After years of mistaken critical evaluation, recent changes in methods of literary assessment brought about by feminist criticism, the development of Afrocentric strategies of analysis, and other variables, such as the attention of black women writers, have made possible the critical rediscovery of the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Since the 1970s, a burgeoning critical examination has taken place. Readers have understood *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an effective work, its values initially misunderstood by a patriarchal and racist literary culture. I want to affirm critical reception of this novel as a feminist narrative, ordered by a method used by other writers (female and male) during the Modernist period: the use of a mythic subtext that modifies and develops the text itself. We need, however, to differentiate Hurston’s method from T.S. Eliot’s description of the mythic method with reference to Joyce, by suggesting a new terminology, which I call a “mythic field,” created within a psychoanalytically disclosed subtext and inhabited by archetypal and mythic elements.” In an insistent and often unrecognized way, the psyche manifests itself in the novel in the ongoing and persistent incorporation, play, or manipulation of mythic archetypes.
The use of the mythic acts as an extra-textual energizing property, as this novel renders into myth intrapsychic and gender-related conflicts.

Zora Neale Hurston pursued a consistent interest in the areas of myth and folklore throughout her life. Her study of folklore was her primary research interest, and her fascination with myth was central to the development of her fiction. She transformed and synthesized autobiographical material and mythic elements through her creative process. In *Dust Tracks on the Road*, her autobiography, she recounts that, as a schoolchild, her early enthusiasm for myth resulted in the gift of several books by two northern White women, including *Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Greek and Roman Myths*, and *Norse Tales*:

> In a way this early reading gave me great anguish throughout my childhood and adolescence. My soul was with the gods and my body in the village. People just would not act like gods. Stew beef, fried fat-back and morning grits were no ambrosia from Valhalla. Raking back yards and carrying out chamber pots were not the tasks of Thor.

In addition to documenting her early interest in myth, Hurston’s autobiography reveals two other aspects of her imaginative capacities: her personification of nature and her visionary imagination. As a child, Hurston was “only happy in the woods” (p. 41). Her fascination with trees becomes important when we understand Janie’s preoccupation with trees in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston describes how she “made particular friendship with one huge tree and always played about its roots. I named it ‘the loving pine,’ and my chums came to know it by that name.” She told her mother that “a bird” talked to her and that his tail was so long “that while he sat up in the top of the pine tree his tail was dragging the ground” (p. 52). The image of the bird in association with the tree is a central one in Plutarch’s version of the Isis-Osiris myth which is invoked in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston rendered her own experience mythic by incorporating and modifying features of Plutarch’s myth. By the age of seven, Hurston was also entertaining visions; she was subject to precognitive epiphanies with regard to her own life.

The novelist supplemented her own exploration into the realm of myth and folklore through her studies with the anthropologist Franz Boas at Barnard and later, briefly, at Columbia. She was a student of comparative religion and remarks in her study of voodoo on the need to “do something with Haitian mysticism comparable to Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.” She produced two studies of folklore, oral folktale from the South in *Mules and Men* and voodoo lore in *Tell My Horse*. Other folklore writings of hers are collected in *The Sanctified Church*. Hurston’s research interests were not purely academic because she involved herself in them as subject, and she filtered her knowledge through lived experience; while researching *Tell My Horse*, for instance, she was initiated into voodoo practices. In speaking of voodoo in Haiti, she says that she found such religious beliefs no

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5. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 41. Subsequent page references to this work will be noted parenthetically in the text.
7. She states that in New Orleans she “delved into Hoodoo, or sympathetic magic. I studied with the Frizzly Rooster and all the other noted ‘doctors’” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* p. 139). Karla Holloway quotes Gwendolyn Mikell, who suggests that in *Tell My Horse* Hurston writes, “‘in the logic of one who practices and believes,’ in the schema of the religion, concentrating on the gods and goddesses as the source of the beliefs and the power of their survival.” (The Character of the Word
more “invalid than any other religion” (Dust Tracks, p. 149). Describing the “history of the great religions of the world,” she reflects that humankind’s religion is an embodiment of a people’s own values (Dust Tracks, p. 200). Karla Holloway draws attention to Hurston’s preoccupation with African religion when she states, “Religious celebration within Hurston’s fiction reflects imagery representative of an African schema and illustrates not only the experience from her father’s house, but the fact that those were experiences rooted in an African sensibility.”

Harold Bloom acknowledges Hurston’s animating religious perspective in suggesting that she has affinities with Dreiser and Lawrence, other “heroic vitalists.” Her independent thinking was reflected as well in her attitude towards racial issues, a process which led to her creation of a novel centered not on racial division, but on one woman’s definition of selfhood. She used myth to magnify and elevate the power of her own culture’s inherited knowledge, and as a consequence she was especially interested in myths which were African in origin. She conceives Egyptian myth as black African in origin in her treatment of Moses, the main character in her novel, Moses, and reclaims him as an African magician. As Robert E. Hemenway asserts, she “kidnap[s] Moses from Judeo-Christian tradition, claiming that his true birthright is African and that his true constituency is Afro-American.” Hemenway contends that Hurston’s “audacity” resulted from her familiarity with the way in which legends develop and from “historical evidence indicating that Moses was probably Egyptian rather than Hebrew,” much as Freud conjectured in Moses and Monotheism.

Several critics have noted Hurston’s penchant for conflating and synthesizing materials. In Dust Tracks, Hurston describes her discovery of a copy of Paradise Lost as a young girl (p. 92). Missy Dehn Kubitschek comments on a passage in Their Eyes Were Watching God concerning the Creation; Janie talks about humankind’s being made of sparks and mud, human “mud-balls,” in search of each other (p. 139), and the critic calls this an “irreverent, edited and conflated variation of Paradise Lost and several Egyptian myths.”

As Michael Awkward suggested in 1990, recent critical debate on Hurston’s most important novel has focused on two areas of discussion. The first concerns “the nature and meaning of Hurston’s delineations of Janie’s responses to patriarchal attempts to limit her to circumscribed, unfulfilling roles.” Hurston scholars disagree about the extent to which Tea Cake contributes to Janie’s development, the extent to which he is a desirable mate, as well as the plot’s contrivance of his death. A second area of discussion is “Hurston’s use in the narrative of black vernacular discourse and Afro-American storytelling conventions” (16). Critics such as Henry Louis Gates address the
way in which the language employed in the text — Janie’s verbal castigation of Joe’s manhood (p. 123), for example — allows her to “write herself into being by naming, by speaking herself free.” He refers to “the killing timbre of Janie’s true inner voice”:

> “Joe’s turn to the male world of play, at Janie’s expense, leads Janie to play the dozens on his sexuality and thus to his death.”

Janie’s verbal sparring effectively curses Joe. She says, “‘When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life’” (p. 123). She renders in pictures a version of castration. Gates calls attention to Hurston’s assertion that “the white man thinks in a written language, and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics,” by which Hurston means “word pictures,” or “thought pictures.”

Gates states that “the speakerly diction of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attempts to render these pictures through the imitation of the extensively metaphorical medium of black speech, in an oxymoronic oral hieroglyphic that is meant only for the printed page.” Thus, Gates views Janie as a creation of the “speakerly text,” and as a voice of power within the novel.

I would suggest that as the novel unfolds, the mythic subtext accomplishes several purposes. It subverts the apparent social myth of female weakness, permits Janie to achieve her dream of the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage, and invests her with independence and autonomy in her own life. One way to understand the novel is to read it as the mythic field requires — for example, Tea Cake’s death as part of the necessary death and rebirth cycle. This also allows us to respond to critical questions about Tea Cake as a less than ideal mate. In his human dimension, he is imperfect, but by providing him with a mythic dimension, Hurston ensures his apotheosis.

Various critics have discussed Hurston’s use of myth. Elizabeth Hayes explores Janie as a Persephone figure; Cyrena Pondrom explores the novel for its “modern reinterpretation of the ancient Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz, with syncretistic allusion to its analogues, the Greek story of Aphrodite and Adonis and the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris.” Patty Joan Farris Kuhel, in a 1990 dissertation, points to specific connections with the Isis-Osiris myth through the

quest, subsumed under his desires, and, at times so subordinate to Tea Cake that even her interior consciousness reveals more about him than it does about her” (Mary Helen Washington, *Introduction, I Love Myself When I am Laughing*, ed. Alice Walker [Feminist Press, 1979], p. 107). Susan Willis questions the way in which “Janie’s happy relationship to Tea Cake comes to an abrupt and tragic end. We might even want to accuse Hurston of literary overkill in making Tea Cake the victim of a mad dog’s attack, and then portraying Janie confronted by her enraged hydrophobic husband and forced to shoot him down like a stray dog” (Susan Willis, *Zora Neale Hurston*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and K.A. Appiah [Amistad, 1993], p. 126). She connects the way Tea Cake turns on Janie with Joe Stark’s accusatory dying words and implies that the novel’s most important contribution is a vision of “some new community based on sisterhood” (p. 127). Lloyd Brown, on the other hand, has suggested that there are parallels between Hurston’s representation of the feminine reliance on dream and Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that it “is a female trait . . . to use dreams as a means of transcending rather than resigning to reality; dreams are the woman’s means of compensating for a sense of subordination (immanence) through the ‘realm of the imagination’” (“Zora Neale Hurston and the Nature of Female Perception,” *Ophiolian IV* [1978], p. 39).


17. Gates, p. 190. As Gates suggests, “Hurston seems to be not only the first scholar to have defined the trope of Signifyin(g) but also the first to represent the ritual itself. Hurston represents a Signifyin(g) ritual in *Mules and Men*, then glosses the word *signify* as a means of ‘showing off’ rhetorically.” He states of the passage in *Mules and Men*, which “prefigures the scene of Signification in *Their Eyes;*” “This is a classic Signification, an exchange of meaning and intention of some urgency between two lovers.” (“The Speakerly Text,” p. 181).


symbolism of the novel. While I concur with Kuhel and Pondrom on several points, my ideas differ in specific ways. I would argue for Hurston’s use of a myth specific to the African continent, offer a more detailed analysis of the mythic imagery within the subtext, and examine aspects of the creative process in relation to Hurston’s autobiographical materials. I would also point to the syncretistic nature of the myth. Not only do Janie and Tea Cake become Isis-Osiris figures, but Janie might be seen as enacting the part of Set, and her friend Pheoby might be read as the figure of Isis’ sister, Nephthys.

The text itself makes reference to Egypt and Africa. When the men are telling tales on Joe Starks’s porch, they speak about a dinosaur in Egypt (p. 104), and at the close of the novel Lias bids Janie and Tea Cake goodbye by saying, “Ah’ll meet you in Africa” (231). While the subtext of mythic images reveals the imagistic and metaphoric unfolding of the interplay between Isis and Osiris — and elevates Janie and Tea Cake as embodiments of ideal qualities — it also reflects autobiographical elements from Zora Neale Hurston’s life. Janie, in the novel, settles with her second husband, Joe Starks, in the town of Eatonville, Florida, where Zora Neale Hurston was born. The actual name of the general store’s owner was Joe Clarke. Hemenway describes her style as “part fiction, part folklore, part biography, all told with great economy, an eye for authentic detail, and a perfect ear for dialect.” Although Sherley Anne Williams regards them as very different types, she suggests that “something of the questing quality that characterized Zora’s own life informs the character of Janie”; Karla Holloway confirms that Janie possesses “the same connections to nature” as does Zora in her autobiography. Although Pondrom describes Hurston’s naming herself Isis in the story “Drenched in Light,” she neglects to mention that as Lucy’s second daughter in the autobiographically-based *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston named herself Isis. The character in her novels who best reflects the figure of Isis is Janie. Hemenway confirms Hurston’s statement in her autobiography, that the inspiration for the love affair between Janie and Tea Cake came from her own experience. He also speculates, based on information derived through her family, that Hurston may have been married in the early part of her life, just as Janie is married to Logan Killicks.

Janie’s quest allows her to gain developing knowledge of herself through the dream of relationship. Her vision is rendered more poignant given the rapes of both her grandmother and her mother. As Lillie P. Howard suggests, “Janie gets her definition of marriage from nature.” She contends that Hurston was “undeniably before her time. . . . What really made her premature, however, was all the beauty and struggle of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where marriage is largely defined in sexual terms; where one mate must remain petal open and honest for the other.” As Janie participates in her first two marriages, she registers dissatisfaction with her prescribed role and liberates herself, first by leaving Killicks and then by voicing her anger and astute perception of Joe, because she believes in the vision or dream of a sacred marriage. During her second marriage, she recognizes that she “was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen” (p. 112).

24. Hemenway, p. 70.
26. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934; Harper & Row, 1990), p. 183. Subsequent page references to this work will be noted parenthetically in the text.
27. Hemenway, p. 231.
30. Howard, p. 175.
While critics regard her focus on men as problematic, it is important to understand as a psychological process the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie. While Tea Cake does leave her to gamble, strikes her, and briefly encourages the attention toward him of another woman, these are not patterns of behavior, but rather specific incidents which provide an opportunity for rapprochement. Janie does share his life without being suborned to a prescribed role. She learns to become a player, a participant, rather than an onlooker. Her sexuality is primary to the relationship with Tea Cake.

The myth of Isis and Osiris comes to us from Plutarch, because so much of the Egyptian religious tradition was oral and pictorial. As Viaud writes in *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, “It may seem strange to suggest that the religion of ancient Egypt is very imperfectly known to us... The full stories themselves, however, are almost never set down; for they were known to every early Egyptian and handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth alone. Only the myth of Osiris... has been transmitted in detail to us by Plutarch.” We do know, however, that Osiris was an African god. Lewis Spence refers to E.A. Wallis Budge, who asserts that “Everything which the texts of all periods record concerning him goes to show that he was an indigenous god of North-east Africa, and that his home and origin were possibly Libyan.” “In any case,” Spence continues, “We may take it that Osiris was genuinely African in origin, and that he was indigenous to the soil of the Dark Continent.” Stephen Quirke refers to the devotion of the Nubians to Isis: “The temple of Isis at Philae remained in operation later than most sanctuaries in Egypt partly because the nomads of the south-eastern desert retained their devotion to the goddess.” The story concerns the murder of Osiris by Set and Isis’s quest to recover his body. Set, his brother, had tricked Osiris into a coffer, sealed it and thrown it into the Nile, where it floated to the coast of Byblos, in Syria. The tree which had grown up around it was cut down to form a pillar in the king’s house. Isis found the place and “in the likeness of a swallow fluttered around the pillar that contained her dead (husband), twittering mournfully.” Eventually, Isis recovered the coffer, but the body was rent into fourteen pieces by Set, and Isis once again set off on a quest to regain the body of her lover. In native Egyptian accounts, Isis, with aid from the other gods, pieced together the body; “Isis fanned the cold clay with her wings: Osiris revived and thenceforth reigned as king over the dead in the other world.”

In terms of the myth, Isis is called the “sorrowing wife” and “Protectress of the Dead.” When Janie is introduced in the third paragraph of the novel, the narrative reads: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. . . She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgement” (p. 9). She is

32. Spence, *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends* (1915; Dover, 1990), p. 64.
33. It was ordered closed by Justinian in the sixth century A.D. Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Dover, 1992), p. 174.
34. Frazer, p. 386.
35. Frazer, p. 389.
associated with a plural dead, with death by violence, the image of the drowned and the murdered, the “sudden dead,” and in these terms we can read a subtextual link between Isis and Janie, much in the way that psychoanalysis reads the texts of dreams.

Janie is also described as a goddess in terms of the ideal of beauty. Tony Taylor, a citizen of Eatonville, says of her, “‘She couldn’t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England’” (p. 67). Tea Cake tells her, “‘You’re something tuh make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit tuh die’” (p. 206). During the opening of the novel, Janie, “‘dat ole forty year ole ‘oman,” generates an extraordinary response. “The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt’” (p. 11).38

The phrasing, “like a plume,” allows us to identify Janie with Isis through imagery descriptive of birds. Isis fluttered around the pillar that contained her dead husband’s coffin in the form of a bird and is often depicted “beside Osiris, whom she helps or protects as she does the dead-with her winged arms.”39 Janie’s grandmother tells her, “‘Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled’” (p. 37). The imagery of feathers is used elsewhere in the novel and is associated not only with Isis, who wears a feather headdress, but also with Osiris, who as god of death, was also dressed in feathers.40 But in addition to her role in protecting the dead, Isis is also a goddess of birth, as the mother of Horus. However, in the novel, birth is rendered metaphorically, as the birth of self. Janie’s association with the pear tree not only invokes her relationship to the sacred marriage that she seeks, but bears on the psychological process that she undergoes, the process of self-transformation. Neumann describes “blossom and tree” as “archetypal places of mythical birth”; “In alchemy, the psychological significance of birth from tree or flowers is particularly evident.”41 Hurston portrays Janie in association with generative, vegetative imagery:

So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around expecting things… She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. 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. (p. 44).

Neumann discusses the phenomenon of giving birth to the psychic self at some length in relation to Egyptian myth; Jung has referred to the “tree symbolism of alchemy” as well.42 Neumann suggests that a birth “from tree or flowers” is “always the ultimate result of processes of development and transformation”:

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It arises from psychic strata in which — as in the plant — the elements are synthesized and achieve a new unity and form through a transformation governed by the unconscious. They belong to “matriarchal consciousness” whose nature and symbolism are as intimately bound up with the plant world as with the world of the Feminine.43

Hurston devotes great attention to the fruit tree. As Mary Washington has pointed out, “Hurston uses two images from nature to symbolize Janie’s quest: the horizon and the blossoming pear tree.”44 These are fundamental images in relation to the Isis-Osiris myth. The horizon represents Isis’s double quest, once when her husband is murdered and again when the body is dismembered. And the tree encases his body. Hurston identifies Janie’s life with a tree. As Patty Kuhel notes that “even her mother’s name, Leafy, is connected to trees”:45 “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, the things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (Their Eyes, p. 20). Her meditation on the pear tree re-enacts energetically the celebration of a mystical union, and she refers back to this point of communion when thinking about her vision of marriage throughout the novel:46

Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard. . . . It called her to come and gaze on a mystery. . . . It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard had nothing to do with her ears. . . . 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! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (p. 24)

The tree in the myth of Osiris has been identified as a tamarisk tree in Plutarch’s version,47 an aru-tree,48 but also, in the form of a “djed” fetish, as “the trunk of a fir or some other conifer.”49 As Frazer states in The New Golden Bough, the cedar, sycamore, myrrh-tree and pine were all associated with Osiris.50 Kuhel also notes Frazer’s statement, “It accords with the character of Osiris as a tree-spirit that his worshippers were forbidden to injure fruit-trees.”51 Viaud concurs that “as a vegetation spirit that dies and is ceaselessly reborn, Osiris represented . . . trees.”52 Perhaps it is no coincidence that Tea Cake’s last name is Woods; his legal name is Vergible Woods (p. 149). As Gates states, “Tea Cake not only embodies Janie’s tree, he is the woods themselves, the delectable veritable woods, as his name connotes (‘Vergible’ being a vernacular term for ‘veritable’). Vergible

43. Neumann, p. 248.
45. Kubel, p. 48.
46. Pondrom, p. 192; Their Eyes Were Watching God, pp. 38, 43, 54.
49. Viaud, p. 7.
51. Kubel, p. 49; Frazer, p. 408.
52. Viaud, p. 17.
Tea Cake Woods is a sign of verity, one who speaks the truth, one genuine and real, not counterfeit or spurious, one not false or imaginary but the thing that has in fact been named.”53 His age, as Pondrom points out, accords with that of Osiris, that is twenty-eight.54; there is a twelve year age difference between Janie, who is around forty, and Tea Cake (Their Eyes, p. 159). The mythic paradigm of the dying and reborn god always involves an older woman and a younger man.55 Another element introduced in this passage summons up the image of Osiris, who “invented two kinds of flute which should accompany ceremonial song.”56 In this symbolic manner, in one of the novel’s most celebrated passages, Janie invokes the figure of Osiris through her meditation upon the pear tree.

In several passages, Tea Cake is seen as a musician. According to Viaud, Osiris “was the enemy of all violence and it was by gentleness alone that he subjected country after country, winning and disarming their inhabitants by songs and the playing of various musical instruments” (16). While courting Janie, Tea Cake mimics “the tuning of a guitar” (p. 152) and plays the piano (p. 156), as well as the guitar (p. 180). He also charms people on the muck: “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet . . . the way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night” (p. 197). Before Janie buries Tea Cake, she buys a new guitar and places it in his hands. She believes that he will be “thinking up new songs to play her” when she joins him in the land of the dead (p. 281). But there are other ways in which we can read in the novel’s subtext the identification of Tea Cake with the figure of Osiris.

Tea Cake is “a tall man” (p. 144), and Janie finds him handsome. “She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points. Those full, lazy eyes with the lashes curling sharply away like drawn scimitars. The lean, over-padded shoulders and narrow waist” (p. 146). Further on in the courtship she describes him as resembling “the love thoughts of women” (p. 161). Significantly, his physique evokes the picture of the classic Egyptian male statuary from ancient Egypt. Another passage that identifies him as the fulfillment of Janie’s vision evokes the association of spices with Eastern origins and the use of resins in mummification.57 “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). The novel’s depiction accords with the image of Osiris, since we visualize the Egyptian emphasis on eyes, and Osiris is described as “handsome of countenance, dark-skinned and taller than all other men.”58 The Egyptian Book of the Dead also identifies him as dark-skinned: “His flesh is burnished bright as copper.”59 We recall that in the novel Mrs. Turner “didn’t forgive” Janie “for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake” (208). He also feels familiar to Jane — “Seemed as if she had known him all her life” — and of course in their mythic relationship, he is her brother (p. 151).

55. Pondrom’s article is a major contribution to studies on the novel through her discussion of the synchronic vision. I want to supply a more comprehensive reading with reference to the Osiris myth, however. Pondrom makes the connection between the name Woods and Frazer’s identification of trees with the dying god. She also mentions the rabid dog, whom she connects with Cerberus. The other connections which Pondrom makes with the novel include the association of Osiris with Tea Cake at the novel’s close (p. 193).
56. Viaud, p. 16.
57. “Mummification involved immersion in a tub of dry natron, wrapping in fine linen strips, and dousing with unguents and resins” (Quirke, Ancient Egyptian Religions, p. 52).
58. Viaud, p. 16.
Another parallel between Tea Cake and Osiris is created through their association with agriculture. When Tea Cake is courting Janie he makes flower beds and seeds the garden for her (p. 166). As a vegetation god, Osiris was linked with the fashioning of agricultural implements, and the growth of crops. Janie spends much of her time with Tea Cake in an agricultural setting, in the fields picking beans, down in the muck. Tea Cake’s legacy to Janie is a packet of seeds (p. 283). It is worth noting that Tea Cake plants according to the cycles of nature, in harmony with the waxing moon. “The planting never got done because he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness overtook him. The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things” (p. 283). In the novel, the “muck,” is identified as “down in de Everglades . . . where dey raise all dat cane and stringbeans and tomatuhs,” (p. 192) and it is there on the book’s figurative Nile delta that the cycle of death and rebirth is enacted between Janie and Tea Cake, as Isis and Osiris.

The hurricane itself may be associated with Set, murderer of Osiris, because “thunder was said to be the voice of Seth, and in hieroglyphics the word for ‘storm,’ neshen, is given a Seth-animal as its determinative or ending-sign.” The “massive built dog” who attacks and bites Tea Cake is sitting on the back of a cow, and this scene is replete with fragmented elements that are suggestive of the myth. Janie refers to the “pure hate” in the dog’s eyes, and to the “mad dawg” (pp. 247, 263). Anubis, identified as a jackal or a man with the head of a jackal or dog, an animal sacred to Anubis, “opened for the dead the roads of the other world.” Kuhel notes that the cow was identified as sacred to Isis, who is often pictured with a cow’s head. Joe Starks has told Janie that “she must look upon herself as the bell-cow” (p. 66). Another peculiar parallel is that, as a god of the dead, in Abydos, in Upper Egypt, Osiris was identified with Khenti Amenti, the wolf-god. In a peculiar fashion, Tea Cake is personified as a dog or wolf when he suffers in the last stages of rabies. Janie states that “‘Tea Cake was gone. Something else was looking out of his face’” (269). When she decides to go for a doctor, Tea Cake “almost snarl[s],” looks at her with “blank ferocity,” and she later sees him “coming from the outhouse with a queer loping gait, swinging his head from side to side” (269–71). Finally, she sees him as a “fi end,” and he bites her: “he closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm” (273). Quirke speaks of the syncretistic nature of Egyptian deities:

A further area that provokes confusion in modern eyes is the tendency of Egyptian deities to fission and to fuse, for we often have the mistaken notion that each Egyptian deity should be understood as a person. If the gods and goddesses did have the rounded full characters of men and women it would be difficult to conceive of the continual mergers and internal divisions . . . This fusing or merging is called syncretism by Egyptologists, and the compound deities syncretistic; . . . it is . . . fundamentally a part of the Egyptian practice of expressing divinity in the form of names that outline the area of concern.

Tea Cake, as human, may be seen as killed through the agency of the dog as Anubis, or as Khenti-Amenti, fostered in its appearance by the storm itself, but it is Janie who is forced to squeeze the

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60. Viaud, pp. 16–17; Quirke, p. 57; Frazer, p. 385.
61. Quirke, p. 65.
62. Viaud, p. 25; Budge, p. cxvii.
64. Viaud, p. 17.
65. Quirke, p. 17.
At this point, she also enacts the role of Set, as the agent of his death; she has also been a contributing agent of her second husband’s death, and in this the subtext has accorded her godlike powers. However, Tea Cake’s death is contained in the form of ritual, because when she kills him “something else was looking out of his face.” The narrative refers again to the storm as having killed him and indicates an apotheosis:

Anyway, the ‘Glades and its water had killed him. She wanted him out of the way of storms, so she had a strong vault built in the cemetary. . . . Tea Cake was the son of Evening Sun, and nothing was too good. . . . Tea Cake slept royally on his white silken couch. . . . Janie bought him a brand new guitar and put it in his hands. He would be thinking up new songs to play to her when she got there. Sop and his friends . . . filled up and overflowed the ten sedans . . . and added others. . . . Tea Cake rode like a Pharoah to his tomb. (p. 281)

In referring to Tea Cake as the son of Evening Sun, the text invokes the resurrection of Osiris. “Originally Osiris was a form of the sun-god, and, speaking generally, he may be said to have represented the sun after he had set, and as such was the emblem of the motionless dead.”

In response to critical debate, I see Janie attaining a significant degree of autonomy through her experiences in the novel. In the mythic tradition, Isis, through her own trickery and magic, won from Ra the secret of his name and became even more powerful than she had been. What she does, in effect, is to win from Ra a piece of his masculine power, his selfhood, and incorporate it, in metaphoric terms, in her own psyche. Despite Tea Cake’s imperfections, Janie participates in the life of the community on the muck; she does what the men do, hunts, fishes, learns to drive, plays games, picks beans herself. During the telling of the narrative to Pheoby, Pheoby also becomes complicit: “’Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied with myself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this’” (p. 284). We might see Pheoby as the figure of Isis’ sister, Nephthys, who helped Isis embalm the corpse of Osiris, for it is Pheoby who by listening, ratifies the tale through her belief in the value of the story’s being told. When Janie returns home in the last section of the novel, as Robert Steptoe asserts, “the house ‘full ah thoughts’ to which Janie ascends after her ritualized journey of immersion with Tea Cake into the ‘muck’ of the Everglades is clearly a private ritual ground.”

 Ascending to her bedroom, she carries a light which symbolizes her inner illumination, granted to the initiates in the Mysteries of Isis celebrated throughout the ancient world. The trauma of Tea Cake’s loss, the dialectic of growth itself, life itself, is expressed by the “sobbing and singing”:

Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. (p. 286)

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66. Hurston uses exactly this phrasing in *Tell My Horse*. In speaking of the ceremony of “The Nine Night,” which she says is “an African survival,” a kind of night wake, she refers to the procession, “the dead man rode like a Pharoah” (*Tell My Horse*, pp. 39–41).
67. Budge, p. cxiii.
68. Viaud, p. 21.
69. Steptoe, p. 6.
This closing passage recalls the myth itself, and, more significantly, Hurston’s own recollections. The psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva, in *Tales of Love*, speaks with reference to belief and doubt, and the problem of communication in terms of “moments of merging apotheosis, as total as they are unspeakable,” which involve moments of abjection but also of creative renewal. In this passage Janie re-enacts the metaphorical revivification of Osiris. Hurston invokes her own childhood self, a self completely integrated into the natural world through her communion with “the loving pine” (*Dust Tracks*, p. 56). The reference to the pine trees invokes simultaneously Osiris, Tea Cake, and the lover Hurston left behind to go to Haiti and write the novel (Hemenway, pp. 230–31). The “Djed,” the fetish of Osiris, is associated with the fir or conifer, and “a pine cone often appears on the monuments as an offering presented to Osiris.”

Janie-Zora-Isis has fulfilled her quest. She has found love resident within and without: “Here was peace. 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 its meshes” (p. 286). She retrieves the image of the quest, the horizon, because she has fulfilled it; she has caught life in its meshes. In draping on herself the mantle of the fulfilled dream, the horizon itself, she becomes gigantic. The Egyptians conceived of the soul or spirit as separate from the body; it was “a spiritual copy, resembling the body in every way. . . . This was the ka, ghostly in appearance and stored in the heart.” After Janie-Isis draped the net of life about her, “She called in her soul to come and see” (p. 286). A passage in Normandi Ellis’s translation of *The Book of the Dead* states: “I am bound in the cloth of life, wound about by magic. . . . They shall call this mantle life.” In the Theban version of the *Book of the Dead*, chapter CXXXVIa is called “The Chapter of Sailing in the boat of Ra,” and Chapter CLIIIb is called “The Chapter of coming forth from the fishing net.” The titles of these chapters are echoed in the first and last paragraphs of Hurston’s novel.

In her autobiography, Hurston describes living through a hurricane (p. 142), and trying “to embalm all the tenderness of (her) passion” for her lover in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (pp. 188–89). Her use of the verb “to embalm” seems remarkably fitting. Carl Van Vechten describes his memory feeling overwhelmed by this woman who was “put together entirely differently from the rest of mankind.” “When she breezed into a room (she never actually entered) . . . and yelled ‘I am the Queen of the Niggerati’ you knew you were in the presence of an individual of the greatest magnitude.” Holloway asserts Hurston’s belief that “whoever uses language . . . must connect the self and the spiritual source of linguistic power” and acknowledges Hurston’s mother’s “call to her for voice,” “to assure lineage,” that the critic suggests Hurston transformed into “spiritual rather than biological allegiance. Her voice was to be heard by a reader rather than passed on to physical progeny, but was still available to any who could participate in the forms of spiritual epiphany that her writing represented.”

Hurston, indeed, is thus engaged in a strategy that Julia Kristeva has documented in *Black Sun*. Kristeva argues that art can encode the loss of “the thing,” the “impossible mourning for the

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71. Frazer, p. 408.
73. Ellis, p. 179.
74. Budge, pp. xlii-xliii.
75. Holloway, p. 24.
76. Holloway, pp. 116–18.
maternal object.” She suggests that the “work of art” can “ensure the rebirth of its author and viewer,” that a fiction “if it isn’t an anti-depressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection.” In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston describes the death of her mother when she herself was nine years old. Before dying, her mother had given her instructions consistent with folk beliefs and rituals concerning the dead, and because she was not allowed to carry out these instructions, she felt that she had failed her mother (pp. 62–65). She states, “And then in that sunset time, I failed her. It seemed as she died that the sun went down on purpose to flee away from me. That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit. Mama died at sundown and changed a world” (p. 65). This novel creates an imaginative landscape in which the sun becomes a shawl, in which the mythic field enacts a summoning, a synchronous vision of wholeness promised by the pear tree and internalized by Janie at its close. Zora Neale Hurston has created a visionary myth through the figure of Janie, who sets out on a quest to fulfill the promise of the pear tree, her Tree of Life. This novel “deifies” a woman; implicit in such a conferral of power is Hurston’s proposal that the god whom we are watching at the level of subtext, the Creator of Voice and Text, is a woman, and African-American.

77. Kristeva, p. 9.
78. Kristeva, p. 51.