“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” Questions

1. How is love both defined and exemplified by various characters throughout the story? Which characters claim to be in love? Do you believe them based on their words and actions toward their partners? Explain. Compare/contrast these definitions and examples of love to those in Hurston’s novel.

2. With whom do you agree regarding the abusive behavior of Terri’s former lover—Terri or Mel? Explain. Do you believe that Tea Cake—even while beating Janie—really loved her? Explain.

3. What kinds of love does Mel discuss (646)? How does Janie experience all of these kinds of love? Is any kind more “real” than another? Explain.

4. What does the conversation about knights have to do with love? Consider the following:
   - What does Mel mean when he says, “But then everyone is always a vessel [vassal] to someone” (648)? Do you agree or disagree with this? In what ways does it apply to Janie?

   Note: vassal—noun
   1. (in the feudal system) a person granted the use of land, in return for rendering homage, fealty, and usually military service or its equivalent to a lord or other superior; feudal tenant.
   2. a person holding some similar relation to a superior; a subject, subordinate, follower, or retainer.
   3. a servant or slave.
   (from Dictionary.com)

   The narrator argues, “But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel. They’d even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out. I read somewhere that they’d fall off their horses and not be able to get up because they were too tired to stand with all that armor on them. They’d get trampled by their own horse sometimes” (648-9). What does the knights’ armor have to do with love? Do you believe that armor helps or hurts us (or does both) when it comes to love? Explain. Does Janie’s armor (or lack of) help or harm her? Explain.

5. What is the purpose of Mel’s story about the elderly couple? How does this story add a new layer to Carver’s definition of love?

6. At the end of the story, Mel makes threats of violence toward his ex-wife. Are these threats any different from those of Terri’s former lover? Explain. What is the difference between love and hate?

→ Online EQ Connection: What is love?

What is love? Does it exist? If so, how do you know and for whom does it exist? If not, why not and how do you know? Is one kind of love—carnal, sentimental, familial, self-love, etc.—inherently better than another? Explain. Draw support from texts (including but not limited to “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and Their Eyes Were Watching God), films, real-life experiences, and any other references you wish.