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Literacy's Effect on Black Women: A Personal Narrative

English has always been my favorite subject throughout my academic career. Being introduced to different narratives, cultures and experiences through books has always intrigued me. Themes of love, loneliness, life, death, coming of age, and more allowed me to immerse myself into the world of those narratives. But throughout the many narratives I read, I never truly connected with the characters deeper than the surface level. Many of the characters in our novels were of white American or European background. *The Great Gatsby*, *The Things They Carried*, *Hamlet*, *The Odyssey*, all narratives that felt out of touch. An experience that I don't live. And when a character of color did appear, especially a Black woman, they either were usually left under developed, hard to connect with, or insignificant to the overall plot. For example, in the *Hunger Games*, Rue, the only girl of color, faces a tragic death for the sole purpose of moving the plot along for the white female protagonist. No backstory, no flashback, nothing. She disappears as quickly as she appeared, like a flash of smoke. The injustice of Black narratives like Rue's and others had left me disinterested and, quite frankly, disappointment.

This was my reality, and a reality that women of color too often see. Ever since I've been a young reader, I'd been exposed to a standard that I didn't even realize existed. A standard where whiteness was the default. Never having the ability to truly see myself within stories had become ordinary. Wondering why my favorite series of books didn't have characters that stuck around that looked like me. *Junie B. Jones*, *Dork Diaries*, to *Harry Potter*, all children's books

that were near and dear to my heart but had no representation of the girl who loved them. Until one day, in school, I was assigned to read Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Not only a novel whose sole protagonist is a Black woman, but a Black woman who goes through a journey of self-discovery. The novel explores concepts of identity, power, love, sexuality, and more through the main character Janie Crawford, while also having her represent the intersection of the racism and sexism that was extremely prevalent during the early 1900s. Intersections of oppression that still affect Black women today. But it is Janie's dynamic characterization that shows how, as a Black woman, she maneuvers these intersections present in the relationships she encounters, and the journey that molds her into the woman she becomes.

The various amount of imagery within the dialogue Hurston provides allows Janie to be imagined in a light that Black women are rarely allowed to express. Through the illustration of a blossoming pear tree, young Janie encounters her first experience with sexuality. "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!" (11). Hurston gives Janie the ability to innocently encounter love through nature but describing it in more sexual language. I find this quote significant because Hurston allows Janie to come into her sexuality with a sense of beauty. Being a young woman, the illustration of this tree made me reflect on feelings that are associated with women and sexuality. Feelings of secrecy, shame, or even disapproval in society compared to the natural, and delicate manner in the book. While today's culture encourages the sexual liberation of women, Black women still face a sense of taboo that women who express feeling of sensuality will be perceived more promiscuous or find themselves a stereotype of a "Jezebel". A stereotype that is much too often used to portray Black women in media.

Another example of imagery that show Janie as a dynamic character of a Black woman is through the motif of the horizon. “The biggest thing God ever made, the horizon- no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you- “(13). Hurston uses the imagery of the horizon to illustrate a promise of achieving fulfillment in one life. In Janie’s life she strives to find her independence and fulfillment in love, but because of her socio-economic status, gender, and race, she experiences pressure to marry for survival and financial stability. After two unfulfilling marriages, a true love that ends in tragic heart break, and finding herself alone, Janie finally finds a balance and comfort between love, independence, and self-fulfillment. “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net...She called in her soul to come and see” (193). Throughout Janie’s journey she found herself in relationships that didn’t allow her to be free as her own person. There was always a power struggle between her and love-interests that didn’t foster an environment for her own self-discovery, or her discovery of her “horizon”. I find this very admirable that through all that she endured; she still had the strength to find contentment within herself as her own person. Being on my own college journey, where I am figuring out who I am and what I want to be, I reflect on the importance of finding true satisfaction in my life. How there is a delicate balance between love/dependency and self-fulfillment/independence.

Representation is great, but it is only a stepping stone to what needs to be truly achieved. Not only must characters of color be present within stories but their own stories should be told. It is not enough just be a side-kick, a tragic story, or a caricature. Narratives for people of color, especially Black women, should have depth, understanding, and purpose. This would allow young children and even adults to be inspired, to dream, and to imagine themselves in all different spaces. It would allow readers to see themselves in characters and truly connect with a story. Janie’s narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplified this for me. It allowed me

to parallel myself with Janie, to compare my experience as a Black woman with hers, and embolden me to find my own truth and seek fulfillment within my life.