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EN 288: American South Section

Search for Spirituality

Literature of the American south involves many different aspects of history whether it is The Civil War, Great Migration, The Depression or The Civil Rights movement. Within all the historical contexts of the south lies a more personal and spiritual representation of the people who lived in this time and place. It is through literature and stories that we find the true culture, religion and experience of the American South. Flannery O'Connor states of the American South saying, "I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." Religion and spirituality is represented through Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* as well as in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Artificial Nigger". We can see how the south is "Christ-haunted" as O'Connor says in both of these two author's works. It is clear how the characters in each work either struggle with their relationship with God, or find it hard to define. *Through Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "A Good Man is Hard to Find", and "The Artificial Nigger", Spirituality and Religion is represented in different ways in order to comment on different aspects of the American south when it comes to God.

In "Their Eyes Were Watching God", Janie searches for her self and God through her three marriages while going through different spiritual stages in each. Throughout her search, the images of the pear tree and the horizon are referred to which symbolize her growth and unknown future. In the novel, Hurston uses the characters as different spiritual roles such as God-figures, creators, judges and watchers. Within each community that Janie belongs to through her journey of self-fulfillment, there is a common understanding that that journey is strongly connected to their specific idea of God. (Chinn 79). Her search for self and self-fulfillment is a life long progression just as religion and spirituality is for people. It is through Janie's three marriages that this "movement" occurs and she fully understands the kind of man she wants in her life who

fulfills exactly the self she desires to be. It is through the progression of life and experiences Janie goes through, together with the influences of those around her, that she reaches a spiritual understanding of her self as well. God is represented through themes of Creator in her first marriage, Judge and Master in her second and her final epiphany in the third. Through these different spiritual stages, Janie realizes herself, God and love.

When reading “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, it may seem as if Hurston’s representation of God is off being that God and religion is not directly addressed. Taking a closer look at the text though, it is clear that God is present throughout and the novel actually “reveal(s) Janie’s movement from received ideas to individualism not only in her view of self but also of God”(Chinn 77). These “received ideas” come from when Janie was a teenager. Janie’s Grandmother is responsible for falsely telling her how things are in life when it comes to relationships and life as a woman. It was at the age of sixteen that Janie realized that love does not come with marriage and she realizes this in her first marriage to Logan Killicks. This marriage is where the “creator God” is represented because Janie is at the beginning of her journey. This realization occurs while sitting under the pear tree, which is significant because it is a natural symbol representing life and creation as well as womanhood because of its uterus-like shape. This is where it is stated “Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman”(Hurston 44). This new womanhood is the new creation Janie goes through. Her connection to nature and respect for God’s creation is what helps her move past this first marriage. (Chinn 79).

In Janie’s second marriage to Joe Starks, she recognizes the God-image as master, which she disagrees with. She is aware of the fact that Joe does not fulfill the “promise of the pear tree” but knows that he is going places literally and figuratively so she jumps into marriage with

him. (Chinn 79). When they arrive in Eatonville, Joe becomes mayor and has a prominent position in the community. This power is where the representation of God as master comes in because Joe aspires to have power over others like God. In the scene where Joe brings the first street lamp into the town, he makes it religious ceremony. Previous to the lighting, Joe regarded God as “De Sun-maker [who] brings it up in de mornin’ and... sends it tuh bed at night”(Hurston 72-73). He desires to make light after God puts the sun down therefore wanting to be a God-like figure himself. When he lights the lamp he says, “And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp-wick let de light penetrate inside yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine”(Hurston 73). Here he is speaking of light in a religious way. Another way he acts as “master” is by keeping Janie voiceless. At this stage in her search, Janie is unable to accurately articulate the kind of relationship she desires. When she attempts to speak up, Janie is thrown back by her husband and he makes comments like, “wife don’t know nothin’ bout no speech makin’”(Hurston). In Eatonville, Janie is judged not only by her husband but also by other women and men in the community. She cannot seem to find where she belongs in this community being unable to fully use her voice to state her opinions. Janie does not fit into the traditional view of women so she is stuck in this middle ground between man and woman called the “unnamed woman”(Chinn 78). Janie, in this second stage of her spiritual search, realizes she needs to be independent in order to gain her voice and see the horizon that Joe is blocking.

Janie reaches her final spiritual stage in her marriage to Tea Cake. Finally able to use her voice, Janie has a free marriage with her third husband. When Janie finally has a voice, she is able to vocalize what is in her soul. Tea Cake represents a God-like figure as well but he really relates more to Christ. (Chinn 85). Janie is in her final stage of development and Tea Cake acts as a teacher in her life amongst other things. She now sees

the horizon in this marriage and can fully release what is in her soul. There is a religious reference when Tea Cake finally tells Janie about his feelings for her and she is “lit up like a transfiguration”(Hurstons 159). It is also important to recognize the fact that not only does Janie see divinity in Tea Cake but he sees divinity in her. He says to her, “Ah hope God may kill me if Ah’m lyin’. Nobody else on earth can hold uh candle tuh you baby. You got de keys to de kingdom”(Hurstons 181). This is significant because now that Janie is able to express what is in her soul, her own spirituality and divinity is apparent.

Flannery O’Connor’s quote about the American South being Christ-haunted is clear through Janie’s life long struggle to find her self and her spirituality. This struggle with religion and spirituality is also clear in O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man is Hard To Find”. O’Connor uses shocking violence and vain characters in a comic way in order to express a spiritual message. O’Connor believes that it is in the grotesque that the sublime may appear. (Weber). Those who are blind to spirituality need the violent images so they can see what is going on. Like O’Connor says, “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures”(Weber). This story reflects a fallen world with the family presented. The vain and manipulative grandmother, unhealthy relationship of husband and wife and unruly children are faced with a group of violent murderers led by the “Misfit”. The lack of religion and spirituality in the characters makes it difficult to see what O’Connor is trying to do, but we are supposed to look closely for the grace in the story. This grace is found in the Grandmother at the end when she reaches out to the Misfit even after he family has been killed and he kills her right there on the spot. We can see the divine appear briefly in this scene when she puts her vanity behind her and opens herself up to the grace of God.

Spirituality is also evident in O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger". This is a story about a prideful old man, Mr. Head who refused to acknowledge his grandson Nelson in a cruel way. Throughout the story, Mr. Head continuously proves that he is a judgmental, rude and prideful man. When Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson go into Atlanta, he prefaces the trip by warning his grandson about black people hoping that Nelson becomes scared and intimidated. Mr. Head's goal throughout is to scare his grandson about Atlanta and he does so by deserting Nelson at the streetcar tracks. When Nelson starts running in fear that he was lost and bumps into a woman, Mr. Head denies knowing Nelson and refuses to help him out of the tricky situation. Mr. Head's racism and betrayal throughout the story shows his lack of grace. When Nelson forgives his grandfather, Mr. Head has his spiritual realization on the train back home. "He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it." (O'Connor 129).

Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor use their works to express religious and spiritual concerns they have which reflect the time and place they are living and writing in. The American South is very complex when it comes to matters of race, gender and religion. In all three works, the characters Janie, the grandmother and Mr. Head all achieve grace and self-realization. It is a struggle to reach this spiritual revelation and takes many mistakes and time. This is a lesson that we do not automatically receive spiritual understanding, self- fulfillment and grace without the experience of life and a struggle with faith. Janie's three marriages allow her to find her voice, which allows her horizon to become visible. She is finally able to go back to her image of the pear tree when she fully recognizes herself as a spiritual, growing woman. Similarly, O'Connor's characters are able

to reach their own self-fulfillment after living lives of disgrace. It is evident in all of the stories that the south is most definitely Christ-haunted because the road to grace is never an easy one. It is something people struggle with throughout their lives, but once it is reached, their horizons can fully be open to the spiritual and saving life that God provides.

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