wise and mature. She walked into town wearing dirty overalls, a complete contrast to the clean dresses that the townspeople last saw Janie in before she left with Tea Cake. This change in wardrobe visually symbolizes Janie's change in character. Most importantly, Janie walked confidently into town as an independent woman. At this point, Janie was her own woman; she no longer belonged to Logan Killicks or to Joe Starks—she belonged to herself. Finally, Janie was at peace with herself as the new woman she became.

Foster's various theories can be applied to all works of literature, even classic novels such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston provides interesting

examples of many of Foster's theories. Oftentimes, she created scenes in which more than one of Foster's theories could be applied. Once a reader begins to understand and recognize Foster's theories in other works of literature, they can create better critical analyses of the story itself. It is important to use tools like Foster's theories to analyze literature to unlock the potential of what is being read. When a work of literature is carefully examined and the author's purpose for writing it is analyzed, then its true meaning can be enjoyed.

Works Cited

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading between the Lines*. New York: Quill, 2003. Print.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. New York City: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.