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**The Dilemma of Literary Interpretation: Exploring Different Receptions of Zora**

**Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-**

**American Critics**

A dissertation submitted to the department of English in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of master in English literature, civilization, and language teaching.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my supervisor, family and friends. I could not have done  
this without you.

Thank you for all of your encouragement and support along the way.

## **Acknowledgements**

Above all, I am grateful to Allah, the Almighty for his bountiful gifts. He gave me courage, patience and faith in myself to be where I am.

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## Abstract

All over the time readings of the same literary work differ unexpectedly. Sometimes critics and readers fall in sharp oppositions concerning a text's meaning. Zora Neale Hurston's African-American novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) can best exemplify this tension between literary studies. This research seeks not to judge about which interpretation is more valid, but to understand why such contradictions between readings of the same text occur at all. To this end, it seeks to form an understanding about the perspective(s) of literary criticism in literature, its origination and development in order to spot the reason(s) responsible for their diversity. After that, it moves to practically analyze how the results work their way through a text interpretation, taking the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American critics of *Their Eyes* as a sample of the study.

**Keywords:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the reader, interpretation, Reader-Response theory, 'horizon of expectations', 'interpretive strategies'.

## Résumé

Tout au long du temps, les lectures du même travail littéraire diffèrent de façon inattendue. Parfois, les critiques et les lecteurs tombent dans des oppositions sévères concernant le sens d'un texte. Le roman afro-américain de Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), peut illustrer le mieux cette tension entre les études littéraires. Cette recherche ne cherche pas à juger quel interprétation est plus valable, mais à comprendre pourquoi de telles contradictions entre les lectures d'un même texte se produisent du tout. À cette fin, elle cherche à comprendre le (les) perspective (s) de la critique littéraire dans la littérature, son origine et son développement afin de repérer la (les) raison (s) responsable (s) de leur diversité. Après cela, elle passe pratiquement à analyser la façon dont les résultats travaillent leurs chemins à travers une interprétation d'un texte, en prenant les lecteurs afro-américains du vingtième siècle du roman *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comme échantillon de l'étude.

**Mots-clés:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, le lecteur, l'interprétation, Théories de la Réception et de la Lecture, 'horizon de l'espérance', 'stratégies interprétatives'.

## الملخص

مع مرور الوقت تختلف قراءات نفس العمل الأدبي بشكل غير متوقع. أحيانا يقع النقاد والقراء في معارضة حادة فيما يتعلق بمعنى النص. رواية الروائية أمريكية ذات الأصول الأفريقية زورا نيل هورستون *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) يمكن أن تعتبر أفضل ممثل لهذا التوتر بين الدراسات الأدبية. لا يسعى هذا البحث إلى الحكم على أي تفسير هو الأكثر صحة، ولكن لفهم سبب حدوث مثل هذه التناقضات بين قراءات نفس النص من الأساس. وتحقيقا لهذه الغاية، يسعى هذا البحث إلى تكوين فهم حول وجهة (وجهات) نظر النقد الأدبي، مرورا بنشأته وتطوره من أجل تحديد السبب (الأسباب) المسؤولة عن اختلافها. بعد ذلك، فإنه ينتقل لاختبار تطبيقي لكيفية عمل هذه النتائج عبر تفسير النص، وذلك بأخذنا لقراء القرن الـ 20 الأمريكيين الأفارقة كعينة لهذه الدراسة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*، القارئ، التفسير، نظرية القارئ-

الاستجابة، 'أفق التوقعات'، 'الاستراتيجيات التفسيرية'.

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## **General Introduction**

According to the early scholars of literature, we read novels and study literature because they humanize us. Literature provides an aesthetic experience which is a far end in itself. However, it is not a transparent medium. At least, the intellectuals like literature students, scholars, and critics approach it for the sake of having an insight into the world. The humanity therefore should obtain a tool which can explain literary products (Critical Approaches 226). This task of understanding literary works – and the human experience brought with it – is one of literary criticism (Tyson 452).

Therefore, the literary audience tends to subject the text to ‘appropriate’ literary theory(s). A literary theory questions a text’s meaning(s), form, and its possible thematic dimensions so that it is no longer possible to naïvely accept what this text explicitly tells (Selden et al. 04). One reader or scholar approaches the text through a certain theory which he finds appropriate to study this particular work, while the other chooses another theory to study the same text. If the results of this text interpretation are similar or complementary, this would be a favorable enrichment to the text. However, if these studies of a novel or a poem fall in contradiction, this would rather raise a serious debate.

In fact, there is a variety of Literary (or critical) theories, which can be different as they can be harmonious. They “are isolated entities, completely different from one another, separable into tidy bins, like the tubs of tulips, daffodils, and coronations we see at the florist. It would be more useful to think of theories [...] as mixed bouquets, each of which can contain a few of the flowers that predominate in or that serve different purposes in other bouquets” (Tyson 05). Critical studies may therefore end up with

different interpretations for a single piece of literary work due to the degree of overlap between their literary theories. Instead of seeking the help of literary theories to better understand a novel, play or a poem, students of literature end up in a state of confusion. They get lost between the logic(s) of different literary theories and schools of thought. The reader starts with a question about a literary text significance, but he ends up in a maze of many possible answers not knowing which one to follow.

Being myself under such condition, I remember asking myself questions as such. This was last year when we analyzed Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from a modernist point of view. This latter considers Conrad as a condemner of Imperialism. Then we were introduced to another analytical study of this work which shouted 'what you have been studying so far is completely wrong!' This was Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." After reading Achebe's post-colonial criticism of *Heart of Darkness* I felt misled by the Europeans' bright analyses of it.

Directly afterwards our teacher, Mr. Kais, dedicated a session for us, in which we were asked to express our opinions about the interpretation we believe in more and why. I remember well, as if it is now, raising my finger to convince everyone that the first was undoubtedly righteous, then lowering it down in hesitation. Until the end of the session there was a battle in my mind; each time I supported a claim and prepared a list of powerful arguments to defy the other one, then I change my mind, to the opposite argument. The problem was that there wasn't the least face of agreement between the two interpretations of the novel, it is either the novel supports imperialism or it condemns it. Yet, both were built on strong arguments from the work itself. One cannot deny any of

the two explanations, nor can he embrace them both together. This trapped me in the maze of literary criticism and interpretation. I kept struggling inside of it for a year to come.

Another instance which is more striking is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Hurston was an African-American writer at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her literary career and works have gone through a series of ups and downs, from neglect to revival, glorification and debates as a result to the inconsistent evaluation given to them by the critics<sup>1</sup>. We are here speaking about a recipient of two Guggenheims<sup>2</sup> and a prize winning author who "virtually disappeared from her readership for three full decades" (Gates). Marry Helen Washington says that the question about such a disappearance remains without an answer.

Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has a special bewilderment. According to Doris Grumbach in "Saturday Review", it is considered "the finest black novel of her time" and "one of the finest of all time". It has fallen out of print for about 30 years, and then came back strongly as the best seller. More to this fate is that it has been mainly decided by one category of readers, the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American audience. Reader who have a lot to share in common, are most likely to agree on a novel's interpretation and value, yet this was not the case here (Washington qtd. in Hurston xxvii).

The dilemma of interpreting a novel (or a poem, or a play) did not only blur the understanding of *Heart of Darkness*, but was similarly true to other works of literature

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<sup>1</sup> Here we are not addressing these critics for the weight of their literary arguments or so, but as readers who are far from literary ignorance.

<sup>2</sup> According to Wikipedia, these are grants that have been awarded annually since 1925 by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to those who have demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts.

like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Therefore, it is no longer a matter of which interpretation is valid. The core problem is why do we find contradictory interpretations of the same literary work?

Judith A. Langer's *The Process of Understanding Literature* establishes a clear understanding of how does the mind of readers proceed in the act of reading and interpreting a literary work. Langer mainly focuses on the approaches the readers manipulate during the course of reading. Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennett's *An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*, in a complimentary way, accounts for Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland and Stanley Fish's efforts to move literary criticism towards acknowledging the reader's active role throughout the reading process. Royle and Bennett further discuss these critics' theories together with few others. This book illustrates the factors each one sets forth as responsible for shaping the literary understanding. The authors explain how these theorists have together shaped Reader-Response criticism. This latter has raised against new criticism and the traditional schools of criticism which have determinant literary theories.

Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker in their book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* investigate the reasons behind the strong appearance of this tendency towards approving the reader's role in the construction of meaning. They attribute the shift in critical concern to modern developments in psychology and social communities. An extension of this book provides an historical overview about literary theories of criticism - some schools of literary criticism which are still within the interest of present day studies.

These three works are pieces of a puzzle that can be used to build a comprehensive theoretical framework about the shift in the notion of individuals' perception and its impact on the field of literature. However, up to the present a work which provides such a holistic overview does not exist.

In the practical field likewise, projects that deal with different readers' readings and interpretations of literary works are usually expository. An exception is Norman Holland's *5 Readers Read*<sup>3</sup>. He collects and analyses some readers' responses to few works and maintains that these readers' psychologies are the factor which has strong effects on their interpretations of a literary work. However, Holland uses this study the other way round. He analyses these texts interpretations to have an understanding of each of his sample readers' psychology.

Within the category of expository works, Philip Goldstein has an interesting book entitled *Communities of Cultural Value: Reception Study, Political Differences, and Literary History*. It traces various societies' readings and reactions to a wide range of literary texts. One of these texts is Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, Goldstein doesn't thoroughly explain why any of these novels' readings evolved in such ways. He did not provide analyses to these reading which would allow for such an explanation.

To expose various readers' interpretations and further analyze them on the light of a suitable Reader-Response Theory has not yet been dealt with. This is the gap which this research attempts to fill in. Since this research is mainly concerned with explaining and justifying the conflict between literary interpretations and critical ideologies, the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In this book, Holland developed the Psychological Reader-Response theory.

century African-American critics of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would provide a suitable case study for us as Africans. This is mainly due to several reasons. Concerning the work itself, its meaning and value have been place of argument for long. Concerning the sample of readers, they are close to our vision of understanding, due to their Africanism. This would make it easy on us to follow both the course of the work development and to identify with the visions of its readers.

Taking into account the initial problem about literary interpretation, this research aims at establishing a proper understanding of the reason(s) behind the frequently occurring diversity of literary interpretation and the factor(s) which govern the act of reading in general terms. Then, it moves to analyze the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American critics' readings of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the light of the previous results in order to see why did they perceive its text and value it differently?

In order to specify the research objectives, this aim will be broken into a set of question. As an extension to the first part of the aim (theoretical part), these questions will be considered:

1. In what ways a literary work can be understood? Is it satisfactory to rely solely on the text itself, or should we seek further insights into it through the life of its author and context, or should the reader rather rely on his own perception of the literary work?
2. Does the reader's personal perception of these works have any value in the domain of literature? Why is it valued, or why denied?

3. If it is valued, then which factors, in relation with relation with the reader, influence his interpretation of a certain literary text? Can these factors justify the disagreement between these interpretations?

The second part of the aim (practical part) can be pursued through answering the following questions:

1. What is the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about?
2. How did the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American critics perceive it?
3. Can any one of the factors discussed earlier justify these critics' responses to *Their Eyes*? How?

Goldstein classifies *Their Eyes*' readers into 'groups' of similar responses. Hence, the study of *Their Eyes*' reception absolutely will not go in the same direction as Holland's, which is individual readers' psychology. From here, we argue that the selected novel is open to a variety of receptions that seem different due to different factor among them social communities although they all belong the African- American community.

The nature of this topic requires a careful planning of methodology, because it is not concerned with one field of study but an interaction of various fields: philosophical, historical, literary and social studies. Initially, chapter I will be a theoretical exploration of literary criticism in order to gain familiarity with it as a practice of literary interpretation and evaluation. This includes its originations, development and focal points. This exploration will go deep in order to understand why and how ideologies in the world of literary criticism were born diverse.

Chapter II will be basically a descriptive study of the history of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reception during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the African-Americans. This chapter

will undertake the historical approach in order to keep the critics' responses in their original place. Otherwise, an evidence which Reader-Response theorists consider as a contributing factor to the reading experience, and its diversity will be at the risk of distortion, which is social communities. The results of the second chapter will be analyzed in order to adapt or replace the previous hypothesis about social communities' influence on the produced interpretations of *Their Eyes*.

Chapter III will therefore test the reliability of the formulated hypothesis through a diagnostic study which has more than one concern. The first concern is to trace the presence of this factor in the critics, as readers. Then, analyze it in the light of a suitable Reader-Response theory in order to see how it influences these readers' perception of literature in general. Finally, project these analyses against the novel of *Their Eyes* to show how its perception may be rendered by this factor. This diagnostic process will not be undertaken once, nor twice, but up to how many different readings we will distinguish in the second chapter.

Concerning the second chapter, we will be able to get access to these readers' original attestations mostly through their own publications in newspapers and journals. Due of the time limit we have to sort out to indirect sources which provide collections of these readers' responses to *Their Eyes*. The last chapter sources will depend on the nature of the factor responsible for the production of these interpretations. If this factor is indeed the readers' social communities, then the shortest way to access these societies cultural and ideological skeleton in addition to their definitions of a literary work is through encyclopedias or researches. Our target is sources which discuss the history of the

African Americans in parallel with the history of their literature. Such short and straight to the point studies will be difficult to trace in vast original sources like books.

In addition to providing an original practice of the Reader-Response theory on a novel, a study that opens the doors on the understanding of literary would be of a bunch of benefits. First, the audience of literature and its criticism will arrive at a convincing explanation of some of the serious debates in the field, which is represented by this research main problem. Second, the readers of literature will have a wider scope from which they perceive literature. They will be conscious of their authority over the literary work. They will understand the value of their own interpretation such works. What is said about readers of literature can be similarly said about its teachers since they are the ones who teach students of literature how to analyze, interpret and make sense out of literary works.

## **Chapter I:**

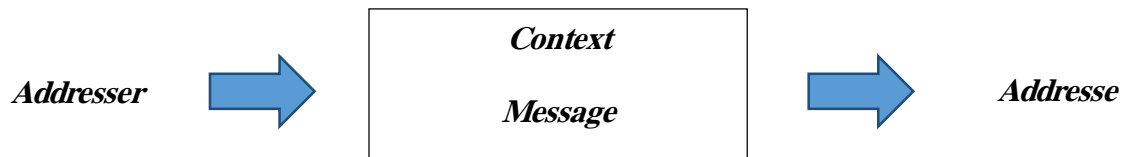
# **Understanding Literary Criticism**

## **Introduction:**

The study of literary texts is primarily the duty of critics. These latter establish their opinions about a literary work on relatively different ideological and theoretical grounds. This chapter will investigate the evolution of literary criticism with regard to two factors thereof. The first is the ideological, philosophical, and psychological foundations of the major schools of literary criticism. The second concerns how these schools and their ideologies did change vis-à-vis the reader himself.

### **I. 1. Literary Criticism**

In order to understand the literary theories view point, Roman Jakobson<sup>4</sup> suggests the following diagram (Selden et al. 46):



It is up to the stand point of the theory and the precise issue of concern, a literary theory is defined. The addresser's stand point revolves around the writer with concern over his personal life, ideological thoughts, and sociocultural background which are reflected in his work. Romantic and humanist schools of criticism are ones of such a concern as in the case of Biographical criticism may exemplify this best.

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<sup>4</sup> An influential linguist and theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is a pioneer of the structural analysis of language.

Concerning the text itself, we find more than one issue. The first concern is the context which is presented by the text itself. The second one is the text itself including its form and structure. In treatment of the text implied context we find Marxist, feminist schools of criticism as ones of the prominent examples. The text itself, however, is the concern of their Structuralist and Formalist counterparts. At the station of arrival, however, another context of this same work is studied, which is the context of the work reception. Reader oriented theories give a basis to phenomenological criticism, which studies the reader and the act of reading as well. Of course there are other theories that focus on the same element with different extent, or totally different elements in the previous diagram. We took the previous examples due to their straightforward treatment of the elements of major significance to a literary works as Jakobson demonstrated.

## **I. 2. Literary Criticism vis-à-vis the Reader:**

If we attempt to understand literary theory with relevance to its adaptation or rejection of the reader's active role in shaping an understanding of a previously constructed work, it may be appropriate to examine the subjectivity of these theories. Approving the reader's significant contributions to the literary work primarily indicates subjectivity of the approach before anything else. Thus it may be of use, first thing, to have an insight into critical approaches attitude towards the subjective experience of the individuals in general. In this regard, two approaches of literary criticism can be distinguished:

- **Expository approaches:** As its titular status indicates, it exposes the “the explicit workings of a text, such as genre, plot, character, setting, literary devices, and historical

context;” i.e. maintaining objective report and explanation of what is already given, and evidentially proved about the text (Critical Approaches 447).

- **Interpretive ideological approaches:** Both adjectives used to describe this approach indicate the coming up of something new to the text, not explicitly provided. This requires the employment of personal insights.

### **2.1. Expository Approaches:**

The three elements of Mr. Jakobson’s diagram, our reference in this discussion, have long been seen with an objective eye. These early schools of criticism will provide a general outlook on this:

- **Biographical Criticism:** The text is used as a source to provide information about the environment in which the text was brought to existence: the author himself, the culture and society lived back then, the prevailing way of thought, presumption and belief and so on. Biographical criticism may also work oppositely, having a look into the history of that era, the biographical documents about the author in order to have a better understanding of the text allusions, references, sources of influence and inspirations.
- **New Criticism:** For this Anglo-American school, extra-textual elements are of no literary significance and can’t help in the work analysis, as its prior biographical critics maintained, like the author’s life, sociocultural background, etc. they even discard authorial intention from literary study. Diaries and other ways of documenting, what the author intends to do, are of no concern to literary scholars as these intentions may be either successfully met on the production work or may not be reached despite the author’s effort. In both cases, the text itself is the only reliable means that can guide the act of its

analysis and understanding. New Criticism proponents use the term ‘intentional fallacy’ to refer to this confusion between the text’s intended and actual meaning.

The readers’ responses are also other extra-textual elements, which the New Critics find unreliable in the establishment of literary meaning of their own. Because these responses are influenced by external factors and experiences, which are literary irrelevant. This kind of confusion between the “text” and its “effects”, “what the text is and what the text does”, is regarded as another fallacy for New Criticism, “the effective fallacy”(Tyson 170). The text meaning is “as objective as its physical existence on the page” and remains stable despite the change of its readers and readings (137).

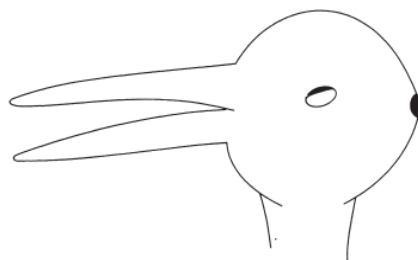
- **Russian Formalism:** Like new criticism, tends to scientifically explore the literariness of a text, with empirically detailed reading. The face of difference is that formalists wanted to establish a scientific basis of literary theory and study far from human content. While new criticism paid attention to the ordered structure of the work, it also approved for its “moral and cultural significance” (Selden et al. 29). This latter is what formalists reject, stating that its only literary purpose is to provide a subject material on which literary devices can work on.

## **2.2. Modern Appeals:**

With the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intellectuals laid doubt on the scientific certainties of the previous century and the commonly agreed upon the neglect of interaction between the literary work and the elements surrounding it. Einstein’s ‘theory of relativity’ explains how truth and knowledge are relative to the individuals and cannot

be equally perceived by all people. The philosopher T.S. Kuhn<sup>5</sup> had relatively similar views about science perception. He demonstrated how all what has been presented as scientific facts until now isn't but a matter of placing the object under study within a specific frame of reference chosen by the scientist. The collaboration of these two ideas introduced an overwhelming tendency towards the perception of worldly issues which was not the same as the previous expository schools of criticism: subjective point of view influenced society, sciences, art and literature (Selden et al. 46).

Floating on the same boat, Gestalt psychology came up with two major ideas. First, the mind doesn't perceive the world's objects, themes, entities in isolation from one another as the formalists previously claimed. It rather forms combination of these; i.e. use the parts to form a whole. Second, Gestalt psychologists maintain that it depends on the individual to choose what is of significance to him. Elements are differently perceived according to the context on which they exist. Even when they are in the same field of



vision, their perception vary from 'figure' to 'ground' according to the observer's individual interpretation. Example: Duck\ Rabbit puzzle, young girl \old woman (46).

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<sup>5</sup> He was an American physicist, historian, and philosopher of science. His book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) introduced the term 'paradigm shift', which was influential in both academic and popular circles.

### **2.3. Interpretive Ideological Approaches:**

As a result, the modern times embraced a subjective attitude towards literary and world perception - as demonstrated in the collective ideological interpretive approaches of literary criticism. The individual for them is no more passive; the writer, on the first hand, implies his ideological tendencies between the folds of his artistic work with regard to race and gender hierarchical status, social and historical progress. Hence, Marxist, New Historical, Feminist, and Gay and Queer literary approaches became prominent. The reader, on the other hand, actively interprets the final product according to his standpoint and characteristics. Hence, reader-oriented theories shifted the moment of existence of the poem or a novel, from that moment of its production to when its reading starts (Critical Approaches 450).

### **I. 3. Reader-Response Criticism**

#### **3.1. Phenomenology: The Philosophical Foundation of Reader-Response Criticism:**

It came in reaction to the formalists' belief in the detachment of the perceiver from the perceived. Etymologically speaking phenomenon, is a Greek word meaning things appearing to mind. The philosophy of phenomenology introduced a shift in concern from external objects to how they are perceived by the conscious mind in order to examine the dual subjective process of objects appearance and their interpretation through the mind. Phenomenology revives the freedom of thinking which Romantics earlier brought. It describes formalists' detached view as being like "looking from mountain's top," which is something that can't be attained even if we attempt to (Selden

et al. 50). Phenomenologists explain that “If we can’t be sure about the nature of the world’s external objects and their independence as formalists claim, we can absolutely be sure of how these objects appear to our subjective apparatus.” Objects exist in their sensed form and can be primarily explained on the basis of this. But the meaning of an object always exceeds its empirical status due to the work of conscious mind. “The conscious mind [is called so because] it is always conscious of something called intentionality, and is never empty, it carries objects within it” (Al-Haba).

What is important to notice is that phenomenologists neither concern themselves over the perception as pertaining to individuals with its “fragmentations and randomness” nor with the work of the conscious mind in isolation from the world, but with the universalities of the essence of an object and then moves to examine its perception: how does a stretch of meaning extends to be projected onto the consciousness (Al-Haba). Phenomenology’s stamp in literature is seen in the Reader-Response Theory. This latter believes that a literary text’s physical presence is true, yet it is incomplete until a reader attributes meaning to it. The text exist as sets of images projected on the conscious mind of the reader.

### **3.2. The Appearance of Reader-Response Criticism:**

Beginning in 60’s and getting influential in the 70’s and 80’s, Reader-Response’ set of theories start from the idea that the reader is an ontological element of the text, in that there are blanks in the text which only the reader can fill. But, the text initially has a closed message system that controls the reader’s act of reading and sense making. Therefore, interpretation of a novel is neither predetermined by its message structure nor

self-formulated by the reader far from the dictations of the text. In the words of the authors of *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, it is the reader who applies the codes in which the message is written.

The newly granted power to the reader's interpretation by the reader-response theory(s), however, has created a common misunderstanding among people. Some believe their interpretations cannot be wrong since it's their own way of responding to a text. Actually, Reader-Response theories differ in the amount of power given to the individuals' responses. Some arrive to the point of accepting it as fully determinate. Yet, even in such extremist types of Reader-Response theory, the work of "that theory practitioner" is to react to the text, and also analyze his or other person's response which is the targeted analysis and the utmost purpose of this practitioner (Tyson 169).

Reader-Response practitioners do not get satisfied with identifying individual's interpretations as a matter of variation. Reader-Response theory has rather "opened a post-modern Pandora box" on the issue of literary reading (Bennett and Royle 12). Critics and practitioners of this theory investigate how readers construct their interpretations, their originations and influential factor such as psychology, society, history of reading, scientific era, personal experience and how the text itself affects these responses.

### **3.2.1 Horizon of Expectations: Hans Robert Jauss:**

Hans Robert Jauss, one of the founding fathers of the Reader-Response Theory, makes a significant attempt to overcome the formalists' over concern with the text as an autonomous and self-contained entity. His studies place the reader within the literary triangle of literary interpretation- author-text-reader. Jauss was conscious of the

importance of both the text and history which put him midway between Social theories and Formalism. The reception theory of Jauss lays its grounds on Kuhn's concept of 'paradigm'. This latter refers to the scientific assumptions, practices, and beliefs witnessed in particular period of time that establish a certain way of viewing reality. "‘Ordinary science’ does its experimental work within the mental work of a particular paradigm, until a new paradigm displaces the old one and throws up new problems and establishes new assumptions" (Selden et al. 50). It is on the basis of the existing paradigm that the reader establishes a set of criteria with which he can evaluate a literary work. These criteria define the limits of the reader's 'horizon of expectations':

For example, if we consider the English Augustan period, we might say that Pope's poetry was judged according to criteria which were based upon values of clarity, naturalness and stylistic decorum [...] However, this does not establish once and for all the value of Pope's poetry. During the second half of the eighteenth century, commentators began to question whether Pope was a poet at all and to suggest that he was a clever versifier who put prose into rhyming couplets and lacked the imaginative power required of true poetry. Leapfrogging the nineteenth century, we can say that modern readings of Pope work within a changed horizon of expectations: we now often value his poems for their wit, complexity, moral insight and their renewal of literary tradition (Selden et al. 50-51).

The horizon of expectations in which a literary work is initially produced shapes its primary value, but doesn't tell for granted how it may be viewed after that. On the basis of this, Jauss rejects the text's timelessness and universality: "A literary work is not

an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reals its timeless essence in monologue” (qtd. in Selden et al. 51). Selden touches in Jauss’ words a belief of the impossibility to trace the horizons contemporaneous to a work from its publication day to the present. Such an attempt to have an encompassing understanding of a work would deny the interpretation suggested by the horizon of expectations on which we are placed.

Jauss’ answer to the common question about whose interpretation should we follow is that knowledge of the past is always limited to our present horizon of expectations. Deriving on the hermeneutics<sup>6</sup> of Hans George Gadamer, literary understanding is always attained through a conversation between the present and the past. The present questions the past from its relatively limited perspective, and studies how a work attempts to answer the questioning of the past preceding it, within a similar conversation and hence the limitation of the knowledge of the past (51).

### **3.3. Reader-Response Theories:**

The new vision about the reader’s special horizon of expectations has been interpreted into more practical precise terms by other theories. Some of these theorists analyze how the text signs interact with the reader’s mind; i.e. the process of interpretation with the interactive elements within it. Within this category we have Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, and Stanley Fish’s Affective Stylistics. Others however, explain how certain factors have a direct effect on a reader’s perception of literature, and therefore different readings of the same work. This latter category includes

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<sup>6</sup> It is the study or theory of the methodical interpretation of texts.

Norman Holland's Psychological Reader-Response theory and Fish's Social Reader-Response theory.

### **3.3.1. Psychological Reader-Response Theory: Norman Holland:**

Holland experiments on the way reader's psychology merges within the text. This latter gets entangled with some conscious desires or fears which are identifiable with the text itself. As a result, the reader sorts out to cope with the text in a certain manner: associate the text with a certain experience, then attributing a meaning to it, finally defending himself against it (by rejecting it) or approving it. "When we read literature we project our identity theme: recreate the world that exists in our minds in the text. Thus, our interpretations are the products of the fears, defenses, needs, and desires we project onto the text" (Tyson 183).

### **3.3.2. Social Reader-Response Theory: Stanley Fish:**

Fish has a noticeable experience in his attempt to explain the reading process that ended up in the same direction as Jauss<sup>7</sup>. In his theory of affective stylistics, Jauss explains how having particular words in particular sequences in a sentence would stimulate the formation of a certain response. In his earlier works, he considers this way of text interpretation the common natural process. This account on the nature of reading was criticized for taking an informed reader<sup>7</sup> as the model of universal measure, which is the case for Fish himself but not for every reader.

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<sup>7</sup> Fish defines the informed reader as: 1) a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up. 2) Is in full possession of the semantic knowledge that a mature listener brings to his task of

Fish afterwards passes through a revolutionary stage at the level of thinking. In a later work *Is there a text in this class?* He found out that his explanation of the process of reading was based on his own literary reading experience. In fact Jauss was unconsciously trying to convince the literature readers to adopt a certain interpretive strategies which may not be shared among all of them. Fish has come to an understanding of Jauss' horizon of expectations in terms of social communities. In his later works he explained<sup>8</sup> that there exists a cultural framework of thought, conventions and principles to every group of people which determines what they think and know. Fish calls this cultural framework "the interpretive community" (58).

### **3.3.2.1. The Interpretive Community in Relation to Literary Conventions:**

An interpretive community is characterized by individuals who share the same interpretive strategies in text writing - whether in the common sense of writing, or in the sense of writing what one is reading in one's own way;<sup>2</sup> i.e. interpretation and expectation. Thus, besides cultural conventions language and language usage are also another conventionality pertaining to the interpretive community. Fish explains how both are interrelated. Having certain conventions of language is not a matter of "the meaning of individual words and the rules for combining them, but a way of thinking, a form of life that shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place-objects, purposes,

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comprehension. Including the knowledge of lexical sets, collocations probabilities, idioms, professional and other dialects ...3) Has literary competence. That is, he is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of literary discourses, including everything from the most local device to whole genres

<sup>8</sup> Jauss' ideas were not pointed at by Fish despite the fact that it is clear in his later work, *is there a text in this class?* That the ideas of interpretive communities/strategies were a clear development and continuity of Jauss' horizon of expectations.

goals, procedures, values and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any word we utter be heard necessarily referring” (Markham 5).

Similarly, a piece of literature doesn’t subdue to universal standards and characteristics, but it is regarded as such due to consensus about what is considered a literary work in a given community of readers. The community therefore has an authority to shape its individuals’ perception, or rather recreation, of a text. The following is an experiment conducted by Fish in his classes:

At the end of his first class he wrote an assignment on the board that consisted of the following list of linguists’ names his students were studying. (The question mark after the final name was to indicate Fish’s uncertainty)

Jacobs–Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman (?)

When his second class entered the room, he told them that the writing on the board was a seventeenth century religious poem like the ones they’d been studying and asked them to analyse it. In the discussion that ensued, his students concluded that the poem celebrated God’s love and mercy in giving his only begotten son for our redemption. Their interpretation accounted beautifully for every word in the poem, including, among other evidence, the following points: the poem is in the shape of a cross or an

altar; “Jacobs” suggests Jacob’s ladder, a reference to the Christian ascent into heaven; “Rosenbaum” literally means rose tree and refers to the Virgin Mary, the rose without thorns, whose son Jesus is the means by which human beings can climb to heaven; “Thorne” thus refers to Jesus’ crown of thorns, a symbol of the sacrifice he made to redeem us; and the letters that occur most frequently in the poem are S, O, N. (qtd in. Tyson 186)

Thus “the qualities that make a poem a poem do not reside in the text, but in the interpretive strategies we have learned whether consciously or unconsciously before we ever encounter the text” (186).

### **Conclusion:**

A literary work used to be thought of as the exclusive production of the author’s horizon. Thus, the readers and critics were dedicated to find the intended meaning behind this work. Soon afterwards, critics seeking the final interpretation. When critics’ attempts to find the author’s intention failed to reach agreement, new philosophical and psychological insights to argue for individuals’ perceptions of these things (texts) on the basis on their relative point of view. Moving with the flood, Reader-Response criticism established an encompassing explanation about readers influence by a set of interacting factors. The psychology of the reader and the socio-historical background of their reading define the boundaries of their horizon of expectation from which they read the text.

## **Chapter II:**

**The 20th Century African-American Critics'**

**Receptions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

## Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston, a folklorist and anthropologist African-American writer, started her writing professionalism amidst the Harlem Renaissance. Her second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, received great attention from readers, writers, and critics upon its release; and at times considered her best<sup>9</sup>. This chapter will mainly account for the ways in which this audience have read *Their Eyes*. Taking into account that the reading process occurs in the process of interaction between the reader's mind and the signs of the text, the focus of this chapter will be on three points: First, the major aspects of the novel about which these critics disagreed (or agreed); second, the meaning(s) and value(s) attributed to these aspects; third, the critics who thought as such and such of the text aspects. The stance of every reader(s) will be respectably maintained throughout the discussion by explanation and arguing for each with evidences from the (or about) the novel. This to insure a clearer understanding of their assumptions about the novel.

### II. 1. An Overview About *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* realistically weaves the threads of a story of a girl struggling in the face of her romantic illusions and caught in oppressive marriage(s). Far from *Pride and Prejudice*<sup>10</sup> fashion, however *Their Eyes Were Watching God* doesn't keep up with "enlightenment optimism and middle-class propriety, to reveal the debilitating effects of plantation slavery" (Goldstein 190). In a rather modernist way, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* overlooks the existing class system. It lifts up the dialect

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<sup>9</sup> According to Richard Bone in Goldstein's *Communities of Cultural Value*.

<sup>10</sup> A British novel written by Jane Austen, published in 1813. It evolves around the emotional development of the main character.

into a mythical level. The story is about Janie Crawford, an African-American of mixed black and white heritage and her journey looking for true love in post-slavery Florida, which was not an easy time for mixed-race girl. Readers receive her story in the form of a long flashback: her telling her best friend Phoeby Watson about her three marriages to three very different men.

The Janie's story starts with her coming of age, which signals the start of her emotional awakening, and growth, which she compares to a pear blossom in spring. It all started when she saw a bee pollinating a flower in the backyard pear tree and she decided to find true love. Janie's first marriage to an older farmer looking for a wife, Logan Killicks, was planned by her grandmother Nanny hoping that it will give her the opportunities and the stability that neither Nanny nor Janie's mother Leafy had. Nanny was raped by her master and abused by his jealous wife when she ran away pregnant with Leafy. Although Leafy lived in post-slavery period she also was raped by her teacher and got pregnant with Janie, after going through breakdown, she abandoned Janie and left.

Logan was a reliable man; however, he wasn't the romantic type Janie has dreamt of. He was looking for a helper more than a lover. Janie was unhappy and lonely with him, after he threatened to kill her for not obeying him, she left with glib and ambitious Joe Starks. The Second marriage was to Joe Starks, who took her to Eatonville where he found an opportunity to get rich and lately became the mayor of the town. However, she found that her husband has a very rigid view on women's role, and that he was only using her in this all-black town. He ended up controlling what she wears and says. As he grew old he felt insecure and tried to divert public attention to Janie and starts to make fun of her in public and accusing her for acting too young for her age, and was striking her

occasionally. Finally, Janie lashes back at him and insulted his manhood and pride. Later, Joe got sick and refused to see Janie. But Janie knowing that he might not make it she bursts into Joe's room in his final moments and speaks her mind and how he never knew her because he never let her.

After living happily as a widow upon Joe's untimely death, and turning down all the prestigious suitors that asked her hand, Janie meets the slick, fun-loving and 12 years her younger Tea Cake. With him she found true love that she dreamed of all her life. Even though she has doubts at first cause she was older and wealthy but she ended up in love with him. In their relationship, they both experienced bouts of jealousy, but Janie and Tea Cake eventually found happiness working in the fields of the Everglades with the migrant workers there. But the area was struck by a hurricane, ignoring the warnings to evacuate, Tea Cakes chose to stay in the "muck" for the love of money, only to end up forced to run for his life with Janie later. While fleeing, Tea Cakes saves Janie from a rabid dog but gets bitten in the process.

Tea Cake gets rabies, and he gets more jealous and aggressively suspicious of Janie despite her best efforts. He ends up trying to shoot her in one of his paranoia episodes, and Janie shot him dead in self-defense. She gets charged for murder. But she was backed up by the white women against the black men opposing her. Later, she was pronounced innocent by an all-white jury. In a trial that was after Tea Cake's funeral and receiving an apology from his friends. Janie returns home to Eatonville, to find herself the center of gossip. And there, she meets up with her old friend, Phoeby Watson, and tells her the whole story. Janie's narration to Pheoby provides the framing for the whole novel.

## **II. 2. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American Critics' Receptions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:**

### **2.1. Early Reception (1937-1940's):**

#### **2.1.1. First Stance of Readers:**

Like many other well-written novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was not received with much enthusiasm. As early as it was published, Richard Wright<sup>11</sup> wrote an article to the "New Masses" (October 5, 1937) demonstrating how it was a backward step in the history of African-American social and literary progress; a step towards the revival of the ministerial shows<sup>12</sup> which were forcefully performed to entertain the white folks ("Hurstons Reviews").

Instead of bringing about social progress through revealing the social structure, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* overshadows racial tension. The story opens up with an indifferent introduction of races. Janie starts telling an innocent memory from her childhood with the Washburns. They were the white employers of Nanny; they raised Janie together with their children, and dressed her up from their kids' clothes which were far better than the black's. Throughout the story, Janie reveals that she was not aware she was different from the other children with her dark skin, until a picture was taken for them together. When Janie grew up, the Washburns as usual were there to help her in her marriage with Logan Killicks.

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<sup>11</sup> An African American novelist, poet, and journalist

<sup>12</sup> See the appendices.

Whereas the whites are as peacefully represented as the Washburns, the blacks are represented in such a way that meets the whites taste. "Her characters eat and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro life: between laughter and tears [...] she exploits that phase of Negro life which is 'quaint', the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the of the 'superior' race" (Wright qtd. in "Hurston reviews"). Mrs. Turner, a light colored black lady, goes on explaining her despise of her own race specially the darker skinned ones. Turner makes a living from the Negros who visit her eatery and yet she fiercely tells to Janie:

Ah can't stand black niggers, Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin'em cause Ah can't stand'emmahself. Nother thing, Ah hate tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid'em. Us oughta class off... And dey makes me tired. Always laughin'! Dey laughs too much and dey laugh too loud. Always Singin' ol' nigger songs! [...] If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wisddem. De black one is holdin' us back [...] Look at me! Ah ain't got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah'm featured woman. Ah got white folks' features in mah face. Still and all ah got tuh be lumped in wid all the rest. It ain't fair." (Hurston 289-290).

In another incident Mrs. Turner, refuses to see a nigger doctor around her bed, because they are not educated and knowledgeable as the white doctors (166).

When the hurricane signs start to be clear the citizens, Indians start moving east to the high lands. Tea Cake is not convinced that a hurricane is going to strike, not until he

sees the white folks taking the necessary precautions “De Indians... don’t always know. Indians don’t know much uh nothin’, tuh tell you the truth... De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey ought know if it’s dangerous. You better stay heah, man.” That moment, rabbits, snakes and coons all were hurrying east but the Negroes were celebrating, dancing and singing around fire. “Waiting for the sun to get friendly again” (182-183).

Wright strongly disdains this reckless portrayal of race and inter-race relationships. This mythical realism is simply unfit for the representation of the black life and it is counter revolutionary in nature. The prose of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is “cloaked in that facile sensuality and has dogged the Negro expression, Miss Hurston”, Wright emphasizes, “Voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition in which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the ministerial technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. The ministerial technique targeted her language more than her representation of blacks and whites. The novel is mostly in the southern black dialect which was at the heart of minstrel shows (“Hurston reviews”).

Despite her talent, Hurston fails to make out of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a qualified realistic novel. Wright finds a difficulty in making a sense out of it, but not for its sophistication or elaboration, rather because it “has [no] basic idea or theme that tends itself to significant interpretation. Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction” (“Hurston Reviews”).

Alain Locke<sup>13</sup>, another figures of the Harlem Renaissance leaders, praises the amazing and amusing formula of the novel to the extent that he thinks any another kind of retelling would do it a disfavor. Yet, in the harsh manner of Wright, he criticizes the

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<sup>13</sup> According to Wikipedia, he was an American writer, philosopher, educator, and patron of the arts. Distinguished as the first African-American Rhodes Scholar in 1907, Locke was one of the figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

fact that her focus on the artistic representation of folk and southern language withheld her from putting hands on the character's psychology or social issues facing the black community, which are of greater concern for the African-Americans. In his review published in "Opportunity" ( June 1, 1938) Locke evinced that *Their Eyes* is indeed "a folklore novel at its best, but when will the Negro novelists of maturity who know how to write a story convincingly, which is Miss Hurston's cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?" The southern fiction has long been past this carefree bright childhood phase where Negroes were some "entertaining pseudo-primitives" for the whites. It is high time, Wright says, to "get rid of oversimplification" ("Hurston Reviews").

Otis Ferguson<sup>14</sup>, in "The New Republic" (October 13, 1937) similarly acknowledges Hurston's evident skills in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but feels contempt toward what these skillful fingertips has brought in their effort to tell stories of the Negro community. In a more analytical way, he attempts to explain the novel's failure. It is not as good as it deserves to be. Due to the realistic gap the novel creates with its revolutionary<sup>15</sup> expressions. Ferguson explains "Crises of feeling are rushed over too quickly for them to catch hold and then presently we are in a tangle of hush exposition and overblown symbols... Dialect is sloppy, is fact and so is all this conflict between the real life we want to read about and the supper wordy, floppy lyric discipline" ("Hurston Reviews"). The African-Americans are "sick" of standing in "the grey category of neutral gender". The novel's ethnography is basically aesthetic. This attributes to the blacks "an unchanging [simplified] definition that excludes the very real

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<sup>14</sup> An American writer best known as music and film critic.

<sup>15</sup> Revolution against the African American standards.

existence of urban misery.” In fact, the novel takes the side of black folk just too much to “ignore a racist social order” (Konzett qtd. in Schellinger 1328).

### **2.1.2. Second Stance of Readers:**

In the same year, Sterling Brown, an African-American folklorist and poet, gave a more balanced criticism stressing stylistic and formal aspects of the novel. In a review to “The Nation” (October 16, 1937) he attracts the public attention to some “narrative gaps” which need to which intimidate the story. These need to be filled out by a reader. Moreover, “many incidents are unusual”. But, what has been told is undoubtedly full of shockingly “earthly and touching poetry”, which is the creation of Hurston’s tentative ears and sharp taste of folklore (“Hurston reviews”). This can be best seen in Nanny’s speech which is full of black proverbs:

When you got big enough to understand things, Ah wanted you to look upon yo’self. Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face. And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you. Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate.  
(Hurston 24)

The poetic folk narration has plenty of humor, which has comical appeals to the reader. Yet, it is not “a cartoon” (Brown qtd. in “Hurston reviews”). It all revolves around serious issues and debates. What Nanny has said to Janie in this passage stems out of the American women’s fear of being doubly colonization. Nanny knows exactly how does it feel to be treated as a “work-ox” and “brood-sow” by the whites in the plantations, and

neglected human tributes by the black men. Raping a black woman is becoming a symbol in the novel appears whenever white men appear. Nanny and her daughter Leafy. Even when Nanny buys a piece of land to raise Janie in, far from the whites. Janie is not far better treated in her own society by black males (Hurstun 19).

Sterling Brown further makes notice of Hurston's silent political call in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Indeed, "blacks are not portrayed as ugly from ignorance and broken from poverty [struggling in] short-time jobs" as it is the case for most of political African-American novels. They live in "an all colored town" which make them escape the most pressures of class and caste". This bring the novel far from the major interracial problems the black face in mixed societies. "But still there is a bitterness, sometimes oblique, in the enforced folk manner, and sometimes forthright" ("Hurstun reviews"). He exemplifies with Nanny's story about how she was beaten up by her employers when she came back with her illegitimate child. And again about how the grave diggers after the hurricane stroke, examining the dead body through their hair type to mark the black with quicklime and the white with pine coffins: "Look at the hair, when you can't tell no other way. And don't lemme ketch none uh y'all dumpin' white folks, and don't be wastin' no boxes on colored". Tea Cake comments on their useless measures "look lak they think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law" (Hurstun 201).

In terms of characterization, Brown suggest that the novel is not exclusively a representation of the Negro "as the forward states". Janie is an unconventional Negro woman, and the rest of the characters are not like those with whom we meet in our lives but still they are not "naïve primitives" as the social realists saw them. These characters only dare to share with the world the frailties of unabashed shrewdness of the blues"

among all other “human needs”. This definitely makes it a story about the universal human or rather a feminism experience (“Hurston Reviews”).

Carter G. Woodson<sup>16</sup> shows more acknowledgement for Hurston’s “anthropological approach about writing...She studied [the Negroes] until she thoroughly understood the working of their minds, learned to speak their language” (qtd. in Wikipedia Presents 30-31). An example about this is present in the small realities about the Negro way of thinking shown in the Eatonville community. On the one hand, Black males often have that sexual look towards their females. At the opening of the first chapter.

When [Janie] ...turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They [men] scrambled a noisy “good evenin’” and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate...The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye... But nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her. (Hurston 2)

The women on the other hand wish out of jealousy “that she might fall to their level someday ... Pearl Stone opened her mouth and laughed real hard because she didn’t

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<sup>16</sup> According to Wikipedia, “Carter Godwin Woodson was an African-American historian, author, journalist and the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Woodson was one of the first scholars to study African-American history. A founder of *The Journal of Negro History* in 1915, Woodson has been cited as the father of black history.”

know what else to do. She fell all over Mrs. Sumpkins while she laughed. Mrs. Sumpkins snorted violently and sucked her teeth.” At the porch these folks “sit in Judgement” and “tell tales to explain Janie’s empowerment, which remains beyond their understanding” (Milvert 2). Besides this psychological side of the Negro mind, a cultural one resides in the novel as well. Early in the novel, Janie finds answers to many of her questions about life cycle using her knowledge of folklore “ God [tears] down the old world every evening and [builds] a new one by sun-up”(Hurston 25). This gives her hope and passion to wait for her turn, a time in which God’s cycle of reincarnation rebuild her world. Nanny, however, due to her misery in slavery, tries to “replace Janie’s folkloric vision of God and nature with one of social subjugation [...] which has shaped Nannie’s world for her” (Milvert 14).

## **2.2. Later Reception (1960’s):**

An article was written to the “New Masses” in 1940, by Ralph Ellison<sup>17</sup> under the title “Recent Negro Fiction.” In this article, he addresses Hurston together with the rest of the Negro fiction writers as being ignorant about revolutionary experimental measures pushed for by their peer American writers “such as Joyce, Stein, Anderson and Hemingway”. He emphasizes on Hurston’s unawareness on how literature should be. The grand writers, which Ellison has put forward as a model, didn’t address “the negro readers, but the white audience that has recently discovered the Negro”. In such an advanced stage of fiction writing, “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* retains the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred Hurston’s writing”. He expresses his surprise of the

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<sup>17</sup> A novelist, critic, and scholar. He won the National Book Award in 1953 with his novel *Invisible Man*.

novel's carefree focus on the love story of a young black girl in a black community, whereas, "the casual brutalities of the south seldom intrude" ("Contemporary Reviews"). This side of the black life doesn't take as much space in the novel as it does in real life.

In the later few years, further negative critiques on Hurston herself were on the main, again from her male counterparts. Collectively they focused on the "perfect darkie" image of Hurston, which she exercises through her writings. A combined claim from Darwin Turner<sup>18</sup> and Langston Hughes<sup>19</sup> sets forth that *Their Eyes* brought the language and imagination about certain aspects of the Negro life to its extreme at the expense of the work just to make "perfect book of entertainment" in order to attain more popularity among the whites who supported her career (Awkward 14). For Turner and Hughes she was a "shallow woman, desperate for recognition [who] always remained a wandering minstrel" (Dance 344).

In 1948, Hugh Gloster<sup>20</sup> released half-formal, half-realistic criticism agreeing with all critics of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* about Hurston's mastery of folk material. But he attributes the novel's formal and realistic flaws to the author's excessive focus on the production of a great folktale. Hurston sacrificed "the character development" and the analysis of social problems in this novel. Her interest in folklore stood between her and between understanding "social criticism". Gloster puts a remark on her successful vivid picturing of "social life in Eatonville, gambling dives in Jacksonville and bean-picking communities in the Everglades" (Goldstein 187).

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<sup>18</sup> A critic, a poet, and an English professor.

<sup>19</sup> A poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist. He was one of the precursors of the Jazz Poetry.

<sup>20</sup> An author and also the seventh president of the black Morehouse College in the Civil Rights Era.

### 2.3. The Revival of the Novel: Postcolonial and Feminist Studies (1970-1990)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been brought again to the literary scene in front of a new generation of readers and a renewed critical attention. While the harsh apathy for the novel was directed towards its shallow treatment of social conflicts against the black race, the authentic blending of anthropology with fiction writing craft, and the sensitive treatment of feminist issues was highly embraced in a later phase.

The rediscovery of Zora as a writer started with to a Walker's coincidence of passing through her novel *Mules and Men* in search for some voodoo short stories. At a later time, Walker reads an article by Hemenway where He mentions the existence of this folklorist's grave unmarked in some land in Eatonville. Angry at this ungrateful deed, Walker went in a journey in 1973 to look for the Hurston's grave saying "a people can't through their genius away". Walker's article "In search for Zora" was released to the press 2 years later. She explains how *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Speaks to [her] as no novel, past or present has ever done. And that the language of the characters, that comical nigger dialect that has been laughed at, denied, ignored, or 'improved' so that white folks and educated black folks can understand it, is simply beautiful. There is enough self-love in that one book – love for community, culture, traditions – to restore a world, or create a new one." She makes notice of Hurston's portrayal of the African-American woman who is in search for self-assertion in a time of race and gender pressures. (Hurston, *I Love Myself* 2)

She makes notice on Hurston's portrayal of an African-American woman who is in search for self-assertion in a time of race and gender pressures. This article renewed other writers' interest in Zora as writer and her works as well. Robert Hemenway edited Zora's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. He restored three chapters of it, which were denied existence prior to that. He also wrote the first biography about her in 1977. Walker wrote the first anthropology of Hurston reviewing 14 of her prose works. Other writers released some significant editions of Zora's novels as well. As consequence, Zora's works were back to print, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* came to life again, and was examined under different lights (Gates).

### **2.3.1. African-American Studies: (1970's- 1980's)**

Gay Wilentz<sup>21</sup> stands against the social Marxists misunderstanding of the politics of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Despite Hurston's overshadowing of some of the explicit racist practices against the Negroes, she touched more sensitive racial issues, which may be of greater danger to the African-Americans. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reveals how the superior white culture is in control of the thoughts and actions of blacks. Even when the Negroes of Eatonville live in a community of their own, an all-black community, they are not secure from such a poisonous mind inflections. In the midst of such cultural struggle, some people reach to the extent of despising themselves while others fight to secure their identities. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* categorizes the Negro reaction to this psychological oppression into 2 categories as Marry Helen Washington notices: "Those, like Nanny, whose self-esteem and sense of identity are tied

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<sup>21</sup> Director of Ethnic Studies at East Carolina University in the U.S.A., also worked as a visiting professor at the University of Belize, and a critic.

up with the standards dictated by white society, and others, like Tea Cake, who retains close bonds with the black community and have about them a kind of integrity and freedom” (Crabtree). Throughout the novel we can see how there is always a kind of brightness, promise and satisfaction in the lives of those who took racial pride in their own race upbringing.

There is a clear transition in the cultural portrayal in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Hurston has “created an alternative culture that validates the [Negro’s] warmth as human beings”. In the cultural landscape of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Negroes “attained personal identity not by transcending the[ir] culture but by embracing it”( Gale, Cengage Learning). Cheryl Wall<sup>22</sup> hints to the folklore and language attributed to the characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a way of embracing the culture. Larry Neal<sup>23</sup> equally makes notices of the originality of Hurston’s non-scientific folklore in *Their Eyes*, which he considers as her most significant contribution to literature.

Regarding the language importance to the southern African-Americans. Henry Louis Gates Jr.<sup>24</sup> explains how the language in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the southern black vernacular, is a crucial step taken by the author in support of the theme of black identity. The author’s trouble to “scratch for a telling form of language indeed ... a black literary language itself” is in itself an act of “search for the self” (Gale, Cengage Learning). From this point, political ignorance and social unconsciousness previously attributed to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were falsified. The novel’s quest flows in

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<sup>22</sup> According to Wikipedia, she is a literary critic and professor of English at Rutgers University. She specializes in black women's writing, particularly the Harlem Renaissance and Zora Neale Hurston.

<sup>23</sup> a scholar of African-American theatre during the Black Arts Movement (1960s and 1970s)

<sup>24</sup> According to Wikipedia, he is an American literary critic, teacher, historian, filmmaker and public intellectual who currently serves as the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He has discovered what are considered the first books by African-American writers

the direction of rescuing a culture and a language which are being put on the margins of racist societies.

### **2.3.2. Feminist Studies: (1980's-1990's)**

For the black women readers in particular, the character of Janie was strikingly influential. She was “powerful, articulate, self-reliant, and radically different from any woman character they had ever encountered in literature.” It is worth noticing here how this way of presenting the black character was in itself regarded by the Harlem Renaissance realists as a misleading cover of the Negro’s miserable experience. The same point of the story tastes differently. In the words of Lorraine Bethel<sup>25</sup>, Hurston’s works challenged the social tradition which the whites and blacks males established for the black women. All women across the country had a personal response to the novel’s spirited representation of them. The characters were accepted as real people with whom they could identify. The ties were especially close between these black women readers and the characters of Janie and Tea Cake (Washington qtd. in Hurston xxv-xxvi).

Washington<sup>26</sup> tells an anecdote about Sherley Anne Williams’<sup>27</sup> students’ experience of reading *Their Eyes*. These students lived in Fresno, California, in the same farming environment as Zora’s Everglades and Eatonville. It was “their first time” they could see themselves reflected in fictional characters, literature more over allowed for a joyful portrayal of these women’s lives. The novel’s portrayal of the black woman in her

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<sup>25</sup> According to Wikipedia, she is an African-American lesbian feminist poet and author. Bethel has taught and lectured on black women's literature and black female culture at various institutions.

<sup>26</sup> According to English department-university of Maryland website, from 1975, she was appointed Director of Black Studies at the University of Detroit. She has studied, taught, and written about African American literature. In addition to the University of Detroit, she has taught at many other universities, and is currently Professor of English at the University of Maryland.

<sup>27</sup> According to Wikipedia, she is an American poet, novelist, professor, vocalist, Jazz poet, and social critic.

cultural environment, as Williams and Rushing remarked, is considered by them an “affirm[ation of] black cultural traditions while [at the same time] revising them to empower black women”. This is what critics would later see as the novel’s contribution to black literature.

Addison Gayle<sup>28</sup> identifies Janie with the modern black woman. Janie doesn’t challenge the class system. She is allergic to the traditional woman role and white culture. He explains that Janie is not taking measures against the black male establishment as well, but against the limitations which these man set for her as a woman in a patriarchal society. Janie goes beyond having a share in the life’s concrete pleasures which black males longed for. The theme of the novel is rendered more sensual. Even though she starts in a journey for the sake of true love; at the end of it she develops “a black female self which no longer needs to identify with men’s life or aims or white middle class culture she ends in self-fulfillment .The modern black characters in Hurston’s novels are “the foundation of a new order” which would bring about new men. Gayle is one those critics who classify Hurston within the category of authors who have “flaws in perception which often limits their vision”. But at least, to him she was one who understood the sadness of the “black spirit”, and “sought through her [art] to elevate a race of people”. On these grounds, he considers *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an evidence of “the strength and promise of African-American culture” (Dance 348-349).

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<sup>28</sup> According to blackpast.org, he is a critic of black American literature and distinguished professor of English at Baruch College and the City University Graduate Center. During the 1960s, Gayle passionately felt compelled to call for a new Black Aesthetics that radically differed from the standard Eurocentric approach to literature.

#### **2.4. Further Understanding of the Novel (1990's Onward):**

In more recent years, around the 21<sup>st</sup> century approximately, scholarly studies of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became more controversial. Scholars expanded on the former formal, realist, and feminist studies of the novel. Some of them sharply questioned particular aspects of the novel, while others came with completely new insights into the whole work.

One of those critics who conducted in-depth studies of particular issues in the novel is H. L. Gates Jr. He concerned himself with how the language is an instrument of control being the source of identity and empowerment. Gates identifies *Their Eyes* as a novel which is primarily concerned “with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation of selfhood and empowerment” (Hurstons 231). After becoming a mayor, Jody prevents Janie from delivering a speech in public at the request of the town’s people. This muting of her voice leads to Janie’s hatred of him. On the contrary, her heart is opened for Tea Cake, who encourages her speech expressions and accepts her person as equal to his. Again, after “discover[ing] her ability to define herself by her speech interactions with others, [Janie] learns that silence too can be a source of empowerment, having found her voice, she learns to control” it, as in the incident of her trial (Natchez and Ward 23).

M.H. Washington, who was pleased in an earlier time with the novel’s daring to open the doors of feminism at a time when everyone else was focusing on other issues, is by 1989 questioning whether the novel is really pro-feminism, and whether Hurston was “ambivalen[t] towards her female protagonist.” Indeed, Janie’s experience in this patriarchal society is faithfully portrayed, the thing which a gift to the black women. But

now, as Washington re-reads *Their Eyes* with a more critical eye, no criticism or comment on the physical violence and psychological oppression can be felt on the part of the Hurston here. The least example of such practices to mention, is Tea Cake's beating of her: Tea Cake the man who loved who loved her and appreciated her individualism. Washington similarly notices how "Janie's voice is dominated by men even in passages that are about her own inner growth." This is another issue which passed without comment in one the strongest African American novels-*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston xxx).

### **Conclusion:**

Written at the dawn of modernism (1937), *Their Eyes* mainly addressed issues typical to the African-Americans; thus mostly stimulating the African-American audience, or at least this was the case at the decade of its production. However, critics couldn't agree about the novel's value, or even significance which was mainly due to certain aspects of the novel. Talking about the Negro life in an all-black community and escaping racial tension, focusing on folk tradition of these people, using black vernacular to its extreme was adored by some black critics whose readings was in the 1930's and 1940's, and others between 1970's and 1980's. However, these same aspects enraged other black critics who came across it between 1930's and 1960's. Yet, still other aspects of the novel such as the style, the innovative folk use in fiction writing, the convincing vivid picturing of people and their lives, were similarly praised by all of these critics. Out of this we can understand two things, primarily: first, attributing different significations and values to the same aspects of the novel means that these conflicts in opinion trespasses the text to

fall on the reader. Second, these opinions about the novel were shared by group of critics, not individual opinions; the change of these group readings did not follow identity or living place but was related to time to some extent- the reading context. Therefore a new question imposes itself about what was happening to the African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Although the reading of concern fell between the 1937 and 1980's, including the early twentieth would keep us away from having a limited and blurred image about the African-Americans experience during the target period. Because no one can deny the influence of previous experience on the individual. The last decade (after the 80's) however will not have such an influence, thus it will not be within concern of this study.

## **Chapter III:**

**Social Reader-Response Analyses of the 20<sup>th</sup>**

**Century African-American Critics'**

**Receptions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

## **Introduction:**

A Reader-Response theory would have to be adapted to study the factor(s) laying behind the diversity of African-Americans responses to *Their Eyes*. Since this factor have been traced to the conditions preoccupying these readings contexts, Fish's Social Reader-Response theory would be appropriate. Because It focuses on studying readers' (or rather readings) socio-historical context<sup>30</sup>. This chapter aims at finding out the relationship between this context and its readers' responses (here critics responses) to the novel. On the light of the Social Reader-Response theory, first, the modern history of the African-Americans will be revised in order to follow its paradigmatic shifts, thus locate the distinctive communities existing throughout the period. Then, information about the interpretive strategies which are indirect relation with a community's paradigm will be collected. Finally, the degree of harmony between each community's interpretive strategies and the text of *Their Eyes* will be measured to see if we would end up with similar reading experiences similar to those communities members' readings or not.

### **III. 1. The Harlem Renaissance (1910's-1940):**

#### **1.1. The First Interpretive Community:**

The novel came into the light by the end Harlem Renaissance (1937). At the opening ceremony of the century, Harlem and some other northern cities served as a destination for The Great Migration of African-Americans fleeing the oppressive segregation in the south. Their move towards liberation introduced a spirit of

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<sup>30</sup> According to chapter two findings. See its conclusion.

independence to their minds, political debates were however far from their concern. Soon afterwards this exploded in in one of the largest grounds of social, cultural, artistic expressions about the Negro and his freedom. Pan-African sentiments from the previous period – The reconstruction period – were still carried by these African-Americans.

As the initial paradigm of Harlem Renaissance, this shaped the horizon of Expectation of its community members. To their specific horizon, literature and arts should create a space where the African-Americans can reconnect with their rich cultural artistic past from the days of slavery. The outcome would be a set of “Black” formalist interpretive strategies upon which a literary work can be evaluated. Their ideals were not far from those of the Reconstruction Era except the fact that Harlem in the 1920’s and 1930’s allowed for a wide African-American space which sheltered people together with their art and culture.

The thematic and formal elements of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to a great extent subdues to these interpretive strategies. Narration on the one hand is formal with a lyrical style as it’s clear through this passage: “Janie saw herself as a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (Hurston 10). On the other hand, Hurston blends this purely lyrical narrative voice, which is full of figurative images with an indigenous one. This latter catches the phonetic rhymes of African dialect and implies their proverbs, sermons, folk stories. It is the latter which sounds more real and therefore accurately representative of its people. “*Their eyes* also serves as a document of black culture and black tradition. Hurston recreates the southern rural dialect of the folk, the folk sayings, the folk tales and speechmaking around the store porch, the ceremonies and rituals and other folk item-

from the blues tradition to the food ways that characterize the black community and its rich, expressive culture” (Noel 39). Folk use in the novel reflects the interpretive strategies of this community in various ways. First of all, it revives the Negro’s unique way of life. Second, it shows how the African-Americans are still blended with it. Third, it shows it shows its place and role within the aesthetic world.

At a deeper level, however, the novel structure is flawed like Brown’s previous remark of the narrative gaps. However, this does not affect the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the text. Thus, it is of less concern to this interpretive community. Up to the early Harlem Renaissance figures’ horizon of expectations, the cultural load of the novel is of a perfect match. The artistic criteria of the story as fine fiction product, however do not completely meet the standards. Yet, these latter are beyond the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the text. Hence, they are of a less concern to this particular interpretive community. Including Brown and Woodson.

### **1.2. The Second Interpretive Community:**

However, this pure spirit of yearning the past was just an extension of the previous era’s way of thinking. Soon it would give way to the new minds, the new community, which is more identifiable with its period, will give a new direction to the movement. At the core Harlem Renaissance the earlier ‘dream deferred’, in the words of Langston Hughes. For the majority of Harlem intellectuals - the second interpretive community in this chapter- the accumulation of a set of contemporary events played a big role in shaping their way of thinking. The influence of slavery practices on them, their experience under the south segregation, and the stereotypical image about them in the

minds of nearly every American were the main ones. The dream of the Negroes no longer a pure desire of restoring and reviving their African-American identity. More urgent was the preservation of the dignity of the New Negro. The New Negro came at the point of conviction that African-Americans' place is within the American society: a fate which is sealed. Gaining acceptance in this society was their priority.

Within the borders of this community, there was a conviction about the necessity of presenting the Black race in a humanistic way in order to convince the nation of their equality with the rest of the American population. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folks* (1903) fashioned for the New Negro movement and stood as the backbone of the Harlem Renaissance. At the heart of it there is Duboisian "Goal of personal Transformation" the work goes on explaining the required "physical, economic and political reforms" which would allow for the Black (social) identity appropriation (Hale 208).

The convictions of this community were interpreted into 'Racial Uplift' literary strategies. Through this program, they "presented fine and upstanding African-Americans, who conformed to the social mores of the day" (Wikipedia Presents 28). In spite of this so white manner of character representation, the primary interpretive strategy for the Harlem Renaissance leaders was revealing the unfair social structure of the United States in literature. Aesthetic form also remained loyal to the African tradition as a matter of self-expression and artistic innovation. They wanted to show how beautiful is their art, and how far they can go on enriching the American cultural diversity when the Negro intellect is blended with its heritage from folk, musical and rhythmic expressions, to jazz and blues. Literature for them is therefore meant to bring a nation's attention, if not the

world's, to the situation of this marginalized group of American citizens whose members are as civilized, intellect, sophisticated as the superior race itself.

In order to put ourselves in the horizon of expectation pertaining to Harlem Renaissance leaders, a reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would need to employ their interpretive strategies. *Their Eyes* elevates to a level of art that fits for the representation of the Negro intellect and talent. An eye witness on that is how the novel goes beyond the traditional recording style of folk presentation in literature.

It is important to mention that two interpretive communities in the Harlem Renaissance period lived contemporaneous to each other. It is just one community members were tied to the past, while the other was more concerned with its present situation. Second, is the way Hurston tells a story convincingly, which is the attestation of Lock and Wright. However, *Their Eyes* in the main violates a more significant interpretive strategy to this community which is the representation of the New Negro Identity. The social atmosphere of the novel is in total opposition to the Racial Uplift Program procedures. *Their Eyes* characters still identify with the Negro identity of the old days. Back then, when the Blacks lived in their own societies they lived with free mind and used the language that appealed to them. Now, in a racist society these characters still live the same way: they laugh and play ridiculously as if nothing has changed. If this would prove something, it would prove that these colored people lack the depth to realize the seriousness of their current position. This community members see this as a sign of the Negro primitivism which goes hand in hand with the minstrel images attributed them in an earlier time. The novel reassures these images which popularized negative

stereotypes about the black race. How can these people be accepted in a high-standard society?

Another similarly important criterion of this community's interpretive strategies which is not met with the novel's storyline and thematic discussions is the exclusion of racial tensions. The novel is disguised in realistic outfits. However, it misses the depiction of the wide spread phenomenon of hegemony against the African Americans race. This misleading realism about the Negro life in the US convinces the readers that they are happy as they are, and nothing needs to be changed in their situation. Is it possible for such a type of fiction to deliver a message which would change the social situation of the Africans in America? According to the horizon of expectations of the Harlem Renaissance leaders the answer is 'No!' Their community simply couldn't find the motive behind writing this novel. That is why much of the novel's initial negative reception was mainly from black male leaders of the Harlem Renaissance contemporary to Hurston, like Wright, Locke, and Ferguson.

It is important to notice that both interpretive communities of the Harlem Renaissance period co-existed in the same time span. Yet, the negativism of the second community overpowered the positivism of the first one mentioned which led to the downfall of the novel consequently. So, why was that? This can be explained in the terms of Kuhn's paradigm Shift. The paradigmatic foundations of the first community are closely tied to the Reconstruction Era: when the Negroes finally gained a voice in the literature and used it to exhale their Africanism, which was suppressed for long. In the 1930's, this was considered reminiscent of an old paradigm. The accumulation of many anti-racial practices, the appearance of urgent political needs and the conviction that

something needs to be changed to get a life similar to the Whites', all combines together shaped a new paradigm, which is of more concern to the present situation. Hence, the new paradigm would be more authoritative and convincing for the public. Therefore, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fell out of print and disappeared from the literary scene according to the new paradigm's established conviction.

### **III. 2. The Protest Era (1940's -1950's):**

This period was an extension of the previous era. The point of difference is that the previous one was marked by social consciousness whereas this one had a political consciousness. This was primarily due to the raise of the Civil Rights movements. Its community was growing impatient with the later unfair segregation incidents in transportation, universities, restaurants and other public places. Segregation was an ingrained behavior, which went against the text of the constitution and prevented the African Americans from practicing their legal right. Similar to the preceding community, this one pursued integration and equality. However, identity transfer seemed to be taking a long time to achieve these aim. Thus they knocked the doors of politics. Protests spread to summon immediate changes. Interpretive strategies as a measure of the literature of the period were loyal to the new paradigm which shaped this community vision. It was a Literature which shouted out loud. Ellison, Turner, Hughes, and Gloster are samples of this interpretive community members.

The Protest Era' horizon of expectations has much in common with Harlem Renaissance's second community. Its members did not expect an African-American writer to write a sensitive romance and exclude the brutalities that the Negroes suffered

from. More particular to them was the relationship a literary work ought to have with the reading public: Having a political call at its heart, literature should be addressed to the white oppression. Blacks are already aware about what is happening to them, and they commonly agree about what their needs are. They don't need literature to raise their own population's consciousness about all of this. They need one which makes the whites come into terms with their vision. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was a far cry from these interpretive strategies all together. It is not a novel which would be recognized as politically conscious. It rather targets Black readers in particular through dealing with interracial issues. If *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has something serious to say it would be for the Blacks. The whites only get to enjoy its humor and speech patterns.

### **III. 3. The Black Aesthetic Movement (1960's-1970's):**

The Civil Rights movements was fruitful at last. The political and social freedoms it granted pushed in two directions. The first one was a continuation of it. Now that their individuality is accepted in the American society as that of human beings. African-Americans no longer wanted to live according to the American society standards. Their long struggle against the white oppression couldn't be let to dissolve after it has finally made a success. It was still considered as a significant phase of their lives. From students to intellectuals, the African-Americans wanted their achievements and their suffering to be kept in record and studied by the humanity. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, there was a great demand for an accommodation to the American educational institutions, towards acknowledging the African-Americans' history.

From the beginning of the African-American presence in America, till the success of the Civil Rights movement, Blacks were oppressed so hard and constantly that they needed to hold together very closely to gain progress in their rights and status. “Though, the fight against racial prejudice and discrimination has not ended till today, the seventies were liberate enough to break down the tie” (Hájková 21). This was the reason behind the paradigm shift.

Therefore around the 1960’s, the next call was for having an education relevant to their history of racial oppression. Artistic interpretive strategies pertaining to this community were not a mere reflection of the era’s paradigm. They rather resemble the other face of the community’s main concern. The members of this community wanted to build a separate African-American identity for their people. They wanted to establish deep roots for their black ideals and bond of unity.

Art was a method that could make the hopes of this community to become real or at least clear. This became the inspiration of the name of the period. L. Neal says that when we speak of Black aesthetics, several things are meant by that. First, we assume that there is already in existence a basis for such an aesthetic, and it doesn’t come out of the blue, art is always a birth child of cultural and ideological institutions. He continues explaining that “the motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the White thing, ideas, ways of looking at the world” (Neal).

It was not until the following decade that the African-American scholars started to be enlisted in the American universities. In 1974, Pennsylvania University took the initiative in the development of Black American. This position made many things possible such as the reestablishment of an African-American study program at

universities, reissuing norms of Black literature, which had always been forced to stay within the American one, and having their own publishing houses as well. The Whites no longer have to approve of the Black literature. Amiri Baraka was an important member of the black aesthetic community, whose novels were politically powerful pieces of art. He was the one to introduce the necessity of giving the African-Americans a space outside of the White aesthetics in order to find Black identity. Accordingly, this community's interpretive strategies measure a literary work according to its authenticity and faithfulness towards the Black identity and history on the one hand, and particularly creative to be able to horn in the White canonized art institution (Barrios 22).

Up to the appearance of this community, few aspects if not just one of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was approved of by the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American interpretive communities. The other aspects of the novels were either of no concern to them, or defied a community's interpretive strategies. However, to the quest of this community, Black aesthetics of the 1960's and 1970's, the whole novel was seen perfectly right in place as represented by Walker, Wilentz, Washington, Wall, and Gates Jr. Its aesthetic pursuit is recognizably African-American, and distinct from the White institution. Thus, it was celebrated as a canonical work in the African-American literature, which defines its norms. Moreover, by presenting such a pure Black art, the novel automatically undertook a search journey for the Black self and identity. Because Black literature finds its roots in the Black culture and tradition, especially oral one, which the early Negroes lived with. A revival of these aspects means the reconstruction of strong pillars Black identity as it was known to be. This equation was earlier introduced by Baraka. *Their Eyes Were Watching*

*God* was a forerunner of the ideology of embracing one's culture in order in order to come in terms with one's identity, the gospel of Black aesthetics interpretive strategies

Far from aesthetics and identity, the novel took the initiative to explore a sensitive side about the Negro's politics. The Black aesthetics wanted to flee the restrictive norms of the American ideals. They were aware of the long impact of this restriction: dictating the standards of sophisticated manners, and the appropriate way of thinking would on the long run erase a people's original identity. This issue of the effects of the superior cultural society on the inferior ones was not only tackled by *Their Eyes* but criticized as well.

Thus from their horizon of expectations, Black aesthetes defended the novel's focus against previous abasement and non-differentiation. The White community and the early Harlem Renaissance one could not recognize this message. They merely focused on the pleasure of reading it. The second Harlem Renaissance and Protest Era communities turned the novel down when they couldn't touch explicit signs of white oppression, like the physical one and the one which is clear in everyday social interactions between Whites and Blacks in the American society. The novel's avoidance of this kind of racial problem was due to overall structure of its community, which is almost an all-Black one. The situation of this community made them escape most of the tension between the two races. Yet, the Black society of Eatonville remained under the long effects of their previous life in a mixed and racist society. The sustained psychological oppression was one on which Hurston focused on in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This was in fact a political call of a new kind, which was either not clear or not sufficient for the earlier interpretive communities.

### **III. 4. The Black Feminist Movement (1970's -1980's):**

The success of the Civil Rights movement simultaneously pushed in a second direction: the rise of a separate voice of the African-American women. Black women came out frustrated about their situation after the Civil Rights movement. Already in the 1928, a law was established granting suffrage rights to the women in all parts of the world. At that time, black women and men as well were regarded as an inferior race. The 1960's Civil Rights movement laid its efforts on foundation on efforts to grant political and social freedoms to the whole Black race. However, the whites' institution answer was 'yes' for black males, and 'no' for black women liberation. The black males' community, in general terms, did not take collective actions to change the situation of the black women. This is evidential in the immediate shift of their concern toward pursuing other forms of liberation: individualism at cultural and identity levels.

African-American women had always had worries, problems and womanly interests special to them. What is more urgent is their worries and problems. The black women lived under double oppression: firstly, due to their race in a racist society; secondly, their gender in a patriarchal one. These two "problems capture the full essence of black feminist thought." There exists many faces to the oppression in the American society. Economically speaking, the black women were considered as vital means in the economic income of the United States. Suffering severe inhuman labor was a wide spread image among this category (Simien 2).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny was trying to make Janie understand that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston 17). That was true throughout their history. Politically speaking, their image was denigrated due to

such practices. They were seen as a category that was created to be exploited, common privileges therefor are of no use to them. All of this was made possible and regarded as natural due to sexist and racist ideologies in the US social system, which placed the black women at the very bottom of it. Beside these problems, which threatened the African-American women's humanity, there was another part to the story, which concerned their feminine identity. Like every woman, they had interests and desires.

At the dawn of the 1970's, while the black men were preoccupied by creating a space for black identity<sup>31</sup>, their female counterparts bore on their shoulders the burden of changing their marginalized situation. Black feminist were active on the political scale and the artistic one as well. For these activists, the change should not only cover the white society, something has to be done towards the black society as well. Black women suffer twice, once for their skin color, and another for their gender. For them it has become difficult to survive under this double colonization.

In literature, the role of black women writers was multidimensional. It had something to share with Black race in general, but a big part was typically about themselves. A Black women writer aimed at correcting stereotypes about the Blacks and the Black females in particular. Therefore, they sought to portray Black life and their life faithfully in their work, while zooming in the intra-racial ones. The African-American writers indeed brought new themes to the black literature like intra-group relations, sexual liberation, and gender and class identity. However, they were faithful to the Black arts institution, for they were similarly interested in high standard, authentic African-

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<sup>31</sup> A cause undertook by the Black Power movement, which was the backbone of the Black Aesthetic/Art movement

American pieces of work. Therefore, their voice was one of a woman who is Black in identity.

At this point of African-American history, there appeared what is called the inner diversity of the 70's African-American race. Gates explains how the Black women's writing between 1970's and the 1990's function both as "an extension of the Black arts movement and its repudiation as well, as a political activity indeed" (Sengupta 57).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of a black woman's experience in a black society, which was racist to some extent by largely sexist. Hurston spotted the light on the interracial relationships, which are patriarchally based. Issues that were not revealed even in the best realistic works of the African-Americans, males here are overtly portrayed. Nanny, the grandmother who understood how the African-American women were treated, plans a respectable life for her granddaughter, Janie, the one way out of the Black women's dark life is to rise in class to gain people's respect. Although, Janie's expectations of herself go far beyond that. She has an inner passion to live life as it should be. The powerful, passionate, self-reliant character of Janie goes against the image of the black women in the minds of the Black males and the White society as well.

In search of her true self, first she assimilates to the Black community expectations from her, to see if it's satisfactory. She marries a wealthy, works out his plantations, speaks when he allows her and keeps her opinions for herself the rest of the time. Her life with her 3 husbands show her each time how she is inferior to them. This part of the story is Hurston's portrayal of the African-American women's lives in their societies. The other part of the story is resistance and revolt against the whole American societies' expectations from and of the Black women.

Janie discover that this place, with her first husband is not the right place for her. She runs away with another man, with whom she expected to find the pleasure of love and taste the real life, and again with a third where she finds her destination. Janie's relationship with her last husband was a typical one. With Tea Cake, she finds all what she ever wished for. By contrasting how the African-American is in real life, with how it should be, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* goes in harmony with the concerns of interpretive community of Black women. It bring this community's interpretive strategies into action in a high standardized piece of art, which brings pride to the African-American artistic expectations.

Yet, Hurston doesn't conclude the story by that. She adds an extension to the story – the one after Tea Cake's death – that suggests that an African-American woman can live independent from men. Hurston shows how Janie could rely on herself and finally satisfied about her life experience due to this self-reliance, and sticking to her goals turning her back to everyone who stands in her way. For all black women in the US, Janie's bildungsroman<sup>32</sup> was a pleasure to read, an inspiration; moreover, it was the only true story about them in African-American up to that time.

### **Conclusion:**

Being a repressed minority in the American society, denied the least of their rights and not accepted by the mainstream social group, African-American people were equally sensitive to the criteria of their literature, as it represents their race, culture and art as well. What is remarkable about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* groups of critics is that

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<sup>32</sup> A coming of age novel which traces the psychological, social, and moral development and growth of the main character.

they approximately share the same identity (African-Americans), history (colonialism, slavery, and segregation), societies (racist patriarchal American societies). But, they didn't live in the same period and thus not influenced by the same events. Standing as the only noticeable non-static factor, these events in the lives of *Their Eyes'* critics has completely changed their perception of literature, and evaluation of it. That is to say, the horizon of expectation is attached to a particular paradigm. This letter has a direct influence on a community's interpretive strategies.

## **General Conclusion**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has opened the doors for an unprecedented philosophical transition. The existing certainties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century started to be rejected in favor of new 'truths'. There was no longer one side of 'the Truth'. People have started to question the old conventions to discover what possible realities a certain object may contain. In literary criticism, the way in which literary works were studied witnessed a similar revolution. The exposition of intra-textual elements was no longer accepted as the only truth about the work. Interpretations from different standpoints were believed to have similar values, including the one originally intended by the author. Reader-Response criticism has been introduced as an umbrella term which covers this new change in the world of literary criticism.

Reader-Response criticism, has believed in no single best interpretations of texts, as claimed by New Criticism and other expository critical theories. There is a variety of Reader-Response theories, but their main premise is one: Despite the physical presence of the literary work, its meaning is conceptual. Therefore, the text exists within the mind of the reader. This latter attributes certain images to the text out of his personal experience while the textual elements serve as guide-posts to this act of reading. On this manner readings of the same text will go in a variety of directions.

Since the mind of the reader is in control of a text's meaning to some extent, we expect to have certain factors which have an effect on the mind perceptions. Reader-Response theorists mainly account for the psychological and the social factors. Regardless to these factor. The reader is initially placed within a specific cultural

environment which is defined by time and place of his existence. This environment shapes the overall criteria with which the reader evaluates the text. This is what Hans Robert Jauss refers to as the reader's horizon of expectations. Therefore, we can say that the readers' personal interpretations is primarily determined by their existence in a certain time and place (horizon of expectations) and further guided by their psychologies or (and) social communities.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been evaluation by its 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American critics in a variety of ways. The heirs of the Reconstruction Era's paradigm have made a balanced criticism of the novel. The Harlem Renaissance and Protest Era central figures had a rather scattering criticism. The Black Aesthetics and Black Feminists opposed the later stances by showing great praise and enthusiasm about this novel. Each group of readers among these has special measurements of literary works. A common point between their horizons of expectations was that they all wanted a literature which best represents them, a one which would voice out their needs. This stems from their experience as African-Americans in a racist society. However, the identification of these needs was a problem of major importance.

The first interpretive community was closely tied to the near past of their ancestors. From here, they saw that literature should provide shelter for them in the old life of the Negroes, full of Africanism and free like the wind. This was largely found in *Their Eyes*. The second interpretive community was contemporary to this one, however they were mainly affected by their current social position and the injustices they were facing around the end of the first half of the century. To change their situation they emphasized on a literature which would go against all of the stereotypes attributed them.

A literary work should present the Negroes as sophisticated people who have a deep rooted culture despite all of that they are treated unfairly by the whites' institution. None of these aspects was can be seen in Hurston's *Their Eyes* except the cultural heritage. Therefore this novel was considered by this community as anti-revolutionary.

With the raise and success of the Civil Rights movement, African Americans insured that their social and political rights are insured. Thus, assimilation literature was of no longer needed. A new need came to the front, which is the emphasis on a separate identity, mainly through arts. *Their Eyes* were watching was a perfect match to this, with its cultural confident and emphasis on the way of the Negro life. The last community, which was mainly represented by the Black women, was concerned with this category's special status. The liberations granted by the Civil Rights movement were in favor of black males only. The black women remained under double oppression by their males and the white society as well. Z. N. Hurston largely focuses on the situation of these women in the story of her protagonist Janie Crawford. This stimulated the large audience of African-American women to embrace this novel.

According to these communities experience with *Their Eyes*, interpretive strategies basically dictate how a work of literature should be read. A study which expended through a century almost, make it safe to generalize that interpretive communities provide an influential reading contexts as grounds for literary works' interpretation and evaluation. The Social-Response Theory, succeeds to explain why *Their Eyes*' African American critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century perceived it differently. It indicates that "each interpretation will simply find whatever its interpretive strategies put

there. As Fish notes, interpretations will always be controlled by relatively limited repertoire of interpretive strategies available at any given point in history” (Tyson 186).

Out of this research’s findings we can say that when a disagreement occurs about the significance and value of the same textual properties of a novel, it is a matter of contradiction between the readers’ interpretive communities, or psychologies. Hence, these readers will consciously or unconsciously develop particular interpretive strategies which define limited boundaries of their horizon of expectations.

This research takes the initiative to practice the Social Reader–Response theory on a sample from real life-far from mere theorizing. This would have an original contribution to the existing literature about Reader-Response theory. In the same time, it would open the doors for further studies, about other samples of readers, or analyzing how other factors, such as psychology, affect the readers’ literary responses.

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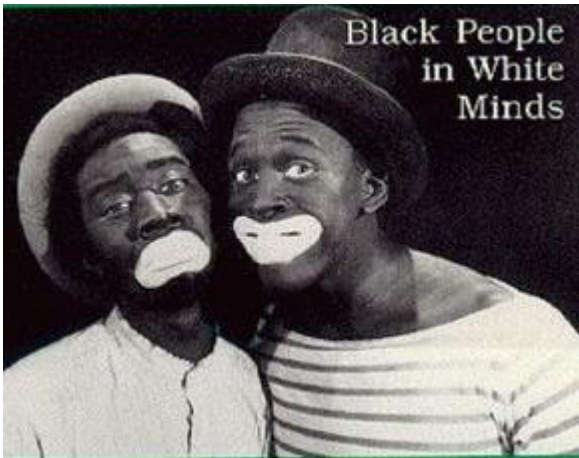
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## **Appendices**

### **Affective Stylistics and Transactional Readers-Response Theories**

Affective Stylistics, as defined in the book of *Critical Theory Today*, is “the ‘slow-motion,’ phrase-by-phrase analysis of how the text structures the reader’s response” (175). Transactional Reader-Response theory rather analyzes the opposite side of the effect. Reader’s feelings, mood, physical situation make special associations with the text signs under which the text is interpreted.

## Minstrel Theater



The cover of Marlon Riggs' award-winning documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1987)



The character of Jim Crow the slave, as created by Rice.

Minstrel shows appeared as early as 1769, when white actors appeared in comedic shows costumed as black slaves. One example of ministerial shows is T.D. Rice appearance in 1836 in the character of Jim Crow in a theatre performance. Rice put on an exaggerated mimicry of the blacks “manners and non-rhythmic speech and even physical appearance”. It was this character that popularized the Jim Crow laws term. Ministerial shows were created to entertain the white folks, before the blacks were allowed to represent themselves in the theatre. Ministerial shows were the source of the blacks’ image in the minds of the whites, until 1852 when *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* came to introduce a serious social realism for the Negroes (Lester 07-13)