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# The Boys and the Bees

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## The Boys and the Bees

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, sixteen-year-old Janie begins a journey of sexual discovery underneath the beloved pear tree in her Nanny's backyard. However, the tree's symbolism is much more complex than standing for the search for love and fulfillment of sexual desires. Through her writing, Hurston creates in Janie a character who desires sexual intimacy; however, it is not the intimacy but rather what Hurston derives from it that is significant. Through examining Freud's description of the phallic stage and paralleling Janie's experiences to the relationship of a bee and a single flower on the pear tree, the pear tree goes from a symbol of sexuality with one partner to a symbol of self-revelation, highlighting Janie's role within a larger community.

In Hurston's flashback-style narration, Janie returns to Eatonville and begins recounting her experiences to her best friend Pheoby. She starts with a brief overview of growing up with Nanny during her "young years" and jumps immediately to the "end of her childhood" at the age of sixteen (Hurston 10, 12). Hurston uses two key events in Janie's life—her entering the phallic stage and Nanny rejecting Janie's urge for pleasure—to introduce her journey to self-revelation that will change not only her life but the lives of those in Eatonville. Janie allows nature to educate her about intimate relationships and the appeal of a sexual partner as she witnesses her first sexual encounter through observing the physical relationship between a bee and pear tree blossom:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink in 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! (11)

This memorable passage serves as the foundation for the stories Janie tells Pheoby upon her return and introduces her sexual awakening as a woman. This sexual awakening, according to Sigmund Freud, initiates the final of three overlapping stages of human development. Charles Bressler describes Freud's views on the final stage by explaining that in the phallic stage "a child's sexual desire or libido is directed toward the genitals when the child learns the pleasure that results from stimulating one's sexual organs" (128). By witnessing the sexual interaction between the bee and flower, Janie enters the phallic stage and feels the urge of the pleasure principle, a part of the psyche that "craves only pleasures, and...desires instantaneous satisfaction of instinctual drives, ignoring moral and sexual boundaries established by society" (126). However, Janie's first urge from the pleasure principle is crushed by Nanny when she exclaims that she "wants to see [Janie] married right away" to Logan Killicks, a thought that immediately begins "desecrating" the newly-formed vision of marriage Janie found under the pear tree (Hurston 13, 14). Both of these moments set the trajectory for her journey and eventually lead Janie to a self-revelation she shares with Pheoby upon her return to Eatonville in the opening lines of the novel.

While talking to Pheoby, Janie defines her role within the community by sharing her story and breaking free of the expectations that once bound her. As Janie introduces Pheoby to the pear tree, the narrator informs the readers that Janie had been spending every spare moment underneath that tree "ever since the first tiny bloom had opened," feeling called to "to come and gaze on a mystery" (Hurston 10). Even before Janie initially witnesses the sexual bond existing between a bee and a flower, she feels pulled to that newly opened bloom in Nanny's backyard. Seeking answers to the unknown, Janie questions, "What? How? Why?... She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How?" (11). While Janie does not yet know what she is being

called to or how this mystery will be fulfilled, there is no denying her attraction toward some greater calling. Upon Janie's return to Eatonville, the town buzzes with rumors about her journey and where her beloved Tea Cake is. However, Janie speaks only to Pheoby and unfolds her self-revelation, her arrival to consciousness, through embracing her sexuality. Freud asserts that this is necessary in order for her to mature in both her sexuality and as an individual: "If a child...is to grow up as a normal adult, he or she must develop a sense of sexuality, a sense of his maleness or her femaleness" (Bressler 128). In order for Janie to become who she is destined to be and answer those questions she first asked underneath the blossoming pear tree, she has to go through a series of experiences from the time she enters the phallic stage at the age of sixteen to the time she achieves consciousness at the age of forty. Through this path, Janie is able to more clearly define her role in a community, which is made evident through the sharing of her story upon returning to Eatonville, the place where she was once silenced.

Throughout the novel, Hurston provides clues alluding to the definition of Janie's role in a community and sexual relationship, challenging gender roles traditionally assigned to members of each sex. For example, immediately following Janie's observation of the bee's pollination of the pear tree blossom, she was entranced by the relationship. The narrator demonstrates Janie's desire for a relationship such as this by saying, "Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!...She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her?" (Hurston 11). Janie deeply desires a marriage like that of the bee and flower, one full of sexual pleasure. In this moment, Janie is picturing herself as the flower, wishing that bees would come to her and fulfill the act of intimacy she witnessed underneath the pear tree. While there is no denying Janie's sexual desires, it can also be argued that Janie instinctively knows from the first time she met Jody that she is supposed to fulfill the

role of the bee—its stinger being a phallic symbol—rather than that of the blossoming flower—a yonic symbol—in the type of relationship she most desires. While Janie was nearing the end of her marriage to Logan and the start of her relationship with Jody, Hurston writes, “Janie pulled back a long time because [Jody] did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon” (29). While the natural symbolism in this passage could be referring solely to the sexual component of the relationship that exists between a bee and its flower, it also represents Janie’s needs as the bee. As the bee, Janie would both need and desire a partner that would supply her with pollen to collect; therefore, if Jody did not represent the open blossoms that would provide the necessary pollen and nectar, he would not be tempting to Janie upon first glance.

Furthering the image of Janie as the bee rather than the flower, each of Janie’s marriages demonstrates the working relationship between a bee and a flower. Bees are attracted to a flower from the bright colors of the petals or from its aroma (Canada). Once a bee is attracted to a particular flower, the bee’s main job is to facilitate pollination, which is “the transfer of pollen from the male parts of a flower to the female parts of a flower of the same species, which results in fertilization of plant ovaries and the production of seeds” (“Pollination”). The seeds produced by the pollination eventually mature and become fruit—in this case, a pear. In this same way, each of Janie’s husbands—Logan Killicks, Joe “Jody” Starks, and Virgible “Tea Cake” Woods—rely on Janie to fulfill some sort of role in his life in order to produce a desired outcome. In her first marriage, Logan depends on Janie to help tend the land on his farm, insisting that she “ain’t got no particular place” except for wherever he needs her to be (Hurston 31). Arranged by Nanny, this relationship does not begin with an initial attraction to each other. Nanny picked Logan as a suitable partner for Janie because of his “often-mentioned sixty acres”

and ability to provide financially for her granddaughter while Janie only saw him as “some ole skullhead in de grave yard,” clouding his physical appeal as a partner to Janie (21, 13). This lackluster experience makes Janie eager to find her next flower when she meets Jody and is more easily attracted to him and the change in lifestyle he so promisingly speaks of. Jody explains to Janie when they first meet that “[i]t had always been his wish and desire to be a big voice” (28). As the bee, Janie helps Jody fulfill this dream by remaining submissive to Jody’s requests. After Jody’s death, Janie is, yet again, ready for a change of lifestyle and welcomes Tea Cake’s presence into her life. While Janie’s marriage to Tea Cake has much more reciprocity than her marriage to the other men, Tea Cake yields fruit out of his relationship with Janie—validation of his carefree, youthful lifestyle.

While each of these relationships certainly help Janie explore her sexuality, they ultimately serve a greater purpose, collectively working to transform Janie into the woman she is upon her return to Eatonville. In her newfound womanhood, Janie goes through the same process as a bee, allowing Janie to share her newfound knowledge with Pheoby and the rest of her colony in Eatonville. Explaining the bee’s process, Cook writes, “After collecting nectar and pollen from many different flowers, bees fly back to their colonies. They regurgitate nectar, mixed with enzymes, and expose the mixture to the air for several days, creating honey. This honey is used to feed the colony.” Just as the bee engages in a complex, almost sacrificial process to turn its collected pollen and nectar into food for its hive, Janie uses her experiences with each husband to nourish her community in Eatonville. Elizabeth Meese quotes Barbara Christian, furthering this thought by stating, “Janie Stark is not an individual in a vacuum; she is an intrinsic part of a community, and she brings her life and its richness, joys, and sorrows back to it. As it has helped to form her, so she also helps to form it” (60). This life-giving quality is displayed when, after

hearing Janie's stories, Pheoby is inspired by Janie's self-revelation and declares, "Lawd!...Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'," demonstrating both the success of Janie's self-revelation and the importance of using her experiences to further her hive in Eatonville (Hurstons 192).

Janie Crawford's experiences underneath the pear tree indisputably change the trajectory of her life and set her on a path of sexual exploration and self-revelation. However, while the pear tree is often viewed as a symbol of Janie's sexual discovery, the symbol's importance is rooted more deeply. Janie's relationships with her husbands—parallel to the relationship between a bee and a flower—eventually lead Janie to a self-revelation and open up the possibility for her to impact the community in Eatonville. After relaying her journey to her best friend, Janie stresses the importance of first-hand experiences to Pheoby by stating, "It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (Hurstons 192). While Hurston does not provide details regarding what happens after Janie shares her story with Pheoby, readers can assume that, just like a bee, Janie will continue to nurture her community and create an impact, one flower at a time.

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