

Everlasting Love: The Greatest Gift of All

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Defining true love and finding examples in human experience has long been at the heart of many works of fictional and spiritual texts. In the Holy Bible, possibly the most famous text in the world, St. Paul discusses the importance of love in First Corinthians, along with love's impact on life and community. The discussion of love continues in Zora Neale Hurston's fictional masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, vividly taking the reader on a journey through Janie's lifelong search for true love. In this text, there are many examples of failed attempts of love, and it is not until Janie reaches middle-age that she finally finds the love she has been yearning for since her youth. This desirable, powerful type of love is not merely romantic—it affects her on a deeper, spiritual level. St. Paul's discussion of love not only reveals the faults in Janie's first two marriages, but also perfectly describes Janie's love with Tea Cake, allowing her to discover the powerful, inspirational joys of everlasting love.

First Corinthians deeply examines the nature of love, and how important it is to the wellbeing of community. The hope and faith that love brings are extremely comforting and enlighten people along the way. "It [love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (*Holy Bible*, 1 Cor. 13:7). This inspirational summary of love's power describes how love touches people with everlasting faith, creates a powerful, connecting hope, and has the potential to endure all the obstacles and hardship one encounters during life's journey. This hopeful, inspirational love is all young Janie longs to experience in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Lying under a pear tree at age 16, she dreams and longs for an ideal love—a love and marriage she could treasure. "Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing

bees singing of the beginning of the world ... Where were the singing bees for her?" (Hurston 11). Janie is longing for the world to begin, for bees to visit her blossoms—signifying a longing for personal growth and love. Hurston repeatedly uses the imagery of the blooming pear tree, representing Janie's desire to experience "ideal," spiritual love and marriage, as described in First Corinthians. Although in Janie's youth she longs for romantic love, romantic love and marriage alone do not fulfill her. However, as she develops and finds her own voice, she begins to long for something deeper and greater than her life has to offer.

Janie's hopeful views of love are quickly jaded in the light of her arranged marriage to Logan Killicks. While Janie wishes that her ideal love would surely follow marriage, she is quickly disillusioned with her loveless marriage, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (24). Janie still yearns for the sweetness love can bring, yet painfully comes to realize that "marriage did not make love" (25). Janie's relationship with Logan is nothing like the love she imagined in her days under the pear tree. While Logan is financially well-off (owning 60 acres of land), there is no love in their relationship, no spiritual connection. She is not content with marrying for security, but rather wants to marry for love. Janie's view reflects St. Paul's discussion of love, which states that without love, nothing in life matters. "If I give away all my possessions . . . but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). This fulfilling love of St. Paul's idealization is exactly what is missing from Logan and Janie's relationship—their forceful courtship focuses on usefulness and security, leaving Janie's spirit crushed in their loveless and cold marriage. At this point in Janie's journey to find true love, Hurston's narrator reveals that, "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 25). For Janie, becoming a woman means facing the realities of a marriage based on financial security, not love.

In Janie's time, society viewed love as an unnecessary and foolish component to marriage, as her grandma, Nanny, describes when Janie comes to her about her problems with Logan. "Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me 'bout love" (23). There is a great deal of practicality in Nanny's words. For many individuals, land, a home, food, and a decent income is more than enough to keep them happy and fulfilled. Security is the most important thing in their lives, and marriages are like business contracts. For Janie, this is not enough. Rebelling against her grandmother and her culture, she strongly values relationships and love. In her society, however, love often comes secondary to possessions, security, and social status. The danger in highly valuing objects and status is that possessions and security are fleeting and the desire to attain them is often insatiable. This is unlike love, which stays with a person forever, as described in the First Corinthians. "Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge it will come to an end..." (1 Cor. 13:8). The desire to find this everlasting love drives Janie to follow her heart (and desires) into the arms of the dashing Jody Starks.

Sophisticated and charming, Jody Starks is undeniably physically attractive, appealing to Janie's visual image of a desirable lover. He flatters her with flirtatious words, and gives her a renewed hope of finally experiencing true love. "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (Hurst 32). This physical desire masks the true personality of Jody, and despite Janie's inspirational outlook, her love with Jody is anything but real. While Jody eventually becomes an influential mayor of Eatonville, giving Janie the esteem of being the Mayor's wife, 200 acres of land, a big house on the hill, and many other monetary luxuries, the spark of love and desire in their relationship

quickly fades away and is replaced with cruelty and bitterness. She becomes a trophy wife—a symbol of status and beauty to be envied, yet isolated from the community. “Janie soon began to feel the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities. The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. . . . She couldn’t get but so close to most of them [townspeople] in spirit” (46). Janie’s status as Jody’s wife stifles her voice and personality, separating her from the community and her dreams.

When Janie marries Jody, she not only loses a part of herself to the abusive marriage, silencing her own unique voice, but the marriage crushes her dreams of love once again. The physical and emotional abuse Janie receives from Jody causes her to reevaluate his role in her life, along with recognizing the shortcomings in their relationship. “. . . he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears. . . . She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. . . . It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams” (72). Janie realizes that this is not the love of her dreams, but rather Jody is something, “she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over” (72). Janie’s view of real love is consistent with St. Paul’s, as he writes that “[love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:5). During her marriage, Janie feels as if her own mind “had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours [Jody’s]” (Hurston 86). His control over her life leads Janie to recognize that Jody’s abuse on physical and emotional levels is anything but patient or kind. Jody’s so-called “love” is full of anger, boastfulness and resentment, the exact opposite of St. Paul’s account of the joys of love, illustrating the failures in their marriage.

With two failed marriages behind her, Janie still has hope in her heart that she would find true love. “Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he [Jody] could never find

them. She was saving up feelings for some many she had never seen" (72). After many years of being trapped in a stifling marriage, which took "all the fight out of Janie's face" (76), Janie finally finds love and freedom with a young man named Tea Cake. Fun-loving Tea Cake, twelve years her junior, makes her laugh, smile, and most importantly treats her with the utmost respect and dignity, an essential element to true love. He tells her, "Nobody else on earth kin hold uh candle tuh you, baby. You got de keys to de kingdom" (109). Along with Tea Cake comes new freedoms for Janie, including their moonlight fishing trips, picnics, checker matches, and dancing. During their relationship, Tea Cake truly cares for the person Janie is, sharing love and kindness with her, the epitome of St. Paul's discussion of love. As he writes in First Corinthians, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant . . ." (1 Cor. 13:4). Through this kind, patient relationship with Tea Cake, Janie rediscovers her soul and inner voice. After following her heart to run away with Tea Cake, Janie completely opens herself up to him, making a very important discovery about the nature of love ". . . Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (Hurston 128). The love Janie feels for Tea Cake creates an all-encompassing connection that is bigger than herself. With this new-found love, Janie allows her delicate soul, which is her innermost essence, to be exposed—a part of herself she has kept hidden for years. Through their true, unconditional love, Janie develops her independent voice and allows herself to trust love again.

In spite of their true love, Janie and Tea Cake's love affair has many obstacles along the way. With Tea Cake lacking the financial security Janie is accustomed to, trust issues between the two develop, with Tea Cake indulging in gambling and running off with Janie's money. However, Janie comes to peace with this issue, accepting Tea Cake for who he is. "It [gambling] was a part of him, so it was all right. She rather found herself angry at imaginary people who

might try to criticize . . . Tea Cake had more good nature under his toe nails than they had in their so-called Christian hearts" (126). Tea Cake always comes back to Janie, a symbol of their love, but now and again, jealousy brewed between the two, with public disapproval threatening to push Tea Cake over the edge. ". . . jealousies arose now and then on both sides . . . Tea Cake . . . just slapped her [Janie] around a bit to show he was boss . . ." (147). The violence Tea Cake shows Janie in this case is anything but St. Paul's kind, patient love on which their relationship is based. However, Tea Cake is responding to the Mrs. Turner's attempt to pry Janie and Tea Cake apart by fixing up Janie with another man. While this does not condone Tea Cake's behavior, in the framework of their culture, the slap does not destroy their relationship. No relationship can ever be perfect. There are struggles and low points in even the most loving relationships—it is part of human nature. However, the key to Janie and Tea Cake's everlasting love is that they accept each other's faults and weaknesses, allowing their unconditional love to overcome the obstacles.

The greatest indication of Janie and Tea Cake's powerful love comes with Tea Cake's untimely passing. Janie is forced to kill him after he was infected with rabies from a dog bite, and "she was beginning to feel fear of this strange thing in Tea Cake's body" (182). Tea Cake was infected with the deadly disease when he was trying to save Janie, and he lost his life because of his love for her. Although Janie went through much grief with his death, the love they had together was a great comfort to her. "He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace" (193). Even in death and through their struggles, Janie still feels the peace of their love, which will stay with her the rest of her life. In describing love's greatness, as seen in

their relationship, St. Paul writes, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Janie’s journey through love’s triumphs and tribulations stimulates immense personal growth, and finally leads to everlasting love. From the young, hopeful girl underneath the pear tree dreaming about true love, to the stifling, subordinate role of Mayor’s wife, and finally to an independent, free-spirited woman, Janie’s soul finds confidence, trust, freedom, and most importantly, love. True love is found in her relationship with Tea Cake, and despite their struggles and his death, their love changed Janie’s life and will stay with her forever—the very essence of St. Paul’s words, “Love never ends.” St. Paul’s ideal love, shared by Tea Cake and Janie, was the greatest gift of all in Janie’s life, conveying the everlasting qualities of love’s light and joy.

The search for love and acceptance are very common themes in our lives today. Love is often idealized in our society, with many individuals looking for love to “complete” them. While Janie searched for love during her life, she was not able to truly love any one person until she was able to love herself for who she is. Tea Cake was the one person who showed Janie the amazing power of everlasting love, and through his openness, she learned to love and accept herself. Janie’s development is something we all can learn from, along with her expectations for love. We cannot look for external sources to complete us; that is something we have to do for ourselves. Nonetheless, how can we deny the inspiration and enlightening power that love brings to a life? This inspiring love is truly timeless, and once you experience it, nothing, not even life’s impermanence, can ever take it away.

Works Cited

Holy Bible: The Harper Collins Study Bible. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2006 (Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition).