

Their Eyes Were Watching God
Final Discussion Questions

What does Janie mean when she says “ Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore?”

At least twice in chapter 19, Janie refers to Tea Cake as “the son of Evening Sun.” This allusion may be referring to a popular blues song called “St. Louis Blues,” which begins:

I hate to see that evening sun go down,
I hate to see that evening son go down,
‘Cause my lovin’ baby done left this town.

Or it could be a reference to William Faulkner’s short story “That Evening Sun” (1931), in which the black protagonist fears that her husband is going to kill her in her sleep once the sun goes down because she is pregnant with a white man’s baby.

Which do you think is more plausible? Or is it a combination of the two? Explain your reasoning.

The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?

Many readers consider the novel a coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each experience?

In the novel, speech is used as a mechanism of control and liberation, especially as Janie struggles to find her voice. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or to remain quiet?

Is there a difference between the language of the men and that of Janie or the other women? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?

How does the image of the black woman as "the mule of the world" become a symbol for the roles Janie chooses or refuses to play during her quest?

What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning?

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Re-read the last three pages of the novel. How do the imagery and tone connect with other moments in the novel? Does Janie's story end in triumph, despair, or a mixture of both?

What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?

How does Janie's journey – from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades – represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions?

In what ways does Janie conform to or diverge from the assumptions that underlie the men's attitudes toward women? How would you explain Hurston's depiction of violence toward women?

Why is adherence to tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?

After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her." Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others?