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Lesson 9

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Lessons 1-8 should assist the class in developing its interpretation of the novel by exploring several themes. Try to get your students to come to agreement, as a group, to the dominant theme and how this lends to an interpretation of the novel. This complex novel possesses many themes, but here are three to begin class discussion.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Now that you've finished the novel, listen to The Big Read CD, Track 1 again.

A Woman's Voice

1. What do Bret Lott, Azar Nafisi, and Alice Walker say about Janie's developing voice? Do you agree? Give supporting examples from the novel.
2. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or remain quiet?
3. How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's story? What is Janie's final advice to her best friend?

Race

1. On the CD, Carla Kaplan, Robert Hemenway, and Alice Walker discuss Hurston's folk voice and complex characters. Assess the accuracy of their opinions with evidence from the novel.
2. The novel's only explicit reference to Jim Crow laws appears in Chapter 19, when Tea Cake is forced at gunpoint to clear the hurricane wreckage and bury the dead. See Handout 3 for details on Jim Crow laws. What role does Jim Crow play in the novel?
3. Why are white people omitted until the last chapters? How might this reflect Hurston's literary goals?

Religion

1. Voodoo and Catholicism influenced Hurston. In *Tell My Horse*, she includes formulas from hoodoo doctors, calling the Bible the "greatest conjure book in the world." How would you describe Hurston's idea of religion in the novel?
2. What might be the meaning of the novel's title? In what ways do the characters see and hear God? Does He answer their questioning?
3. In Chapter 17 Janie muses about the pious Mrs. Turner's idols and altars. The narrator says that "Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood." What does this mean?



Homework

Read the Afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Students should begin working on their essays. See "Essay Topics" at the end of this guide. Turn in outlines at the next class.