

Their Eyes Were Watching God

(Difficult allusions, words, and phrases; page #'s correspond to the '98 Perennial Classics Edition)

Chapter 1

- ♦ **porch sitters** are hard-working farmers and laborers; men and women who work for someone else—a white bossman. Only in the evening do they gain control of their time. Janie's late husband, Joe Starks, seems to have been the only man in Eatonville who didn't work for someone else. (1)
- ♦ **dat ole forty year ole 'oman** is a reference to Janie; the remark is made out of spite and envy. Although Janie is forty years old, she is still a very attractive woman—much to the annoyance of the women. (2)
- ♦ **bander log** is possibly a long log that people sat on and bantered, joked, and gossiped. (2)
- ♦ **fall to their level** The women hope that Janie will someday, somehow, stop having an aura about her. Her charisma reinforces their envy and is proof that they do not think well of themselves. (2)
- ♦ **to study about** This is Mrs. Sumpkins' phrase and means that she isn't "thinking about" Janie; ironically, it is evident from her remarks that she has spent much time doing just that.
- ♦ **She sits high, but she looks low.** Lulu Moss suggests that while Janie carries herself in a high-mannered way, her social standing has come down considerably after her relationship with Tea Cake. (3)
- ♦ **booger man** is the mythical monster who is often called the "boogie man"; supposedly he prowls at night, scaring women and little children. (4)
- ♦ **mulatto rice** is a concoction of cooked rice, chopped and browned onions, crisp bacon bits, and some chopped tomatoes. (4)
- ♦ **lamps and chimneys** The reference is to kerosene lamps. Apparently Janie, a good housekeeper, either left the lamps clean when she went away or else she took time to clean at least one of them as soon as she returned. Kerosene lamps and their glass chimneys must be clean in order to function properly. (4)
- ♦ **stove wood** Although Janie has the most pretentious house in town, it does not have gas or electricity; she must cook on a wood-burning stove. (5)
- ♦ **Mouth Almighty** is someone who talks too much. (5)
- ♦ **"An envious heart makes a treacherous ear."** Pheoby characterizes the gossipy women with this biblical-sounding adage. (5)
- ♦ **a lost ball in de high grass** The townspeople love baseball; not only do they like to watch it, but they also like to play it. The field where they play has tall, uncut grass, and fly balls are often lost and the game delayed while both teams search for the ball. (5)
- ♦ **"They don't know if life is a mess of corn-meal dumplings, and if love is a bed quilt!"** The experiences of the townspeople are so limited that they can't make any valid observations on life and love. (6)
- ♦ **come kiss and be kissed** Come and talk to me, Janie is saying; it's implied that the townspeople should do more of this in their lives. (6)
- ♦ **the 'ssociation of life . . . De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin'** Janie is referring here to the common experience of belonging to fraternal or church organizations and going to their conventions and meetings. Janie wants Pheoby to understand that her experiences in the past eighteen months were as exciting as attending a big convention. (6)
- ♦ **hard of understandin'** Pheoby will want a detailed explanation to be sure that she understands all that Janie says. (7)
- ♦ **a mink skin . . . a coon hide** that is, one thing looks pretty much like something else until both can be studied carefully. No one can understand what Janie's life was like with Tea Cake or with Joe until each life is examined closely.
- ♦ **monostropolous** This is a hyperbole invented by Hurston; it's perhaps an extension of "monstrous." (7)

Chapter 2

- ♦ **never hit us a lick amiss** never beat or spanked the children when they didn't deserve it (8)
- ♦ **palma christi leaves** the leaves of a gigantic herb plant called *palma christi* in Spanish-speaking countries; its leaves are believed to relieve severe headaches. (12)
- ♦ **bore the burden in the heat of the day** The reference is to Matthew 20:12: "These latecomers did only one hour's work, yet you have treated them on a level with us, who have sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun." (13)
- ♦ **school out. . . high bush and sweeter berry** The message here is: take more time to look around and think about what you want to do. Picking a good husband is compared to knowing what part of a berry bush has the sweetest fruit. (13)
- ♦ **angel with the sword** This is a metaphor for death; the reference comes from the Bible, Numbers 22:23: ". . . the angel standing in the door with his sword drawn. . ." (15)

- ♦ **got in quotation wid people** Sherman's march had ended, the slaves had been freed, and the Union had set up a system to help the freedmen. It was only by talking around, though, that Nanny found out what was going on. (18)

Chapter 3 & 4

- ♦ **knocked up** pregnant (22)
- ♦ **kissin'yo'foot** acting more like a servant than a husband and an equal (23)
- ♦ **by and sell such as them** Nanny is concerned about both the protection and economic security that Logan can offer Janie. (23)
- ♦ **freezoly** indifference, or a lack of interest (26)
- ♦ **sleeveholders** fancy elastic bands similar to women's garters, worn on the upper arm of a shirt sleeve to be sure the cuff falls exactly where the wearer wants it. (27)
- ♦ **in and through Georgy** living in and passing through the state of Georgia (28)
- ♦ **sugar-tits** a mixture of sugar, butter, and bourbon, tied up in the corner of a cloth and given to babies to suck on in order to hush their crying. (28)
- ♦ **ribbon-cane syrup** sorghum molasses (28)
- ♦ **fall down and wash up** fall down and worship (31)
- ♦ **yo' royal diasticutis** a sarcastic reference to Janie's buttocks (31)

Chapter 5

- ♦ **sitting on their shoulder blades** a position that's closer to lying down than sitting (34)
- ♦ **a huge live oak tree** an evergreen oak (35)
- ♦ **uh mite too previous** in this particular colloquialism, "previous" means "a little too early." (35)
- ♦ **Middle Georgy** the middle of the state of Georgia (35)
- ♦ **Ah'm un son of Combunction** a polite way of swearing; similar to "Well, I'll be a son of a gun. . ." (36)
- ♦ **all de women in de world ain't . . . teppentine still and saw mill camp** free and easy women, women from the lowest level of laborers. Turpentine stills and saw mills were usually located in the woods, removed from town and close to the trees essential for their products. (39)
- ♦ **Isaac and Rebecca at de well** This reference is not literally accurate. Isaac never met Rebecca at the well: It was Isaac's father's servant who encountered Rebecca at the well. The servant had prayed for Divine Guidance in finding a wife for Isaac—that after his long journey to the land of Aramnaharaim, a generous and humble woman would approach him at the community well and offer him a drink of fresh water from her jug, as well as offer to draw sufficient water for his camels. Rebecca did so and agreed to leave her village and travel to the land of Canaan to become Isaac's wife. (42)
- ♦ **all them dat's goin' tuh cut de monkey** in other words, if everyone has finished acting silly . . . (42)
- ♦ **bell-cow** the leader of the herd; here, the most important woman in town. (45)
- ♦ **traditional prayer poem** Many sermons followed traditional patterns. Read the introduction to James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*. (45)
- ♦ **protolapsis uh de cutinary linin'** The reference is to something that upsets the stomach and makes a person nervous. Hurston is pointing out the men's fondness for impressive words, whether they have real meaning or not. (49)
- ♦ **the street lamp** Before electric lights were common, cities and towns lighted their streets with gas lamps. The lamplighter would go around at dusk with a small four- or five-step ladder which he would climb to open the globe of the lamp and light the wick. (45)

Chapter 6, 7, & 8

- ♦ **. . . and yo' feet ain't mates.** In the first part of Matt's response, he does something that frequently occurs in fold speech: he equates the man Sam with a lie. "You'se a lie, Sam," he says, adding "Yo' feet ain't mates," meaning that Sam is not put together right and hence can't be believed. (52)
- ♦ **Feeds 'im offa 'come up' and seasons it wid raw-hide** This is a way of saying that the animal is not well fed. "Come up" would be a promise--someone is waiting for something to come up—a job, for example. Raw hide is untanned cattle skin, certainly not ver palatable for man or beast. Raw hide is also a material often used for whips. (53)
- ♦ **rub board** The old-fashioned galvanized or glass washing board was in common use before washing machines became econmically available. (52)
- ♦ **before de ornery varmit could tack** a sailing and boating term, consistent with the strong wind that was blowing during this episode. To a sailor, "tack" means to turn the bow to the wind. The mule wasn't fast enough to turn and run into the wind in pursuit of the children. (53)
- ♦ **Say you started tuh Miccanopy but de mule . . .** Micanopy is a small community northwest of Eatonville. The man

really didn't know where he was going. (55)

- ♦ **Folks up dat way don't eat biscuit breat but once uh week** Biscuits must be made of white wheat flour, something better than cornmeal. Cornmeal is the staple of the poor, used in corn bread, corn pone, hush puppies, cornmeal mush, and a host of other stomach-filling items. Biscuits are special and an indication of some prosperity. (56)
- ♦ **side-meat** Matt bought side meat by the slice. Side meat is cured and smoked bacon. In Joe's store, it would be sold by the slab to be sliced at home by the purchaser or sliced and weighed in the store. This is another indication of Matt's poverty or ignorance – or both. (56)
- ♦ **fractious** unruly, out of control, resistant to authority. This word is not really a regional dialect word. (56)
- ♦ **goosing** teasing, hassling, annoying (56)
- ♦ **black gaiters** ankle-high shoes with elastic gores at the sides. For Joe, they would be a classy sort of house slipper. (57)
- ♦ **crazy as uh betsy bug** a variation of "crazy as a beg bug," an insect all too familiar in many of the households. (57)
- ♦ **you didn't have gumption** "Gumption" is common sense, mother-wit, survival skills one is presumably born with. (58)
- ♦ **Drag him out to the edge of the hammock** a precarious place to be because a hammock tips very easily when the occupant gets too close to the edge. (59)
- ♦ **No Matt Bonner with plow lines** Plow lines control an animal. Now that the mule is dead, he will no longer be hitched to plow. (61)
- ♦ **Ah knowed you would going tuh crawl up in dat holler** In other words, I knew that you were going to take that path in the discussion. Sam will "smoke out" Lige in his rebuttal. The two men engage in regular and predictable arguments. Each one knows pretty well what the other one will say, but all of this is part of the entertainment on the porch of the

store.(64)

- ♦ **uh butt-headed cow** a stubborn animal that won't do what its owner wants it to do (65)
- ♦ **dat great big ole scoundrel-beast up dere** The speaker is referring to a picture of an enormous dinosaur on a billboard advertising the Sinclair Oil Company. A dinosaur was the logo of Sinclair and prominently displayed at their filling stations. In all likelihood, the men do not know it is a dinosaur. (66)
- ♦ **Daisy is walking a drum tune** The drum is the key percussion instrument in a musical group. It sets the tempo. Daisy is walking with the stylish snap of a precision solo drummer—and she knows it! (67)
- ♦ **a "studied jury"** Educational resources were limited for this community, and there were very few men with college degrees in law or medicine—or even the ministry. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston has a character say, "You see when Ah was studyin' doctor . . ." Whereas a man or woman might get a "call" to the ministry, the path to informal law or medicine was self-study or perhaps apprenticeship with a practitioner. (69)
- ♦ **Sam Watson, you'se mah fish.** a good catch—not an empty hook for the fisherman or woman. Joe plans to beat Sam at checkers—that is, catch him like a fish on his hook. (75)
- ♦ **Then too she considered thirty-five is twice seventeen** Janie has grown older and is more experienced than when Nanny married her off to Logan Killicks. She realizes how much of her life has passed. Accurate addition isn't important; the passage of time is. ((76)
- ♦ **Y'all really playin' the dozens tonight.** trading insults, usually in a predictable way; but the insults are based on exaggeration of personal traits and involve derogatory statements about members of each other's family—often, someone's mother. (79)
- ♦ **The thing that Saul's daughter had done to David.** In I Samuel 18-19, Saul has two daughters. Merab and Michal. Saul gave Michal to David, and she saved his life. Saul was immensely jealous of David because of his youth, beauty, intelligence, and potential power. Saul wanted to kill him, but Michal foiled that plot. (79)
- ♦ **Well, if she must eat out of a long-handled spoon, she must.** A long-handled spoon has a long history in the English language. Jody has become almost evil in his illness, and Janie must treat him with all caution—with a long-handled spoon, something that she would use if she were to dine with the devil. (81)
- ♦ **de big fuss in de store dat Joe was ;fixed' and you wuz de one dat did it.** Here again, the busybodies are at work, suggesting that Janie has put some sort of spell on Jody. Jody is terminally ill, and the people do not understand his illness. It is much easier for them to accuse Janie of putting a hoodoospell on Jody to hasten his death than it is for them to understand that Joe's condition is hopeless. (82)
- ♦ **Ah been feelin' dat somethin' set for still-bait** In other words, he's saying that he's feeling like he's the target of community disapproval, like bait on a hook that can't move or wriggle free as a worm might do. A fishing analogy is particularly appropriate for these people who love to fish. (82)
- ♦ **Last summer dat multiplied cock-roach wuz round heah tryin' tuh sell gophers!** Janie and Pheoby have no time for the charlatan, the "two-headed" doctor, the scheming, self-serving quack. Note the hyperbole "multiplied cock-roach." Note also that "gopher" could be a mispronunciation of "goopher," a well-known conjure mixture. It was usually an herb-root mixture alleged to have great power to do whatever the two-headed doctor said it could do. (83)

- ♦ **He'd be all right just as soon as the two-headed man found what had been buried against him.** Hurston discusses this phrase of conjure in *Mules and Men*. If indeed Janie has “fixed” Joe, then the conjure man has to find out what the “fix” is and where it is buried. His next task would be to concoct something that would counteract the “fix.” All of this was done for a fee, of course, preferably paid in advance. (84)

Chapter 9

- ♦ **gold and red and purple, the gloat and glamor of secret orders** Joe evidently belonged to several lodges or fraternal orders, and each one has a different ritual to be performed when a member dies. Hurston mentions the Elks (BPOE) band that plays at Joe's funeral. (88)
- ♦ **celebration** Funerals and wakes often become festive affairs when family and friends gather not only for the burial but also for a celebration of the life of the deceased. (89)
- ♦ **set for still bait** a term from fishing, meaning that the bait is easy for the fish to grab. (90)
- ♦ **like a pack of chessy cats** The reference is to the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, who had an all-knowing smile. Here, Janie is saying that all her gentleman callers have smug, too-confident grins on their faces. (90)

Chapter 10, 11, & 12

- ♦ **kitchen matches** These were a type of common household matches made for years by, among others, the Ohio Match Company. They were about two-and-a-half to three-inches long and were sold in a box, the side of which contained a strip of abrasive like fine sandpaper. The abrasive contained the chemicals needed to ignite the match when it was briskly scraped across the surface. Before electric stoves and gas stoves with automatic pilot lights, no kitchen was complete without a box of these matches. Many campers still include them in their equipment. (95)
- ♦ **cold-cocked her a look** looked her straight in the eyes. (95)
- ♦ **Dixie Highway** U.S. Highway 1, the major Maine-to-Florida highway in the old U.S. highway system (95)
- ♦ **Ah done cut a hawg** I've made a mistake. Tea Cake thinks perhaps he has said something he shouldn't have said. (97)
- ♦ **You got me in de go long** An opening for his proposal of marriage. Janie has captivated Tea Cake, and he will “go long” through life with her. (105)
- ♦ **run our conversation from grassroots to pine trees** We've gone as far as we can go with this conversation – from minor matters to larger issues. Hurston has used other expressions like this to indicate limits and extremes in conversations. (106)
- ♦ **See yuh later, tell yuh straighter** This friendly chatter indicates that Tea Cake wants to see Janie again and continue talking more at length about important matters. Expressions like this are sometimes classified as “jive.” (107)
- ♦ **De big Sunday School picnic** The Sunday School picnic that took place on a spring or summer day was often the biggest social event in a small community like Eatonville. (108)
- ♦ **sense her into things** Sam Watson wants Pheoby to talk some common sense to Janie (111)
- ♦ **class off** act better than other people; show off (112)
- ♦ **He ain't got uh dime tuh cry.** The townspeople are sure Tea Cake has no money. Janie, however, knows he works and always pays their way. (112)

Chapter 13

- ♦ **two hundred dollars inside her shirt** Janie is following some basic wisdom shared by wise somen; always have enough money on hand for your fare home – no matter who your date is. (117)
- ♦ **twelve o'clock whistle** Jacksonville is a railroad town, and railroad shops usually had loud whistles that sounded at regular times during the day. (118)
- ♦ **pink silk vest** Janie's “vest” or undershirt, is made of silk. Chances are that most of the women in Eatonville wore cotton underclothes. (118)
- ♦ **round house** A huge, round shed with a large circle as its main construction feature, it contained train tracks that could be linked with tracks outside the shed. Locomotives could be run into the shed for repairs and maintenance. (122)

Chapter 14 & 15

- ♦ **pickin' my box** playing my guitar (122)
- ♦ **flivvers** old cars (131)
- ♦ **black-eyed peas and rice** combination is known as “Hoppin' John.” (132)
- ♦ **card-playing chatter** Hurston, the folklore storyteller, records the sort of patter that went on during card games.
- ♦ **sit in the doorway** Hurston does not even suggest that the migrants go into Janie's house. (132)

Chapter 16 & 17

- ♦ **Bahamian drummers** Hurston worked with Bahamian musicians in one of her theatrical efforts, and she used some of their nicknames for the characters in her book. (139)
- ♦ **Saws** another name for Bahamians (139)
- ♦ **meriny skin** like browned-egg white meringue; a complexion color (143)
- ♦ **a vanishing-looking kind of man** Mr. Turner is a totally ineffectual mousy kind of man. (143)

Chapter 18

- ♦ **money and insurance papers** This is further evidence that Tea Cake is a responsible man, even though he ignores the storm warnings and will be stubborn about seeing a doctor. (160)

Chapter 19-20

- ♦ **tryin' to keep you outa yo'comfortable no longer'n you wanted to stay** in other words, I don't want to keep you here in this uncomfortable place any longer than you want to stay. Earlier in the novel, Tea Cake wanted to comb Janie's hair, and she referred to it as her "comfortable," not his. "Comfortable" would be a unique personal possession. (168)
- ♦ **give it uh poor man's trial** A poor man takes any respectable job he can get and he does his best with it (169)
- ♦ **uh common trial** similar to the definition above. Just to be working, Tea Cake will take any job available. (169)
- ♦ **de Jim Crow law** Jim Crow laws were laws that enforced strict racial segregation. It originally referred to a stereotype black man in 19th century minstrel shows. (171)
- ♦ **trouble and compellment** Tea Cake is troubled by the white guards forcing him – compelling him – to help bury the dead.(172)
- ♦ **motherless chile** Tea Cake is out of his element. He feels as though he doesn't belong to anyone, like a child in slavery sold away from its mother. (172)
- ♦ **six months behind de United States privy house at hard smellin'** reference is to a privy, an outdoor toilet which has a thoroughly obnoxious smell if it isn't properly cared for. This is Tea Cake's metaphor for being tossed into a federal jail and put to hard work. (172)
- ♦ **bucked each other** beat and/or challenged each other (173)
- ♦ **quart of coon-dick** cheap moonshine or bootleg whiskey (176)
- ♦ **lap-legged brother** a suggestion that Mrs. Turner's brother's legs are malformed and not straight – clearly an insult. (181)
- ♦ **watchin' de job** watching and waiting for Tea Cake to die
- ♦ **relic** Janie is the relic, or remainder, from their marriage. The word, of course, could also be an echo of the Old English term *relict*, which designates a widow. (186)