Their Eyes Were Watching God Socratic Seminar Questions

1. What is the role of humor in this novel? Hurston goes to great lengths to depict the verbal sparring, called "playing the dozens," which is so important in the Eatonville community. She represents long scenes on the porch, which have little if anything to do with the plot. What is the purpose of these storytelling scenes? What role, overall does the space of "the porch" play in the communities she depicts? And what do you make of the elaborate ceremonies constructed by the community in Eatonville, for example, around the lighting of the street lamp or the mock funeral for the mule?

2. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? To what crucial moments of the plot does the title allude? How does this deity relate to the maker of mud-balls that explains Janie's view of God? How does the God referenced in the title relate to the deity of fear and blood that Mrs. Turner worships? In what ways does God answer or not answer Janie's questioning? In what ways does God figure into Janie's sense of peace at the novel's close?

3. What is the relationship of the voice of the narrator, who is not a character in the story, but in the third-person and partially omniscient, to the voices of the characters, who speak primarily in a Southern, black dialect? Some of the descriptive passages in the novel -- the opening passage about "ships at a distance" for example, use richly (and traditionally) poetic language, which contrasts sharply with the humorous, earthy language of Hurston's characters. What is the effect on the reader as the text switches between these different modes? Why might Hurston have chosen to tell the story in this way when she easily could have chosen to tell it all in "standard" English or all in dialect?

4. To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice? Discuss what you regard as the chief accomplishment of Janie's life. Pay particular attention to the motivating factors that shaped the course of events. Assess the cost to Janie of all the sacrifices she has had to make. After Joe Starks's funeral, Janie realizes that "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her" (Hurston 89). Why is this important "to all the world"? In what ways does Janie's self-awareness depend on her increased awareness of others? What is your overall assessment of Janie's character as Hurston presents her?