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# Fingering the sublime : thirsting for a misnaming in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their eyes were watching God*

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Fingering the Sublime: Thirsting for a Misnaming in Zora Neale Hurston's  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by

Rebecca Martin

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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts/Science.

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## ABSTRACT

Many critics have written about and wondered over how the pear tree scene in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* functions as a part of the larger work. This paper seeks to explore that scene utilizing the theoretical framework offered by Slavoj Zizek in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Indeed, Zizek's work allows for a naming of Janie's misnaming during the course of the scene. Janie, stretched on her back beneath the blooming pear tree experiences ecstatic union with the tree. In this semiotic space, Janie feels overpowered by her experience and seeks to name it. The name she finds ("so this is a marriage!") comes from the realm of the Symbolic and thus does not adequately or appropriately label her experience. This misnaming creates the template for the process Janie experiences through the rest of the novel, as she seeks to re-cover, through her marriages, the bliss she felt beneath the tree. Zizek allows us to query the root of Janie's misnaming and also to explore more closely the metaphysical grounding from which Hurston works. Indeed, unlike Zizek who understands the path back to the pear tree as one of psychotic collapse, Hurston understands the journey as a process of renewal and growth. Both authors detail the same journey but with different outcomes.

## Fingering the Sublime: Thirsting for a Misnaming in Zora Neale Hurston's

### *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

#### *An Introduction:*

At the end of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie, the book's heroine, experiences a mystical encounter with her dead husband, Teacake. Back from the Everglades, Janie is exhausted from burying the dead, and she returns to her old home (the one Joe Sparks built) to mourn. At the end, Janie is on her porch, comfortably alone. She explains to her "kissin'" friend, Phoeby: "It's uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh go there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everbody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they go tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (192). Janie explains to Phoeby that she has been to see God and come back again. She has learned to live life for herself and has thus done the two things all people must do for themselves.

In the final scene, Janie climbs up to her bedroom, which is full of the memories she made there with Teacake, and finds there the mystical union of Teacake with the earth, the sunset, the horizon: "The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulders. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (193). Janie, at peace with her memories, sees Teacake in the "pictures of love and light" that splashed "against the wall" (193). Teacake is part of the horizon, and it is this that Janie pulls toward her and drapes over her shoulders (193). But Janie does not only pull in Teacake, she also pulls

in the rest of life. Janie is in a place in her life where she once again feels connected with the world and with life. She can see that her love is now a part of the horizon – a part of nature – and it is in this realization that Janie takes comfort. It is in this realization that Janie can call her soul to come forth.

Calling forth her soul is an interesting phrasing at the close of the novel. Indeed, where was Janie's soul during the rest of the story? When did it disappear? Why didn't it come out when she fell in love with Teacake? Janie explains earlier in the novel that the end of her youth was marked by her experience at the gate after her experience under the pear tree. I wish to argue that it was at that moment – at the gate – that Janie's soul first went into hiding. Though it came back for brief periods (finally disappearing for good during her marriage with Joe), it first left at Nanny's call – at Johnny Taylor's kiss. Importantly, however, Janie's soul comes back by the end of the novel. Its return marks an important stance on the part of Hurston.

This paper will focus on Janie's experience beneath the pear tree. I will bring that experience into dialogue with Slavoj Žižek's work *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. What I seek to explore is the way in which Hurston's world-view accords with Žižek's. Indeed, I see great similarities between the two – similarities, which enable us to pinpoint more specifically the way Janie must repeat in her marriages, with a difference each time, her attempt to find the union she originally experienced beneath the tree.

Indeed, the scene under the flowering pear tree creates a model by which we might begin to read and understand Hurston's novel. Two important things happen to Janie underneath the pear tree, which ultimately allow her to experience a sexual orgasm.

First, she is introduced to the rhythms of nature. In these rhythms and cycles, Janie discovers her part within a larger, longer structure. This structure opens itself to Janie, allowing her to experience a world awash with libidinal pleasures, spiritual insight and extra-sensual perception. Second, Janie seeks to make sense of what she sees, hears, and smells beneath the tree by appealing to the world of language – the Symbolic world. It is in that world that she finds a name for her experience: “So this was a marriage!” Both experiences lend themselves to the pinnacle of Janie’s ecstatic experience: the orgasm.

I will be utilizing the work of Slavoj Zizek – specifically his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* – in order to make further sense of the naming Janie performs beneath the pear tree. In turning to Zizek, we can begin to understand how the naming is indeed a misnaming – a misrecognition of what she experiences. In the naming, Janie others herself from her own desire. She produces a separation between herself and what she felt beneath the tree. Thus, she finds herself at a gate post – at the intersection of the public and private, a place where the first dualism arises in the narration. By misnaming, Janie creates a world of binaries and dualisms and she must spend the rest of the novel seeking to re-cover a place beneath the pear tree – quite literally back before when she was beneath the dualisms.

### *Joking Around: Zizek Tells Two Hegelian Jokes*

In Section 2 of his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek presents a subsection entitled “Two Hegelian Jokes.” This subsection will form the central pivot around which my comparison between Zizek and Hurston revolves. Zizek asserts first (before the jokes) that “truth arises from misrecognition ... our path towards truth

coincides with truth itself” (64). These premises, he asserts, will be illustrated through the jokes themselves. Indeed, Žižek appeals to the jokes to make manifest the way that misrecognition – our own inability to recognize that the secret from which we feel left out is actually the product of our own desire – yields the truth, insofar as misrecognition brings us back to our own desire – the thing which keeps us from recognizing the way back into the secret.

The first joke Žižek tells is about a Pole and a Jew. The Pole and Jew are on a train and the Pole asks the Jew to explain how he (and other Jews) “succeed[s] in extracting from people the last small coin and in this way accumulate all your wealth?” (64). The Jew agrees to share with the Pole how he succeeds in doing this, but first asks the Pole for five zloty (Polish money). The Pole gives the Jew the money and listens for the answer to his question. The Jew proceeds to give him part of the story, then ask for more money, then give more of the story, then ask for more money until the Pole jumps out of his seat and exclaims: “ ‘You dirty rascal, do you really think I did not notice what you were aiming at? There is not a secret at all, you simply want to extract the last small coin from me!’ The Jew answered him calmly and with resignation: ‘Well, now you see how we the Jews ...’” (64).

Žižek explains that throughout the joke, the Pole believed there was a secret (how the Jew gets his money) into which he would gain entrance. Thus, the Jew “embodies for him the ‘subject presumed to know’ – to know the secret of extracting money from people” (64). During the telling of the joke, the Pole waited for the revelation he suspected would come at the end – the revelation of how precisely the Jew takes money.

What he doesn't recognize is that instead of coming at the end, the story itself is the revelation – the Jew demonstrates how he takes money while “explaining” the process in a nonsensical way. Thus, when the Pole jumps up and exclaims that the Jew was taking his money the whole time, he is inadvertently telling the truth of the situation: “he is already telling the truth without knowing it – that is to say, he sees, in the Jew's manipulation, a simple deception” (65).

The Jew knew how to take into account the Pole's desire for the revelation at the end of the story. Indeed, the “secret” of the Jew resides in the Pole's desire: “the Jew's ‘secret’ lies, then, in our own (the Pole's) desire: in the fact that the Jew knows how to take our desire into account” (65). The entire time the Jew demonstrated how he took money – by appealing to the Pole's desire to hear a story that would reveal the method going on before his eyes. The Pole, lost in his desire, could not recognize the process going on before him until the very end. Thus, Žižek concludes, the path of misrecognition coincides with truth.

Žižek then introduces his second joke. This joke is “about the Door of the Law from the ninth chapter of Kafka's *Trial*” (65). In the joke, a dying man asks the doorkeeper:

‘Everyone strives to attain the law, how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?’ The door-keeper perceives that the man is at the end of his strength and his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: ‘No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since the door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it.’ (Kafka as quoted in Žižek, 1985, p. 237).

Žižek explains that the ending to this joke is homologous to that of the first, because “the subject experiences how he (his desire) was part of the game from the very beginning,

how the entrance was meant only for him, how the stake of the narration was only to capture his desire” (65-66). Similarly, in the case of the Pole, the “secret at the end of the Jew’s narration is his [the Pole’s] own desire” (66). Both men desire ways into a door that seems shut to them. The secret they perceive, however, is not actually a secret at all, but an Othering of themselves from another that they themselves created. Zizek writes:

... in short, how his external position vis-à-vis the Other (the fact that he experiences himself as excluded from the secret of the Other) is internal to the Other itself. Here we encounter a kind of ‘reflexivity’ which cannot be reduced to philosophical reflection: the very feature which seems to exclude the subject from the Other (his desire to penetrate the secret of the Other – the secret of the Law, the secret of how the Jews ...) is already a ‘reflexive determination’ of the Other; precisely as excluded from the Other, we are already part of its game. (66)

The Pole wishes to know the secret that makes him different from the Jew. The Pole has constructed a world frame in which he understands himself as distinct from the Jew because he, the Pole, does not, like the Jew, take every last bit of money from people.

The Pole has created the separation between himself and the Jew by understanding there to be a difference – even if one does not exist. Thus, when the Pole asks the Jew to explain to him how Jews take money from people, the Pole is asking the Jew to prove the Pole right – to prove correct the distinction he made between himself and the Jew. Thus, the Pole asks the Jew out of his own desire for confirmation. Thus, the ‘secret’ is not a secret at all but a distinction the Pole himself created out of his desire to be distinct from the Jew. In this case then, the answer to the Pole’s question is an unveiling of his own desire.

*Underneath the Pear Tree: Sexual Vision in Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Hurston begins the narration of Janie's life at a gatepost. Chronologically, the gatepost follows Janie's experience beneath the tree, even though it comes before it in the narrative. The gatepost is an important frame for the pear tree scene, however, because it introduces the place to which Janie will move: to a consciousness of her place within binaries. Poised between the public and the private, between the conscious and the unconscious, Janie reaches out and kisses Johnny Taylor:

She thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate. On a late afternoon Nanny had called her to come inside the house because she had spied Janie letting Johnny Taylor kiss her over the gatepost.

Conscious life commences at a gate – at the demarcation between the private world of the home and the public world of the lane. At this intersection, Janie becomes conscious – of herself, her position as a female in a society ruled by men, her sexuality, the divide between the public and the private. Importantly, conscious life commences just after Janie achieves her first orgasm beneath the blooming pear tree – just after she appeals to the world of the Symbolic to describe her Semiotic, libidinal ecstasy.

But before Janie can get to her recognition of binaries, Hurston must first take us through the blooming pear tree scene. Hurston believes something truly groundbreaking occurs to Janie underneath the tree. Janie's experience of ecstatic bliss is carefully attended to, for this very reason. As such, Hurston is careful to set the specific scene in which such transformation might occur. Hurston begins the narration of this scene by locating Janie in time and space:

It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that

she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously.

Hurston locates Janie geographically – she is in West Florida – as well as within the seasons and the day. Interestingly, Janie is in the spring – a time of newness, growth and regeneration – but also in the afternoon – a time just after the peak of the day. Thus, her location is both at a point of growth toward a pinnacle, while also at a point of maturity. Moreover, her location denotes that while she is at the beginning – in the spring of her life (as we will soon see) – she is also located within a larger cycle: a cycle older than her that stretches out both before and beyond her. Hurston further locates Janie in the backyard. This is significant because though still concealed within the confines of the gate – and concurrently the home place – Janie is not in the front of the house, but behind. Thus, she is outside and in the proximity of the road, but she is concealed from it by the house. The house, in this scene, offers itself as a protective shield from the public nature of the world beyond the gate.

Beyond locating her physically, Hurston also locates Janie in terms of the social system and expectations that surround her. She has been “stealing” away from her chores. This alerts us to the fact that what she does beneath the tree is not something that fits easily into the life orchestrated for her or expected of her. Her dealings with the tree are thus positioned as covert – as subversive and potentially (we will see) divisive acts. Moreover, the introduction of the chores marks one of only two places in the passage where the social system is invoked. While experiencing the pear tree, Janie is positioned as below the level of the social system. She is outside of that system.

After locating Janie, Hurston then moves on to begin describing the components of Janie's experience. Hurston utilizes religious language throughout the pear tree passage as she attempts to describe the spiritual dimension of this experience. She begins the use of religious language when she tells the reader that Janie has been spending every moment she could "steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days." The use of three calls the reader's attention to what is about to occur – alludes to the potential for great growth and regeneration from that time. Indeed, Hurston follows the use of three with a description of the budding, then blossoming of the tree. Janie has been following this progression – has been partaking in the "mystery" of the tree's development and transformation – a transformation that, like Christ's after the crucifixion, moves from death to regenerated rebirth.

This transformation "from barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" stirs her "tremendously." For Hurston, Janie's vision beneath the pear tree has everything to do with being open, with being as receptive and virginal as the new bloom. Janie sees the tree poised at the point of openness, at the point of being ready for the bee and being beautiful and whole in that readiness. This openness "stirs" Janie, causes her to be moved "tremendously."

The passage then moves on to explore the inundation of Janie's senses beneath the tree. In this exploration, the intersection points between the physical experience of Janie's body and the metaphysical experiences that defy the senses are elucidated.

How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected

itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.

Janie hears a “flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again,” and as she does, she struggles with how such an experience is possible. She is remembering something from another life, from another place. Moreover, the “singing she heard” had “nothing to do with her ears.” So, it is not only from another time and life but it is a song that is not transmitted through her ears but that some how finds itself in her mind.

Beyond sound, Janie also smells the “rose of the world.” Janie smells all the beauty of the world. All that beauty is concentrated beneath the pear tree. The beauty follows Janie “through all her waking moments and caress[es] her in her sleep.” Thus, there is the impression that what Janie witnesses beneath the tree extends beyond. It is a presence that follows, but one that is not threatening, rather it ‘caress[es].’ Importantly, the beauty calls to attention things that “had struck her outside observation” and brings those things back into her “consciousness.” Thus, things that would generally remain unexplored by Janie are brought to her attention and given a place to be explored.

Hurston then shifts back to Janie’s location: she is “stretched on her back beneath the pear tree” and “soaking in the alto chant” of the bees, sun and breeze. This move back to location is important because it also marks the move back to the physical nature of Janie’s experience.

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been

summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.

The “inaudible voice of it all came to her.” We are reminded again that the song Janie hears does not involve her ears. Yet, though what she sees and smells are extra-sensual, what she sees is firmly bound to the earth. Janie witnesses the approach of the bee to the bloom. The bloom, which had previously been only described as virginal, now experiences the “dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of the bloom.” The bee bears pollen and is thus able to fertilize the bloom. Moreover, the bee sinks into the “sanctum of the bloom.” The meeting of the bloom and the bee is a sacred meeting.

Janie also sees “the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace.” Importantly, Janie sees thousands of calyxes meet the lover (the bee). Not just one calyx, but thousands. There is an overwhelming response by the flower to the bee. Every part of the flower rises to meet the bee. After this response, Janie witnesses the “ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch.” The whole tree shakes – is stirred by the arrival of the lover. More specifically, the tree “cream[s] in every blossom and froth[s] with delight.” Janie witnesses the pollination of the tree and the response such pollination causes. This response, to Janie, is distinctly sexual.

After witnessing the response of the tree, Janie introduces the social system back into her experience (last introduced when she spoke of her chores). She marvels at the tree and names the process she witnesses: “So this was a marriage!” The introduction of marriage happens in the middle of Janie’s ascent to orgasm. Indeed, the thought of marriage has a part in facilitating the orgasm. However, Janie links what she sees as the revelation of marriage. She follows the idea of marriage with: “She had been summoned

to behold a revelation.” She then orgasms. Thus, both the vision of the tree and the vision of marriage produce Janie’s orgasm.

Janie describes her orgasm in terms of a “pain remorseless sweet.” The use of pain is interesting here because nothing before it connects Janie’s experience with anything dissatisfying or harmful. Indeed, the beauty caresses and lulls her into orgasm. Since the beauty of the tree is clearly described as a positive force, the pain cannot come from it but from some other place. That place might be the social sphere, which Janie herself introduces. For introducing a word like marriage brings along many other meanings not associated with the bliss-filled world beneath the pear tree. Marriage, like the chores Janie steals away from, is a binding covenant that brings with it obligations and expectations. Indeed, marriage and chores are both strongly marked by their obligations – by who is doing which tasks and how those tasks bestow levels of status and control. Thus, when Janie seeks to name what she sees beneath the pear tree, she does so by giving it a name understood and formed by the social system she had to escape in order to experience the pear tree at all. Janie introduces the pain and the thought of remorse (in its absence it is yet present).

### *Re-Visioning Psychic Collapse: Imagining Re-Integration in Their Eyes*

The metaphysical space occupied by Žižek differs greatly, in some respects, from that occupied by Hurston. First, Žižek, following the direction of Lacan, believes that individuals are created at a moment of disintegration, of lack – at the moment upon which they recognize their separation from the people and places around them. Thus, any

model offered by Zizek does not prescribe a way out of the initial break, but only describes how an approach to that break might look. For Zizek, there is nothing beyond the break. All analysis can get you is back to that initial place – a place where, if you arrive, will usher in catastrophic repercussions for the individual: psychotic autism, psychic suicide.

Thus, to follow Zizek's model perfectly is to miss the ways that Hurston differs from him. For her, there is hope beyond the break. Indeed, within her metaphysical vision, the individual exists before the break. Whole and self-sufficient, the individual is broken through the misrecognition that occurs when things become separated out. For her, as for Zizek, the process of working through, amounts to a movement back to the initial misrecognition. However, for her, this movement back does not culminate in psychic suicide, but in the potential for reintegration on the other side.

Zizek conceives of a 'secret' – of something that appears locked away from the self. Thus, the self is constructed from the very beginning as lacking something – knowledge of the secret, of the other that excludes you. If you pursue the secret it will evade you because you are not aware that it is your own desire that keeps it from you. To get the secret is to understand the truth of your own exclusion – to understand that you produced the Othering that excluded you in the first place.

For Hurston the founding of the subject is quite different. For her, there is first a 'mystery' that though apparently separate seems and feels connected to the subject. Indeed, the subject comes to recognize, once the mystery is pursued, that the rhythms of it are mirrored in the rhythms of the self. The pursuit of the mystery yields bodily bliss,

spiritual rebirth and growth. Getting the mystery is pure pleasure. Only when the subject seeks to make sense of the mystery – and in doing so reenters the symbolic realm from which an escape was necessary in order to experience the mystery – does Zizek's vision come in. In the misnaming of the mystery, the subject divides itself from the point of pleasure – from the pear tree. The misrecognition, or misnaming, creates a separation between the subject and their desire. This separation occurs because of the subject's desire to name, to understand. But this naming causes the subject to become Other from its own pleasure and desire.

*A League of Her Own: Solitary Promise in Their Eyes*

Though the ground from which Zizek works differs in significant ways from the place where Hurston works, it is important to point out that Janie finds a solitary bliss under the pear tree which is only recreated when she, alone in her bedroom at the novel's conclusion, gathers the horizon to her. What are we to make of the fact that Janie feels most completed when left to her own solitary wanderings? Indeed, what sort of relational identity is being offered in *Their Eyes*, if any?

These questions lead to important points of overlap between Hurston and Zizek's metaphysical orientations. Indeed, for both there is a sense of radical isolation and autonomy. For Zizek, the self is alone in its alienation, left to fend for itself in its radical isolation. The only way the self is not alone is in the creation of an Other – a figment of the self's imagination which bestows stability to the psyche. Vitally, solitude also seems key for Hurston. Janie does not need another person to satisfy her libidinal needs. In

fact, throughout the course of the novel, we see that the presence of another often leads further down the road of isolation and disunion. Only when freed from the oppressive presence of another can Janie begin to reassert her own autonomy – her own claim to pleasure. Teacake pulled Janie back to life, but it was only after his death that her soul was called forth.

Importantly, the process of therapy for both Hurston and Zizek involves the self recognizing that it does not need an Other. In Zizek's conception one does not need an Other because the Other was always an illusion. The Other never existed in the first place. For Janie the same is true. She did not need an Other when beneath the pear tree and it was only when she misnamed the experience marriage that she introduced the need of an Other. Thus, she spends the rest of the book looking to others to make her feel complete, stable, whole. Like the self in Zizek, however, the Other never delivers the stability it promises. Indeed, the other contributes to the isolation of the self. Only with the recognition that the self does not need the Other, however, can the psyche become free. Free, however, on a first reading means slightly different things for Zizek and Hurston. For Zizek it means psychic collapse; for Hurston it means reintegration with nature. However, upon closer examination, both do entail a sort of break from reality – a break from the Symbolic. Indeed, Janie's experience beneath the tree was outside the Symbolic, in a Semiotic, non-linguistic space. For Zizek, this space is the place of autism. For Hurston it is reintegration with nature. Both entail a movement away from civilization. For both it is a place where solitary pleasures move to the forefront.

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## About the Author

Rebecca Martin was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania to William and Mary Martin on September 9, 1982. She attended the University of Scranton in Scranton, Pennsylvania where she obtained degrees in English and Philosophy in May, 2005. Following her time with the Jesuits, Rebecca studied at Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania where she obtained a Masters in Education in Curriculum and Instruction in August, 2006. Rebecca also gained Pennsylvania Certification to teach at Bloomsburg University. Currently, Rebecca is at Lehigh University where completing her Masters degree in English. She began coursework for the PhD in August 2008.

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