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Capitalist Behavior In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In the 1930's Zora Neale Hurston was the first black-woman writer to publish a book during the Harlem Renaissance. Though during this time, she was criticized by her male counterparts for not writing about the issues of race and instead focused on feminism instead. Although, Hurston is indeed more credited as a feminist writer, many literary critics have spotted a number of other literary themes as well, such as marxism. In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston shows us how capitalism promotes the ordinary dream of joining the upper hierarchical socioeconomic status of American society, by using the character Nanny Crawford as an example of this desire. Hurston also illustrates the kind of effects capitalism has exuded upon American society by using Joe Starks as her primary example, as he embodies many of the ideological characteristics that capitalism promotes. By using a Marxist lens of literary theory, Hurston's examples in her novel become explicitly clear as they offer a commentary on capitalist ideological issues which have more to render than a compelling tale of feminist promotion.

I want to begin with the first example in the novel, Janie Crawford's grandmother, Nanny. Nanny is a character who is obsessed with socioeconomic status because people of the upper class appear to be superior to those who are below them. Since Nanny suffered under the oppression of slavery by privileged white owners, she had always envied the life of financial stability and the high socioeconomic standards of living. As a slave, a financial future was

something she never believed she could have and she instead always had to live her life with the uncertainty of her safety and future. When slavery came to an end Nanny, “wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and cook-pot and throw up a highway through the wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt” (Hurstons 16).

Nanny wished she could have sat up high in social standing like her Master’s wife, because she observed that it was an easy life, free of hard work and labor. In order to achieve this dream Nanny, “raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land” (19) so she could provide her daughter with a decent upbringing and education to improve her lot in life. Yet, Nanny’s daughter ultimately ended up running off; leaving her with Janie, so instead Nanny aimed to live this ideology through her grand daughter instead. Similarly, Nanny's dream was again put into jeopardy when she saw Janie kissing a male character, Johnny Taylor, late at night. She told Janie, “Ah don’t want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’ body to wipe his feet on” (13). Nanny did not think Johnny Taylor was of the correct social upper-class that she worked so hard to prepare Janie for, thus, Johnny Taylor was deemed an unsuitable partner. Nanny couldn’t risk Janie throwing away the future she worked so hard to secure for her and said, “Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and sweeter berry. But dat ain’t yo’ idea, Ah see” (13). Thus, in order to quickly establish Janie’s social position she had her married to Logan Killicks who was a man of wealth and higher socioeconomic status. In Todd McGowan’s article, “Liberation and Domination: Their Eyes Were Watching God and the Evolution of Capitalism,” McGowan argues that, “Nanny thrusts [Janie] into marriage with Logan and subjects Janie's dream to the exigencies of the Protestant work ethic” (113). I disagree with this analysis. I believe Nanny marries Janie to Logan Killicks specifically in order for Janie

to avoid the Protestant work ethic. Nanny herself endured this work ethic during and after slavery in order for her offspring to hopefully be able to avoid it. Nanny wanted Janie to be married to someone of the upper class so Janie could live an easy life free of labor like Nanny dreamed of. This idea is tied to the American dream, where people strive to reach a wealth that changes their life from one of hard work to easy living; free of financial worries. This idea was as relevant in the 1930s as it is today. Unfortunately, it just so happened that Logan Killick's plans for Janie did not align with what Nanny had envisioned. Hard work and labor seem to be the primary reasons that socioeconomic status was so important to Nanny. Nanny believed she saved Janie from this fate by marrying her to Logan. Thus, she couldn't understand Janie's unhappiness with her life with Logan and said to her, "Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and...Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on" (23). Instead of considering Janie's feelings, Nanny cared more about the material wealth—or rather, a new socioeconomic status and financial security—Janie had by marrying Logan and listing the things Janie has, that most people do not. Janie has acquired everything Nanny had always dreamed of but never had a chance of obtaining it herself. It is reasonable to believe that Hurston wrote Nanny in this way to demonstrate the misconception many people have, that material possessions and reaching the upper class is the only answer to finding happiness, because clearly for Janie this was not the case.

Hurston's next example of a character who embodies American capitalist ideas, is Joe Starks, commonly referred to in the novel as Jody. Jody arrives in Eatonville and quickly establishes himself in the prominent social position of Mayor. Joe's wealth and purchase of land to expand the size of Eatonville, as well as his ideas to improve the town give him the

appearance of standing on a higher social class from the rest of Eatonville's citizens. Viewing this from a Marxist lens, Tyson writes, "From a classist perspective, people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical, and so on." Therefore, considering Joe's quick contributions, along with his confidence, he is quickly seen to be a superior man among the rest of the townspeople and appears naturally more suited to be placed in a position of power and leadership. In the article, Todd McGowan argues that Jody's power does not extend from his wealth but instead through his personality stating, "the people in the town obey Joe for only one reason: he acts as if he is to be obeyed. Joe's power does not come from a tangible quality-strength, intelligence, etc.-but from the appearance of authority and a corresponding willingness to obey, to bow before authority, among the people of Eatonville" (115). I disagree with this analysis. I think Jody's power comes almost exclusively from his wealth. It is because Joe has money that he was able to make a splash upon first arriving in Eatonville. People are willing to listen to him, because he flexed his power by purchasing over a hundred acres of land as soon as he arrived; bought the first light in the town, opened a store, a post office, and became the mayor. These synchronized events gave him the big authoritative voice he was searching for and all these attributes correspond directly in thanks to his money. In a capitalist society, the people who control the most wealth are usually the ones who are the most obeyed. Wealth attributes itself to a person's power and allows them to subjugate others in the lower classes. Without the wealth he acquired working in Atlanta, he would not have been able to achieve these events. When he first arrived, none of the resident's took his boasting seriously until he returned with the deeds to the land that vastly increased the size of the town. If Joe had been a poor man, none of this would have been possible and Joe's status would have been no higher than any of the other townsfolk in

the novel. I believe Hurston shows how Joe's money elevates his social position in order to demonstrate the privilege and influence money has over people of lower financial standings. Joe's wealth disrupts the equality of living standards that existed in the town before his arrival, and it places people in a worse off position than they had been in previously. The townsfolk now had a resident who was able to display everything in life that they lacked, and they were made inferior in comparisons of social standings.

Though along with Joe's power and higher socioeconomic status, Joe falls victim to conspicuous consumption, otherwise known as materialism. He finds that while he has established himself as a person of higher status, he also feels the need to flaunt his wealth through material possessions as a way to further enhance his image of superiority. The narrator comments that Jody "spit in that gold looking vase that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front-room table. Said it was a spittoon just like his used-to-be bossman used to have in his bank up in Atlanta" (Hurston 47). This is problematic for two reasons. The first issue here is that Joe decided to purchase a fancy spittoon specifically to use for his spit. Others would have proudly put it on a table for decoration, yet Joe uses it to spit in. This is a symbolic demonstration of his wealth. Joe is much less concerned over the spittoon's actual use, but receives his satisfaction by the common observer's reaction to the object. It demonstrates to the townspeople how much higher he is in the socioeconomic class structure in comparison to them, "it weakened people" (47) by making them feel inferior. The other issue here is that Jody is emulating what his white boss had done in Atlanta. This is problematic for another reason. The sole reason for founding Eatonville was so that black people could live in a community free from the oppression and class system that had been established by the whites. By Jody living with excessive wealth and beginning to emulate the habits of white men such as; purchasing a fancy

desk, a swivel chair, and spittoon like his boss used to have, it likens him to white men, and puts the townspeople back in their inferior position that they sought to escape. McGowan also states that “Joe's authority, his power over the town and over Janie, does not exist in itself; it exists only insofar as they invest him with this authority, insofar as they recognize his authority” (115). I agree with this idea. I think that Hurston was using Joe's possessions to give him the image of a higher position in his societal hierarchy, and with this elevated position, the town's people acknowledge Jody's power over them. Much like the middle and lower classes acknowledge the power of the rich elite. They unconsciously submit to influence as a result of seeing his possessions that they could never possibly afford. They are no longer all equals because Jody's material possessions become a constant reminder of what they lack, just as people do in our current capitalist society. Hurston is showing us the difference between the “haves” and “have nots” of wealth (Tyson). While Joe lived a life of luxury, the townspeople lived in substandard positions and performed the manual labor Joe had assigned, much like how proletariats labor under the bourgeoisie's control. His possessions reinforce his dominance, just as the upper class did in the 1930's and today.

Finally another example of how Joe has become a tool of capitalism is how he commodifies the town mule and Janie. Tyson explains this ideology by stating, “I commodify human beings when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially.” When some of the townspeople are harassing an old mule, Jody tells them to quit and buys the mule from its owner and lets it free. He didn't do it out of the good of his heart but because he knew it would make him look like a savior and improve his social image among the town. Joe felt validated when Sam told him, “It's uh noble thing you done.’ [And] Everybody agreed with that” (58). Joe uses Janie's good looks to enhance his image within the

town as well. He wants her to look beautiful so others can be envious of him as having her as another one of his possessions. On the opening day of their store, “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (41). This signifies that it is important to him that she looks better than all the other women in the town, because if she does not, he fears it would lower his social standing. Joe did not want to lose a shred of his image by other men ranking Janie’s looks below anyone else’s. Joe has become so consumed in capitalism that he wants Janie’s beauty to represent his high status. If Janie does not look better than every other woman in town, she is not helping Joe flaunt his success over others. Joe based Janie’s value on her looks, and as she aged he would publicly insult her, which demonstrated to people that his expectations remained high and he didn’t want her diminishing beauty to affect his social status. I believe Hurston was using capitalism here to show us the negative effects of a capitalist economy. Joe disparages Janie’s looks because capitalism thrives on making other people unable to feel good about themselves. Tyson describes this ideology in the terms that, when people are upset, their insecurities promote the purchasing of more material things. In this case, it could have prompted Janie to try and dress better or try to look prettier for Joe but instead Janie retaliates, much like how the proletariat strikes against their employer (Though their results can vary widely). In Janie’s case, her retaliation of insulting Joe in front of Lum, resulted in not only a slap in her face, but as McGowan states, “by revealing that the center [Joe] has no substance, that it is impotent, Janie deconstructs the hierarchy of domination endemic to the epoch of monopoly capitalism. The organization, the manifestation of this power structure, loses its substantiality without the stabilizing force of the phallic center” (117). As a result of Janie’s retaliation, the illusion that

Joe was an unchallengeable figure came crumbling down. I believe Hurston wrote this part of the book as a response to what supporters of marxism truly want; to rise up against their oppressive employers. In Janie's case, her uprising is successful and Jody dies not long after she topples his authoritative domination.

While Zora Neale Hurston is indeed an incredible feminist writer, I believe that her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, demonstrates that Hurston has many more literary commentaries to offer. It seems likely that Hurston understood the capitalist themes she wrote into her novel, because the characters of Nanny and Joe Starks characterize capitalist themes so clearly. While many literary critics may not agree on every interpretation of the text, there is certainly room for debate and discussion to be had. Hurston is a very complex person, so her commentary may never be entirely clear, but I feel certain that she purposely wrote these marxist ideologies into *Their Eyes* as a commentary of capitalist effects on American society.

Works Cited

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