

**Title:** The Search for Identity: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Grade Ranges:**

    K-4

    5-8

  X 9-12

**Subject Tag:**

Language Arts: Literature: American Literature

Writing Guides: Composition Writing

Creative Writing: Screen Writing

Reading Skills

**Synopsis:**

This lesson plan is a series of ideas and activities to use when teaching Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although the focus is on the novel, the lessons integrate reading, writing (both response and analytical), and oral activities. The plan includes ideas for individual work and group work.

**Keywords:** Zora Neale Hurston, writing process, literary analysis, reader response, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, African-American women writers, Harlem Renaissance, 20<sup>th</sup> Century American literature

**Body:**

Introduction:

This unit plan begins with some introductory activities to prepare students for reading, understanding, and appreciating Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students will write journal entries focusing on their own life experiences that have created their sense of identity. Introduce the idea of the frame story — a story within a story — before they begin to read. It is also important to prepare the students for reading the dialogue. They will find it advantageous to read some of the conversation aloud if it seems difficult to understand. Assign chapters 1-4.

Chapters 1-4:

The following day, ask students to write a reader response to the first two paragraphs in the book, making personal or literary connections to the text. Students should read the dialogue of the people on the porch aloud. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to find textual evidence that reveals Janie's character in these first four chapters. They should also look for figurative language (primarily metaphors) that shows her closeness to the natural world. All students should save these notes as possible prewriting for later assignments. Assign chapters 5-6.

Chapters 5-6:

After students have read Chapters 1-6:

1. Ask each student to select an important passage in the novel and explain why it is important. You should also point out Hurston's use of figurative language.
2. After sharing these choices, the students are ready for short role playing activities including the following: a political speech given by Jody Sparks; diary entries

written by Janie during her marriage to Logan or to Jody; the men on the porch in Eatonville (including talk about Janie and Jody, the mule, Mrs. Tony); a scene between Janie and Logan; a scene between Janie and Jody; or a scene between Janie and her grandmother. These scenes may be improvised, but they should reflect the text. Assign chapters 7-9.

#### Chapters 7-9:

After reading through chapter 9, students will write a response to these three chapters and focus on the relationship between Janie and Jody. Students will exchange responses with each other and write responses to their peer's response. Then ask the class to defend Joe's actions in these chapters and then to defend Janie's actions in these chapters. Although students have not finished the novel at this point, you should explain the writing assignment (an analytical commentary) that they will write after they have completed the work. A commentary is a 20 to 25-line essay based on a specific passage in the novel. The commentary should contain a thesis statement that explains why the passage is significant and how the author's writing is effective in the passage. The commentary should contain specific evidence that shows how the passage relates to a theme in the novel, and how the language works to emphasize the theme. As they read, students should look for passages to use for their essays. Assign Chapters 10-12 for reading.

#### Chapters 10-12:

After students have completed the reading assignment, select two students to read the dialogue between Janie and Teacake when they first meet in Chapter 10. Divide the class into small groups, have them analyze Janie's relationship with Teacake, and then ask them to compare this relationship to her relationships with Logan and Jody. Assign chapters 13-17.

#### Chapters 13-17:

This next lesson focuses on the life in the Everglades and the relationship between Janie and Teacake. Divide the class into groups and have them create charts that explain themes/relationships/lifestyles in the Everglades. Include such ideas as prejudice, the working class, the social interactions, the fun, and the characters of Janie, Teacake, and Mrs. Turner. Groups share their findings with the class. Assign chapters 18-20.

#### Chapters 18-20:

Ask students to write responses to one of the following topics: the way Teacake beats Janie or the underlying racism evidenced in these chapters. Students should also be able to explain the meaning of the title of the book.

Class activity: find evidence that Janie has completed her quest for self-fulfillment and identity by the end of the novel.

Students should next complete rough drafts for their commentaries then bring these to class for peer editing. During peer editing sessions, students should underline the thesis statements, check to make sure that every sentence in the paper addresses that thesis, underline the concluding sentence, check to see that the paper is not a plot summary, and look for present tense verbs and active voice. (See related links for excellent writing process information from Nancie Atwell.) After peer editing, students should revise their papers again and write one to two sentences explaining what revisions they have made. After another round of peer editing and self editing, students complete their final commentaries, along with all drafts and revisions.

### Final Group Projects:

A final group project on the novel is a television talk show. Students can produce “The Dating Game” with all three bachelors (Logan, Jody, Teacake) competing for a date with Janie. Questions and answers should reflect material in the text. Students can also complete a talk show with Janie, Phoeby, and other women from Eatonville discussing Janie’s behavior. Another talk show could include Janie and her grandmother reuniting after Janie has left Logan for Jody and Teacake. Students could also role play the trial scene.

### **Related Links:**

TeenLit.com: Process Writing; <http://www.teenlit.com/teachers/process.htm>; link provides a quick look at the steps for teens in the writing process as defined by Nancie Atwell

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) Teacher Resource File; <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/hurston.htm>; link includes information on Zora Neale Hurston, on the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and other links that might help the teaching of the novel

### **Features:**

- Contains special education tips
- Quick Activity (less than 30 minutes; story starter)
- Requires Internet access for students to complete

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to appreciate and understand the figurative language in the novel.
2. Students will be able to prove a thesis about a passage in the novel through a written piece of analysis.
3. Students will evaluate Janie’s choices in her search for self identity.
4. Students will examine components of their own lives that have shaped their own sense of identity.

### **Standards:**

**NY: 1.** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding. **2.** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression. **3.** Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

**NYC: E1B:** Read and comprehend at least four books on the same subject, or by the same author, or in the same genre. **E2B:** Produce a response to literature 4A: Independently and habitually demonstrate an understanding of the rules of the English language in written and oral work. **E4B:** Analyze and subsequently revise work to improve its clarity and effectiveness **E5A:** Respond to non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and drama using interpretive and critical processes.

**CT: 1.** Reading and responding. Students will read and respond in individual, literal, critical and evaluative ways to literary texts. **3.** Applying English Language Conventions. Students will apply the conventions of standard English in oral and written communication **4.** Exploring and Responding to Texts. Students will use the language arts to explore and respond to classical and contemporary texts from many cultures and literary periods.

**NJ: 3.4:** All students will read various materials and texts with comprehension and critical analysis. **3.3:** All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.

**Prerequisite Skills:**

1. Some experience with reader response writing is helpful but not required.
2. Some familiarity with the writing process (particularly Nancie Atwell's) is helpful but not required.

**Time Required:**

approximately two weeks on either traditional or block schedule

**Technology and Materials Needed:**

1. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel* by Zora Neale Hurston (a Perennial Classic)
2. computers for commentaries
3. props for role playing (optional)

**Procedures**

1. Introductory journal writing based on personal identity
2. Reading of the novel divided into chapters
3. Written responses based on assigned reading
4. Group activities after Chapters 1-6 including role playing activities
5. Reading of the novel divided into chapters
6. Groups activities and responses based on reading
7. Written commentary based on a passage in the novel
8. Group activities based on the entire novel

**Assessment Criteria:**

1. Reader response journals
2. Commentaries — final copy and all drafts
3. Group work
4. Unit test

**Recommended Lesson Plan Review Date:**

NA

**Review Comments:**

NA