Janie Crawford is a fascinating character in African-American literature and a study in weakness and strength, freedom and captivity, and the struggle to emerge with a greater concept of self. Janie, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a young black woman yearning to be master of her own life in a time when black women had little say. Some literary critics consider Janie as a hero of feminism because of this, but a look at the relationships of her life proves that such is not necessarily the case. Janie finds some independence in Hurston’s book, but she is marred by the fact that she always has to have a man to define her. Despite the seeming liberty that she experiences near the end of the novel, Janie only lives life and has adventures through the dominance of a male figure. She is not a heroine of feminism but an example of weakness because her husbands ultimately control and direct her actions.

The first husband Janie has, Logan Killicks, is anything but a romantic ideal. Quite a few years older and hardly in love with her, Janie simply marries him to please her grandmother. Unfortunately, Logan controls Janie from the start. She is relegated to staying in the house and doing inside work, and even then, her husband begins demanding that she do outside work as well. Janie’s breaking point comes when Logan asks her to help him move a manure pile. When she refuses, he becomes furious and vows to “take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!” (Hurston 31). After this threat, Janie takes only a few moments to decide that she needs to leave.
her marriage, yet she does not run to true independence. Instead, she runs into the arms of another man—a visionary stranger named Joe Starks, whom she met by the road. The reason she leaves is because she has a better offer than Logan. Consequently, while Janie’s departure is arguably a sign of strength, she falls right back into a relationship with a man who eventually becomes as controlling as Logan.

Janie’s marriage to Joe appears promising at the outset, but it soon becomes apparent that Starks intends to keep Janie in her place. Janie and Joe go to the all-black town of Eatonville after they’re married, where Starks constructs a store and soon becomes mayor. Speeches are being made to celebrate his inauguration when someone requests that Janie make a speech. Joe immediately puts a stop to it. He tells everyone that his “wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’” (Hurston 43). Janie is not even allowed a chance to speak, and from that moment, she realizes that she has no say in the marriage. It isn’t long before Starks is consigning her to work in the store and trying to control her appearance. As the years go on, he even becomes abusive. The most tragic example of his abuse is when he hits Janie one day in the store. For a long time, Joe has been humiliating Janie about being an old woman, and the icing on the cake is when he insults her posterior. Janie fights back for the first time, repaying his insults in kind. Pride shattered, her husband responds with violence to the point where he “struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store” (Hurston 80). He is so angry that he abuses her, yet Janie still stays with him. She doesn’t seek help or stand up for herself, but gives in to Joe’s control for the rest of their marriage—hardly a heroic characteristic.

Tea Cake is the last man Janie marries, after Joe dies, and their relationship is marked by much more freedom. However, even with a more understanding husband, there are still times when Janie is told what to do. Janie and Tea Cake spend the night together once, before they’re
married, and Janie wants to make him breakfast the next morning. But Tea Cake “wouldn’t let her get him any breakfast at all…he made her stay where she was” (Hurston 107). Though this is arguably a loving act, Tea Cake is the one dictating what Janie is doing. Though they seem to have a freer relationship, Janie never quite gains true liberation. As Hurston expert Cheryl Wall says, “even Tea Cake, strongly idealized character though he is, has had difficulty accepting Janie’s full participation in their life together” (Wall 688). Tea Cake is the one who determines where they get married, where they live, and whether or not they stay in the face of an oncoming storm. Janie’s marriage to him is a marked improvement, but even so, she doesn’t find true freedom until he’s gone. Thus, she is not a paragon of feminist valor, but a weak-willed woman, driven by the dominance of the husbands in her life. Her independence is always limited by men, and so she is an example of a feminist antihero more than anything else.
Works Cited
