Reading African-American Literature in an Asian Context: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God

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ABSTRACT

This article examines ways of effective reading of non-Asian literary texts in Asian contexts, e.g. in a predominantly Thai classroom, among others. It puts forth essential elements of student-centeredness that need to be implemented and analyzes useful teaching strategies. To this end, Their Eyes Were Watching God by African-American novelist Zora Neale Hurston has been selected as a model on which objectives, guidelines, questions, activities and stages of literary analysis are based. The article culminates in a discourse on the issue of identity, which is a comprehension threshold to be crossed in order to gain insights that reach beyond the scope of a novel. Through this process Asian (Thai) students are guided toward expressing their own concepts of identity and constructing unbiased applications of their notions to literary characters.

บทบาทนี้เป็นการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับการอ่านงานประพันธ์ที่ไม่ได้อยู่ในภาษาไทย แบบการเรียนการสอนโดยสารเพียงอย่างเดียว ยกตัวอย่างในเรื่องของหนังสือที่นักเรียนไทยโดยวิธีการนี้เป็นการก้าวแนวต่อประชาธิปไตยในเรื่องที่นักเรียนเป็นที่น่าสนใจอย่าง พร้อมกับวิเคราะห์ถึงการสอนที่มีผลประโยชน์และจากจุดนี้มาสู่บทบาทนี้เป็นประโยชน์ "อธิบายเรื่อง วิเคราะห์ วิจารณ์" โดย บังคับตามแนวหมายของอาจารย์-นักเรียน โดยว่า นิยม越来越多 แล้ว ได้สู่ผลกระทบไปยังระบบของวัฒนธรรมไทย สำหรับ ศึกษา กฎหมาย รวมไปถึงสิทธิของนักเรียน วิวัฒนาการที่จะสามารถ บทบาทนี้เป็นกระบวนการเกี่ยวกับการเรียนรู้ในประเด็นของตัวละคร ซึ่งนำมา เป็นตัวอย่างเพื่อให้เกิดความเข้าใจในองค์ประกอบของเขาของงานประพันธ์ ด้วยแนวปฏิบัติ นักเรียนจะเรียนรู้ (ไทย) ได้รับการสื่อสารให้แสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับองค์ประกอบของตัวเอง พร้อมทั้งแสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับตัวละครในบทประพันธ์จ่าจก其中包括

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Introduction

Why should literature be used as a teaching resource and how can students, Asian students in particular, benefit from it? McRae claims that an essential goal of teaching of literature is the students' acquisition of critical thinking abilities (22-23). To this end, literature is essential and teachers must not shy away from making it a device not only for learning and sustainability but also for introducing Asian students to non-Asian cultures. At the same time, it is the instructor's task to guide the students toward heightened language awareness and independent thought, which is facilitated when the students are aware of their own identity; thus, in an Asian context, such as a Thai classroom, it is advisable to discuss issues of Thai culture and identity in order to raise the level of self-awareness before a text steeped in a foreign culture is tackled.

Literature moves beyond culture, space and time and may capture anyone's imagination. Thus, it should be viewed as a device to improve the learner's understanding of other nations. For Collie and Slater the study of literary texts makes sense, as long as they are relevant, authentic, offer possibilities of cultural and linguistic progress, and foster the reader's personal engagement. They also propose that literature presents a wide-ranging body of texts that deals with deep-seated human issues (3-4). Many students have few opportunities to travel to countries vastly different from their own, their expectations of a novel they are about to read may be tarnished by stereotypes acquired from films and by personal – possibly failed – communications with foreigners. Therefore, they may benefit from reading original and translated works from foreign countries, as long as such works are adequately introduced.

The value of literature lies within the appeal of stories and within the meaning through connection that stories offer. They present readers of all nationalities with ways to discover new aspects about their own and foreign cultures and are fundamental in broadening their interests and knowledge. Readers are entertained by stories and appreciate narratives they can relate to; hence, even though there are differences between Asian and non-Asian traditions of storytelling, such differences may be overcome in the reading process if the instructor is aware of them and is able to foster the students' positive attitude toward the foreign text. In the process of exploring stories students will become engaged and drawn into them to such an extent that they may even identify with the characters' emotions and actions, which will increase their motivation to read and should guide them to shape their personal identities.
Before a novel is selected for classroom discussions, the instructor should think whether it offers sufficient learning opportunities and consider the suitability of the novel's content. The instructor should also be aware of other literary texts already read by the students in order to gain insight into their prior knowledge, to assess their ability to do literary analysis, and to anticipate comprehension problems. It is vital to reflect not only on student-related knowledge and the students' understanding and ways of thinking, but also on their interests and attitudes toward certain topics and their readiness to tackle a text. Thus, one may start out with questions such as the following: Where are my students now? Where do I want them to go from here? What are the teaching and learning goals and how can these goals be reached? McRae (24) promotes a student-centered approach when learning goals are being set: "The bottom line always has to be the learning achieved. So the question must be asked, 'What will my students get from this text?'" Asked within an Asian context, these questions gain in significance because when reading a text that is based on non-Asian perspectives, most Asian students are likely to confront cultural and linguistic challenges. Adherence to these questions indicates the instructor's awareness of these difficulties. It ensures his or her effort to guide the students through their learning processes, in which literature is employed as a means of discovery, reflection, response and source of cultural identity.

Selecting *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for Classroom Reading

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by African-American author Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is an adequate choice in order to demonstrate how the issues raised above may be addressed and how a student-centered approach of a particular literary text may be achieved. Because advocating the perspective of an African-American woman, i.e. of a minority-author in her time, rather than the perspective of a dominant white male culture, this novel is of great benefit to Asian students, as will be demonstrated below. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is rich in imagination, description and universal themes applicable to modern life. If used with careful preparation, it is a fitting text to create learning opportunities and to foster critical thinking. Hurston is best known for this particular novel, yet her other works, including *Mules and Men* (1935), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), have also received considerable attention especially in the US and Europe, as these texts challenge the reader with linguistic and thematic wealth, humor,
and poignancy. Hurston’s portrayal of black history, the hardship that black people in her time had to endure, the ambivalence between the force and the fragility of the human soul in general and the African-American soul in particular, elevate her work to a level of insight equal to that of other distinguished African-American novelists.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a synthesis of various topics, among them physical and spiritual traveling, transformation, colloquialism, and the quest for identity. Its strength is based on the colorful description of black people in the South of the United States and on the exploration of various forms of identity, specifically the identity of the protagonist Janie as opposed to communal identity. Self-recognition and an awakening from passivity to action are at the core of Janie’s quest. Disillusion, unfulfilled desires, being devalued by others, and living the roles that are given to her by her grandmother Nanny, African-American communities, and her first two husbands Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, are all factors that guide her toward finding her own voice, but that stop her from ultimately achieving it. The roles she is forced to perform must be replaced by an identity she can call her own. She hopes to gain spiritual freedom through conformity with others, but she has to experience many disappointments. The third man in her life, the free-spirited drifter Tea Cake, is the first person who truly accepts her. Although she has to endure more hardship as her lover dies, she is finally able to see her true self.

The novel examines the constitution of identity through culture, community, heritage, location, time, language and gender. Historic events and Hurston’s experiences are incorporated in and give shape to the trajectory of the story and the development of the characters. The story gives rise to reflections that elicit various interpretations and responses, and it presents students with countless opportunities for discovery. They learn about Florida during the early 20th century and the laborious emancipation process of a woman of extraordinary moral fiber.

Prior to choosing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* one must carefully consider whether the students have reached the personal maturity necessary to address the sensitive issues in the novel, and whether the students can bridge the distance between their own culture and the culture of the text. Collie and Slater recommend that literary texts should be selected to match the language competence of the reader, so as to avoid discouragement (14). Due to its generous use of the African-American vernacular and non-standard spelling – e.g. that vs. dat; with vs. wid; I vs. ah; he doesn’t vs. he don’t; etc. – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is full of linguistic challenges, yet students who are comfortable with texts that deviate from standard
American English can easily overcome the difficulties posed by Hurston's style. Thus, the instructor should introduce the novel with enthusiasm for its prose and its undoubtedly rich story, so as to motivate the students to be engaged and to improve their cross-cultural awareness and analytical skills.

With the issues addressed above in mind, the author of this article recently selected and taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God* at an international high-school in Bangkok. The ten students who analyzed the novel were native Thais or of half Thai and half non-Asian descent. They were bilingual or multilingual students with a strong command of English. None of them had had much prior exposure to African-American culture and literature. In this context, reading a minority novel became a rewarding experience for all participants. The students soon came to appreciate the novel as a device that boosts their critical thinking as well as their analytical skills and that shows the process of identity formation they could relate to despite the novel's non-Asian content.

**Student-centeredness in Teaching Literature**

McRae makes a valid point in seeing the teacher's role as that of a supporter whose goal it is to lead the students to autonomy (31). How can students be lead to more autonomy and does it really foster effective learning? Collie and Slater support student independence, i.e. the students are to be encouraged to read substantial parts of the novel on their own, and this should be supported by tasks (12). This approach is sensible because classroom time is needed for selected reading, discussions, presentations, group work, and pair work. It increases students' self-reliability, gives them considerable freedom as to when, where and how fast they complete their reading assignments, and it encourages them to think critically about the text without teacher's interference. It seems important, however, that students be taught notetaking strategies before they are assigned long texts to read independently.

There needs to be a clear and measurable symbiosis between the student work done in the classroom with the guidance from the instructor and student autonomy initiated by homework assignments. Furthermore, the students should be encouraged to keep a journal of their responses to the homework reading so as to be better prepared for discussions. In this context Collie and Slater call for a smart linking of reading homework with reading and discussion done in class. If this coordination works well it frees the discussions from a basic cause-and-effect-analysis of the plot. They emphasize the necessity of breaking the dull process of working through a book page by page and highlight the need for selecting challenging reading
assignments (12-13). However, assignments should not only be demanding, but should be manageable for everyone.

Activities should be student-centered while also leaving room for the teacher to take the lead in discussions. In order to achieve the goal of student-centered learning, much of the work may be done in groups or pairs because it boosts the confidence of each student in reaching deeper levels of comprehension. Through cooperative work students may also find it easier to grasp the story and the author's intentions. Finally, within a group relevant questions and concerns are filtered without teacher interference, and students are encouraged to help each other in finding answers. Students come to trust the validity of their answers and gain confidence in their analytical and communicative skills.

With a student-centered teaching approach and the goal of student autonomy in mind, the guiding principles and overall objectives in teaching literature must be determined. The guiding principles and objectives suggested here are applicable to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, yet they may certainly be adapted to fit other literary works. The teacher’s guiding principles may include the following:

- Create learning opportunities for the students.
- Accomplish an improvement of the students' analytical skills and enhance the scope of their understanding of literature.
- Present questions and tasks applicable to selected aspects of Hurston's novel in order to build a foundation which supports analysis and discussion of the entire novel.
- Conclude with a selected theme, such as identity in general and the identity of the protagonist Janie in particular.

The students' objectives should sum up what they will be able to do as a result of each lesson and what they will be able to do once they have studied the entire novel. Objectives of individual lessons depend on the instructor's lesson plan and should be linked to the overall learning objectives:

- Reach a measurable level of expertise and understanding of the novel.
- Identify and discuss various aspects of the novel, including language, characters, settings, themes and narrative trajectory.
- Demonstrate creativity and critical thinking skills in discussing selected themes.
- Apply various concepts of identity to the novel and demonstrate spoken and written ability in discussing identity in general and in specific terms.
Adhering to the principles and objectives above should help the instructor to engage the students in the text, keep each lesson relevant and focused, provide a structure for the entire process of reading and analysis, establish rules in evaluating student performance, and ultimately foster student-centered learning. Moreover, as has been suggested by Beach (online), student-centered objectives may focus on emotions, narrative development, character actions, social practices, constructing social and cultural worlds, as well as elaborating on connections to other texts. All of these issues may also become relevant as the students engage in discussions about the culture presented in the novel.

**Four-Stage Analysis**

The instructor must use care in preparing activities, questions, and assignments. Teaching should be done with a pre-conceived yet flexible structure in mind, which should help the instructor and the students alike to stay on track. A division of the analysis of any chosen novel into stages is appropriate, so as to set the ground for student engagement and development. The time needed for going through the stages depends on the speed at which students and the teacher wish to progress, yet proper time management remains an issue. Each of the four stages suggested here explores various aspects of the novel through questions and tasks of general and specific nature in order to sharpen the students' analytical and critical thinking skills and to prepare them for an in-depth analysis of the novel's overall themes.

The *pre-reading stage* addresses student expectations, prior knowledge, and transcribing the African-American vernacular. It is vital to tackle these issues here because they constitute the foundation for student understanding of Hurston's fictional universe. It may be useful to review cornerstones of African-American history in order to build appreciation of the multiple contexts in which the story is set. This may be done depending on students' background knowledge and the time and materials available. Thus, even before entering the *pre-reading stage*, the instructor should consider the implementation of outside materials:

A complete list of materials, including full citations of textbooks or story books used, worksheets, and any other special considerations are most useful. What materials will be needed? What textbooks or story books are needed? [...] What needs to be prepared in advance? (El-Tigi online)
To answer questions during this stage, a proper contextualization of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* necessitates several materials, e.g. historical maps of the State of Florida, interviews with Hurston, newspaper articles, statistics and history books. The use of such materials requires careful preparation and time management; however, materials development is not a major concern of this article and shall not be explored in detail here.

During the *while-reading stage* first reactions and further predictions are addressed as the goal is to reach a general understanding of the story by focusing on character analysis, language, style, themes, symbolism, setting, plot, and point of view. These topics should be introduced one by one and merge in such a way that the students get accustomed to an increasingly detailed analysis of the novel while being prepared to explore the theme of identity in the next stage.

The *post-reading stage* increases the students' awareness of the thematic scope and linguistic richness of Hurston's text. They expand their knowledge by undertaking an in-depth character analysis that leads up to the study of the novel's fundamental theme of identity. The objective is to apply discussion results to an analysis of identity as presented in the novel and as experienced in real life.

Finally, the *wrap-up stage* gives an opportunity to tie up loose ends. The students can voice their personal impressions of the novel, i.e. they discuss the author's accomplishments and conclude with reactions and evaluations.

Each stage relies on a stock of questions and tasks pertaining to the text and fostering student-centered discussions. An adequate selection of questions is essential if the reaching and learning goals are to be reached. McRae emphasizes the need for questions that make meaning of the text on various levels, i.e. they should include wh-questions that lead to understanding and deal with text structure, organization and content. Questions should be somewhat open, not necessarily look for only one specific answer, and encourage "response and interpretation, evaluation, and comparison with other texts. These questions involve inference, the evoking of the reader's own experiential baggage, cultural awareness, maturity, reading frame of reference, and so on" (28).

Questions should not be asked just for the sake of being asked. The instructor need not have perfect responses ready at hand, yet it is necessary to have possible answers in mind, accept alternative answers offered by students, and encourage them to create questions of their own. The questions should develop and improve the students' linguistic competence and literary competence in a measurable way. The instructor ought to encourage the students to select and evaluate their answers, to express their personal
opinions, and even to evaluate and criticize answers given by fellow students. The text and the questions are supposed to arouse the students' curiosity and in the process of trying to find answers the students should gain confidence in their analytical thinking and in expressing their ideas.

The guidelines, questions and tasks below help to prepare *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and to take a student-centered teaching approach. Many of the questions are general in nature so as to facilitate discussions. The questions and tasks are arranged in ways that analytical processes can be initiated and move forward in a structured manner. Additional comments and ideas help to link the questions to the text. They awaken the students' interest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, challenge their ways of reading and interpreting the novel, encourage them to write, to think critically, to organize information, to make choices based on analysis, and they are suitable for pair and group discussions. They also help the instructor to determine the degree of students' comprehension and progress. Most of the questions and tasks may be addressed during the reading process and the sequence by which they are tackled may be altered. This depends on the speed at which the class progresses. The sequence of questions and tasks may be adapted and some parts may be skipped to avoid repetition and time constraints. The instructor may alternate group and pair discussions, have students present their results to groups or to the whole class, have them submit their answers in writing for review and grading, or have them conduct peer quizzes.

**Pre-reading Stage**

*Expectations and Prior Knowledge*

How should a novel be introduced to students? Use warm-up activities to awaken the students' interest and enthusiasm for the text they are about to read. McRae posits that a literary text should be presented by means of simple and straightforward warm-up exercises that may consist of pre-reading stimuli, which should not only show where the teacher intends to take the students but also whether they have enough background knowledge to tackle the text and that therefore they should feel confident (25).

1. How do the images and comments on the book cover influence your expectations?
2. What are your presumptions and expectations before you start reading the novel? What are they based on?
3. Have you read comments or articles about this book or other novels by Hurston that may influence your expectations?
4. What do you think about the title? Whose eyes could they be and why were they watching God? Speculate.

The students’ answers help to determine how much they already know, where potential comprehension problems might occur in the course of reading the novel, and how to guide forthcoming discussions.

**The African-American Vernacular**

The following is a short passage from the novel’s opening page. The instructor should select more passages and have the students write the dialogs in Standard English. This preparation activity ensures that the students have an opportunity to become familiar with Hurston’s unique use of prose and the African-American vernacular.

"What she doin coming back here in dem overalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on? - Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in? - Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? - What dat ole forty year ole oman doin wid her hair swingin down her back lak some young gal? - Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? - Thought she was going to marry? - Where he left her? - What he done wid all her money? - Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs - why she don’t stay in her class? “ (2)

The transcription exercise may be assigned as homework and then be reviewed in class. This is an opportunity to highlight linguistic and grammatical varieties that the students must be aware of throughout the reading process. Moreover, the exercise sharpens the students’ awareness to seek connections between language and identity, which will be a recurrent topic in their analyses.

**While-reading Stage**

**First Reactions and Predictions**

The objective here is to give the students opportunities to express their likes and dislikes concerning the book after they have read the first chapter. This section also offers them a chance to voice first impressions, to gain confidence to continue reading the book. It helps them to overcome comprehension problems with regard to content and form.
1. What are your first reactions to the novel and your impressions of its possible intentions?

2. Why do you find reading Their Eyes Were Watching God (not) enjoyable? What are some interesting aspects and details about this story that motivate you to read until the end and possibly to re-read it later?

3. At this point in the reading process do you find Their Eyes Were Watching God informative, entertaining, or philosophical? Explain your answer and find more ways to describe the content and language of the novel.

Some students will be critical of the text at this stage because they may struggle with the text's language varieties and therefore dislike being challenged by a text in non-standard English. Thus, the instructor should open the discussion on these points and continue to encourage the students in their reading and highlight what they know and can do, rather than let them linger on what they do not know and cannot do.

McRae stresses the importance of asking about point of view and of having students make predictions about the events to come (36). The task below is an extensive writing activity designed to awaken the students' imagination and to increase their ability to predict the events to come:

As students move through a narrative, stop at different points in the story and have them write out optional predictions for what may happen next or how the story will end. Then, have them cite reasons for their predictions from both the previous events in the story and from their own knowledge of storylines. Then, at a later point in the story, have them determine whether their predictions were valid and reasons why they were or were not valid. (Beach online)

This exercise may have to be adapted so as to fit the given circumstances, e.g., instead of doing it in writing it could also be done in form of a group discussion. Its advantage lies in its adaptability and the fact that it can be implemented at any time of the reading process. It helps the students to think critically about the story and gives them ample opportunities for target-oriented discussions.

**Basic Character Analysis**

During the early phases of literary analysis it is common practice to put much focus on the characters because this helps the students to relate to fiction, to understand the undercurrent meanings of the plot, and to gain access to
abstract issues. In this respect, it is vital to carefully study the characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. They include the protagonist Janie Mae Crawford and main characters Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, and Tea Cake. Two minor characters requiring special attention are Janie's mother Leafy Crawford and her grandmother Nanny Crawford. Through the study of these characters the students increase their understanding of the story.

1. **Who is Janie Mae Crawford and what drives her forward?** Why do other people not understand her? What happens to her at the end of the story?
2. **Who is Leafy Crawford and what happened to her?**
3. **Who is Nanny Crawford and what is her role with regard to Janie?** How does Janie relate to Nanny's values?
4. **Who is Logan Killicks and who arranged Janie's marriage with him?** Why is the marriage a failure and why does Janie leave him?
5. **Who is Jody Starks and how would you describe Jody's personality?** Why does his marriage with Janie fail?
6. **Who is Tea Cake and what makes him a believable character?** In what ways is his marriage with Janie successful?
7. **Task suggested by Hopkins (online):** 'Character Trait Chart. Each student creates a chart with three columns. Each column is headed with the name of one of the book's characters. As the student reads the book, he or she can keep a record of the traits each character possesses and include an incident that supports each trait.'

The remaining characters are of less importance and should be discussed in relation to Janie. In this respect the reader may focus on their roles in moving the plot forward and in directing Janie's decisions and the development of her identity. Hopkins' activity is useful as it helps students structure their thoughts, engages them in a valuable writing process, and makes them 'experts' of the selected characters. Thus, already at this point the students are introduced to taking various perspectives of the story, which is an essential skill with regard to the discussions on identity that will follow later.

**Language and Style**

One of the objectives for students is to acquire an awareness of the subtleties of the author's writing, to overcome comprehension problems, and to gain a sense of the connections between one's language and cultural identity. A particular focus lies on choice and usage of words, style, effects of dialects, and colloquialisms. The students should be encouraged to use dictionaries to delve deeper into Hurston's linguistic universe, and be guided toward
comprehension and appreciation of the connections between the novel's content and linguistic form.

1. In what ways do you find Their Eyes Were Watching God (not) a challenging text?
2. Why has Hurston chosen specific words, sentences and paragraph arrangements and when did you need clarification of those?
3. How do the simplicities and complexities of the language play a part in Hurston's development of the story?
4. What are the effects of the novel's conversational and narrative language? Why is the language spoken by the characters (not) representative of and (not) appropriate for their cultural background?
5. Does Hurston guide the reader's attention toward the way she uses language? Is her style not immediately obvious? Is the style consistent throughout the novel? Can you detect linguistic shifts between levels of formality?
6. In what ways is the style (not) appropriate for the issues raised by the novel? Does the style help you understand the meaning of the story or does it pose an obstacle?
7. Task suggested by Mavrogenes (online): "List new words learned from the book and tell why each is interesting."
8. Task suggested by Hopkins (online): "Glossary and Word Search. Each student creates a glossary of ten or more words that are specific to a book's tone, setting, or characters. The student defines each word and writes a sentence from the book that includes that word. Then the student creates a word search puzzle that includes the glossary words. Students can exchange their glossaries and word searches with others in the class."

This section also provides the instructor with opportunities to assess and evaluate the students' understanding of the text. In this respect Hopkins' activity is designed to expand the students' ability to differentiate Standard English from African-American English. Moreover, it combines writing with analytical thinking, and the task moves from individual to group work.

**Themes, Images and Symbols**

What are themes? They are meanings, ideas or central concepts communicated through a work of fiction. They establish links between the reality of the reader and the fictional reality created in the novel. Themes are abstract, and in order to be analyzed they have to be presented in the form of generalizations. Examples of basic themes in literature are love, jealousy, revenge, loss, life, death, search, isolation, metamorphosis, or innocence. Their
Eyes Were Watching God is convincing in that it employs and weaves together several themes, such as traveling, transformation, colloquial language, and identity. Most of these themes will not come to the fore until the novel has been read entirely, and they keep a sense of ambiguity as they can be reduced to or grasped with simple explanations and definitions.

1. How does Hurston reveal the themes of the story?
2. Does the title carry any meaning and/or does it communicate a theme?

The students should come to understand that Hurston's novel presents its themes through character, setting and plot, i.e. indirectly for the most part, and through metaphors, similes, imagery and symbolism, and that it is the reader's task to search for the themes.

1. Does the author use figurative as well as literal images and metaphors?
2. What kind of images and symbols does the story rely upon? What is their significance and how often do they occur? Are there variations and patterns to these occurrences?
3. Are there images, symbols and details in Their Eyes Were Watching God that are used to create or support themes?
4. Task suggested by Mavrogogenes (online): “Find and write down twenty-five similes and metaphors.”

Symbols that need to be looked at among others are the mule, the pear tree, the bee, and Janie’s hair. The symbolism and images of the ship, the horizon, and dreams in the opening and closing passages also need to be addressed. Moreover, the students should see that the main characters represent abstract qualities which can be linked to the themes and possibly equated to them.

**Setting and Plot**

The students must gain a clear understanding of a number of literary expressions and concepts before they tackle questions about setting and plot. They must be familiar with terms such as story, plot, action, event, time, passage, episode, foreshadowing, flashback, flash-forward, suspense, climax, realism, fantasy, dramatization, internal and external conflict, and ending in order to come up with feasible answers.

1. Do the settings create a certain mood or atmosphere? Does the author put an emphasis on specific details of the settings? Do they hold any symbolic values or do they merely serve as realistic surroundings and conditions?
2. Does the plot follow a chronological and linear order? In what ways are the passage of time and the changes of setting significant?

3. How are present, past and future connected; i.e., how do foreshadowing and flashbacks play a major role in the structure of the story?

4. What gives rise to the various conflicts, actions and moments of suspense of the story and what is their nature? How are they motivated, narrated and resolved? Are they well connected and are they described in realistic ways?

5. When and where does the plot reach its climax and why has Hurston chosen to place the climax where she did? Draw a diagram of the plot.

By discussing these questions the students will learn that all decisions about setting and plot are fully intended, and that the sequence of locations is thoroughly planned. The choice of setting has an impact on the characters, and at the same time the characters shape the space they occupy. The goal here is to see the centrality of setting and that setting itself may be analyzed as a character. The questions explore setting and plot from various angles and offer opportunities for in-depth analysis. For additional visualization it is useful to follow Janie's journey on an actual map and to have the students gather information about the history and culture of the places she passes through.

**Point of View**

The students may struggle with the concept of changing point of view. It is thus vital to ensure their understanding of narrator omniscience and of the difference between a first-person and third-person narrative. Note that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the shifts in narrator voice influence point of view. On one level the story is Janie's recount of her experiences and her friend Phoeby is her direct audience, but the story is not told from Janie's point of view alone but rather from what appears to be an omniscient narrator.

1. Since there is a first-person narrator, can you determine who that person is? Is it a main or minor character? Are there any restrictions as to the quality and quantity of information this person's point of view can give the reader?

2. There is also a narrator in the third person. Is that person omniscient or limited in what they can tell the reader? If you see such restrictions, can you explain them?

3. Can you pinpoint specific paragraphs where the point of view changes and give reasons as to why and how the changes happen?
4. Do you find that the narrators are trustworthy or do you think that they are (intentionally) misleading the reader?

The objective here is to get the students to notice how perceptions are affected when the point of view shifts from the actions or thoughts of one character to those of another. Moreover, the instructor has to lead the students to an understanding of how the choices of point of view and language are interdependent and how they affect the reader’s interpretation of the text.

Post-reading Stage

In-depth Character Analysis

The following list of additional questions and tasks is an expansion of the basic character-analysis section introduced above. It serves to gain further insight into the inner works and interdependencies of the characters and to reach more complex levels in exploring them.

1. In what ways does Hurston bring the characters to life and how does she explore them? What appears to be her attitude toward her characters? Does she use descriptions, comments and revelations about their actions and thoughts?
2. Describe some essential traits of the main characters and compare their self-judgment with how others view them. Does the author create the characters in such ways that we are meant to criticize or sympathize with them?
3. Janie is the protagonist, yet is she also a traditional heroine? What problems does she encounter and how does she try to solve them?
4. In what ways do the main characters develop in the course of the story? Are there characters that appear to be resistant to change?
5. What are the roles of some of the minor characters? In what ways do they shape our views of the main characters? Do you see similarities or contrasts between main and minor characters? Are the characters round or flat, stereotypical or original?
6. What are some of the values and virtues that each character conveys? Are these values and virtues conflicting, and does the novel seem to prefer some over others?
7. In what ways are the social class, ethnicity and gender of the characters important? How do political, religious and economic views impact Janie and other characters and how do they shape the reader’s perception of the story as a whole?
8. Task suggested by Hopkins (online): “Interview a Character. Each student composes six to eight questions to ask a main character in a book just completed. The student also writes the character’s
response to each question. The questions and answers should provide information that shows the student read the book without giving away the most significant details."

9. Task suggested by Beach (online): "Revolving Role-Play: In this activity, each group member will choose a character to play from the scene. After acting out that particular scene, everyone will "switch" into a new role and reenact that scene from a new perspective. This activity is similar to the dramatic play activity because you may be creative in acting out imagined conversations and interactions between/among characters."

While discussing the questions and completing the tasks above the instructor should make sure that the students understand the difference between character and protagonist, and that it does not suffice to analyze characters in isolation. They must be thought about and put in relation to one another.

Exploring Issues of Identity

It is likely that during the discussions of the topics above – certainly during discourses on language and character – the issue of identity has already been raised. However, it is vital that the instructor does not go deeply into the theme of identity until this point now, where the students should be guided not only toward learning about the story and the characters, but also toward a thinking that reaches beyond the scope of the novel, because Their Eyes Were Watching God gives the students an opportunity to learn about others and in consequence about themselves. Thus, the instructor should awaken the students' interest in issues of identity, and do so by finding out what identity means to them. In order to test their prior knowledge, the instructor may have them come up with different types and definitions of identity. Students may try to define their personal identity and who they are as individuals. They should consider various factors that set them apart from others, think about specific types of identity, such as cultural, social, personal, political and gender identity, and put their own identity in relation to these.

1. Task suggested by Woodward ("Questioning Identity" 10): "Think about your own passport or any other identity card or official document. What does it say about you? Does it suggest groups with whom you share an identity and those from whom you are different? Does this suggest several different identities? What is omitted? What is the importance of such institutional identities?"

2. What does the question: 'Where do you come from?' signify? In what ways does a person's origin influence others' perception of that person?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between a particular place and a person's identity?
4. Do you agree with the premise that identity is largely based on difference, opposites, categorization and inequality? Or do similarities and equality form a basis for identity?
5. Is identity something that is constructed by people? How is it constructed and to what purpose?
6. Is a purpose of identity to separate insiders from outsiders, individuals from groups?
7. Does a person have control over his or her identity? If yes, to what extent?

The objective given by the statements and questions above is for the students to come to a deeper understanding of the construction and various dynamics of identity. First, the discussion should focus on identity in general terms, and the results are then applied to Janie and the other characters.

After a general discussion of identity the focus should shift toward identity as seen in the novel. Through the questions that follow the students are given opportunities to explore the theme of identity as it applies to Janie and as it is constructed throughout the novel. They should come to understand that on the one hand, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores various levels of interpersonal relationships by focusing on Janie and her encounters; on the other hand, Hurston is interested in the complexities of an individual’s quest for independence, identity, self-development and enlightenment, and all action is to serve the purpose of engaging in this quest.

1. Chapters 1-4: How are gender differences established and how do they shape Janie's character? How do gender identities complement each other? Why does Janie favor a female identity? What is she searching for? How are inequality and the lack of love between her and Logan revealed?
2. Chapters 5-8: Why and how does Jody challenge Janie’s equality? How does he exert his control? How are identity and community related? How do Jody and the community shape Janie’s identity? What is the role of Janie’s hair with regard to her identity and quest?
3. Chapters 9-12: Why is Tea Cake a more suitable partner for Janie than Jody was? How does he help her find her own voice? What are some major sources of pain and sorrow? What does Janie come to understand about her quest, spirituality, materialism and her late grandmother?
4. Chapters 13-16: How and why do Tea Cake’s guiding presence and Janie’s quest for identity become one? What is the significance of their fight and passion? In what ways are speech and language revealed as keys to Janie’s identity?
5. Chapters 17-20: In what ways are these chapters climactic? Which conflicts culminate here and how are they resolved? Is Janie's quest that of a black woman, is it successful, and can it be understood in universal terms? In what ways is her search different from men's dreams and ambitions? In what ways do the human condition and the quest for identity merge?

For possible answers to these questions and a further discussion on the novel see Natchez and Ward (online).

McAdams emphasizes the temporal aspect of identity and sees culture and life influenced by central entities:

[Identity is itself a life story that the person begins constructing in late adolescence and young adulthood. As an internalized and evolving narrative of the self, the life story integrates disparate roles and brings together the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future in order to provide a person with a purposeful identity in modern life. Culture provides the narrative resources for identity, and life stories are strongly shaped by gender, social structure, and the material and ideological givens of a particular society. (426)]

McAdams' statement is relevant with regard to Janie's life story because from childhood on she struggles to define herself and her role as an individual within a society that does everything to pigeonhole her. Even her name is what others choose to call her, and confusions about name, color of the skin and otherness merge in Janie's first epiphany as a girl. Thus, she remembers:

"So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Flenor. Dat's where Ah wuz supposed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ask, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.' Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chilun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, 'Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo ownself?'

"Dey all useter call me Alphabet cause so many people had done named me different names. Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said:

"Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!"

"Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest." (Hurston 9, emphases added)

Thus, at the outset of her endeavors Janie has many names, but none to give her direction, and throughout the story her goal is to free herself from imposed roles and perceptions and to seek her identity.
Wolff is right in seeing the key to the way in which Janie develops her identity and finds her truth in a process of coming to understand herself:

It is she who reveals her past to her friend as she speaks, but, in a sense, Janie also narrates the manner in which her identity has been revealed to her. The story is structured around successive scenes of self-recognition which are Janie’s repeated attempts to create a clear, satisfying picture of who she is. The events of the narrative, and the other characters, function within this structure. Janie is lead to form her own dream, her own truth, from what she has lived. (219)

Self-recognition is at the core of Janie’s search for identity, as is an awakening from passivity to action. Disillusion, dissatisfaction, unfulfilled desires, being devalued by others, and living the roles that are given to her by her grandmother Nanny – who taught her that the black man is always at the mercy of the white man and that “de nigger woman is the mule uh de world” (Hurston 14) because she always ends up doing the black man’s work –, her first two husbands Logan and Jody, and the community are all factors that guide her toward finding her own voice, but that stop her from ultimately achieving it. In other words, the images and roles that are put upon her must be replaced by those she can call her own. She hopes to find herself through others, but she has to experience a life of hardship before she can truly be herself. Thus, in moments of great conflict brought forth by those she encounters she ponders the past and comes to recognize and appreciate who she truly is.

Here Wolff emphasizes the negative and positive impacts key characters have on Janie’s development: “From her grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks, Janie receives a ready-made text, i.e. a definition of her role. She is expected to conform to it. From Tea Cake, on the other hand, she receives an invitation to live a text, to formulate a role” (224). In fact, Tea Cake serves various purposes. He recognizes Janie’s ambition to grow as an individual and to do so by her own rules. He acts as her guide and supports her wish for liberation. Unlike his predecessors he does not attempt to undermine her pride or to keep her in a spiritual cage but treats her with love and respect. He fills a void in Janie’s soul by letting her partake in his adventures and unpredictable turns of life. Thus, Janie’s journey is as much spiritual as it is physical and helps her in finding her place in society.

Tea Cake does not try to fit her into a predetermined role but rather teases out her potential and lets her choose her own role, not least by freeing her language. While others use language as a weapon to force Janie to accept roles given to her, Tea Cake speaks a language of playfulness, romance, and
devotion and assists her in finding her own voice, a voice she ultimately needs to tell her story. Tea Cake's language speaks to Janie's senses and is in sync with her inner voice, which she has not had the opportunity to express in full until she meets him. Janie's final recount is the basis for the novel and the manifestation of the fact that through her marriages and numerous adventures she has found her identity and own voice. Thus, she aptly concludes: "It's uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh go there to know there" (Hurston 192). In the process of her adventures she changes profoundly as she comes to see the world and herself with clarity of mind and love in her heart. At the core of her development lie Janie's voice and her use of language. In this sense language plays a vital role in the novel, empowers Janie, and supports her quest.

With regard to Janie's search for individual identity the following statements are relevant: "Identity denotes the way in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins 18). And Woodward: "Identity is about difference; it is about marking out 'us' and 'them' [...]" ("Understanding Identity" viii). These statements correspond with the moral discoveries of Their Eyes Were Watching God as the novel constitutes an evocation of the ever changing realities of African-Americans and their shifting identities. Hurston explores the forms of adaptation and transformation, the outside forces that influence the formation of identity, and incorporates plot and themes in order to formulate her own approach to identity. Furthermore, the novel delves into the formation of Janie's individual identity in relation to other individuals as well as to the community, and it is a study of recognition of the self by the self and by others, which is a concept supported by the following statement: "To exist one has to be recognised by an-other" (Lacan qtd. in Homer 26).

Therefore, Their Eyes Were Watching God is a thoroughly structured yet delicate comment on the constitution and location of identity within oneself and within the community. It rests to hope that the stages, questions and tasks suggested above lead the students to this deeper understanding of the novel's purposes and that they encourage each student to think about his or her own identity.

Wrap-up Stage

Hurston's Accomplishments

The following questions deal with Hurston's achievements. Thus, they revisit features that have already been discussed, yet the answers should be closely
linked to the author and her ability to create an insightful work of fiction. The subsequent small tasks are designed to help students take the author's point of view.

1. How would you compare this novel to other works of fiction you have read?
2. Do you think Hurston has succeeded at bringing a fictitious world to life? Are the world and characters she has created realistic, and why should the reader think about them?
3. Is the language of Their Eyes Were Watching God engaging and challenging? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses in Hurston’s use of language? Is there a match between the language and the story?
4. What are the strengths or weaknesses of Hurston’s literary techniques?
5. In what ways is this novel a valid representation of literary trends, society, history and philosophy of its time?
6. Does the novel communicate universal truths? What are they?
7. Tasks suggested by Mavrogiones (online): “Make up five interview questions (with answers) for the author.” / “Pretend you’re the author and explain why you chose the title of your book.” / “Pretend you’re the author and describe the part that was most fun to write.”

Final Reactions and Evaluation

The objective here is to give the students a chance to look back on the text once more, to express their reactions, and to formulate evaluations and reviews. Useful questions may include the following:

1. In what ways has the novel changed or expanded your way of thinking?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the values and ideas put forward by the novel?
3. What are some things you have learned through reading this novel that you find applicable to your personal life?
4. At what points of the reading process were you able to apply your personal experience to the discussions of this novel?
5. Explain how your appreciation of the novel has changed during the reading process. Were there parts of the novel you enjoyed more than others?
6. How has your knowledge of other novels and possibly films helped you in reading and thinking about Their Eyes Were Watching God?
sentences, must include details the student didn’t know before reading the book.”

8. Task suggested by Beach (online): “Missing Scenes: Your group will create a missing scene or missing scenes that you feel were implied by the story or could have happened. You will act these out for the class and be prepared to have supporting evidence from the text that shows these scenes might have logically occurred.”

Conclusion

In the first part, this article has offered a discussion on why literary texts should be implemented in Asian contexts and how Asian students may best benefit from them. A literary text used as a teaching device has to be selected with care and needs to be authentic, relevant, and offer learning opportunities on various levels. It is not only a way to initiate conversation, but it also assists in broadening the students’ understanding of cultural identity, foreign and their own, and ways of thinking. Moreover, literary texts offer captivating stories driven by the actions and emotions of engaging characters, and through their inherent connectedness stories build a bridge to real life, which facilitates learning and elicits motivation.

Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an appropriate choice because its rich language and appealing themes are suitable for analysis by mature students who are prepared to discuss cultural as well as social issues. Before selecting *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for reading in an Asian classroom, the instructor has to consider the students’ prior knowledge and anticipate comprehension problems, as much of the story is told in the African-American vernacular, which is likely to cause some challenges. Due to its complexities, the novel offers many opportunities to relate African-American to Asian cultures, and the discussion of such differences is beneficial to the students’ own identity formation.

The second part of the article has put forward guiding principles and overall teaching objectives to keep lessons focused and to foster student learning. The article has advocated a student-centered teaching approach in which student autonomy is a primary goal. Most of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is to be read independently, supported by set tasks, so as to make classroom time available for discussions and activities that require student participation. Assignments should be demanding and manageable, and guidance by the instructor is limited yet specific. This boosts the students’ confidence, facilitates their text comprehension, and leads to improved critical thinking and increased independence.
A division of the analysis into four stages, i.e. pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading, and wrap-up stage, is appropriate and does justice to the proposed principles and objectives. By going through these stages the students are given many opportunities to voice expectations, prior knowledge, reactions and predictions, and they analyze the novel's language, characters, themes, narrative trajectory and Hurston's accomplishments, among others. The questions and tasks allow room to explore alternative answers and ensure structured proceedings.

The third part of the article has demonstrated the value of emphasizing a particular theme and of connecting it to the reader's personal experience. Thus, the discussion of Their Eyes Were Watching God culminates in a study of identity as it is presented by the novel and as it occurs outside the fictional sphere. The students explore the literary creation and various dynamics of identity, i.e. the ways in which Their Eyes Were Watching God tells the story of Janie and her quest to break out of predetermined roles given to her by society and individuals in order to become active and to find her own voice and identity. Through this process the students may draw conclusions as to what identity means to them as individuals and as members of Asian communities. Hence, the article has shown that the process of finding the location of identity via reading an African-American novel in an Asian context offers an abundance of useful learning opportunities that ensure the development of critical thinking as well as the establishment of perspectives that look beyond one's own cultural heritage.

Note

1. This article was presented at the 3rd Annual International ACSA Conference held at Assumption University, Bangkok, in August 2009.

References


