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Lesson 3

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with an unidentified third-person narrator who remains outside the story. This anonymous, omniscient narrator immediately creates interest by declaring: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead.” The first page also contains one of several allusions to the book’s title: “the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.” However, the narration changes when Janie tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson.

Discussion Activities

How can an omniscient narrator tell the story at the same time that the novel’s heroine, Janie, also tells her story? Do these voices reflect different parts of Janie, or does the omniscient narrator reveal another force in Janie’s universe?

Janie is judged throughout the novel. In the first chapter, who judges her, and why? How does Janie respond?

Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does our audience (especially friends) affect what we reveal or conceal?

Writing Exercise

Choose one secondary character who has appeared so far: Nanny, Logan, Pheoby, the Eatonville townspeople, Johnny Taylor, or Janie’s mother. Rewrite the novel’s beginning from the perspective of this character. Use this exercise to reflect on how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. Why did Hurston choose Janie as the heroine instead of another character? Provide a dramatic presentation of the re-told story.

Homework

Read Chapter 4 (pp. 26-33). Five significant characters have been introduced: Janie, Pheoby, Nanny, Logan, and Joe. Have students make lists of what motivates each of these characters.