
Archetypes of Empowerment: A Mythological Reading of Female Selfhood in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract:

This paper explores Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through a mythological and archetypal lens, analyzing the protagonist Janie Crawford's journey toward selfhood. Drawing from Jungian psychology and Joseph Campbell's monomyth, this study argues that Janie's narrative follows the hero's journey and integrates archetypal figures such as the Great Mother, the Trickster, and the Wise Woman. Janie's evolution from dependence to self-realization mirrors classical mythic structures, highlighting themes of transformation, resilience, and female empowerment. Hurston weaves African American folklore with universal mythological motifs to craft a heroine whose journey transcends time and culture. Through her relationships with Nanny, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake, Janie undergoes trials that shape her self-awareness and autonomy. By the novel's end, she emerges as a self-actualized figure who defies societal expectations and reclaims her narrative. This study situates Janie as a mythic heroine, redefining traditional narratives of female empowerment in literature. By applying archetypal and mythological criticism, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Hurston's work, demonstrating how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* bridges personal and collective histories of Black womanhood and self-determination.

Keywords: Archetypes, Hero's Journey, Jungian Psychology, Mythological Criticism, Female Empowerment, African American Literature, Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a seminal text in African American and feminist literature, chronicling the protagonist Janie Crawford's quest for love, freedom, and self-actualization. While previous scholarship has examined the novel from socio-historical and feminist perspectives, a mythological reading offers a deeper understanding of its universal significance. This paper explores how Hurston employs

archetypes, drawing upon Jungian psychology and Campbell's monomyth, to depict Janie's transformation into an empowered individual.

Janie's story is framed within the context of African American folklore, oral storytelling traditions, and the broader realm of mythological narratives that emphasize the hero's trials, sacrifices, and ultimate enlightenment. This study aims to explore how Hurston crafts Janie as a mythic heroine, aligning her transformation with classical and archetypal frameworks that transcend time and culture.

Theoretical Framework

Jungian Archetypes and the Hero's Journey

Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious suggests that certain archetypal images and patterns are ingrained in human consciousness. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) further expands on these ideas by outlining the hero's journey, a narrative structure that appears in myths across cultures. Key stages include:

- Call to Adventure
- Initiation and Challenges
- Abyss and Transformation
- Return with Wisdom

Applying this framework to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reveals Janie's journey as a mythic quest for selfhood. The novel follows a circular pattern, beginning and ending with Janie's return to Eatonville, marking her completion of the archetypal hero's cycle.

Archetypal Analysis of Janie Crawford's Journey

Call to Adventure: Nanny and the Archetype of the Great Mother

Janie's early life is shaped by her grandmother, Nanny, who embodies the Great Mother archetype. While Nanny provides protection and wisdom, she also imposes traditional expectations upon Janie, pushing her into a marriage with Logan Killicks. This moment represents the threshold of Janie's journey—a call to adventure that she initially resists.

Nanny's desire to secure Janie's future stems from her own traumatic past as an enslaved woman, which underscores the generational conflict between security and self-fulfillment. This phase of Janie's journey illustrates the tension between individual agency and societal expectations. Janie's initial acceptance of Nanny's wisdom shows the restrictive societal roles imposed upon Black women, aligning with archetypal narratives where the hero must first accept a false sense of security before breaking free.

Marriage and Disillusionment: The Trickster Archetype in Joe Stark

Janie's second husband, Joe Starks, represents the Trickster archetype, luring her into a relationship that promises empowerment but ultimately reinforces oppression. Joe's ambition and eloquence mask his desire for control, and Janie's voice is silenced in their marriage. However, this phase of her journey introduces the trials necessary for her transformation.

Joe's role as a Trickster figure is evident in his manipulation of power and language.

By building Eatonville and asserting his dominance as mayor, he establishes himself as a patriarchal authority figure. His charisma initially deceives Janie, much like the deceptive nature of the Trickster archetype in myths. Her realization of her constrained role within their marriage serves as a crucial turning point, pushing her towards self-assertion. Her eventual defiance of Joe on his deathbed marks a significant step in her journey toward individuation.

The Abyss and Transformation: Tea Cake as the Guide

Tea Cake plays a pivotal role in Janie's evolution, embodying both the Trickster and the Wise Man archetypes. Unlike Joe, he encourages Janie's self-expression and challenges her to experience life on her terms. However, his own flaws and the tragic circumstances of his death force Janie to confront her deepest fears, leading to her ultimate transformation. Tea Cake's love, though imperfect, allows Janie to explore a more equal partnership. His playful, spontaneous nature contrasts with Joe Starks' rigidity, representing a shift from oppression to personal freedom. Despite his downfall, Tea Cake serves as a catalyst for Janie's empowerment. His death, which forces Janie to act decisively to protect herself, represents the classic moment of rebirth in the hero's journey, where the protagonist must emerge stronger after a significant loss.

Return with Wisdom: Janie's Self-Actualization

Janie's return to Eatonville marks the completion of her journey. Having navigated love, loss, and self-discovery, she attains a state of wisdom and empowerment. In this final phase, she embodies the archetype of the Wise Woman, secure in her selfhood and no longer reliant on external validation.

Janie's final moments in the novel highlight her spiritual and emotional growth. She no longer seeks validation through marriage but finds fulfillment in her inner self. The image of her pulling on the horizon symbolizes her acceptance of life's experiences and the wisdom gained through her journey. Her transformation is now complete, and she has achieved a sense of selfhood beyond societal expectations.

Summing Up

Through a mythological reading, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emerges as a tale of heroic transformation, aligning Janie Crawford with archetypal figures of myth and legend. By charting Janie's development through the hero's journey and key Jungian archetypes, this analysis underscores the novel's universal themes of empowerment, self-discovery, and resilience. Hurston's work, therefore, not only affirms the specificity of African American female identity but also situates Janie as a timeless mythic heroine.

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