

# Killicks, Starks, and 'Tea Cake'

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The Functions of Janie's Husbands

in

Zora Neale Hurston's

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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# I Introduction

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. [...] So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

(Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Virago Modern Classics, p. 29)

These words of Janie Mae Crawford's grandmother are clearly depicting the former slave's image of a world full of white oppression and male domination, a hierarchy which cannot be overcome in her opinion. Accepting these inequalities as universal and immutable, Nanny's dream is it to marry her grandchild to an economically secure husband. She sees Janie as an innocent girl at a vulnerable age who is susceptible to victimization as her own daughter was victimized. Nanny wants to make sure that Janie is married before some other man takes advantage of her, which is why she accepted Logan Killick's proposal on her behalf. His sixty acres of land ought to provide Janie with the security that keeps her from becoming a mule or a "spit cup" (p. 37).

While Nanny's image of marriage is based both on historical and personal experience, Janie's idealistic comprehension is most romantically described in the image of the pear tree:

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! (p. 24)

This densely complex social metaphor which juxtaposes the bee- and flowersymbols against men and women illustrates a relationship free of domination and active respectively passive polarities. It is rather a relationship between active equals that the inexperienced sixteen-year-old girl cherishes.

In the following I would like to find out to what extent the different relationships between Janie and her three successive husbands correspond to this powerful metaphor and in how far these men exert an influence on the personal development of the protagonist.

In this respect it is essential both to examine their psychological characteristics and to have a closer look on their social functions within the African-American community.

## **II Logan Killicks**      *sixty acres and a gentle mule*

The short marriage of convenience with the well-to-do widower whom Janie hardly knew before, turns out the way she had already anticipated in her inner soul: “The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree [...]” (p.28).

The young woman becomes increasingly disillusioned with her new husband. Not only does she find his outward appearance repulsive: “[...] Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck. [...] His belly is big too, now, and his toe-nails look like mule foots” (p.42), Janie is also dissatisfied with the role she has to conform to: that of a submissive housewife. The female stereotype Janie has been pushed into does not correspond to her dream of a love-relationship: “Ah wants things sweet wid ma marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (p.43).

Paradoxically, now that Janie is married she feels even lonelier than before.

Without a doubt, the older farmer is capable of providing Janie with the materialistic wealth that Nanny demands, owning a potato farm and a comfortable house, but he certainly lacks the emotional wealth that Janie is yearning for:

“He don’t even never mention nothin’ pretty” (p.42).

Logan Killicks is a hard-working man who seeks fulfillment within his farm-routines, a man who cannot see any further than his potato-field.

Keeping the water buckets full, chopping woods for the cook stove as well as giving Janie a gentle mule so she can help plow are acts of love for him. Killicks seems to replace things for feelings. Their marriage cannot be described as one between equal individuals in any way.

One reason for this might be the age difference. While Janie is very young, immature and still in the middle of her search for identity, Killicks is an experienced man who had already been married before.

It is difficult to find out the reasons for his cruel behavior within his past due to the fact that there is hardly any information given in the novel except for one remark of Nanny: "Some folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of them" (p.42).

It is possible that Killicks has been suffering from a lack of security and love all his life and therefore hasn't been able to develop the capability to return any emotions. It could also be that the fear of another loss makes him refuse to put his heart into his new relationship. Instead, he is putting all of his time and strength into the work on the farm.

In my opinion, Logan Killicks is a disillusioned, bitter man who is protecting himself by treating his wife without respect. One could even have the impression that he envies his young bride for her youth and her dreams. He insists that Janie is a spoiled girl who needs a strict hand. Claiming the position of authority, he orders her around even more strictly and tries to make a better worker out of her, someone who not only has to run the household, but who is also forced to do hard menial labor on his farm.

Ironically, Janie lives the life Nanny worked so hard to avoid for her. Although she is economically secure now, the picture of the 'mule' perfectly describes Janie's situation. After her conversation with Nanny, Janie knows that she cannot expect consolation from her grandmother who - just like Killicks - does not understand the source of Janie's unhappiness. Nanny thinks of love as "de very prong all us black women gits hung on" (p.41). To the old woman, love is an abstract idea that causes the vulnerability that she is so afraid of, which makes her again very similar to Logan Killicks.

Janie reconsiders her role as a wife and finally has to face harsh reality:

"She knew now that marriage didn't make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (p.44).

The process of 'becoming a woman' is an important step in Janie's quest for self-fulfillment. Janie becomes aware of the fact that taking over other people's opinions had suppressed her own feelings. This realization is only possible through her own personal experience. Janie becomes wiser due to this disappointing experience. It is the first time that Janie is really evaluating her situation and reaches the point where she rejects Nanny's philosophy of life.

In this respect, Janie's first husband serves as an initial impulse in the process of finding herself a place in this world, of becoming an autonomous, independent human being.

But this is only the beginning of her personal development. There is still a long way to go for the young woman.

One of the last arguments of the couple that should have given Logan the opportunity to convince Janie to stay instead of moving away with Jody Starks, reveals even more clearly what Logan Killicks really thinks of his wife. Janie is very honest with him and lets him know what she feels about their marriage, while Logan only replies with bitter attacks upon her and her family. His defensive reaction is certainly a proof for his own fear of losing Janie. Instead of confronting this fear, however, he can only be offending, yet aggressive:

Ah'll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh! You better dry up in dere!  
Ah'm too honest and hard-workin' for anybody in yo' family, dat's de reason you  
don't want me! (p. 53)

This reaction shows Janie once more that Logan is neither willing nor able to admit his mistakes. He is just as stubborn as Nanny is before she dies. Eventually Janie is convinced that “even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good.” (p.54)

### **III ‘Big Voice’ Jody Starks**

If Jody Starks has one outstanding trait, it is confidence. From the moment he meets Janie until his death nearly twenty years later, he never doubts his ability to achieve his aims – at the expense of others. He literally forces the people surrounding him to believe in his dreams, to accept his management and to give him loyalty. Without a doubt, Jody Starks is successfully building and eventually running a whole town almost on his own, being self-elected mayor, landowner, businessman and postmaster at the same time. He is keeping himself busy with his position as a “big voice” (e.g. p.48), which is at first appreciated by the citizens of Eatonville, but soon mixes with criticism:

[...], you know dat all he do is big-belly round and tell other folks what tuh do. He loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice. [...] He's uh whirlwind among breezes, [...]. Speakin' of winds, he's de wind and we'se de grass. We bend which ever way he blows. (p.78)

Their resentment is natural, but there is an additional hostility because Jody is a black man who acts in a way they have only associated with white people.

Jody is just as deeply influenced by the experience of “workin’ for white folks all his life” (p. 47) as Janie’s grandmother was. Being aware that “de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves “ (p. 48), he is absolutely determined to claim the position of the white man on top of the social ladder, which is not only shown in his behavior towards others, but also in the acquisition of a slave-owner’s mansion: The rest of the town looked like servant’s quarters surrounding the “big house”. [...] And look at the way he painted it – a gloaty, sparkly white. (p.75)

Jody’s plan to be a leader is not limited to the townspeople, his view of an ideal relationship between a man and a woman is similarly imported.

The imposing man is unwilling to share the glory with anyone, least of all his own wife. By living up his vision of “change and chance” (p.50) on his own, he betrays Janie in her hopes. Although Janie knew from the beginning that she will hardly be able to develop deep feelings for this man, she had hoped that Jody’s dream would be modified to include her: “[...] he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon” (p.50).

The fact that Janie first hesitates to follow Starks because she still feels an obligation to both Logan Killicks and her grandmother makes her situation even worse: Having at least reconsidered her decision is not being rewarded, she once again has to realize that marriage is not going the way she had dreamed.

Like Logan Killicks made a ‘mule’ out of her, Janie is now additionally enduring what Nanny feared despite having attained the economic circumstances she desired: being a spit-cup for Jody Starks. This is very sarcastically exemplified in the “little lady-size spitting pot” (p.76) he gives her.

Although Jody places his wife above the other women, he decidedly places her beneath him. This can be seen rather as a modification than an abolition of Nanny’s hierarchy and is simply covering the degradation Janie experiences. Jody -like Logan- claims an authoritarian status. He defines the role she is supposed to play, and it is one of subservience.

In order to show off his control he does not allow Janie to partake in the social life of Eatonville, stipulates what she is supposed to wear and how she has to treat her hair, and finds it easy to belittle her in front of others because of her ineptness of doing calculations in the store.

Even the porch-sitters are viewing this development with concern: “Ah often wonder how dat lil wife uh hisn makes out wid him, ‘cause he’s uh man dat changes everything, but nothin’ don’t change him” (p.79).

Janie seems more like a handsome accessory to the glory that surrounds Jody Starks rather than an equal human being. To him, Janie is more of a possession, and her purpose is to support him as he performs his duties.

What make Jody different from Logan Killicks are his attempts to control Janie not only with mental but also with physical abuse. He probably does not even hit her because he wants to hurt her, but because he feels it is necessary to maintain his aura of power. He feels guilty, but would only be able to apologize “on his own terms” (p. 113), that is, without a loss of face. All Janie can do is summon the courage to put a good face and endure it, while Jody avoids her and goes through the motions of being friendly to the ‘customer’ Mrs. Tony , perhaps because he cannot be kind to Janie.

Due to Jody’s understanding of the social atmosphere, he cannot maintain an even relationship with Janie because that could be seen as a sign of weakness in the town.

This scene of physical violence makes Janie realize that Jody was never the right man for her:

Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until Something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. 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. Just something she grabbed up to drape her dreams over (p.112).

It was something different that Janie had wanted from Logan, but it is certainly not Jody himself. Jody can free her from her first marriage, but he as well cannot satisfy her simple need: to love and be loved. The inner Janie is, once again, far from being satisfied.

Nevertheless, Janie feels obligated to stay with Jody until the very end end. The long years of the empty, loveless marriage go on. Janie develops an outward appearance of compliance, but

inwardly she is saving her emotions. It takes almost seventeen years until Janie finally dares to speak up for herself, when Jody steps over the line and comments on her age in a plain cruel way:

[Starks] Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is.  
[Janie] Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon I looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. (p.123)

This retaliation of Janie marks the beginning of her emancipation. Janie unexpectedly strikes back and with a few sentences, she "had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible" (p.123).

Jody has to see for the first time in his life that he is a source of amusement. His illusions of masculinity and power are immediately destroyed when Janie breaks out of Nanny's hierarchy, finally rebelling against his constant insults that effected her self-esteem over the years.

The townspeople, perhaps still slightly resentful of Jody's position, don't hesitate to rub it in: "When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned him" (p.42).

Jody learns that his position of power is directly connected to his wealth, which is a tremendous blow to his ego. Jody's reaction to this revelation is not unexpected. He cannot do anything except lash out now that his self-perception has been shattered.

Jody Stark's severe illness and his death in the end suggest, that, after the loss of his status, he no longer has a basis to live on. One could argue that Janie kills Jody rhetorically.

Jody deliberately ignores Janie in order to prove his superiority, but his true weakness is obvious. The image of his white models of manhood finally crumbles. By claiming that he does not need to see the doctor even as he becomes sicker and sicker, he surrounds himself in denial. The belief that he can cheat death is the height of his ego, and, ironically, the cause of his death.

So the townspeople were right that 'nothin' don't change him'. Janie looks at Jody's death with a mixture of sorrow and relief. She regrets the waste and the unhappiness of unmet expectations. His departure is sad, but with his death comes a new beginning symbolized in

the scene where Janie removes the hair rag that Jody had forced her to wear: “She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. “ (p. 135)

#### **IV Verigible ‘Tea Cake’ Woods** *love in the muck*

The twelve years younger gambler marks the turning point in Janie Crawford’s live, he finally might correspond to her idea of an innocent love described in the pear tree-metaphor:

He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (p.161)

Having buried her thoughts about flowers and trees during her marriages with Logan and Jody, Janie gradually begins to reuse her favorite symbols when Tea Cake comes into her life. Nevertheless there still is uncertainty about the sincerity of the young men appearing from nowhere and seeing to have no visible sign of support. Janie is not sure what to expect. She starts to feel something that she hasn’t felt for years. These rekindled emotions, however, come into conflict with her habitual surroundings. She has lived in an area where her identity has been established for years. Her romance with Tea Cake contradicts this identity, and as a result, causes Janie to second-guess what she is doing. Janie’s doubt is caused by many different things. The most prominent one is her self-doubt brought by the fact that she is several years older than he is and exacerbated by the mentality of the town. There are stereotypes of relationships ingrained into the town; a younger men with an older, richer woman is a type of relationship very unusual and becomes immediate fodder for the gossip hounds. The townspeople assume that the poorer one instigated the relationship in order to get money. Even though Janie might not believe it herself, she does have some subconscious doubts from these stereotypes.

Another important doubt of Janie that makes her a bit hesitant is the fact that experience had made her wary of men. The pleasure she had from being alone after Jody’s death doesn’t compare to the pleasure she has with Tea Cake, but with this pleasure comes a sizable risk of being made a fool.

After being told by Jody for twenty years that she is old and does not know anything, Janie does not have the confidence to run off and leave everything she did with Jody.

She wants to be convinced with tangible proof, rather than her feelings. After having to live through one failed dream, she does not want to experience failure again.

Tea Cake has to provide evidence that he is different from Janie's previous men. And that is what he does. He treats Janie like a special person – not because she still carries with her that aura of class, but because some masculine instinct tells him that if he wants her, he will have to woo her.

Tea Cake leads Janie to discover things about herself she never knew about in her years with Joe, Logan, or Nanny like playing checkers, teaching her how to handle guns, and taking her to picnics, much to the consternation of the porch sitters, who resent his intrusion in Janie's mourning period.

Tea Cake is the first man in Janie's life who is honestly interested in Janie as an equal person, as a woman with sexual desires and needs. This is what makes the young man a lot more mature compared to the people that once dominated Janie's life.

Unlike Starks, Tea Cake encourages Janie to express her opinions: "Have de nerve tuh say whut you mean" (p.165), which shows how far away Tea Cake is from making a 'spit-cup' out of Janie. His belief in the legitimacy of black women's self-expression makes him deliberately reject all kinds of oppressive hierarchy. He wants Janie to give up her passive role that made her hide her true feelings. Reciprocity might be the term that could describe their relation most adequately. Their relationship is based on giving *and* taking.

Tea Cake is also very self-confident and ambitious when it comes to achieve his aims, just like Jody Starks was, but he would never try to take advantage of Janie in order to get what he wants. In every respect, Tea Cake is a powerful antithesis of Jody Starks. May it be his nickname 'Tea Cake' which implies a "sweeter" kind of masculinity or his surname that can be easily associated with naturalness compared to the barrenness of Jody's character.

Tea Cake is able to frankly show his feelings for Janie – an ability Janie never found in Jody.

Tea Cake serves as the person who elevates Janie onto the final stage of her personal development. After years of callousness, Janie finally can live her dream: that of an equal, active relationship with a sensitive man.

However, the couple does not live in a vacuum, i.e. the lovers are exposed to their social environment. There are several situations that put their relationship to a test. They have to face the gossiping among the citizens of Eatonville before they can move to the Everglades where they are really accepted, Janie almost loses her faith in Tea Cake when he takes his money without her permission and they are also exposed to jealousy.

But these problems pose no threat to the balance of their relationship. The honest expression among equals prevents that external tribulations will do any damage – as long as both characters within the relationship remain full of respect for each other.

This unspoken agreement is betrayed when Tea Cake gradually takes over the characteristics he had first condemned. After the flood when Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog, his thoughts are very similar to the words of Jody Starks or Logan Killicks:

He was not accusing Janie of malice and design. He was accusing her of carelessness. She ought to realize that water buckets needed washing like everything else. He'd tell her about it good and proper when she got back. What was she thinking about nohow? He found himself very angry about it. (p. 260)

Just as Tea Cake suffers a physical infection by the dog, he all of a sudden is 'infected' with the same way of thinking that has degraded Janie all her life.

This is the reason why Janie has to kill Tea Cake when the situation cannot get any worse. It is not an act of anger and resentment like it was when she indirectly killed Jody, she does it because she truly loves Tea Cake. She wants to defend both her and himself from the hateful and evil characters that she has suffered from, and in doing so, must sacrifice the first man who succeeded in making her happy.

## V Conclusion

She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in this message! She called in her soul to come and see. (p. 286)

These last thoughts of Janie are very well describing the inner peace that Janie finally achieves.

There have been a lot of different argumentations whether Janie emerges from the Muck as an independent female, or -at the other extreme- as a devoted wife who adores a husband who beats and finally tried to kill her.

In my opinion, the protagonist has evolved into a complete woman who is now able to control her life as she had wanted. With this control, her horizon is no longer a far away place like Starks had described it. She wears her horizon “draped over her shoulders”. This self-fulfillment is rare to come by; it requires living by one’s own moral code. Learning how to live this way was the most difficult lesson she had to learn.

The three husbands stand for different experiences that someone makes in life, good ones as well as bad ones. Killicks, Starks and Tea Cake are men of different characters behaving in different ways, but they have one thing in common: they allow a constant inner growth of Janie’s character despite the fact that her true liberation takes a long time.

They - unconsciously - teach her to create her own conscious life from the interpretations of her experiences. Aware of this, Janie is able to pass her wisdom on to others:

You got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there.[...]  
Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go to God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves (p.285).