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Their Eyes Need Better Books: *Romeo and Juliet* Has A Diverse
Replacement in the High School English Curriculum

by
Alexis Monnet

Let's face it, *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare is not the novel everyone talks about when they name their favorite romance. These days, it seems to be a cliché if anyone mentions it as a "teachable" romance novel and coming-of-age story. After reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neal Hurston, I immediately felt the urge to write it into my future teaching curriculum. Not only does the romance have a coming-of-age story, but it is also historically accurate. It contains a female protagonist with strong-natured characteristics, who overcomes adversities, cultural diversity, all from a feminist point of view. These aspects of the book are critical in the literature taught today. High school teachers should be throwing *Romeo and Juliet* away for its shallow romance, promotion of misogyny, and immaturity. A book like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more realistic and relatable than what Shakespeare wrote hundreds of years ago.

What literature English teachers choose to teach in high school is critical. Sometimes it reels students in or pushes them away. By reading a novel like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students are reading a novel containing a black female protagonist. Until recent years, typical English classroom books do not include our current diverse culture. What we need as a society is to slowly replace literature labeled as "the classics" or considered "the canon". Why? Because teenagers are groaning and moaning over reading literature they cannot understand or relate to. *Romeo and Juliet* is a prime example. In 2018, Kathy Ishizuka published an article named "Can Diverse Books Save Us? In a Divided World, Librarians Are on a Mission" on the School Library Journal stating a survey was conducted in April 2018 about child and young adult literature diversity. The results revealed eighty-one percent of the 1,156 people consider it "very important" to have a diverse book collection for kids and teens (Ishizuka). Since diverse books are in such high demand, teachers should consider tossing books such as *Romeo and Juliet* and replace them with books containing multiple perspectives. Diverse books such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contain underrepresented ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and a female protagonist. The mixture can reach more readers than *Romeo and Juliet*. The School Library Journal included a few types of diverse genres such as: underrepresented ethnicities, disabilities, cultural or religious backgrounds, gender nonconformity, or LGBTQIA+ orientations (Ishizuka). As previously stated, reaching multiple audiences and gaining new perspectives in young adult literature is vital for teenagers in school. Marianne Grasso writes in "The importance of multicultural literature", "multicultural literature serves as a powerful tool in enabling students to gain a better understanding of both their own culture and the cultures of others." She continues, "Through this

deeper knowledge, relationships can be strengthened, bridging the gap between students from diverse cultural backgrounds” (Grasso). Not only will students engage in a romance novel packed full of adventure and adversity, they will come to know the protagonist, Janie as a strong, female. This can allow for classroom discussions about culture and history, the engaging material will springboard conversations about race since the book is set in the time period of the 1930s. Grasso also writes “Stories portraying cultural diversity can foster the belief that race is not a barrier, but rather a contribution to the beauty of our multicultural world” (Grasso). Though race is one type of diversity, it is an important idea to foster in young adults that there is beauty in a multicultural world. Diverse books are a fantastic way of gaining the perspective of what another culture may look like, even in what love may have looked like in the 1930s for a black woman. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has a lot of similar themes to *Romeo and Juliet* but are vastly different in how they are portrayed.

Janie marries three men in the story, Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo finds Juliet attractive and swears that he will marry her. Juliet’s immature idea of love in act three scene two can be read in the lines of when she yearns for her wedding night “Come, gentle night, come, loving black-browed night/ Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die/ Take him and cut him out in little stars” (Shakespeare 3.2.) Juliet is yearning for sex with Romeo, not love, just lust. This is one example of why *Romeo and Juliet* is a terrible love story for impressionable teens. There is no depth in her thoughts about Romeo, she simply yearns to be wed to him so she can have sex with him. Meanwhile, Janie professes her love to Tea Cake repeatedly on such a deep level. When they first meet, Tea Cake establishes her as an equal. Janie thinks to herself, “Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points” (Hurston 96). Tea Cake is teaching Janie how to play checkers, the first of many leisure activities he teaches her. He’s treating her as if she is a best friend, they enjoy each other’s company. This can give young readers the idea of a healthy relationship. It is important to teach what a healthy relationship looks like, and Hurston can offer this in the classroom.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the “romance” is pure lust. Paul Kottman points out in “Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*” that the play, “...is the story of two individuals who actively claim their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way that they can—through one another. Their love affair demonstrates that their separateness or individuation is not an imposed, external necessity, but the operation of their freedom and self-realization. To show this, they will stake their lives” (Kottman 6). This article promotes the idea of individualization through *Romeo and Juliet*’s own battles for freedom through their pursuit of each other. The flaw in this idea is the portrayal to readers it is acceptable to find yourself through another person. Christina Torres, an educator who wrote “Why I’m Thinking About Reteaching Shakespeare in My English Classroom” states that “I feel guilty when I agree to another year of *Romeo and Juliet*. I still feel excited about diving into language I love with my students or helping them parse a difficult line. But at the very same time, I wonder if Shakespeare is actually good for my students to read” (Torres). She argues it still has some elements of language to teach in it, but there are more quality novel aspects that can be found in other novels written by Toni Morrison and Garcia Marquez. Why not use other novels to convey romance, tragedy, and death? There is far better literature out there for students to read in the classroom than *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are other novels and plays that could be used to convey a theme of freedom or self-realization. Yet, this one is chosen because it has been deemed over and over as a “must-read”.

Yes, once upon a time Shakespeare was an important influence in literature, but should his work still be chosen for a romantic tragedy? *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of many romance novels capable of teaching self-actualization, freedom, with tragic elements. Hawkes DeLisa writes in a journal in favor of Janie's self-actualization, "Janie's relationships prior to meeting Tea Cake place her on the road to self-realization before she even knows Tea Cake exists. Additionally, these relationships do not just include men. Each relationship and noteworthy event in Janie's life provides her with a new lesson learned about her 'self' and what she wants." (Hawkes 2). It's important to note *all* of Janie's relationships are lessons, eventually teaching her what she wants and helping her learn about herself. By the time she meets Tea Cake, she knows what she wants. The main tragedy in this novel is the hurricane that kills Tea Cake. Both stories contain tragedy and adversity, arguably, *Romeo and Juliet* shows far less tragedy than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While *Romeo and Juliet* have its infamous suicides, "I will be brief, for my short date of breath /Is not so long as is a tedious tale. /Romeo, there dead, was husband to that Juliet,/And she, there dead, that Romeo's faithful wife. /I married them, and their stol'n marriage day /Was Tybalt's doomsday, whose untimely death /Banished the new-made bridegroom from this city, /For whom, and not for Tybalt, Juliet pined. /You, to remove that siege of grief from her, /Betrothed and would have married her perforce /To County Paris" (Shakespeare 5.3, 238-248). Friar Lawrence has just explained the tragedy and is breaking the news he is the one who married them. He helped Juliet come up with the plan to play dead so Romeo and Juliet could run off together. Other minor characters die in this play, but of course the real tragedy is Romeo and Juliet's suicides. However, Janie had it far worse. Janie also had to submit to an arranged marriage at sixteen, became a widow twice, and after finding true love, loses her lover to a hurricane. This story has some deep adversities, but Janie is always able to see the bright side, Shakespeare neglects to have any authentic solutions to resolve the conflicts and adversities in *Romeo and Juliet*. Neither character shows personal growth or characterization, which is an important aspect to point out when exposing death to young readers.

Additionally, Janie's character overcomes each tragedy and adversity, unlike Romeo and Juliet who arguably have outdated troubles. Her first tragedy is not rooted in the pear tree, but is about her relationship with Nanny, "She often spoke to falling seeds and said, 'Ah hope you fall on soft ground,' because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed...Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 25). There is so much power in this quote. After her devastating grandmother's death, her first adversity she had to overcome, she chose to be a woman. This is not the last time she faces adversity, but it is the beginning of her character growth. Her juvenile ways dissipate, and she starts to grow up after this tragic event. After this, Janie chooses to be her own advocate for the rest of her story. After this quote, it is clear to the reader that she realizes getting married to Logan Killicks did not make her fall in love with him. It instead implies that being disappointed in love is a normal part of becoming a woman.

Yes, it is a romantic story, but it has moments of magic that allowed you to see glimpses of hope, such as Janie letting her hair down from the handkerchief. "The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (Hurston 87). This quote alone describes Janie as a person. She starts as someone who takes orders from her controlling husband, who makes her put up her long, silky hair that many had grown to love. After he dies, she starts to gain confidence for herself and take control of her own fate. Her best friend, Phoeby, even shows a bit of characterization. By the end of the story she is inspired by how Janie lives. She wants to be her own independent woman. On page 192, Phoeby talks about possibly making Sam, her love

interest, take her fishing. This is interesting because Phoeby is a timid character as Janie tells her story. But by the end, she's grown to even say that no one should criticize her actions, which is a major reflection of characterization for her.

Overall, this book allows readers to see feminism in a romantic magical light, something not often found in literature. Meanwhile, Juliet is almost throwing herself at Romeo, an aspect of the story that can be misinterpreted as helplessness, an outdated idea in the twenty-first century. Janie is a strong woman who knows what she wants with or without a man. Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, Janie never relies on a man for her freedom or growth, she understands how a man can be supportive of a strong-willed, independent woman such as herself. Throughout the story, Janie finds herself, while enduring troubling relationships. These qualities allow readers to look up to a female protagonist who is not written off as a woman who needs to be saved by a man, but rather as a woman who wants to be seen as an equal. Toward the end of Jody's life, Janie is constantly made fun of for being "old" and "no good", Janie becomes tired of it one day and embarrasses him in front of a group of men. "Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman either...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" (Hurston 79). Janie's feminism is prominent here because she recognizes Jody wants her to be nothing more than a trophy wife he can keep tucked away in a store. Janie is clearly a proud, strong woman, and shortly after this she's struck by Jody. She realizes Jody was unable to give her what she wanted all along, which was equality.

Readers can enjoy Janie develop her characterization and become a stronger woman who tolerates nothing by the end of the novel. One notable example is throughout the three relationships Janie has. Each relationship can be seen as a progression of her finding out who she truly is, which sticks to one of the novel's many themes of a coming-of-age story. One of these reflections comes shortly after her second husband dies when she had told herself years before as a young girl to wait for her in the looking glass (Hurston 87). She's able to see how much stronger she has become as the years passed, she also sees how much she has changed. Each romantic relationship can be interpreted as a lesson, for example, when she is speaking to Jody on his death bed, "Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died" (Hurston 86). This is one small turning point in the story when Janie realizes her independence and feministic ways would help her become the best woman in the looking glass she could be.

Her feminism becomes prominent early in her marriage to Jody when interrupting a conversation between men. Women were not to interrupt conversations. Janie's feminism and fearlessness shows in this quote when she says, "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'-self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens" (Hurston 75). She is fearless, authentic, independent, and determined to prove women have an equal place in this world.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is not only a romantic book, but it is also a historically accurate book that is relevant to give students an idea of what the thirties looked like from a black feminist's lens. Readers can see how black women were treated in the thirties, but also see feminist ideas rising through Janie's ability to overcome each relationship and survive a devastating hurricane. For instance, when deciding to leave Logan for Jody, she thinks, "What was she losing so much

time for? A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good" (Hurston 33). Janie's willingness to escape from a forced marriage and take charge of her own life is commendable and inspiring to readers.

As an end all be all, if *Romeo and Juliet* must be taught, there should be lessons about the misogyny in it. For instance, when Sampson says, "I will push Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall" (Shakespeare 1.1.) This can give young readers the wrong impression of what respect for one another should look like. Instead, they should be exposed to examples of what respect should look like. Hurston gives readers Logan and Jody, they are not misogynists, instead, they are characters who help Janie grow. Logan simply wanted a wife who would cook him dinner and contribute to his labor. Jody wanted Janie to be able to run the store and sit as a trophy and hide her hair.

This novel is all about being fearless in the pursuit of happiness, and loving yourself in ways you never thought possible, despite life's obstacles. Janie gives her all, her passion and empathy is eye-opening, which is more inspirational than a story whose conflicts are unrelatable. Any English teacher should consider having this book in their classroom. This novel should be strongly considered for students who can read between the lines and pick out more than just a love story. Hurston would be influential and appealing to those who are unable to find literature works that represent characters similar to them. Adding this book to the English curriculum would be inspiring in a way that students can learn their own capability of putting their foot down and saying "this is not how my story will end" through this novel. Janie could have chosen to be a widow, or run a store, instead, she chooses to chase her dreams and find something *better* for herself. Students can read this message as a sign of hope that there is something out there waiting for them!

While *Romeo and Juliet* may be an instinctive novel to teach a coming-of-age, romance, or freedom novel, there are many more ideal novels capable of conveying the same messages across to young adults. It is also imperative to reconsider what should be kept or tossed out of the canon. Because a lack of representation in novels can seriously damage the ability to keep students' enthusiasm for reading literature. I encourage all readers, of any kind, to read literature out of your comfort zone. Diversity can only help others better understand the world around them and open eyes to the opportunities to learn about culture, race, and other aspects of what makes us all human. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a prime example of why all high school classrooms should be inclusive of stories that are not "typical" and allow readers to be inspired by stories like Janie's.

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