

The Color Purple by Alice Walker
Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Discussion Points

These two novels have many significant points in common; in fact, Alice Walker credits Hurston with the inspiration for her own novel. Walker views Hurston as a "literary foremother" whose storytelling made it possible for Walker to tell her own stories. Critic Henry Louis Gates (in *The Signifying Monkey*) calls *The Color Purple* a retelling of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Readers of both texts may notice intentional connections. Apply each of the following questions/discussion points to the novel you read. (If you read both, you will be able to see the connections clearly.)

1. As both novels begin, their protagonists (Celie and Janie) are "married off" to men they do not love for the purpose of finding security. Both are beaten and abused by males. Explain and support with specific examples.
2. Both novels rebel against dominance or abuse by black males by creating in the end a new social order. Explain how this happens for either Celie or Janie. What characters help the protagonists to find the strength to reach this resolution? Examine these role models and their impact on the novel as a whole. Why is sisterhood for black women an important underlying concept of these novels?
3. An interesting background comparison exists in the description of Shug in *The Color Purple*. When Celie first sees the photograph of Shug shown to her by her mother, this description exactly Walker's description of a photograph she owns of Zora Neale Hurston. Find the description of Shug (if you read *TCP*) and share with those who read *TEWWG*. What tribute is implicit in this description?
4. Examine the role of Shug in *TCP* and Teacake in *TEWWG*. Both represent a love interest of the protagonist, and even their names show an interesting connection (sweetness). Upon learning Teacake's name, Janie remarks, "Are you as sweet as all that?" Show how these relationships provide Janie and Celie the love and ultimately the strength to find themselves and their own independence. Compare to *Jane Eyre*, and contrast with *A Doll House* and *The Awakening*.
5. Alice Walker has said of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "There is no book more important to me than this one." In her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker describes Hurston's impact on her as a writer. Walker also has expressed her sadness at the Hurston's desolation at the end of her life, and she set out on a personal quest to find and mark Hurston's grave. Critic Gates suggests that in *The Color Purple*, Walker's "love letter" to Hurston, Walker has written the ending to Hurston's life as she wished it could have been.

6. *The Color Purple* uses epistolary form (letters) which critic Gates identifies with the earlier tradition of the slave narrative--representative of the history of black women passing down their stories to younger generations. How is this characteristic represented in *TEWWG*? What story of Nanny's does Janie pass down? What about her own story (as it is passed down to whom)?
7. A characteristic focus of African-American literature is the search for voice. (Look for this element in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as well.) How is this theme central to each novel? In *TEWWG*, how are the narrator's and Janie's voices at odds with each other, only to blend together at the end? How is Celie searching for her voice in her letters--first to God, then to Nettie? Note that when she is evolved, she is able to address God, the stars, the trees, etc. What kind of God is Celie searching for--with Shug's help, where does she finally find God? How do both protagonists come to their own understanding of God?
8. Note the close connections of both protagonists to nature. From where do both Janie and Celie hear voices? Consider the symbolic function of the tree in both books. (Janie lies under the pear tree and hears the voice of nature: "So this was marriage." Celie hears a voice from the trees when she finally stands up to Mr._____. After being beaten, Celie says to herself, "Celie, you are a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men.")
9. Consider the way in which neither woman fulfills the traditional role of a mother. How does the absence of children intensify each woman's search for her own voice?