

Possible Exam questions – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Great Gatsby*

1. Janie’s voice is of paramount importance to this novel. Critics constantly refer to “the figure of Janie Crawford – powerful, articulate, self-reliant, and radically different from any woman character they had ever before encountered in literature...a woman who wasn’t pathetic, wasn’t a tragic mulatto, who defied everything that was expected of her, who went off with a man without bothering to divorce the one she left and wasn’t broken, crushed and run down” (Washington ix). So, do you agree? Is Janie’s character all of these things? Is her voice compelling? How does the free indirect discourse supply her voice with “self-consciousness” and power? Explain, being careful to define your terms and provide good examples. (hint – read the pdf on free indirect discourse)
2. How might the following quote be used to explain one of the over-arching themes of the novel? (question requires that you define what that theme **is**)

“When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks makes them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud balls, Janie had tried to show her shine” (Hurston 86).

3. Janie’s definitions of love and marriage appear to be a major focus of the novel. Her first experience with love comes from an observation of nature – the pear tree scene of Ch. 2:

“She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.” (11)

How does this first experience define love and marriage for her? How well do her experiences match up to her understanding? How does she continue to “seek confirmation of the voice and vision” (11)?

4. The hurricane is a massive natural force in the novel that gives us the title *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against the crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (Hurston 151). What might the hurricane symbolize? What does the title mean? How does it “title” the novel as a whole?

5. What is the anthropological importance of the novel? What did Hurston do with poetic literature that hadn't been done before? How does it demonstrate Hurston's creation of a black female voice? Explain, using examples. (hint – read foreword and afterword and the pdf on “Signifyin”)
6. In what ways does Janie violate typical gender boundaries? How could some of her words or actions be seen as masculine? How might men view this as a threat?
7. Dreams and how they are and are not realized are important in Hurston's novel. Read the following poem by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston's contemporary in the Harlem Renaissance (and onetime writing partner). Use this poem as a lens to “see” *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How does it apply? Be specific!

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

8. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was an African American poet and precursor to the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry would have been familiar to Hurston. Read the poem below, “We Wear the Mask.” Use this poem as a lens to “see” the characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How does it apply? Be specific!

We Wear the Mask

WE wear the mask that grins and lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!