



Lesson

Their Eyes Were Watching God

A novel by Zora Neale Hurston



Family Violence Prevention Fund

Lesson: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Overview

In the following unit, students will explore themes of power, control, abuse and respect in relationships and how these impact identity and self-growth of individuals and society in the book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The terms “power” and “control” refer to how power in an intimate or peer relationship can be used, either positively or negatively, to control or influence another person.

This lesson incorporates media literacy to help students discover and analyze the impact various media have on our values and thinking. It also incorporates observation research to help students connect what they read in literature and absorb from media with their daily lives.

Learning Objectives

- Identify and describe power and control dynamics between characters and relate these to Hurston’s use of imagery.
- Analyze the cyclical structure of Hurston’s plot and the novel’s character development to identify incidents of relationship abuse in the literature.
- Explain the impact of abuse and violence on individuals and society.
- Identify personal boundaries for the novel’s protagonist and for students’ own lives.
- Recognize the implications of media images and relate these implications to power, control and relationships.
- Create a media product or campaign to address the influence of media on societal views of men and women.

Instructional Sequence

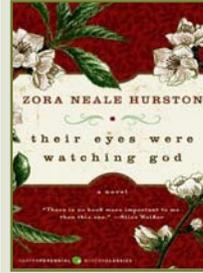
Outlined below you’ll find the *Lessons from Literature* recommended instructional sequence for teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This lesson was designed to be taught as-is or integrated into your existing lesson plan for this book. We recommend you tailor this sequence to your own teaching style and your students’ abilities and interests.

Part I: This section kicks off the lesson with an activity to familiarize students with the themes of power, control, abuse and respect.

Part II: This section deepens students’ understanding of power, control, abuse and respect after they’ve had the opportunity to explore these themes in Part I.

Part III: This section has culminating activities and assessment opportunities that you can select from to complete this literature unit. At this point in the lesson, it is assumed that students have engaged in most or all of the Discussions, along with any other activities you’ve taught along the way.

Approximate Time: 3 Weeks (daily 55-minute sessions)



Their Eyes Were Watching God
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Materials

Their Eyes Were Watching God – one copy of the novel per student recommended

Teacher Preparation

Photocopy [Handouts](#) (see page 31) – one per student

Terms

Power, control, abuse, violence, consequences, principles of respectful behavior (See online section [Getting Ready to Teach](#) for term definitions.)

English Language Standards

- Reading comprehension/Critical thinking/Analysis
- Writing expression
- Language/literary techniques, terms
- Research skills
- Cultural understanding
- Active (civic) participation

Print or download the full NCTE Education Standards Chart at www.lessonsfromliterature.org.

Discussions: Designed to be integrated throughout Parts II and III of the lesson, this section offers discussion topics and activities that address themes of power, control, abuse and respect, as students make their way through the reading. These Discussions provide students with multiple opportunities to articulate their ideas, engage in dialogue with their peers, and reflect on how these ideas relate to the text and the real world.

Part I | Understanding Power and Control and Their Impact

1 Introduction: To activate students' prior knowledge of power and control, have students come up with a list of people who they believe have power. Discuss ways those people can use their power positively and/or negatively. Then, ask students to make two lists: one of people whom they think have used their power for *good*, and one for those who have *abused* their power. Have students make brief notes describing the examples of power. Explain that some people will appear in both categories because, while specific behavior can be good or bad, people rarely fit into just one category. Some examples of powerful figures include: the school principal, the president, police officers, parents, teachers, and students. Discuss the types of power these people have and ways they can use this power, both positively and negatively.

2 Discuss: Introduce and distribute the [Power and Control Wheel/PCW](#) (see page 32) to students. Allow them time to read and ask questions or comment. Ask students to reassess their power and control lists from Step 1. Does the PCW change any of their markings? Then discuss what students learned. What had they not considered before about power and control?

3 Homework: Have students collect imagery of males, females and relationships in society today (magazines, television commercials, television programs). You may choose to have students do this from one or a number of sources, which determines the time you will spend on this activity.

TEACHING Tip

TV commercials/program clips should be no longer than three minutes.

4 In class: Introduce the short autobiographical piece, *Girl*, by Jamaica Kincaid. Have students annotate the text as they read and listen. Then have students free-write, considering the messages they have received during childhood about being a girl or a boy.

TEACHING Tip

You can find Jamaica Kincaid's piece, Girl, online at: Bedford St. Martin'sVirtualLit Interactive Fiction Tutorial (<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/fiction/>)

5 In groups: Introduce the concept of society's influence on shaping our beliefs through the use of media. Divide the class into groups and assign each group one type of image or media. First, have students use the [think aloud](#) strategy (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) while examining the image/media.

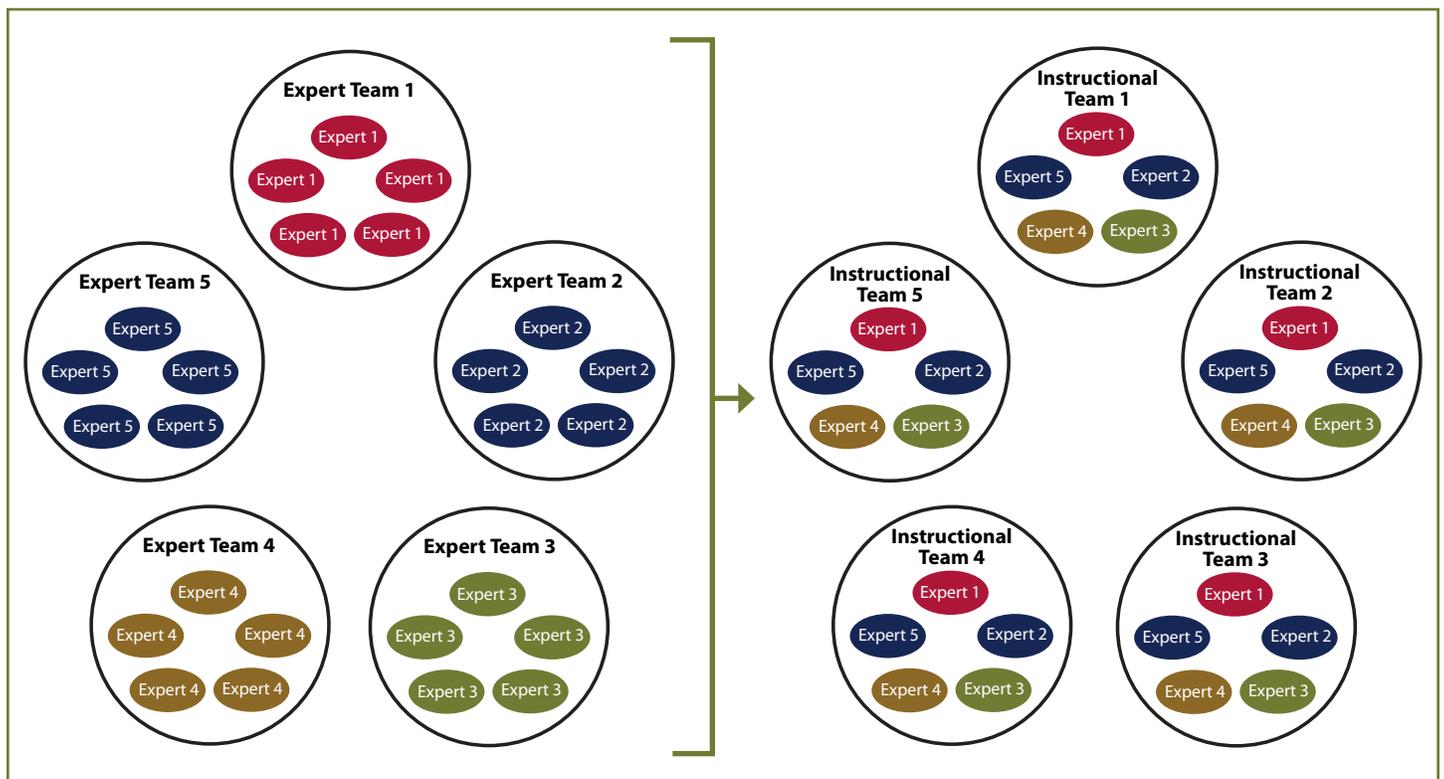
6 Examine: Ask groups to use the two *Guiding Questions for Media Images* handouts (see page 31) to carefully examine the messages regarding status and behavior expected of respective genders. Have them explore the implications that are communicated visually (photos) and verbally (TV/Internet). They may create [dual-entry journals](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) for their work.

7 Wrap-up: After students have finished, share the guiding discussion questions below. As students work, refer them to the PCW. Help students connect where the images might lead to issues of the misuse of power and control and have them explain their reasons.

- How do these images and other advertisements send simplified messages or stereotypes about the roles of men and women and how they should interact?
- What are some of the consequences of these messages about relationships between people?
Students may write a response to the images they have examined and what they have noticed/learned.

Part II | Deepening Our Understanding of Power and Control through Literature

- Examining the Cycle of Abuse:** Have students divide the book into four sections: Janie's life with Nanny, with Logan, with Joe Starks, and with Tea Cake. Have students work in groups using the [Plot Diagram](#) handout on page 38 to create a plot diagram for one of the four sections. Then, in a class discussion, have students share plot cycles and examine the abuse cycles in the text. Introduce and distribute the [Respect Wheel/RW](#) (see page 33). Help students make connections using the PCW and RW.
 - Examining Relationships through Imagery:** Like the media, Hurston paints images throughout her novel. As a romantic writer, she uses a great deal of nature. Help students connect the nature imagery to the PCW and RW.
- How does Hurston use nature to reflect the state of relationships throughout the novel? Have students choose a section of the text and create a [dual-entry journal](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) to examine the evidence (quote and type of imagery: auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, thermal, visual) and its effect (what it shows about relationships).
- Wrap-up:** Have students jigsaw what they have learned in a class discussion and then create a [Venn diagram](#) (see example on page 26) to show where they see overlaps in attitudes/behavior of characters. The aspects can come from the PCW, RW, or the students.



Example Jigsaw Activity Set-up

Part III | Assessment and Culminating Activities

Assessment Opportunities

1 Learning to Make Choices

At the beginning of the novel, Nanny makes choices for Janie. Then, Janie begins to make choices for herself. Do her choices lead her to what she seeks? Write a persuasive letter. Use examples from the text and the PCW and RW to develop and support your answer.

2 Relationships and Social Norms: Then and Now

Each of Janie's relationships is complex, with both positive and negative aspects; she negotiates her way through each relationship, influenced by her family history and the societal norms and expectations of the time. In a letter to Janie, discuss what her search has taught you about defining your own personal boundaries of what is acceptable or not in relationships. Considering societal and media influences on expectations and roles of men and women, compare her struggles in defining personal boundaries and healthy relationships in the early 20th century to contemporary society. Use the PCW and RW, along with examples from the text and your own experience.

3 Express Yourself

Write a letter to one of Janie's husbands discussing his behavior toward Janie and the results of this behavior. Consider how the behavior affects the husband and Janie while referencing societal expectations and the historical context of the novel. Does their behavior help each of them achieve what they want for themselves and their relationship? Use examples from the text and the PCW and RW.

Culminating Activities

1 Observe and Reflect

Spend one to three days conducting observation research: How do boys and girls interact? Consider any power and control dynamics at play, both positive and negative. Then, analyze what you have learned in a written reflection, including evidence of behavior(s) observed, some thought on the motivations for those behavior(s), and an explanation(s) of the consequence(s) of those behavior(s). Conclude by considering the part each plays in using power and control and ways boys and girls can avoid abuse by creating personal boundaries and practicing the principles of respect.

TEACHING *Tip*

Observation research can be conducted in the school whereby students analyze the behavior of their peers. As an alternative, you can also choose to have students examine behavior they witness on TV, in a movie, or in another form of media.

2 Create an Ad

Using the themes we've discussed throughout this book, including power, control, abuse and respect, create an ad that addresses relationships, friendships or other peer dynamics within our school. Your ad can be a TV skit, radio script, billboard design or something similar. Use the media techniques explored in the media images activity, the *Guiding Questions for Media Images 1* and *2* handouts (see pages 34–35), the PCW and the RW as references.

TEACHING *Tips*

- *You may choose to assign this as an individual project or have students work in groups based on their interest in a particular type of media.*
- *You may use the Media Literacy Rubrics (see pages 36-37) or design a similar rubric.*

Discussions | Weaving Power and Control into the Central Literature Theme

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a story of growing up and finding one's identity. Janie, the protagonist, attempts to find love, navigating through a series of relationships that result in varying levels of freedom, alienation and abuse.

Essential Questions

The following *essential questions* can help guide class discussion throughout the reading of the text:

- What is acceptable behavior in a healthy relationship?
- How do our families affect our behavior and our relationships?
- What does society expect of men and women in their relationships?
- How do these expectations impact society?
- How do the choices we make affect our lives and our relationships?



Facilitating Safe and Respectful Class Discussion

Your students may not be familiar with discussing topics of relationship abuse and violence. If your students need a break from a difficult topic, you can reintroduce an essential question to guide the discussion toward more philosophical and general concepts. You can also assign [dual-entry journals](#) (see Strategies for Supporting Student Learning on page 8) or written reflections for students to explore their opinions and feelings beyond the discussion.

Be aware of the mandatory reporting requirements that apply to you as a teacher, and be prepared to refer a student to the school counselor, a local resource or emergency services, if needed. See [Responding to Relationship Abuse](#) on page 39.

Chapter 1

Power and Control and Societal Views on Gender

Examine the initial introduction to characters. Provide students with the first two pages of text (first eight paragraphs ending with "...level some day."). Have students [annotate the text](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) as they [think aloud](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8), considering the following questions:

- What views of men (paragraph 1 and 8) and women (paragraphs 2 and 3) are presented?
- What do these paragraphs tell the reader about the author's feelings (tone) toward each character or group?
- Why are the Sitters so negative?
- What predictions can you make about this text based on the different views of characters: Janie versus the Sitters?

Wrap-up: Have students choose one of the following questions and write a reflection/response, providing evidence from both the media images and the text. They may choose to write a comparative response.

- How does the porch sitters' conversation reflect the expectations and roles of men and women during the early 20th century? How do you see the media images you have examined connecting to this text and Hurston's ideas?
Student answers may include: Hurston contradicts common media images by presenting men as passive and women as active. Women seem to live in dreams; women are competent and can do everything. The woman seems to be in a less powerful role, defeated by outside forces; the image of death is the opposite of media portrayal of people as always pretty, happy, and alive. Women are plagued by gossip; the group looks down on the woman — they are the "in" crowd. Women are objectified and put on a pedestal.
- What might Hurston be trying to show the reader regarding power and control dynamics here? *Student answers may include: Hurston makes women more active/powerful than men, challenging societal norms. Hurston makes the group of people powerful over the individual woman; they are judges, but they are also controlled by the "bossman" and don't always have power or influence.*

TEACHING Tip

Hurston's use of dialect often challenges students' reading and comprehension of the text. To help them overcome this challenge, here are two ways to incorporate the Strategies for Supporting Student Learning, described on page 8: For the rest of the chapter, have students keep a [metacognitive log](#) to track their understanding of the text. In class, allow students to discuss their questions and sort out parts that are unclear to them by [thinking aloud](#).

*Chapter 2***Power and Control, Identity and Societal Views on Race and Gender**

Create a family tree for Janie. Examine how power, control, abuse, and violence affected Janie's life and the lives of her ancestors. Issues of race and gender both surface. Direct students to the PCW and have them make connections, providing examples of behavior and explaining the connections to the PCW. Create a [dual-entry journal](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) for the relationship between Janie and Nanny. The left side will be evidence from the text; the right side will be interpretation of text/connections to the media images students examined, the PCW, and the RW.

- How do Nanny's assessment and choices rely on the societal beliefs that surround her regarding the roles of men and women and their ethnicity? Consider her history and experiences.
- How does Nanny use power to control? [Direct students to the PCW and have them make connections.]
- Look at the *Respect Wheel*. Which of these are missing in the relationship between Nanny and Janie?

Wrap-up: Have students write a reflection predicting the consequences of Nanny's beliefs and choices and how they will affect Janie's life throughout the rest of the text.

*Chapters 3-9***Power and Control and Societal Views on Love Relationships**

As students read, have them create [dual-entry journals](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) to process the text. As discussions about power and control continue, direct students back to the central themes in the novel: family, roles of men and women, love, and relationships. Students may use the PCW and RW to frame discussions/reflections. To facilitate discussion, you may ask:

- How do Logan's views of women and white people shape the way he treats Janie? How do these views affect Janie and Logan's marriage?
- How does Joe's view of men's and women's roles affect his behavior toward Janie? Does Joe see anything wrong with his constant finding of fault with Janie? Are Joe's controlling actions a display of real love? Does Janie believe Joe's actions are a display of love? Why or why not?
- How do the Sitters reinforce societal norms about power and control? Why do you think they do this? [The Sitters seem to sanction power, control, and abuse to some extent. Help students link this back to the Sitters' experiences at the beginning of chapter 1.]

Wrap-up: Have students write a reflection comparing Logan's and Joe's treatment of Janie. Students should consider how the men's treatment of Janie connects to today's media images of women.

*Chapters 9-20***Power and Control and Societal Views on Gender**

As students read, have them create [dual-entry journals](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) to process the text. Continue to direct students back to the novel's central themes of family, roles of men and women, love and relationships.

- How does Virgible Woods (a.k.a. Tea Cake) differ from society in his views of men and women? [Help students connect Tea Cake and Janie's relationship to the RW.]
- How does he fall prey to societal views both of gender and of ethnicity?

Wrap-up: Have students write a reflection on Tea Cake's treatment of Janie. Do they see connections between his behavior and today's media images of women?

*Bird's-eye View***Power and Control, Identity and Love**

Mrs. Turner's appearance in chapters 16 and 17 raises the same issues that Janie's family tree does. Have students read these chapters [thinking aloud](#) and [annotating](#) (see *Strategies for Supporting Student Learning* on page 8) their thoughts. You may guide students to connect Mrs. Turner's views and Tea Cake's actions to the PCW with guiding questions:

- What happens when Tea Cake physically abuses Janie? Why does he use violence? How would Tea Cake explain this abuse? What does Janie think of his violent actions?
- What is the community's perception of Tea Cake and Janie's relationship after the physical abuse? How do expected roles within relationships and definitions of love contribute to this perception?
- Help students connect these characters' views and actions to Janie's family history.

