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Symbols in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is reawakening. Most metaphors and symbolic elements are related to Janie's womanhood and the sense of freedom. Symbols represent the evolution and ultimate development of Janie's character, who blossoms, matures, and finds her identity. Hurston uses the recurring motif of symbolization of the protagonist's hair, the pear tree, and the horizon to illustrate not only Janie's growth but also other characters' position towards her.

One of the strongest symbolic motifs is Janie's hair, which represents her pitch of freedom. Joe Starks is mesmerized by her hair, but after they marry, he orders Janie to hide the hair as a symbol of his ownership (Hurston 64). On the other hand, Tea Cake sees her hair as a token of good luck – after combing Janie's hair, he brings a few hairs with him to a card game (Hurston 148). Yet, after Tea Cake dies, Janie lets her hair down, claiming a new beginning as a woman who is in control of her own destiny. This motif was also reinforced in her childhood, when the protagonist used to wear her hair down. As such, it becomes evident that Janie's hairstyle is a symbol of her inner and outer freedom.

Horizon is a strong symbol in Hurston's novel, which has a religious Vodou background besides its primary meaning. Some scholars interpret Janie's character through the prism of feminism (Thomas 1285). Hence, she can be interpreted as corresponding to Erzulie Freda, the Vodou goddess associated with love and femininity. Janie reflects the main characteristics of the

goddess: sensual nature, skin tone, and preference for the color blue (Hurstons 137). While Janie can be interpreted through the figure of Erzulie, Tea Cake can be associated with Legba, the Vodou gatekeeper of the crossroads who mediates between the spiritual and material worlds. Through this association, Tea Cake becomes a figure who opens a “gateway” for Janie toward new possibilities, represented by the recurring symbolism of the horizon. For Janie, the horizon became a symbol of the opportunity for a better life, the future. Using the revelation about the Vodou, the sense of the horizon becomes deeper – Tea Cake, as the representation of the spirit, opened the horizon for Janie. Eventually, it turns out that she could only pursue her bright future after meeting Tea Cake.

A pear tree is one of the most obvious symbols used by Hurston, which translates into life, love, and one’s own sexuality. The blossoming tree is a standard representation of growing into a mature woman, exploring love and own sexuality. When Janie is lying beneath the tree, she watches a bee gather pollen from the pear flowers (Hurstons 14). The scene becomes an idea of a perfect relationship for her, and she later says that Logan and Joe were not letting her blossom. Janie’s quest for identity is strongly bonded with the idea of love and idealistic marriage she discovered under the pear tree. When she meets Tea Cake, her dreams of love and an ideal relationship become true. Janie says that “he could be a bee to a blossom” (Hurstons 126), meaning that he could be the one bringing her satisfaction. The repeating motif of a blossoming pear tree allows readers to see how the main character’s attitude towards love and womanhood changes through time.

To sum up, there are three main recurrent symbols in the novel. These are Janie’s hair, the horizon, and the blossoming pear tree. The symbolic motifs used by the author give out the narrative of Janie’s development as a character and as a woman. The symbols have become an

essential part of Janie's personality. They represent how free she feels, how she foresees her future, and how she perceives love.

Works Cited

- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. PerfectBound, 2004.
- Thomas, Ada C. M. "From Zora Neale to Missionary Mary: Womanist Aesthetics of Faith and Freedom." *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 16, p. 1285. MDPI, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101285>.