

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Author: Zora Neal Hurston

- **Intended Audience**

AP Literature and Composition Students —this is a college level course

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

Set in the 1900s Jim Crow South, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers around a young, middle-aged, biracial woman named Janie Crawford. She has returned to Eatonville, FL after marriages to three very different men, and recounts the story of her life to her friend, Phoeby.

Having appeared on the AP Literature and Composition Exam thirteen times and being recommended in a 2010 College Board curriculum module titled “Engaging Students with Literature” (http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/AP_CM_Eng_Lit_differential_instruction.pdf), this text is appropriate for an AP Literature Class. The AP course description says, “In addition to considering a work’s literary artistry, students reflect on the social and historical values it reflects and embodies. Careful attention to both textual detail and historical context provides a foundation for interpretation, whatever critical perspectives are brought to bear on the literary works studied.” This text allows an opportunity to fully address these course goals.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

The inclusion of diverse texts in any secondary English curriculum helps increase literacy and empathy, carries students through different worlds, and encourages the discussion of sensitive topics to gain deeper understanding. On the surface, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an ordinary “coming of age” story, but Hurston details the main character’s narrative with conscious awareness and vivid, unchecked realism. This book is ideal for mature, high school students and is also a staple in introductory college English courses across the country. In addition to facilitating discussion of culture differences, the dialect of the novel is very challenging even for A.P. students, so it is a good test in the spring of students’ readiness for the A.P. exam.

Their Eyes Were Watching God provides opportunities to:

- Examine the use of Southern vernacular and representative culture in the novel.
- Analyze prejudice and racial stereotypes in the past and in the present.
- Describe the use of literary devices (symbolism, imagery, etc.) and how they lend significance to the novel.

- o Trace the development of the main character from the beginning to the end of the novel: How has her thinking evolved following events in the story? How has her attitude(s) changed?
 - o Pinpoint how each marriage contributed to Janie's attainment of self-fulfillment.
- **Potential problems**

The era in which the novel was published was extremely critical of the concepts that lead to the book's ban. Many felt that Hurston's interpretation of these ideas was inappropriate and that the book itself was a literary train-wreck. Nonetheless, these concepts have been and will continue to be part of society. It is crucial to sensibly educate mature adolescents on such topics, and students will discuss how these subjects support character development, Hurston's use of language to convey cultural concepts, how sex and abuse is used as a tool of oppression, and how religion and experience compels/contradicts the thoughts and actions of the novel's characters.
- **Addressing potential problems**

The novel contains: domestic abuse/wife-beating, sexual imagery, strong sexual content, biblical allusions, racial prejudice, murder and vulgar language. However, none of these scenes are depicted graphically. The College Board expects A.P. Literature students to write about cultural and societal issues in literature, and this novel provides a perfect subject for such writing. The obvious cultural differences between most Wyoming students and the main character of this novel (and its author) provide for a rich discussion of how to read and interpret literature written from such an unfamiliar perspective. Students read various essays on the novel and Hurston's background, including essays by other African Americans who are both positive and negative in their reaction to Hurston's work. This is another book that allows students to test and apply Foster's advice on *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*.
- **Awards and honors**

Their Eyes Were Watching God was first published in 1937 and was not well received by literary critics nor important figures of the Harlem Renaissance. It was rescued from obscurity four decades later and is now firmly established as a part of the American Literary Canon. Hurston's seminal work is considered essential reading in many campus has been chosen as National Endowment for the Arts Big Read, a *Time Magazine* Best English-written novel,