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He was a Glance from God: Mythic Analogues for Tea Cake Woods in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Hannah,

Kathleen Powell

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"He was a glance from God": Mythic Analogues for Tea
Cake Woods in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were
Watching God

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Kathleen Powell Hannah

August 1992

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Cake Woods in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were
Watching God

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"He was a glance from God": Mythic Analogues for Tea Cake Woods
in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

Kathleen Powell Hannah

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84 pages

Directed by Pat Carr, Lou-Ann Crouther, and James Flynn

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

The use of myth in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God has been touched on by a few critics, but the wealth of Hurston's knowledge of different cultures offers readers a number of stories and tales from which to draw possible analogues to her characters. In fact, readers can trace Greek, Roman, Norse, Babylonian, Egyptian, African and African-American mythic elements in her character Tea Cake Woods. Hurston uses these analogues to enrich the characterization and to posit her theories of love and happiness in the modern age.

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Preface

I was introduced to Zora Neale Hurston's work by my mother-in-law, Meridith J. Wheatley, who lent me her copy of Their Eyes Were Watching God. I was fascinated first by the story. On a closer reading, I was impressed by her artistry, and finally, careful study put me in awe of her scholarship. I am grateful to Meridith for this and much else.

I am deeply indebted to my committee, Pat Carr, Lou-Ann Crouther, and James Flynn, mostly for their patience. Special thanks are due Dr. Crouther for her help in locating sources.

As always, I am thankful for the help and support I receive from my family and friends, most notably William and Joanne Powell, Pamela Johnson, and Barry Hannah, Jr.

Chapter One

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's masterful second novel Their Eyes Were Watching God has endured several interpretations since its publication in 1937. Dianne Sadoff sees the novel as a celebration of love undercut by Hurston's problems with male domination. Sadoff maintains, "Hurston profoundly distrusts heterosexual relationships because she thinks them based on male dominance and willing female submission; yet such inequality appears necessary to the institution of marriage" (21), so Hurston inserts incidents such as Tea Cake's taking Janie's two hundred dollars to make her readers distrust him. Molly Hite finds the center of the novel in Janie's acquisition of a voice and claims "the theme of finding a voice does not supplement the heterosexual romance plot of Their Eyes Were Watching God, but supplants that plot" (443). Perhaps the best interpretations involve the idea of the female quest. Missy Dehn Kubitschek asserts,

the quest motif structures the entire novel:
Janie twice leaves established social
positions for a more adventurous life,

descends into the underworld of the hurricane, faces a literal trial following Tea Cake's death, and returns to Eatonville with her hard-won knowledge. (19-20)

Mary Helen Washington supports this idea by indicating that the horizon and the pear tree in the novel are symbolic of the female quest: "one, the horizon, suggests that the search is an individual quest; the other, the pear tree in blossom, suggests a fulfillment in union with another" (15).

Bernard Bell explains the dreams of fulfillment which make up Janie's quest are different from Nanny's dreams of security. Janie, says Bell,

is more faithful to her symbolic significance as a Bodacious Woman--an individualist who audaciously rebels against social conventions and rejects family in pursuit of her romantic personal interests, dreams, and development--than to traditional poor black women who respect the sturdy bridges of kinship, male and female, that helped them to survive the pitfalls of life. (125)

Instead of wanting to sit on the porch like a white woman, Janie wants to have happiness in love:

"Rejecting the economic security that Nanny and most

black women dream of as a cornerstone of marriage, a youthful Janie "wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think"" (125). It is important to note that here Janie's idea of marriage combines her idea of love (the pear tree) with thought. Janie is constantly reevaluating her life, and she searches throughout the novel for a marriage that will satisfy her both spiritually and intellectually.

This quest motif is underscored by the fact that the quest is a traditional characteristic of the epic, and the epic formula is used by Hurston in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Her hero, Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods, is, like the epic hero, "a figure of imposing stature" (Holman & Harmon 178), at least to the town of Eatonville: she is "Mis' Mayor" and lives in a big house. She is even courted differently from other women: "They were all so respectful and stiff with her, that she might have been the Empress of Japan" (88). The theme of Janie's search for her dream is stated in the second paragraph of the novel: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth" (1); the action begins in medias res: "So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead" (1); and

while Pheoby does not exactly act as muse, Janie's story would not be told without Pheoby's presence: "'Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint'" (7). Another important epic convention involves intervention of the gods. Holman and Harmon explain that in an epic "supernatural forces--gods, angels, and demons--interest themselves in the action and intervene from time to time" (178). Hurston called her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, in part an allusion to the characters' feelings of helplessness in the face of the climactic hurricane scene, when Janie, her husband Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, and the angelic Motor Boat "sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against 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" (151). This is far from the only reference to God or gods in the novel, and it appears Hurston wants us to see Janie as the questing hero presented with a series of obstacles, including meddling gods. Robert A. Bone points out a specific reference to gods which he believes to be of utmost importance:

As the reader tries to assimilate Janie's experience and assess its central meaning, he

cannot avoid returning to a key passage which foreshadows the climax of the novel: "All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear, and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood." . . . Through Tea-Cake's [sic] death, Janie experiences the divine emotion, for her highest dream--to return to the opening paragraph of the novel--has been "mocked to death by Time." Like all men, she can only watch in resignation, with an overpowering sense of her own helplessness.

(131)

It seems obvious that Janie is far from helpless-- a helpless person would not have been able to kill her husband to save herself, and a helpless person would not have been able to come home, tell her story, and settle down to "live by comparisons" (182). In fact, her highest dream might just be self-fulfillment rather than love, and thus her dream is fulfilled, not mocked; why else would she, at the end of the novel, call "in her soul to come and see" (184) what she has

accomplished? Bone's analysis raises some good points, however: Janie does suffer to gain the knowledge she brings home with her, and that knowledge is more than just the "beginning of wisdom": she has found out about living for herself and about thinking for herself (183). And it is not only through Tea Cake's death that Janie experiences the divine emotion. His presence causes her to be "lit up like a transfiguration" (100). "He was a glance from God" (102), and because of her love for him, "her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122).

Bone's argument brings up another point, as well. Janie encourages Tea Cake to see a doctor after he is bitten by the rabid dog but when he refuses, he becomes an active participant in Janie's suffering. There is no reason for Tea Cake to die, since rabies shots administered immediately would have saved him. By association, then, Tea Cake becomes one of the "gods [who] dispense suffering without reason" (138). Tea Cake's disappearances, during which he gambles and fights; his stealing of Janie's money; and his beating of her are additional examples of "indiscriminate suffering" inflicted on Janie.

On the other hand, gods dispense favor as well, and Tea Cake often aids Janie in her quest for self-fulfillment. He shows her new ways of life and

encourages her to do as she pleases; no one in Janie's earlier life ever encourages anything but submission. Addison Gayle, Jr., asserts Tea Cake "is not only capable of accepting Janie's new-found freedom as a woman, but of encouraging it. Adventures with Teacake [sic] complete the liberation of Janie Starks" (146). Robert A. Bone concludes that "it is the folk culture, through Tea-Cake [sic], which provides the means of her spiritual fulfillment" (131). Tea Cake, says Michael G. Cooke,

has shown [Janie] not only the far horizon Joe Starks promised but also sunup and pear trees in bloom, which her instinctive mind had desired. . . . Above all, Tea Cake and life together have shown her herself, Janie (Crawford and Killicks and Starks and Woods are inadequate surnames, appendages)." (80)

Janie's experiences with Tea Cake have pushed her toward maturity, for, according to Lillie P. Howard, "when Janie returns to Eatonville, she is an older and wiser woman. She has learned that even the best things must end, but she has enjoyed herself immensely. She has no regrets" (111). Citing that key passage which begins "all gods dispense suffering without reason," Howard notes "Tea Cake has given [Janie] happiness, but, like all happiness, it has been transitory, and it

has been costly. Having accomplished his purpose--to make the realization of Janie's dreams possible--his physical presence seems no longer required" (106). This again points to Tea Cake's active participation in both Janie's suffering and her self-realization. Janie thinks Tea Cake "had to die for loving her" (169), but perhaps, as Howard suggests, he dies so that she can complete her quest for an identity and a voice, a voice big enough to come home and relate her whole story for the benefit of Pheoby and all of Eatonville and, by association, for all of us who need to learn there are "'two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves'" (183).

Hurston may have given Tea Cake both positive and negative qualities and motivations in order to create a realistic, human character. But perhaps she also meant for us to see him as an intervening god in Janie's quest--sometimes helping, sometimes hindering. In studying gods and higher beings with which Zora Neale Hurston would have been familiar--Greco-Roman, Norse, Egyptian, and African mythological gods, and African-American folklore heroes--we can see a bit of Tea Cake emerging from each tradition. And with gods from practically every corner of the world meddling with her efforts to acquire her own identity, Janie's quest

becomes that much more remarkable.

The idea of mythology in the novel has been explored by Cyrena Pondrom in her article "The Role of Myth in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God."

Pondrom effectively argues that

The story of Janie Killicks Stark [sic] Woods--with her capacity to fascinate men, her sometimes startlingly brutal treatment of two husbands, her blameless slaying of a third (the 'Son of Evening Sun,' whom she greatly loves and laments), her restoration of this third to life in her memory and commemoration of him by planting seeds--is a modern reinterpretation of the ancient Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz, with syncretic allusion to its analogues, the Greek story of Aphrodite and Adonis and the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris. (182)

This use of myth is, as Pondrom asserts, of "considerable importance. It documents far broader contexts for Hurston's work, both in content and literary form, and it should accelerate full recognition of her importance within the American literary canon" (183).

In addition, Geta LeSeur argues that Janie is a kind of Sisyphus in the modern existential sense.

LeSeur cites Camus's explanation of "the power of a single human being to exist happily in an unfair inhospitable universe" (34-35) and Ibsen's rendering of Peer Gynt, who "by travelling the world over and examining the corners of his mind . . . returns to where he started; the answer to his existence lay with his Self" (36) to show how Janie resembles a modern Sisyphus. Janie acquires the power of Camus and finds the answer of Ibsen; "just as Sisyphus is the master of his own destiny, Janie is the mistress of hers" (39).

If the myths of Sisyphus and of Ishtar and Tammuz are employed in Their Eyes Were Watching God, what of other myths? Hurston's fascination with mythology is well-documented in Dust Tracks on a Road, her autobiography (1942), in which she mentions Pluto and Persephone, Odin, Hercules, and Thor. She remembers her first high school English teacher's reading to the class and reminding her "of some old Roman like Cicero, Caesar or Virgil in tan skin" (107). She studied Greek at Howard University and discussed her lessons with one of her politician clients at the barber shop at which she worked (116). So she knew a great deal about Western mythology. This does not even touch on the African-American mythology she first learned on the porch at Joe Clarke's store in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. So, while Pondrom's and LeSeur's

studies are accurate, they are not complete. Because the character Tea Cake is usually glossed over or ignored completely, I have chosen to show how he can be seen as instrumental both in Janie's quest and in Hurston's efforts to use myth in structuring Their Eyes Were Watching God. I intend to demonstrate that these myths are employed by Hurston both as an artistic device and as a way of showing that Hurston's own idea of love and marriage is similar to Janie's: "'lak when you sit under a pear tree and think'" (Their Eyes 125).

Chapter Two

Greek and Roman Mythology and Tea Cake Woods

Zora Neale Hurston and the other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance must have felt something like the epic poets of Ancient Greece and Rome: not only were they helping to establish a new keystone of culture, an Afrocentric rather than a Eurocentric hub for art and literature, but they were also working to set to paper the oral traditions of their people. In the Ecloques, according to Mary Ellen Snodgrass, Virgil emphasizes "flowing rhythms" of the people; she adds he "also includes many realistic details--in particular, Virgil is concerned with the political confiscation of the rural estates in his homeland" (102). In much the same way, the Harlem Renaissance writers wanted to capture the rhythms of African American speech and the people's attachment to the land while spotlighting the injustices suffered by blacks in America. Hurston was particularly concerned with the "realistic details"; she wanted to get at the heart of her characters, to find out "what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so" (Dust Tracks 151). The years she lived in New York are marked by a tendency to regale her colleagues with

tales of her beloved Eatonville. In fact, asserts Robert Hemenway, "much of Hurston's personal success was built around her storytelling, which more often than not emphasized the Eatonville milieu. She could become a living representative of the southern folk idiom" (61). Hurston, like Virgil and other pre-print authors, was fascinated with oral-aural representations. And, like Virgil's Aeneas, she was ready to establish her own Rome at a place called Eatonville, Florida.

It should not be surprising, then, that Hurston used many references to Greco-Roman mythology and history in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Hurston reports, in Dust Tracks on a Road, her voracious reading of Greek, Roman, and Norse myths and her disappointment that the people around her "just would not act like gods" (39-41). She may be letting us know she is using references to mythology in the name of Janie's third husband: Vergible, possibly a linguistic corruption of Virgil. Snodgrass's description of the Roman poet as "tall and lanky, dark-eyed, somewhat unpolished in appearance and behavior" (101) could describe Tea Cake, who is "tall," with "full, lazy eyes . . . lean, over-padded shoulders and narrow waist" (90-92), and, as a day laborer, wore overalls, typically considered "unpolished." We think again of

Hurston's much-admired teacher, whom she describes as a tan Virgil (Dust Tracks 107). Virgil was a beekeeper; Book One of the Aeneid describes Carthaginians as a hive of bees and indicates their honey smells like thyme (Snodgrass 115). Similarly, Hurston's Janie sees Tea Cake as "a bee to a blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took" (101-102). Cyrena Pondrom indicates this passage also alludes to the birth of Adonis (193).

The interpretation of Their Eyes Were Watching God as a heroic epic, a spiritual quest for self, typically centers on Janie. Mary Jane Lupton asserts that "no woman in fiction exhibits so strongly as Janie those strengths associated with the Homeric epic hero--bravery, the completion of a voyage, the endurance of trials, mastery in battle, acceptance in the community, self-definition, survival" (47-48). The obstacles Janie encounters on her quest for self-realization include the persons of her grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Jody Starks. The town of Eatonville further attempts to squelch her wandering spirit. Tea Cake Woods seems to be an obstacle in some instances, but he also helps Janie in her quest for fulfillment.

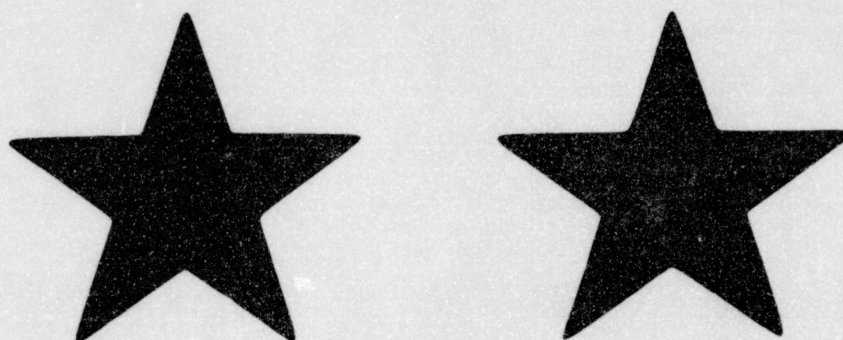
This is not to say that Janie is dependent upon

Tea Cake. He is more an instrument of her quest, perhaps like the golden bough of Aeneas. For example, if we look at the hurricane waters of south Florida as a symbolic river Styx, we can see how Tea Cake could function as Janie's golden bough. Helene Guerber describes the Styx of mythology: "The current of this river was so swift, that even the boldest swimmer could not pass over; and, as there was no bridge, all the spirits were obliged to rely upon the aid of Charon, an aged boatman, who plied the only available skiff" (161). Their Eyes Were Watching God's Tea Cake and Janie must "swim a distance, and Janie could not hold up more than a few strokes at a time, so Tea Cake bore her up till finally they hit a ridge" (155). The six-mile bridge the couple comes to is overcrowded by white people, and Janie and Tea Cake are not allowed to stop: "They could climb up one of its high sides and down the other, that was all" (156). This effectively makes the flood waters resemble the bridgeless river Styx. Charon, Styx's lone ferryman, "guards these flowing streams, ragged and awful . . . his eyes a steady flame" (Snodgrass 123). Perhaps the ferryman for Janie is the rabid dog, who "stood up and growled" (157) at Janie, desiring passage to shore via the cow on which he is perched (although Pondrom plausibly suggests the dog represents the three-headed dog guarding the gate

her own right, not a dependent of her man. She is Aeneas; he is the golden bough, a separate entity. Both may exist on their own, but they choose to be together.

Although Hurston seems to have wanted us to look to Virgil by naming Tea Cake Vergible, there exists another possible origin for the name, again linked to the golden bough. At Nemi, Diana's consort was the minor deity Virbius, "the mythical predecessor or archetype of the line of priests who served Diana under the title of Kings of the Wood, and who came, like him, one after the other, to a violent end" (Frazer 8). Virbius, king of the wood: Vergible Woods. This king of the wood was supposed, according to Frazer, to be the personification of "the tree on which grew the Golden Bough" (703), which fits with my interpretation of Tea Cake as the instrument itself. As an anthropologist, Hurston would certainly have studied Frazer's masterpiece, The Golden Bough. Virbius was consort of Diana the huntress; Frazer reports Virbius "spent all his days in the greenwood chasing wild beasts with the virgin huntress Artemis (the Greek counterpart of Diana) for his only comrade. Proud of her divine society, he spurned the love of other women . . ." (4). Hurston describes Janie's learning to hunt with Tea Cake: "She got to the place she could shoot a

CORRECTION



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CORRECT A POSSIBLE ERROR***

of Hades, Cerberus [193]). Janie remarks later that she is "'never tuh fuhgit dem eyes'" (158). Like Charon, the dog does not wish to allow Janie's passage on the cow, functioning as a vehicle for him and Janie, like Charon's "crazy bark, which sinks deep in the water under the unusual weight" (Frazer 707). Hurston says the cow/boat, as Janie grabs her tail, "sunk a little with the added load and thrashed a moment in terror. Thought she was being pulled down by a gator" (157). But just as Aeneas has only to "draw the Golden Bough from his bosom and hold it up, and straightaway the blusterer quails at the sight and meekly receives the hero" (Frazer 707), so Janie has only to call to Tea Cake, who swims out to the dog, "finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there. The cow . . . was landing on the fill with Janie before Tea Cake stroked in" (157).

If Hurston intended for Tea Cake to be Janie's golden bough, she makes a significant point: Tea Cake is a helpmate here, rather than a dominator as were Janie's previous two husbands, and the relationship is on more of an equal footing. He comes to Janie's rescue, just as she meant to come to his rescue when she went after the tar-paper roofing, which caused her to fall into the water. Tea Cake as golden bough also provides for an interpretation of Janie as a person in

her own right, not a dependent of her man. She is Aeneas; he is the golden bough, a separate entity. Both may exist on their own, but they choose to be together.

Although Hurston seems to have wanted us to look to Virgil by naming Tea Cake Vergible, there exists another possible origin for the name, again linked to the golden bough. At Nemi, Diana's consort was the minor deity Virbius, "the mythical predecessor or archetype of the line of priests who served Diana under the title of Kings of the Wood, and who came, like him, one after the other, to a violent end" (Frazer 8). Virbius, king of the wood: Vergible Woods. This king of the wood was supposed, according to Frazer, to be the personification of "the tree on which grew the Golden Bough" (703), which fits with my interpretation of Tea Cake as the instrument itself. As an anthropologist, Hurston would certainly have studied Frazer's masterpiece, The Golden Bough. Virbius was consort of Diana the huntress; Frazer reports Virbius "spent all his days in the greenwood chasing wild beasts with the virgin huntress Artemis (the Greek counterpart of Diana) for his only comrade. Proud of her divine society, he spurned the love of other women . . ." (4). Hurston describes Janie's learning to hunt with Tea Cake: "She got to the place she could shoot a

hawk out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake. They'd go out any late afternoon and come back loaded down with game" (125). Of course Janie's most important position as huntress comes when she must shoot to kill to save her own life. Like Virbius, Tea Cake spurns the love of other women when he rejects Nunkie, "a little chunky girl [who] took to picking a play out of Tea Cake in the fields and in the quarters" (130).

The priests of Nemi, or kings of the wood, always die violent deaths (although they are safe until their killers break the golden bough), but "may escape from it for a time, by their bodily strength and agility" (Frazer 300). Tea Cake, of course, escapes immediate death by killing the dog, but his eventual death is inevitable because the dog is rabid, and his bite has poisoned Tea Cake.

Another significant point concerning the kings of the wood is that they must always be runaway slaves who are "strong of hand and fleet of foot" (Frazer 301). Tea Cake is a strong day laborer, most probably a descendant of slaves. He is sometimes seen in the sense of a slave; he and Janie end up in the hurricane because Tea Cake ignores the signs of it, following instead his bosses: "'De white folks ain't gone

nowhere. Dey oughta know if its dangerous'" (148). Later, he is pressed into service by white men with rifles, who force him to bury those who have died in the hurricane. But here, the first chance he has to get away, he bolts. So he is like the runaway slave who becomes a priest of Nemi.

Frazer suggests that the killing of the priests at Nemi is necessary for the guarantee of renewed life in the spring. This idea recalls the passage at the end of Their Eyes Were Watching God, in which Hurston writes that Janie saved only one thing from the house on the muck following Tea Cake's death: "a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant. . . . Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance" (182). Frazer further notes that Virbius "came to be confounded with the sun," for "if Virbius was . . . a tree spirit, he must have been the spirit of the oak on which grew the Golden Bough. . . . As an oak spirit he must have been supposed periodically to rekindle the sun's fire, and might therefore easily be confounded with the sun itself" (707). Vergible Woods was "the son of Evening Sun" (169); he had "the sun for a shawl" (183). This comparison to the sun is intensified by the fact that Janie's first husband "did not represent sun-up" (28), and after seven years with Joe, "she wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (67).

Pondrom notes Tea Cake's similarity to the sun:

After [Tea Cake's] first night with her, "she could feel him and almost see him bucking around the room in the upper air. After a long time of passive happiness, she got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind." . . . The gesture recalls the sun rising in the morning; when Tea Cake is not there, Janie "descended to the ninth darkness where light has never been." (193)

Frazer suggests that the mortal kings of the wood had a similar relation to Diana that Virbius himself had: "If the sacred tree which he guarded with his life was supposed, as seems probable, to be her special embodiment, her priest may not only have worshipped it as his goddess but embraced it as his wife" (8). This passage recalls Janie's own attraction to trees. Her first image of sexuality takes place under a pear tree, and after watching the exchange of pollen between the tree and a bee, she thinks, "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?" (11).¹ Her answer comes some twenty-five years later, in the person of Tea Cake: "He could be a bee to a

blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101). If Janie is a "sacred tree," Tea Cake does guard her with his life; his death comes as a result of saving her.

By using the analogue of Virbius, Hurston wants us to know that the ideal marriage involves comradeship. Janie and Tea Cake's hunting together (along with the many other things they do together) shows they are consorts in the same sense as Virbius and Diana. Virbius's spurning of other women parallels Tea Cake's rejection of Nunkie and Janie's rejection of Mrs. Turner's brother. Hurston seems to be saying that jealousy in a good relationship is inevitable, but that the lovers must rebuff the advances of others. It is quite possible that the violent death of Tea Cake/Virbius symbolizes a belief on Hurston's part that the ideal marriage she is detailing is impossible, or if possible, only for a short time. The real-life model for Tea Cake (whom Hurston refers to only as "A.W.P.") was the love of Hurston's life, but the relationship was, as Lillie P. Howard indicates, "doomed from the start, partly because he could not abide her career, partly because Zora could not abide to give up her work and seemed to have a particular aversion to marriage" (94). It is interesting, then, that she should have alluded to the major deity Diana, whose "work" as goddess of the moon, fertility,

childbearing, and hunting, was infinitely more important than Virbius's work, simply serving her.

Virbius and Diana are gods of fertility and death and rebirth. These themes are explored extensively in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Mary Jane Lupton calls Tea Cake a "Dionysian god of springtime" (49) and makes much of the idea of "the fusion of origins and endings, survival and death" (54). Lupton notes Janie's youthful affinity for the pear tree, "life in full growth," and her attachment to Tea Cake's seeds at the end of the novel:

As the young Janie is springtime, full of expectation and yet to be entered, so the mature Janie is Autumn; like Demeter and other fertility symbols, she remains committed to the earth and to the continuation of the life processes against the approaching cold. (54)

Pondrom also explores the death/rebirth patterns in the novel by comparing the story of Janie and Tea Cake with the stories of Isis and Osiris, Aphrodite and Adonis, and Ishtar and Tammuz (see Chapter Four). A mysterious aspect of the novel concerns Janie's childlessness. In three marriages between the ages of sixteen and forty, she never gives birth; neither is she ever mentioned as being pregnant. In fact, when Nanny asks her if she is

carrying Logan's child, Janie answers emphatically, "'Ah'm all right dat way. Ah know 'tain't nothin' dere'" (21). Hurston herself was married twice and had at least one other serious relationship (with the man on whom Tea Cake is based),² and she never had children, so she is simply writing about what she knows. However, the answer to the childless union of at least Janie and Tea Cake may lie in Hurston's favorite myth: Pluto and Persephone. Janie's affinity for this tale dates back to her elementary school days, when she was asked to read the myth aloud from her fifth grade reader: "Some of the stories I had reread several times, and this Greco-Roman myth was one of my favorites. I was exalted by it . . ." (Dust Tracks 35-36). This myth, too, contains elements which come into play in the world of Tea Cake and Janie.

Janie Starks is "stolen" from society by Tea Cake Woods, as Persephone was stolen by Pluto. The town of Eatonville is certain he means to whisk Janie (and her money) away. Janie's helper at the store, Hezekiah, tells her Tea Cake "'ain't got no business makin' hissef familiar wid nobody lak you'" (98). Her friend Pheoby believes "'Tea Cake is draggin' you round tuh places you ain't used tuh'" (107). Ironically, Pheoby would prefer that Janie marry an undertaker, who sends people to Pluto, rather than Pluto himself. Tea Cake

comes in his chariot, "a battered car," which he tells her he has brought "'tuh haul you off in'" (103). Tea Cake wins Janie the same way Pluto wins Persephone: with food (a pomegranate in Pluto's case), not "groceries for ordinary people" (104), but food from another world, perhaps Winter Park (an actual town near Eatonville, but the choice may be an allusion to Persephone's stay in the underworld). Eatonville seems to attribute other characteristics of Pluto to Tea Cake as well. Alexander Murray writes of the god, "it was necessary to attribute a double character to him: first, as the source of all the treasures and wealth of the earth . . . secondly, as monarch of the dark realm inhabited by the invisible shades of the dead" (75). The residents of the town are friendly with Tea Cake, and are aware of his basic goodness; as Hezekiah says, "'Ah ain't never heard nobody say he stole nothin'. . . . Dey don't say he ever cut nobody or shot nobody either'" (98). All the same, the town fears losing Janie, their presiding "Mis' Mayor," to someone like Tea Cake. They believe he is not good enough for her, though he is good enough for them, as we see when the people return from the ball game after Janie and Tea Cake meet. Tea Cake stays on the porch: "He took a seat and made talk and laughter with the rest until closing time" (94). This gives him a kind of "double

character" like that of Pluto.

Pluto's other name, Hades, "was interpreted by the ancients to mean 'the unseen one,' and some modern scholars find this acceptable, others holding out for a derivation from aia, 'earth'" (Hathorn 88). Tea Cake uses a number of unseen props in his courting of Janie: an invisible guitar, post, and companion, and a pantomimed tying up of horses which pull his battered chariot. He seems, however, to fit better as a god of the earth, reigning as he does over the muck: he hosts all the parties, gambles with the others, and his house is generally "the unauthorized center of the 'job'" (126). When everyone is scrambling to flee the hurricane, Tea Cake and Janie's Bahamian friend 'Lias refuses to allow anyone a place in his car until he has checked to see if the couple needs a ride (147). The muck itself seems to symbolize fertility at its best:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have

fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. (123)

The rest of the world's being hidden indicates the muck was a sort of underworld. Also, Tea Cake as "son of the Evening Sun" would necessarily come from the "remote west," as some indicated the realm of Hades was located (Murray 76). The remote west suggests the horizon, a theme used throughout the novel. Robert Hemenway argues that "Tea Cake suggests the horizon--he is the 'son of Evening Sun'--and the horizon motif illustrates the distance one must travel in order to distinguish between illusion and reality, dream and truth, role and self" (235). Furthermore, Murray states Pluto's underworld "was entered from the upper world by any spot of sufficiently sombre or wild natural aspect, particularly chasms with dark waters such as inspire terror" (76). The description of the muck as the hurricane begins recalls such a place. Lake Okechobee is described as a "monster," which "began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble." And, "it was night, it stayed night. Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands" (150). This relation to Hades recalls some of Hurston's views about race relations. In her autobiography, she suggests that if the races do

not get along during this life, perhaps they will meet in another world at a barbecue (see the full quote on page 78). This barbecue, Hemenway notes, "causes one to think of Hades. Is Zora really telling her readers, 'I'll see you in Hell'? Is it the fire next time?" (286). Is Hurston telling us Tea Cake and Janie will be presiding over that barbecue in the next world?

Tea Cake is like Pluto in another way. Richmond Hathorn notes that "aside from his association with Persephone, Hades is a subordinate figure in myth" (88). Tea Cake is an aid to Janie's self-realization and is the man she deeply loves; yet he is a subordinate figure in Hurston's novel, because it is Janie's story, like Persephone's, which "symbolize[s] the death-and-rebirth pattern in all conceivable forms" (Hathorn 92). Janie may also be identified with Demeter, the earth-mother, also a goddess of vegetation. This is particularly appropriate; Janie is in essence motherless and in fact childless, and since Demeter is Persephone's mother, Janie becomes both mother and daughter. In fact, Pheoby tells Janie when she returns from the muck, "'Gal, you sho looks good. You look like youse yo' own daughter'" (4). Although Tea Cake can be viewed as a god of vegetation or the sun, or as the one responsible for the changing of the seasons, he remains, like Virbius and Pluto,

subordinate to a more important deity (Janie), like Diana and Persephone. Here again, Hurston seems to elevate the place of the female in the relationship, and by exalting Janie, she raises womanhood as a whole.

Chapter Three

The Norse god Balder and Tea Cake Woods

We know that Zora Neale Hurston was also familiar with (and fascinated by) Norse mythology, again from her autobiography, where she tells us she received a box of books from some admirers who visited her elementary school. Hurston loved the book of Norse myths best of all those she received, though she was not sure why:

Why did the Norse tales strike so deeply into my soul? I do not know, but they did. I seemed to remember seeing Thor swing his mighty short-handled hammer as he sped across the sky in rumbling thunder, lightning flashing from the tread of his steeds and the wheels of his chariot. The great and good Odin, who went down the well of knowledge to drink, and was told that the price of a drink from that fountain was an eye. Odin drank deeply, then plucked out one eye without a murmur and handed it to the grizzly keeper, and walked away. That held majesty for me.

Although Odin is ultimately killed by a member of the canine family (a wolf), Hurston makes it clear Tea Cake is not to be confused with that god, by specifically pointing out he retains both eyes. Tea Cake says of the rabid dog, "'He'd uh raised hell though if he had uh grabbed me uh inch higher and bit me in mah eye. Yuh can't buy eyes in de store yuh know'" (157-158). Thor, who kills the Midgard Serpent but is killed himself in the struggle, might be Tea Cake, but the most likely Norse analogue is Balder, whose name "means the shining god" (Murray 359). Again we see the golden bough come into play,³ as the golden bough of the Romans is thought by Frazer to be mistletoe; he tells us how Virgil compares the two:

The poet tells how two doves, guiding Aeneas to the gloomy vale in whose depth grew the Golden Bough, alighted upon a tree, "whence shown a flickering gleam of gold. As in the woods in winter cold the mistletoe--a plant not native to its tree--is green with fresh leaves and twines its yellow berries about the boles; such seemed upon the shady holm-oak the leafy gold, so rustled in the gentle breeze the golden leaf." Here Virgil definitely describes the Golden Bough as growing on a holm-oak, and compares it with

the mistletoe. The inference is almost inevitable that the Golden Bough was nothing but the mistletoe seen through the haze of poetry or of popular superstition. (703)

The connection here is that Balder was slain by a branch of mistletoe, the supposed golden bough.

The name of Balder's home, Breidablick, means "the far- or wide-shining" (Murray 359). This makes us think of a vast area, much like Tea Cake's favorite place, the muck, vast with the plenty of the earth, and of Janie's dreams of the horizon, which is shown to her by Tea Cake. Murray further states, "The joy of the world in the presence of Bald[e]r means only the gladness inspired by sunlight" (359). Janie "had tried to show her shine" before she knew Tea Cake, but she had been "covered . . . over with mud" (86). When she sees Tea Cake for the second time, Hurston describes her as "beaming out with light" (97). Later, she is "lit up like a transfiguration" (100). Balder is killed by Hod, god of winter, with a branch of mistletoe--every other living thing had sworn not to hurt him--and this brings about the decay of living things, "the gloom of the northern climes during the winter months, when, in the purely concrete language of the primitive race, Bald[e]r, or the sun, was dead" (Murray 359). This parallels the death of Tea Cake,

when, for Janie, "the grief of outer darkness descended" (175).

Although Hod is the actual killer of Balder, it is Loki the trickster who brings about the death. Loki is an intelligent but malicious god, and in his penchant for stirring up trouble, he may be seen as an analogue to the troublemaking Mrs. Turner of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Loki finds the mistletoe, takes it to Hod, and shows him where to shoot (Munch 82).⁴ Mrs. Turner invites her brother back to the muck, which plants the seed in Tea Cake's disoriented mind that Janie is cheating on him. It is this thought which makes Tea Cake take aim at Janie, and forces her to kill her rabid husband or be killed. The two actual killers, Hod and Janie, are blind: Hod is literally blind, while Janie is blind to Mrs. Turner's brother and other men because of her love for Tea Cake. So neither would be able to do harm to their victims: for Hod, it would be physically impossible, for Janie, emotionally. But Loki and Mrs. Turner must keep meddling.

When Balder's wife, Nanna, sees his body being carried to the funeral pyre, her heart breaks and she dies from sorrow (Munch 84). Loki escapes and turns himself into a salmon. He is then caught by the gods in a net, "and bound fast until the twilight of the

gods" (Murray 359-360). A theory posited by Pat Carr and Lou-Ann Crouther can illustrate that this part of the myth is parallel to the novel. They submit Janie is infected with rabies when Tea Cake bites her as he is dying, and she makes sure "everything around downstairs was shut and fastened" (Their Eyes 183) because she is preparing to die at the end of the novel. If this is the case, Janie, like Nanna, dies as the result of her husband's death. And, the novel's final simile of the fish net indicates the twilight of the gods (also known as Ragnarok) has arrived, and Loki the salmon is captured. In fact, as Janie returns from the muck, it is twilight: "The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky" (1).

The first chapter of Their Eyes Were Watching God contains many references to Judgment Day, the Christian equivalent of Ragnarok (which literally translates "judgment of the gods," according to Webster's New World Dictionary). "They sat in judgment" (2), says Hurston of the Eatonvillians on their porches. Later, Pheoby comments on the people:

"Sam say most of 'em goes to church so they'll be sure to rise in Judgment. Dat's de day dat every secret is s'posed to be made known. . . . Most of dese zigaboos is so het up over yo' business till they liable to

hurry theyself to Judgment to find out about you if they don't soon know." (5-6)

Of course the peaceful final scene of the novel does not have the characteristics of Ragnarok, although the earlier hurricane scene recalls the flood the Norse predicted. Instead of preparing for battle, Janie seems to be preparing for the renewal of the world which was to follow the destruction of it. H.R. Ellis Davidson describes the renewal of life like this:

Only the World Tree did not fall, although it shook and trembled as worlds were shattered around it. Within this tree were sheltered two beings, called Lif and Lifthrasir, who were the man and woman destined to repeople the earth when it rose again from the sea. Perhaps it was in the tree also that the gods' sons were sheltered, since they were said to survive the conflict and to join Balder returned from the dead. The earth rose again from the water, cleansed of all the terror and destruction, green and fair as at the beginning of time. A new sun, more radiant than her mother, encircled the heavens. . . (122)

Janie, the personification of the World Tree, does not fall, though she falters, fleetingly: "Well, she

thought, that big old dawg with the hatred in his eyes had killed her after all. She wished she had slipped off that cow-tail and drowned then and there and been done" (169). Life is "sheltered" in the meshes of the fish net, her horizon (i.e., she has found the meaning or essence of life within herself). The earth has of course risen back from the sea, since the flood waters from the hurricane have subsided. Balder/Tea Cake has come back to life, "came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl" (183). The "green and fair" new world is symbolized by the evergreen pines, and the "new sun" is experience, the "song of the sigh" being the metaphor for "the day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse" (183).

We can see that with the Norse analogue, Hurston shows us the ups and downs of relationships. The inevitability of death is made clear; outside obstacles (Loki/Mrs. Turner) are to be expected but overcome; experience is praised as a way to discover meaning in life; and joy and grief are seen as necessary cycles of life.

Chapter 4

Babylonia, Egypt and Africa

In considering Hurston's art, we must inevitably move away from Western references, for the author "spent an entire career chronicling the cultural life of 'the Negro farthest down,' the beauty and wisdom of 'the people'" (Hemenway 238). Let us move on, then, to Babylonia and Egypt. Hurston's interest in Egyptian folklore is played out in her third novel, Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939), in which she depicts Moses as a hoodoo conjure man and "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" (Hemenway 257).

Pondrom's article on the role of myth in the novel concentrates primarily on the ancient Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz and its Egyptian analogue, the story of Isis and Osiris (she also includes the Greeks Aphrodite and Adonis⁵). Pondrom suggests that "when Hurston introduces Tea Cake, she is at pains to make him the appropriate mythic consort of an avatar of the great female goddess, and an analogue of the dying and resurrected gods" (192). She points out that of the

above three myths, like Their Eyes Were Watching God, all involve an older woman and younger man; in fact, Osiris and Tea Cake are both 28 (192). In addition, Ishtar's love for Tammuz, like Janie's love for Tea Cake, "somehow causes his death. She grieves for him ceaselessly, and her grief is symbolized by the summer sun drying the vegetation" (185). Pondrom claims the pattern of death and rebirth in the Ishtar and Tammuz myth is recapitulated in the final scenes of the novel. Janie's possession of the packet of seeds recalls "the capacity of Ishtar to restore to life even the lover whose death she has caused" (198). Janie has the power, too, both in the seeds she has at the end of the novel and in her "memory, vision, and imagination [which] are the powers which confer rebirth" (198). This proves Tea Cake, as a god of the sun, is fated to die, says Pondrom, for

if Tea Cake is to replicate the sacred, invigorating power of the sun, he must also replicate its nightly death. His eternity, like that of the fertility gods of old, is also the eternity of seasonal cycle and the regeneration of life in succeeding generations." (198)

Hurston is likely to have known these myths from Frazer's The Golden Bough (Pondrom suggests the book

was a text used by Hurston's anthropology professor, Franz Boas [200 n 21]), and she probably used them to reinforce the cyclic and meaningful nature of life and love. Hurston and Janie want us to find out about living for ourselves; they want us to go fishing with our spouses, as Pheoby recognizes after hearing Janie's story: "'Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this'" (182-83).

Babylonian and Egyptian myths are still better known in America than true African myth. We cannot be certain of how much Hurston would have known of African tales; she did take general ethnology at Columbia, but she rarely attended (Hemenway 208-09). Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" stresses "an instinctual Africanism," according to Hemenway. Through this "common [Harlem] Renaissance technique," Hemenway maintains, "the black writer could easily symbolize a racial pride growing from a cultural difference" (76). Hurston claimed she was most concerned with "the poor Negro, the real one in the furrows and cane breaks" (238). Hemenway asserts, "this sense of racial pride had contributed much to Their Eyes Were Watching God" (238). At the time Hurston was writing the novel, she was living in

Jamaica and Haiti, where she would have been seen as superior by virtue of her reddish-brown skin.⁶

Hurston reports of Jamaican people that "it is the aim of everybody to talk English, act English and look English." The problem, she says, is this:

It is not so difficult to put a coat of European culture over African culture, but it is next to impossible to lay a European face over an African face in the same generation. So everybody who has any hope at all is looking out for the next generation and so on. The color line in Jamaica between the white Englishman and the blacks is not as sharply drawn as between the mulattoes and the blacks. (Tell My Horse 6)

Haiti is a place where "the mulattoes began their contention for equality with the whites at least a generation before freedom for the blacks was ever thought of" (Tell My Horse 73). Hurston describes the Haiti of 1936 and 1937 this way: "Haiti has always been two places. First it was the Haiti of the masters and slaves. Now it is Haiti of the wealthy and educated mulattoes and the Haiti of the blacks" (73). Hurston must have felt much the same as the Jamaican Leonard Barrett, who did not want to emphasize his white ancestry, in fact felt he could not,

because it was the African ingredients in me that freed my being. I therefore decided to identify myself with my African heritage, setting loose the rhythm that I felt throbbing in me. The conflict resolved, I was free to embrace all the members of my family, of whatever hue, and began to smile at those who were unable to reciprocate because of their European bondage. (13-14)

In fact, Hurston often criticized blacks who sought to associate only with whites: "'I am on fire about my people. I need not concern myself with the few individuals who have quit the race via the tea table'" (Hemenway 238). In the chapter titled "My People! My People!" in Dust Tracks on a Road (this chapter was removed from the first edition of the book), Hurston condemns blacks who put down their darker-skinned brothers (164-65). So it seems logical that she would choose to study and write about African cultures.

In Haiti, Hurston was immersed in the study of a religion that was rooted in the mythology of Dahomean, Yoruban, and a number of other African cultures. The religion is vodoun (or voodoo or hoodoo), and its gods, or loa, are African in origin. One such god is Papa Legba Attibon the trickster. He is, Hurston reports, "a spirit of the fields, the woods and the general

outdoors" (Tell My Horse 129). Again we are presented with a linguistic connection to Vergible Woods. Legba is god of the woods, and the consonantal similarities are obvious: g, b, l. "Legba's altar is a tree," says Hurston (129); Tea Cake's association to trees is also clear: he is "a bee to a blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring" (Their Eyes 101). George E. Simpson notes that Legba's favorite colors are black and yellow (248)--the colors of a bee. Although Legba in Haiti is visualized as an old man (Hurston, Tell My Horse 128), in Dahomey, where the god originated, he is the seventh son of Mawu-Lisa and the "spoiled child, because he was the youngest" (Courlander, Treasury 160).

Robert Pelton observes that "the Fon [a Dahomean religious group] know him as a powerful and many-faced agent of transformation" (72). This further explains the many seemingly contradictory actions of Tea Cake. The myth in which Mawu grants Legba the power to act as interpreter and mediator between herself and his brothers "uses the imagery of family relationships to affirm . . . that the force at the heart of the process for shaping the cosmos is not purely physical energy, but a dynamic of intelligence, choice, and chance" (Pelton 73). This affirms the structure of Janie's actions during the last third of the novel: she uses her intelligence to make the choice to marry Tea Cake

and go with him to the muck, even in the face of opposition from her peers; and it is chance that causes Janie to see the tar-paper roofing with which she wants to shelter Tea Cake, and which eventually causes his death.

Hurston reports that "Legba Attibon is the god of the gate. He rules the gate of the hounfort, the entrance to the cemetery and he is also Baron Carrefour, Lord of the crossroads. The way to all things is in his hands" (Tell My Horse 128). Alfred Metraux says that only Legba "can translate men's prayers and transmit them to the invisible powers" (61). The Yoruba's Legba is known as Eshu; of him, Harold Courlander writes, "Eshu strove to turn Olorun's meanings aside, so that events would take an unintended course" (Tales 59). That is, Legba is the translator of the supreme god's message, but he can misinterpret the message for its recipient, thus changing the course of events. We shall see that repeated references to gates in strategic places in the novel show Janie went to the gate several times, but Papa Legba misinterpreted the message (which would bring about her self-fulfillment) until he came in the form of Tea Cake. When Janie begins to tell Pheoby her life story, she concludes "that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate" (10). Janie's search for the horizon

begins in Nanny's front yard, but she cannot see it from the porch, so she "went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road" (11). Through a haze of pollen, she kisses Johnny Taylor across the gatepost, but is called back by Nanny, who believes Janie should live a differnt life from the one she would have with Johnny.

Following this incident, Nanny marries Janie to the aging Logan Killicks. Here, Nanny again represents Legba; Logan is the misinterpretation of the message. Janie, told by her elders that she would learn to love the man, waits for love to come: "So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things" (23). Nanny's ideal of an economically secure marriage is not the ideal meant for Janie. Legba has sent her the wrong message, and she knows it. Her life in West Florida is not her destiny: "The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off" (24).

When Joe Starks arrives, the message is still not quite right, "because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blowing trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (28). Now Janie knows she needs both pollen and horizon, but Joe represents

only one of these. Perhaps Legba Attibon is simply bringing her a step closer to the wide open spaces over which he is lord. The "change and chance" mentioned is significant here, because Legba "must be regarded as Accident, as a means of affording the individual a way out of an inexorable destiny" (Herskovits 56). And change means a great deal to Janie, for when she fights with Killicks, "a feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good" (31). Again she uses her intelligence to make her choice.

But the change does not do her good, for she finds, as do the men on the store porch, that Joe is "uh man dat changes everything, but nothin' don't change him" (46). Janie reiterates the sentiment when Joe is on his deathbed (82). Joe Starks even takes away the haze of pollen, because that surreal image is never mentioned again. In fact, summertime has had to move inside Janie:

Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes. Somebody near about making

summertime out of lonesomeness. (73)
That somebody is Papa Legba. Mawu-Lisa must be getting angry by now that her message keeps getting misinterpreted. Strangely, Legba of the crossroads is mentioned in connection with Joe at his funeral: "The Little Emperor of the cross-roads was leaving Orange County as he had come--with the outstretched hand of power" (84). Perhaps each person associated with the gate--Johnny Taylor, Nanny, and Joe--is a representation of Legba with some defect; the Joe version has too much power and too many things. It is not for Janie to wallow in wealth; her destiny is people:

She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things. (85)

At this point, the imagery changes from gates to doors. It is as if Janie has been driven inside herself so far that Legba cannot just come to the gate for her this time; he must come all the way to the door. When Janie meets Tea Cake, he must come inside, unlike Johnny Taylor and Joe Starks. He helps her close the store that night: "He locked the door and

shook it to be sure and handed her the key. 'Come on now, Ah'll see yuh inside yo' door and git on down de Dixie'" (94). Legba is not only "guardian of the earthly gates and walls, he also watches over homes, roads and paths" (Metraux 62). When Tea Cake returns, Janie must look toward the door to see him (96); he runs out the door of her home at night (101) in order to return to the door in the morning and tell her his "daytime thoughts" (102). The door imagery is most evident during the hurricane scene. By this time Janie has learned to love, to tell stories, to shoot, and to enjoy being around other people (things Joe would not let her do). But fear descends, and it is a door that separates them from safety and death:

They huddled closer and stared at the door. They just didn't use another part of their bodies, and they didn't look at anything but the door. The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. (150-151)

Yet, while Janie realizes a higher power still controls her life and death, she realizes this power has shown her her fate. Tea Cake tests her by asking her if she is angry with him for bringing her to the muck. Janie replies, "'Naw. We been tuhgether round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you

die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door'" (151).

Tea Cake has opened the gate so Janie may find the truth. She relates this truth to Pheoby at the end of the novel:

It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves. (183)

Legba Attibon is often called Papa Legba, and Tea Cake calls himself papa Tea Cake when he writes her from Jacksonville (111). There are other things about Tea Cake's character which can be explained if he is seen as a representation of Legba. The aforementioned passage which contains the lines "all gods dispense suffering without reason. . . . Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom" (138-39) is again important. Janie suffers often at the hands of Tea Cake, but she does learn from these incidents. We see Janie's suffering at the beginning of her and Tea Cake's courtship.

In the first place he looked too young for her. . . . Then again he didn't look like he had too much. Maybe he was hanging around to get in with her and strip her of all that she had. Just as well if she never saw him again. He was probably the kind of man who lived with various women but never married.

(96)

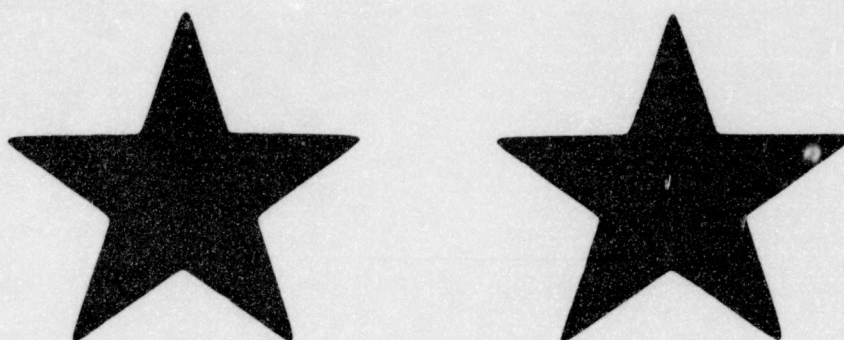
Tea Cake tells her she has got him "in de go-long," but she thinks that is only talk:

He's just saying anything for the time being, feeling he's got me so I'll b'lieve him. The next thought buried her under tons of cold futility. He's trading on being younger than me. Getting ready to laugh at me for an old fool. But oh, what wouldn't I give to be twelve years younger so I could b'lieve him.

(100-01)

Her worst fears seem realized in Jacksonville, when he takes her two hundred dollars and stays gone all day and night. She suffers with the thought she has been made a fool of like Annie Tyler. Showing her strength, though, Janie decides she will not return "to Eatonville to be laughed at and pitied" (115). In her fear she prays to God to not let Tea Cake be hurt or in love with someone else. When Tea Cake comes back, he

CORRECTION



***PRECEDING IMAGE HAS BEEN
REFILMED
TO ASSURE LEGIBILITY OR TO
CORRECT A POSSIBLE ERROR***

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(96)

Tea Cake tells her she has got him "in de go-long," but she thinks that is only talk:

He's just saying anything for the time being, feeling he's got me so I'll b'lieve him. The next thought buried her under tons of cold futility. He's trading on being younger than me. Getting ready to laugh at me for an old fool. But oh, what wouldn't I give to be twelve years younger so I could b'lieve him.

(100-01)

Her worst fears seem realized in Jacksonville, when he takes her two hundred dollars and stays gone all day and night. She suffers with the thought she has been made a fool of like Annie Tyler. Showing her strength, though, Janie decides she will not return "to Eatonville to be laughed at and pitied" (115). In her fear she prays to God to not let Tea Cake be hurt or in love with someone else. When Tea Cake comes back, he

convinces her "'de girl baby ain't born and her mama is dead, dat can git me tuh spend our money on her. Ah told yo' before dat you got de keys tuh de kingdom'" (116). She uses those keys to open the gate to Tea Cake's world. Tea Cake encourages Janie to use her emerging voice; instead of saying his new wife is not made for associating with railroad hands (as Joe would have done), he asks her if she wants to go with him (118-19).

Again Janie suffers when Tea Cake goes to win the money back; she is afraid he will be hurt. And she must endure the pain of seeing her husband injured in a fight. But she learns something from this experience, too. She discovers Tea Cake is not after her money. He tells her, "'Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman'" (122). Additionally, she now understands she can be open with Tea Cake, and she tells him about the rest of her money. When Janie believes her husband is encouraging the affections of the girl Nunkie on the muck, she "learned what it felt like to be jealous" and "feels a cold rage" (130-31). But after she and Tea Cake fight, Hurston says, "The next morning Janie asked like a woman, 'You still love ole Nunkie?'" (132). Janie has gained wisdom, and she knows she need not be jealous of Tea Cake.

The worst case of Janie's "indiscriminate

suffering" is when Tea Cake beats her. He claims he beats her "not because her behavior justified his jealousy," but "tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (140-41). It is not the offender who is whipped, but Janie. Harold Courlander indicates "Eshu was known to do violent things when angry" (Treasury 204), and this is a possible explanation for the beating.

Courlander tells us that "there was one being who did not fear Eshu. He was Iku, or Death" (Tales 63). If Tea Cake is Legba, then we are prepared for his death with this fact. In addition, according to George E. Simpson, the capital of the loa is "Ville au Camp," or "under the water" (238n). It is of course in the water where Tea Cake receives his fatal injury.

Melville and Frances Herskovits describe Legba as "the arch-individualist in a society which institutionalizes so many of the elements of life" (55). This is true of Tea Cake, who never does anything because others expect him to do it. He ignores the social codes of Eatonville by dating a woman above him in economic class. He ignores society as a whole by marrying a woman twelve years his senior. He ignores the Indians and others as they encourage him to flee the hurricane. Finally, he repeatedly refuses to see a doctor (when he is stabbed and when he is bitten).

The Herskovitses further explain that "the concept of Legba reveals the innermost convictions of the Dahomean about the organization and working of the forces of the universe as they affect him" (56). Janie has obviously gained those convictions. Through all her experiences, she has acted out and worked within "the dynamic of intelligence, choice, and chance" (Pelton 73) of the world of Legba. She knows that her first two marriages did not show her what she needed to know, but that life with Tea Cake and the accident of his death helped her find her horizon and return home: "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (184). Janie is aware of the way the forces of the universe affect her, and she is determined to live her life as the same kind of arch-individualist as Legba, no matter what Eatonville thinks of it.

Legba is such a loner that it seems Hurston is not expressing views about marriage at all with this representation of Tea Cake. Perhaps she did this on purpose to show how necessary it is that a woman be able to define herself in her own right, rather than define herself through her marriage. Tea Cake as Legba helps her find sunup, pollen, and far horizon. Because

of this she is able to say,

"Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now
Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by
comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of
things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come
along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat
bedroom. (182)

By saying the house is full of thoughts, Janie is
saying her intelligence will carry her through
anything.

Chapter 5

African-American Vernacular Representation of Tea Cake

Probably the most important mythic element Hurston uses is one she learned from the men on Joe Clarke's porch: the story of High John the Conqueror (High John, John de Conquer). We have already seen that Legba is "a means of affording the individual a way out of an inexorable destiny" (Herskovits 56). This description sounds very much like the phrase used by Hurston to describe the folkloric character of John the Conqueror: "And all the time there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way" (Sanctified Church 70). So perhaps High John is an American extension of Legba the trickster. In any case, John is extremely important to African-American folklore, and Zora Neale Hurston certainly would not leave him out of her efforts to employ mythic structure in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

In most folklore studies, John of the John and Master stories (or John tales) is one and the same as John de Conquer. H. Nigel Thomas reports that "the name 'John' is Mandingo, and the tales are a recreation of a similar body of slave tales in the Mandingo

society," and he further explains, "the theme of triumphing over massa is the chief preoccupation of the 'John tales'" (25). John de Conquer, in Zora Neale Hurston's description of him, seems to be more of a spirit than the folkloric hero of the John tales, though the Conqueror certainly prevails in his exploits. Julius Lester goes so far as to suggest that John de Conquer is all the African-American folk heroes rolled into one: "High John the Conqueror is Br'er Rabbit, Stagolee, John Henry, and the blues without a disguise" (21). Whether John de Conquer is one or all these, it seems clear that Zora Neale Hurston intended Vergible Woods to be a fictional representation of him. SallyAnn Ferguson claims that each man in Janie's life is a folkloric representation. Her marriage to Logan Killicks follows the Chaucerian pattern (from "The Miller's Tale") of a May-December marriage, in which there are three distinctions: "the social and economic advancement the girl expects from the union, the large difference in the ages of the husband and wife, and the eventual cuckoldry of the husband" (186). Ferguson explains how Hurston has altered this story "to reveal Logan's inability to fulfill his wife's human desires and, more importantly, Janie's need to fend for herself" (186). Joe Starks seems to be a representation of the black folklore character "Jody

the Grinder," the "legendary wife stealer of black folklore" (188). Janie calls Joe "Jody," and the tale itself, according to Ferguson, is sometimes known as "Joe the Grinder." She further explains that the folkloric Jody is "a metaphor for stagnant and fleeting adulterous relationships"; he is a man who typically comes along to seduce the wives of men who are in the army or in jail (188). The differences between Joe Starks and Jody the Grinder are that Jody's affairs are "fleeting," while Starks is married to Janie for 20 years. And while the Jody of folklore "lacks . . . the money and much of anything else to keep women from sending him packing when their more responsible mates return" (188), Joe Starks has material wealth but lacks a real love or even, at the end of their relationship, the capability for sexual love. Like the grinder, Starks thinks highly of himself but does not fulfill Janie's ultimate requirements. "He did not represent sun-up and pollen" (Their Eyes 28).

Tea Cake, says Ferguson, "loves, fights, steals, and gambles much like the black folk hero Stackolee (Stagolee, Stacker Lee)" (185). According to Julius Lester, he can really "whup the blues on guitar" (Black Folktales 114). The funerals of Stagolee and Tea Cake are quite similar:

Stagolee was laid out in a \$10,000 casket.

Had on a silk mohair suit and his Stetson hat was in his hand. In his right coat pocket was a brand new deck of cards. In his left coat pocket was a brand new .44 with some extra rounds of ammunition and a can of Mace. And by his side was his guitar. (Lester 131)

Tea Cake's funeral is prepared by Janie:

The Undertaker did a handsome job and Tea Cake slept royally on a white silken couch among the roses she had bought. He looked almost ready to grin. Janie bought him a brand new guitar and put it in his hands.

(180)

However, although Tea Cake is a gambling fun lover, Stackolee seems too shallow a character for him to represent. Tea Cake is not the "'bad nigger'--so labeled by slave masters, according to folklorist Alan Dundes, because he was unafraid of them" (191). In fact, Tea Cake is uneasy around whites in the scene following the hurricane where he is forced into service burying the dead. Unlike Stackolee, Tea Cake works within the system. When the men threaten him to make him come with them, he does not say "You and what army?" as Stackolee would (Lester 119). Instead he goes with them and waits for a chance to run. He and Janie flee the area. Janie is for staying "'until it's

all over'" (163), but Tea Cake explains, "'It's bad bein' strange niggers wid white folks. Everybody is against yuh'" (164). In addition, "about once a month, Stagolee would buy up all the available liquor and moonshine in the county and proceed to get wasted, and when Stagolee got wasted, he got totally wasted" (Lester 120). Liquor is only mentioned once in connection with Tea Cake, and he never appears drunk (142).

Another reason it is difficult to believe Tea Cake represents Stackolee is that he does not fight with other men unless threatened. Far from killing Billy Lyons and shooting his way out of court (Ferguson 192), Tea Cake, according to Janie's helper Hezekiah, "'never . . . stole nothin'" and "'Dey don't say he ever cut nobody or shot nobody neither'" (98). Tea Cake hits a man in Jacksonville for thinking "he was bad," but does not hurt him badly, though he does knock out two teeth (117-18). Shortly thereafter, Janie's voice recalls, "Tea Cake had a knife, it was true, but that was only to protect hisself. God knows, Tea Cake wouldn't harm a fly" (120). He tries to avoid getting into a fight while gambling, and only attacks "ole Double-Ugly" in self-defense. Besides, Stackolee shot Billy Lyons because he lost everything gambling, including his Cadillac, to the man, according to the

song "Stagger Lee." In this version of the tale, put to music, Stagger Lee is the one who accuses Billy of cheating, so Double-Ugly is a better representation of Stackolee than Tea Cake is. John de Conquer is, like Tea Cake, a good gambler. Janie, Tea Cake says, has "'done married one uh de best gamblers God ever made. Cards or dice either one'" (119), while John is "all the time . . . playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way" (Hurstons, Sanctified Church 70). Both men can win "the jack pot with no other stake but a laugh." The reason for this is they are both "winning with the soul of the black man whole and free" (70-71).

"By the time Stack was grown, his reputation had spread around the country," says Lester (114). John de Conquer, on the other hand, "has evaded the ears of white people. They were not supposed to know" (Hurstons, Sanctified Church 70). For although High John de Conquer is a fun lover, he is also a savior and a comfort to his people. Tea Cake's somewhat mysterious appearance suggests that, like John, "he was not a natural man in the beginning. First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song" (Hurstons, Sanctified Church 69). Even before Joe's death, Janie is hoping to find that something. In her unhappiness with Joe, she found that she had a host of thoughts she

had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. (68)

Then, just as Janie has decided "mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer'n grief" (89), Tea Cake appears. Although he looks familiar, she does not know him, though it seems everyone else in town does.

Evidence of John as a comfort to his people is present in a tale reported by Hurston about how the Conqueror is going to take some work-weary slaves for a ride on a crow, but the slaves claim they have nothing to wear. John retorts, "'Oh, you got plenty things to wear. Just reach inside yourselves and get out all those fine raiments you been toting around with you for the last longest. They is in there all right. I know. Get 'em out, and put 'em on'" (Sanctified Church 75-76). The first thing Tea Cake does for Janie is ask her to play checkers with him, and her reaction is much like the discovery of the slaves that they have some hidden talent: "she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (91-92). Then Tea Cake assures Janie she has "got good meat" on her head (92).

But probably the most John-like realization to which Tea Cake brings Janie is that she, too, has assets she has been "toting around for the longest." Her hair, he says, "feels jus' lak underneath uh dove's wing" and she ought to "go tuh de lookin' glass and enjoy" her eyes and her lips (99). She has had those fine raiments all along.

Julius Lester points out that "John the Conqueror was the master teacher. He could teach you to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick" ("High John the Conqueror" 18). Tea Cake's instruction of Janie permeates the last third of Their Eyes Were Watching God. When he meets her, he teaches her to play checkers. Then he teaches her how to admire herself, shows her what fun it can be to fish by moonlight, educates her on the best way to attend a picnic (in pink linen, with groceries from Winter Park or Orlando, not from Joe Starks's store). He shows her Jacksonville and "de muck," a place where the ground was "so rich that everything went wild" (123). On the muck, he teaches her to shoot, something that will be of life-and-death importance to her later, and she is a natural, "a better shot than Tea Cake" (125). He shows her that it is all right to "listen and laugh" at the storytellers on the porch, "and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big

stories herself from listening to the rest" (128). In short, Tea Cake taught Janie how to live, something she had started to discover for herself twenty-five years earlier under the pear tree, but which had been suppressed throughout her other two marriages. He was just helping her regain the lovely thoughts which had permeated her childhood, or, as she tells her friend Pheoby, "He done taught me de maiden language all over" (109).

One of the most wonderful things about John the Conqueror's power is that it can be summoned when needed:

He walked on the winds and moved fast. Maybe he was in Texas when the lash fell on a slave in Alabama, but before the blood was dry on the back he was there. A faint pulsing of a drum like a goat-skin stretched over a heart, that came nearer and closer, then somebody in the saddened quarters would feel like laughing . . . (69)

Janie is not in the position of the slave in Alabama, but she is not satisfied with her life either. When she loses her second husband, she is happy with her freedom, but she still "lie[s] awake in bed asking lonesomeness some questions" (85). She is upset at the prospect of entertaining the attentions of the men who

come to call on her. She is short with one man who suggests a relationship: "'Lawd, Ike Green, you'se a case! De subjick you bringin' up ain't fit tuh be talked about at all'" (87). And she is not happy with working in the store:

She knew by her head that she was absolute owner, but it always seemed to her that she was still clerking for Joe and that soon he would come in and find something wrong that she had done. She almost apologized to the tenants the first time she collected the rents. (87)

Janie Starks is no businesswoman. She has to send her seventeen-year-old helper out to collect the rents. Hezekiah has taken to imitating Joe, who was himself imitating white people, trying to be a "big ruler of things" (28), and using his white-looking wife as window dressing. So it is significant that when Janie's John de Conquer arrives to comfort her, Hezekiah warns her to stay away from him; Hezekiah fears an insurrection against Joe's memory, so he tries to impose his will, just as, for example, whites in eighteenth-century South Carolina passed a law forbidding "more than seven Negroes being out together without a white chaperon" (Franklin 60).

No one in Eatonville, it seems, can understand why

"Mis' Mayor Starks" would be attracted to Tea Cake. Just as in slavery times, when John came, Janie is not concerned: "So they laughed in the face of things and sang 'I'm so glad! Trouble don't last always.' And the white people who heard them were struck dumb that they could laugh" (69). If Janie had ever brought up Hezekiah's (or the others') objections to his courting her, Tea Cake might well have answered in the words of High John:

Don't pay what he say no mind. You know where you got something finer than this plantation and anything it's got on it, put away. Ain't that funny? Us got all that, and he don't know nothing at all about it. Don't tell him nothing. Nobody don't have to know where us gets our pleasure from. Come on. Pick up your hoes and let's go. (78)

Because no one has to know where she gets her pleasure, Janie leaves it up to her friend Pheoby to decide whether to tell the town the circumstances of her life with Tea Cake. And Janie says she is happy with her "hoe," when she is working on the muck right alongside Tea Cake. It is much better than the store or the duties of a housewife: "'Ah laks it. It's mo' nicer than settin' round dese quarters all day. Clerkin' in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain't got nothin' tuh

do but do our work and come home and love'" (127). This statement refutes SallyAnn Ferguson's suggestion that Janie's decision to work beside her husband is "indicative of . . . distrust and insecurity, in their marriage" (193). For in actuality, she simply wants to be with him. The couple's work together is more probably a reflection of Hurston's own desire for a relationship in which both people can work. She uses the physically difficult field work as a symbol for the intellectual work in which she was engaged (literally, anthropological "field work"?) and which she felt none of the men with whom she was involved could abide. Her first husband, Herbert Sheen, "discovered that his bride resented interruptions in her work and had no intention of following her husband in his occupation," and he concluded, "'the demands of her career doomed the marriage to an early, amicable divorce'" (Hemenway 94). The model for Tea Cake, Hurston reveals, "had a fine mind and that intrigued me. When a man keeps beating me to the draw mentally, he begins to get glamorous." But this man differed from Tea Cake, for "he meant to be the head. . . . My work was one thing and he was all the rest. But, I could not make him see that. Nothing must be in my life but himself" (Dust Tracks 183-84).⁷ Hurston loved this man, but he would not let her have her work. Janie loves Tea Cake, and

he wants her to work--alongside him, not in the typical woman's place.

John the Conqueror seems always to be around his people, as we have seen. Hurston says that when he came to America from Africa,

he came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here. The sea captains of ships knew that they brought slaves in their ships. They knew about those black bodies huddled down there in the middle passage, being hauled across the waters to helplessness. John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ships. He followed over them like the albatross. (70)

In addition, Hurston says of John, "the sign of this man was a laugh" (Sanctified Church 69). We have seen that his appearance can make "somebody in the saddened quarters feel like laughing" (69). Tea Cake's presence similarly affects his peers:

Tea Cake's house was a magnet. . . . The way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night. He was always laughing and full of fun too. He kept everybody laughing in the bean field. (126)

The guitar-playing brings up another characteristic of John de Conquer which Tea Cake embodies: both are surrounded by an aura of music. Hurston's tale of John tells of his arrival: "His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing drum" (69). Tea Cake's second appearance before Janie is detailed in this way:

She heard somebody humming like they were feeling for pitch and looked toward the door. Tea Cake stood there mimicking the tuning of a guitar. He frowned and struggled with the pegs of his imaginary instrument watching her out of the corner of his eye with that secret joke playing over his face. Finally she smiled and he sung middle C, put his guitar under his arm and walked on back to where she was. (96)

This is just what John would have done. Tea Cake's instrument of choice is the guitar, and it is significant that the only tangible thing he buys with Janie's two hundred dollars is a guitar with a red silk cord. He has to rescue Janie from doubt, so he brought along a guitar to play "outside her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too"; Tea Cake enters the room "with a guitar and a grin" (115). Hurston

gives her readers another clue as to Tea Cake's allegorical position during a lying session on the porch in the muck, just before the hurricane. The "great flame-throwers were there and naturally, handling Big John de Conquer and his works" (148). An argument breaks out as to whether John played a harmonica or a guitar when he "went up tuh heben without dying atall" (148-49). Most of the men agree that it was a guitar: "Don't care how good anybody could play a harp, God would rather to hear a guitar. That brought them back to Tea Cake" (149). And it brings Hurston's readers back to Tea Cake, too, providing the perfect juxtaposition between Janie's husband and the folk hero. When Tea Cake dies, Janie buries him with a new guitar so that he can "be thinking up new songs to play to her when she got there" (180). And in a gesture of which John de Conquer would have been proud, Janie hires ten sedans and a band so that Tea Cake may ride "like a Pharaoh to his tomb" (180).

Although the body of Tea Cake is laid out on a "white silken couch" (180), it might be said that he had already gone to heaven without dying, because the rabid shell of a man who tried to kill Janie was not Tea Cake. Tea Cake, or the spirit of John de Conquer, began to leave the body when he was bitten in the

hurricane. He is not his cheerful, optimistic self when they finally find shelter after the storm; he sits "heavily" and speaks "humbly" (158). Then as soon as he ventures outside, he is hailed by two white men, who call him Jim, which is a common enough name at that time for whites to use around strange black men. Yet it is significant that the first humans to see Tea Cake (other than Janie) after the hurricane call him by the wrong name. Finally, when sickness overcomes Tea Cake, his spirit departs. In the last tender moment between the couple, he admonishes her with a John de Conquer-type reminder: "'You must let de flowers see yuh sometimes, heah, Janie?'" (172). During the night, Tea Cake has two attacks, and Janie observes, "Tea Cake was gone. Something else was looking out of his face" (172).

Following Emancipation, the African character John the Conqueror declined in popularity. Hurston says, "Like King Arthur of England, he has served his people, and gone back into mystery again. And, like King Arthur, he is not dead. He waits to return when his people shall call again" (71). He has not, like King Arthur, returned to the water (though this is what Tea Cake does; as we have seen, his spirit is left in the hurricane); instead, the freedom of the slaves has enabled John to "retire with his secret smile into the

soil of the South and wait" until he should be needed again (78). And how does one call John? John "left his power here, and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time" (72). Janie brings home from the muck a packet of seeds. "She had noticed them on the kitchen shelf when she came home from the funeral and had put them in her breast pocket. Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance" (182). Perhaps the seeds are those of the John the Conqueror root, and Janie can, along with

the thousands upon thousands of humble people who still believe in him . . . do John reverence by getting the root of the plant in which he has taken up his secret dwelling and "dressing" it with perfume, and keeping it on their person, or in their houses in a secret place. It is there to help them overcome things they feel that they could not beat otherwise, and to bring them the laugh of the day. (Sanctified Church 78).⁸

The root will also protect Janie; Frederick Douglass explains in his Narrative of the Life of an American Slave (1678, 1683n) that many slaves believed a John de Conquer root could prevent beatings from white owners.

Hurston's use of the John the Conqueror tale has

some very important implications. All the other myths she used for analogues had documented histories in the discipline of the classics or in comparative mythology. Thus Hurston's artistic application of them serves to place her in the tradition of modern writers and to heighten awareness of the tales themselves. What Hurston wants us to learn from John is that each half of a couple has the power to comfort the other. And each has the responsibility to point out the "fine raiments" of the other.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

*

In her article on myth in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Pondrom's conclusion is this:

The adoption of myth as a principle of meaning and order is Hurston's most important link to modernism. The chaos and arbitrariness of Hurston's world may have presented itself in the form of oppression founded on race and sex, rather than the world war which helped shape Eliot's views, but she shares with Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Pound, and Crane the use of myth as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (201-02)

But Zora Neale Hurston has given us even more because she suggests that contemporary history need not be futile. When she employs analogues of gods of fertility, death, and rebirth, Hurston affirms the cyclic nature of history, and she seems confident we can emerge from "futility and anarchy" into far horizon

and peace. Hurston suggests that human contact is a way to create order out of chaos; her use of mythic familial relationships in Their Eyes Were Watching God provides a blueprint for finding that contact. Janie's first sexual "experience" takes place when she is alone under a pear tree. We must take our cue from nature, asserts Hurston in this passage. Our relationships must not be based on domination; instead we must be comrades and helpmates, as Hurston shows us with parallels between her characters and Aeneas and the golden bough, Pluto and Persephone, and Virbius and Diana. The violence associated with Virbius may indicate Hurston believes our society is currently incapable of this kind of relationship. But she affirms the potential of humanity to achieve the proper connection with her analogue to Balder. Through experience, the individual can find happiness and meaning. And through Ragnarok's destroying existing notions of love, the whole world can emerge from the depths to the light of a new sun. Through the African Legba, Hurston stresses individuality, intellect, and choice as ways to offset chance.

Above all, Hurston emphasizes power. Each one of us possesses the power to reach out; this is symbolized by the packet of seeds. More importantly, we have the power to walk on the winds and move fast when another

is in need. It is our responsibility to get there before the blood is dry.

The preceding examples have shown that all these rules hold true for love relationships, but Janie's telling of her story to her friend Pheoby shows they also apply to other alliances. While the bulk of the novel deals with eros, sexual love, Hurston's framing of Their Eyes Were Watching God also affirms the importance of agape, friendly love. Her ideas on friendship are articulated in her autobiography:

Let us all be kissing-friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet, or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue. (209)

The two women are "'kissin'-friends'" (7); Janie depends on Pheoby "'for a good thought'" (7), while Pheoby "'done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh" Janie (182). Both Pheoby and Janie benefit from the hours spent on Janie's back porch as the story unfolds: "They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that

oldest human longing--self revelation" (6).

This frame provides Hurston a way to bring agape into her celebratory novel of eros. The points Hurston makes about sexual love through the mythic elements are easily universalized to stand as well for love between friends. If we can all achieve the same combination of eros and agape that Janie does, then we can all call in our souls to come and see.

Notes

1. It should be noted, also, that Janie's mother's name was actually Leafy.
2. For accounts of her marriages and her relationship with the man Hemenway calls "P.," see Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, pp. 93-94, 273-74, and 231, respectively. See also Hurston's account of her affair with "A.W.P." in Dust Tracks on a Road, pp. 183-89.
3. It is interesting to note that there is a bridge in the story of Balder, where there is a lack of one in Aeneas's story (making the aid of the golden bough necessary). The Norse bridge is "called the Echoing Bridge . . . [and] Balder and other dead are said to ride [over it] while it reverberates beneath their feet, but which gives out a different sound when a living man passes it" (Davidson 113).
4. Hod does not know he will kill Balder; since all things had sworn not to hurt Balder, it was great sport to shoot things at him and watch as he endured easily what would kill most.
5. It should be noted that Aphrodite is also associated with the aforementioned Virbius; she was the woman he scorned and who caused his downfall (Frazer 4-5).
6. Although Mary Helen Washington points out that there were numerous descriptions of Hurston's appearance--"big-boned, good-boned young woman, handsome and light yellow" (Fannie Hurst); "short and squat and black as coal" (Theodore Pratt); "reddish light brown" (Mrs. Alzeda Hacker)--she maintains that "Mrs. Hacker's description most closely corresponds with photographs of Hurston and other eyewitness reports" (7, 24 n 3).
7. In her second marriage, Hurston had the opposite problem: she claimed Albert Price "refused to work" (Hemenway 273).
8. For a more sinister use of the John de Conquer root, see Hurston's novel Jonah's Gourd Vine, where John Pearson's second wife braids a piece of the root into her hair in order to keep the love of her husband (139). When he discovers it, he beats her severely, and she files for divorce (162).

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