Atypical Coming of Age Narrative

The Harlem Renaissance was a predominantly African American intellectual, social, and artistic explosion set in the early 20th century and centered about the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. During this movement, African American intellectuals and artists sought to reconceptualize how white people viewed the negro by expliciting defining the African American experience and struggle. One such author from the time, Zora Neale Hurston, championed this idea in many of her works. Hurston’s brilliant novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* tracks the life of a fiercely independent African American woman in her quest for love and happiness. Embracing the idea of defining the African American experience, particularly in the South, Hurston explores themes of love and relationships, racism, and voice as the leading protagonist, Janie Crawford, undergoes a “coming of age” experience. Although many of the themes and motifs present in the novel are noteworthy and crucial to defining the African American experience, Hurston’s approach to the typical “coming of age” narrative is most interesting. Instead of conceiving a stereotypical “coming of age” story in which the protagonist goes through life with defining experiences at each stage of life happening in a predictable sequential order, Hurston plays with that order by having Janie’s youthful parts of the maturity process come later in life. **By taking this atypical approach to a typical story line, Hurston works to define a unique African American experience that is familiar, yet wholly different from the typical white experience.**

**In order to recognize Hurston’s atypical approach to the “coming of age” narrative, one must first define what the typical “coming of age” narrative, or at least life experience, looks like.** This genre of literature is generally centered around the growth of the protagonist as he/she transitions from youth to adulthood. The transition is typically marked by certain defining experiences as the protagonist grows from youthful recklessness to aged maturity. For a protagonist on a quest for love, these defining experiences come in three stages of life: teenage years into mid-twenties, mid-thirties, and forties into old age. With the protagonist's whole life ahead of them, their teenage years and mid-twenties are a time of exploration in which he/she can find what they want in life and in love. During this time the protagonist will typically experience their first love that is pure and true, however some circumstances that are out of their control arise causing a separation and therefore the protagonist’s first emotional step into maturity. Moving into his/her thirties, the protagonist will continue to seek out love and may even find something that he/she believes could be love, however it is ultimately doomed to fail. These “loved and lost” experiences usher in a sense of maturity in the protagonist and with age comes a feeling of acceptance of life, thus the protagonist chooses to settle for something that is good enough to get by. With not much time left, the protagonist settles for practicality rather than a youthful desire of fulfillment in true unbridled love. Each experience at each stage of life is integral to the protagonist’s maturity process and “coming of age,” and Janie Crawford experiences all three over her coming of age. However, the order in which they occur is not of a typical “coming of age” narrative and thus is not of a typical white experience.

**Playing with the typical order of a “coming of age” narrative, Hurston’s protagonist Janie Crawford essentially skips the youthful stage of life, and therefore the youthful stage of the maturity process, due to her grandmother’s insistence on her quickly marrying a suitable suitor.** Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, grew up with the experience of slavery, thus she wanted Janie to have a better life, a life without strife and struggle where Janie could simply “sit on the porch like the white madam” (Hurston 114). This ultimately results in Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks, a marriage that is doomed to fail from the start because Janie is not fully committed to it. Although she had hoped that she would eventually find love in it, almost immediately it becomes clear that there is no love in the relationship as Logan quickly “stopped talking in rhymes [and] ceased to wonder at [Janie’s] long black hair” (Hurston 26). These two details are particularly important in the context of Janie’s love because they are two motifs that reappear in Janie’s subsequent marriages and are therefore defining characteristics of love for Janie. Her next marriage, which is to Joe Starks, lacks rhymes all together, and her final marriage to Tea Cake is marked by intimate caressing of Janie’s hair. Still, Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks is her first forage into love, however it ultimately represents the second stage of life, which is essentially the equivalent of her mid thirties. This is the time when the protagonist typically has their first marriage, after already having some formative experience of a young love, that will not work out. Janie, on the other hand, did not get to experience her younger youthful years exploring what love is in its purest form since she was forced into a loveless marriage at a young age. In the end, Janie’s marriage to Logan teaches her that “marriage [does] not make love,” and with her dreams crushed Janie “became a woman” (Hurston 25). Clearly this experience left a mark on Janie as she goes through her coming of age experience, which is different from the typical coming of age story.

**After having learned early on that not all marriages are filled with pure love, Janie moves on to the next stage of her life, which would be similar to the stereotypical mid forties into old age.** And thus begins Janie’s empty marriage to Joe Starks. Immediately upon meeting Joe she knows that she will not love him either since “he [does] not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” (Hurston 29), which are symbolic of sensual love. However Joe Starks promises Janie an easy life on the porch, a life that Nanny had wanted for her, so despite her lack of love Janie decides to marry Joe. This decision is one of complacency where Janie simply decides to settle for something that is practical and good enough to get by, which is a decision that is typically made later in a person’s life when there is not much time to go out and find love, yet at that point Janie is still very young and she still has time to find love. Thus it appears that Janie has reached a clear point in her maturity process where she understands that true love may not be attainable by everyone and practicality must be prioritized over lofty dreams, however it is important to note that she herself did not ever get the chance to try and find that love herself. Still, having never truly loved in her life, Janie longs for more as she still has “plenty of life beneath the surface” (Hurston 76). This is ultimately due to the fact that Janie skipped her younger years, the time when she could have explored and lived and loved openly. By constantly mentioning Janie’s longing for more and her longing for the horizons, Hurston ultimately emphasizes the undervalued importance of a person’s young formative years. This is an important time when a person finds who they are and what they want, and Janie missed those years. Thus even though she may seem fully matured due to her decision to remain in a loveless marriage with Joe, Janie actually has not fully completed her coming of age process; that is until Tea Cake comes along.

**Tea Cake himself represents youthfulness in the story, and it is his youthfulness that brings out Janie’s youthfulness thus allowing her to experience her formative younger years.** Tea Cake is already much younger than Janie, and his youthful immaturity shows. When Tea Cake took Janie’s money, he showed a childish excitement “when he found out how much it was” (Hurston 122). After counting the money, he went out and bought everyone food spending the money without thinking. This youthfulness ultimately rubs off on Janie bringing out her own youthfulness and allowing her to now live out her younger “teenage” years even though she is now in her forties. They play checkers together, physically flirt, and sing together like young teenagers in a budding romance. Janie is now experiencing new things, the things that are typically associated with youthful love. Even though Janie is aged, she is finally experiencing her first love, which would usually come at a young age in a stereotypical “coming of age” narrative. Still, Janie is clearly in love as she sat on her porch the evening she met Tea Cake and “watched the moon rise… quenching the thirst of the day” (Hurston 99). A clear metaphor for how Janie finally feels satisfied by a man, Hurston is indicating that Janie is now completing her coming of age narrative. However this does not actually occur until Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake after he suffers from rabies, which for Janie was the “meanest moment of eternity” (Hurston 184). Janie has now suffered a life altering trauma and a “loved and lost” situation simultaneously, thus completing her “coming of age” story. Janie has now “been to the horizon and back” (Hurston 191).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, at its core, a “coming of age” story for Janie Crawford as she searches for love and satisfaction in life. However, Hurston takes an atypical approach to the stereotypical structure of a “coming of age” novel. By having Janie Crawford experience her youthful formative years later in her life, Hurston creates a wholly unique experience that ultimately parallels the unique African American experiences that Hurston is trying to embrace. In the end, Janie still reaches a fully matured state; she just took a different path to get there. In that, Hurston shows how many people have both shared experiences with others and unique experiences of their own.