
Overcoming Inherited Trauma in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

"Traumatic events challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe and predictable place. Traumas that are caused by human behavior... commonly have more psychological impact than those caused by nature" APA Dictionary of Psychology The protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a woman who has inherited generations of trauma inflicted upon the women of her family. The physical scars left their bodies but the psychological scars were passed along to the next generation. Janie (the protagonist) lives with the knowledge that she is a product of such violence. Her inability to cope with this traumatic inheritance by directing her anger at the physically absent figures of the grandfather and the father leads her to repress the anguish. Sigmund Freud argues in his essay "Pleasures beyond-Principles": that human beings tend to repeat their behavior patterns compulsively in an effort to come to terms with trauma or to get closure. This paper brings to light Janie as a classic example illustrating Freud's philosophy of compulsive repetition. Unable to overcome the trauma in her past Janie tries to get closure by unconsciously repeating the behavior of the grandmother and mother by marrying men who physically and psychologically abuse her. Retaliation does come, but only towards the end when she physically reacts. The Freudian principles tell us that this breaking of compulsive pattern doesn't necessarily mean that Janie is cured of her trauma. This paper therefore highlights the repressed feelings of anger and resentment, the frustration that is characteristic of the lives of African American women and the effort they put in to try and break free from this cycle of abuse.

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