Zora Neale Hurston in the Classroom

"With a harp and a sword in my hands"

The NCTE High School Literature Series



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Where Life and Art Intersect

Brilliant, enigmatic, eccentric, gifted, contradictory, determined, temperamental, flamboyant, visionary: every one of these words, and many others, has been used to describe Zora Neale Hurston in our time as well as her own. The Hurston canon includes four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories and essays, and several plays—an impressive body of work by many standards. Yet Hurston is more than a respected author or even a personality: she is a phenomenon. In 2008, the Zora Neale Hurston Festival in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, celebrated its twentieth year. The Hurston/Wright Foundation, begun in 1990 under the leadership of author Marita Golden, continues to offer awards, workshops, scholarships, and many opportunities to further the appreciation and development of African American writers. Fort Pierce, Florida, where Hurston died. hosts an annual ZoraFest to celebrate her life and work and recently began a Heritage Trail in her honor. In 2003, the United States Postal Service issued a Zora Neale Hurston stamp. In 2004, Barnard College, where Hurston graduated in 1928, established the Zora Neale Hurston Scholarship with the goal of promoting racial and ethnic diversity. Add to all of these activities Oprah Winfrey choosing Their Eyes Were Watching God as one of her book club selections, and in 2005 producing the film of that novel,

with Academy Award—winning Halle Berry playing the main character Janie.

It's no surprise to find Hurston's stories and essays, and especially her seminal novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (*TEWWG*), as required reading in many high school and college curricula. Yet "Zora mania"—or "Zora heads," as many fans refer to themselves—suggests a connection that goes beyond respect and appreciation for the work that crosses racial and ethnic boundaries. Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd, author of *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, describes how she sees the appeal of Hurston in general and *TEWWG* in particular:

There's a whole community of Zora lovers out there who have their own relationship to her and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—and often they become "Zora heads," like I was, and then start to read her other books. But this particular novel is the story of a woman's journey to know herself, and we are all on that journey at some time or another. The appeal transcends color or culture or gender and touches all people. That's why we're still reading the novel today. There's an enduring quality about her writing that makes us want to go back to it. So whatever our race, we're drawn to Janie as this authentic human being that Hurston created. (Telephone interview, 12 November 2007)

That authenticity is indeed the basis of Hurston's appeal and, most likely, the reason for her iconic status. Since, however, every generation rewrites even our most beloved texts to make them its own, we know we cannot start simply by bowing to the literary icon, but rather by getting to know the life and art of Zora Neale Hurston

Biographical Background

These days we rarely introduce students to a new author with a "background check" of the factual information about his or her life; we tend to jump into the work itself with various prereading experiences. Hurston is another story. Her birth date cues students in right away to the spirit of this fascinating woman. For many years, her birth was listed as 1901 or 1903 from public records she herself filed, yet now most scholars agree that she was born in 1891. This "factual" discrepancy is a place to start off discussions in the spirit of Hurston, who created and constructed identities throughout her life. In fact, asking students to lop off ten years from their own birth date and research the circumstances of being born earlier can bring some of the characteristic "Zora playfulness" into the classroom right away.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston was the fifth of eight children of John and Lucy Ann Potts Hurston. When she was a toddler, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated black township in the United States. Young Zora saw Eatonville as a kind of utopia that the writer later glorified in her fiction. Boyd describes it:

In Eatonville, Zora was never indoctrinated in inferiority, and she could see the evidence of black achievement all around her. She could look to the town hall and see black men, including her father, John Hurston, formulating the laws that governed Eatonville. She could look to the Sunday Schools of the town's two churches and see black women, including her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, directing the Christian curricula. She could look to the porch of the village store and see black men and women passing worlds through their mouths in the form of colorful, engaging stories. (http://www.zoranealehurston.com/biography.html)

When Hurston was thirteen, her mother died, a traumatic event under any circumstance, but apparently especially so to this teenager who lost the closest bond she had known. "That hour began my wanderings," Hurston later wrote. "Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit" (qtd. in *Wrapped in Rainbows* 47). John Hurston remarried within a short time. Hurston did not get along with her stepmother, was passed from one relative to another, and began working various menial jobs as she moved from place to place. Wanting to finish her schooling, she falsified her birth date in 1917 because—at age twenty-six—she could not qualify for free public schooling in Baltimore unless she was a teenager. She graduated in 1918 and entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. There, philosopher Alain Locke influenced and encouraged her to consider a career as a writer, and in 1921 she published her first short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in The Stylus, the Howard University literary magazine.

Hurston left Howard when Barnard College in New York City offered her a scholarship. Her interest in folklore led her to study with the noted anthropologist Franz Boas. After graduating in 1928, she worked with Boas doing field research on a fellowship from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1927–1932). A Rosenwald Fellowship (1934) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1935–1936) allowed her to continue her anthropological research.

Combining her interest in folklore and storytelling, Hurston published her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in 1934, and in 1935 she published *Mules and Men*, a collection of black Southern folklore documenting the influence of voodoo in Florida and New Orleans. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which became known as

her masterpiece, was published in 1937. Incorporating some autobiographical elements about the end of a relationship between Hurston and a younger man, the novel was written in a few weeks while she was doing research in Haiti. Critic Robert Hemenway, author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, describes the importance of this work:

... Hurston's novel is much more than an outpouring of private feeling. ... The novel culminates the fifteen-year effort to celebrate her birthright, a celebration which came through the exploration of a woman's consciousness, accompanied by an assertion of that woman's right to selfhood. (231–32)

Hurston continued to publish during the next few years. Tell My Horse (1938) is a travelogue and study of Caribbean voodoo practices. She published her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, in 1942 and then two other novels, Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939) and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948). Although Dust Tracks was a commercial success and her profile was included in the 1942 Who's Who in America, Current Biography, and Twentieth Century Authors, Hurston lived the remainder of her life largely in poverty and obscurity. Nonetheless, she maintained fiercely independent opinions, even in the face of criticism within her own community. She expressed her opposition to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation Supreme Court decision, for example, on the grounds that she did not believe black children needed to attend school with white children in order to receive a quality education. Hurston died in the Saint Lucie County welfare home in Fort Pierce, Florida, on January 28, 1960.

Writing Assignment

Read Hurston's letter voicing her opposition to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision published in the *Orlando Sentinel* in August 1955. Called "Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix," it is available online at http://www.lewrockwell.com/epstein/epstein15.html. React to Hurston's position by writing a response in your voice or the voice of someone living in 1955; agree or disagree with what Hurston has to say.

Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance

Although Hurston's major work, Their Eyes Were Watching God, was not published until 1937, she was an enthusiastic—and flamboyant—part of the Harlem Renaissance, a great flowering of black arts and culture that was, in the words of Robert Hemenway, "more a spirit than a movement" (35). Defining the time and place of the Harlem Renaissance is problematic, but most scholars agree that New York City was its center and the 1920s its heyday: "black writers between 1919 and 1930 were published in greater numbers, and received favorably by more publishers, than in any other single decade in American life prior to the 1960s" (Hemenway 36). Although these writers—Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Dorothy West, and W. E. B. DuBois among them—published a wide range of ideas and styles, they shared an interest in exploring both their African and American heritages and a sense of selfassertion and pride.

Alain Locke, Hurston's teacher from Howard University, was a prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance. He was a PhD from Harvard University and Oxford University's first black Rhodes

Scholar. His 1925 anthology *The New Negro* synthesized the artistic vision of African American writers, sculptors, painters, musicians, and dancers and is considered by many the manifesto of this period. Locke recommended Hurston to the editor of the influential magazine *Opportunity*, which published her short story "Drenched in Light," a portrait of the character Isis Watts, who was based on the young Zora.

Hurston became an enthusiastic participant at the parties and other gatherings of the luminaries of this period and enjoyed considerable recognition for her work. In 1925, she received more prizes than any other writer at the *Opportunity* magazine awards dinner. She won second-prize for her short story "Spunk," another second for her play *Color Struck*, and two honorable mentions, one for her short story "Black Death" and another for the play *Spears*. Perhaps even more memorable than the awards was Hurston's entrance that night:

She wore a long, richly colored scarf draped across her shoulders. As she strode into the room—jammed with writers and arts patrons, black and white—Zora flung the colorful scarf around her neck with a dramatic flourish and bellowed a reminder of the title of her winning play: "Coloooooor Struuuuckkkk!" (Boyd 97–98)

In 1926, Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman founded the periodical *Fire!!*, which was intended as a quarterly for the younger generation of artists and, Hurston hoped, a magazine celebrating the folk, the common people, rather than concentrating on what she called "the race problem." Various problems beset the journal from the start, and only one issue was published. Yet that issue included Hurston's "Sweat," considered one of her best short stories. The politics of *Fire!!* demonstrate the

conflicts within African American intellectual and artistic communities over whether the function of art should be primarily protest that calls attention to a racist environment or a celebration of the community's intrinsic art and values. Hemenway praises Hurston for recognizing that "the black intellectual had to challenge both the racist stereotype of folk experience in the American minstrel tradition and the historical neglect of the folk arts by black people themselves" (52). Her attempts to reconcile so-called high and low culture engendered controversy during the 1920s and was reflected later on when fellow writers, such as Richard Wright, criticized *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for its failure to take a stand on racial issues.

Our colleague John Howard, who teaches at Kennedy High School in Maryland, focuses his juniors on African American history and culture as part of his study of Hurston, especially important literary figures and movements that preceded her. Working in groups, his students choose one or more of the following to research and explore in terms of influence or contribution to African American literature: e.g., the conjure tale, "the talented tenth," *Birth of a Nation*, Uncle Remus, the trickster tale, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, minstrel shows, and the Great Migration.

An excellent resource to promote this kind of study and that features visual and auditory renderings of Hurston's world is the Guide to Harlem Renaissance Materials on the Library of Congress website: http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/harlem/harlem. html; it includes both external websites and internal links. The resources include African American sheet music, photographs from the Great Depression to World War II, photographs by Carl Van Vechten of some of the celebrities of the time, a collection of ten plays by Hurston that reflect her travels and research into folk-

lore, jazz recordings by Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, and so much more. There also is a section of lesson plans for teachers, including many activities for student research and exploration.

The Kingwood College Library website also offers many resources, including audio and video clips of the life and times of Hurston. There is even a clip of her reading and singing songs she collected for the Works Progress Administration—sponsored Florida Folklife Project. This site also references other online resources for the Harlem Renaissance. One is a video of Hurston and Langston Hughes; another is an exploration of African American women prominent during this period. Links are within the site: http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/Hurston.htm

Alice Walker "Finds" Zora

Hurston virtually disappeared from the literary scene and publication after her death. Then in the 1970s, author Alice Walker developed an interest in her, traveled to Hurston's birthplace in Eatonville and Fort Pierce where she died, and wrote an essay that was published in Ms. Magazine in 1975. That piece stimulated interest in Hurston that resulted in the reissuance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a renewed interest in her writing, and eventually the reprinting of her other works. (This essay became part of Walker's award-winning anthology *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.)

Walker's essay recounts her journey—and it is most definitely expressed as a personal journey—in which her quest to "know" Hurston parallels her journey toward self-knowledge. In fact, Walker admits, rather proudly, that she fabricates "a profoundly useful lie" (95) of her identity as Hurston's niece in order to gain information from the locals who knew or knew of her. At one point, Walker writes, "By this time I am, of course, completely

into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I'm concerned, she is my aunt—and that of all black people as well" ("Looking for Zora" 103).

Walker's description of searching for the grave of Hurston in the Garden of Heavenly Rest, a segregated cemetery, is punctuated with quotations from many sources: critics such as Robert Hemenway, writings of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, comments from students and librarians who are studying Hurston's papers, and Hurston herself. It's a masterfully written essay that can be read as a mystery story, research paper, personal quest, or meditation. Walker's outrage at the unmarked grave, and her determination to change that situation, clearly symbolizes a larger determination to "find" and "mark" neglected artists from the African American past.

Writing Assignment

Read Alice Walker's essay "Looking for Zora." Discuss the search for Zora Neale Hurston and the "clues" Walker finds and interprets. Then consider how this search for Hurston parallels Walker's growing awareness of herself and her cultural heritage.

Festivals and Foundations

Ever since the reprinting of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the late 1970s, Zora Neale Hurston has been celebrated in conferences, symposia, lectures, festivals, and foundations. Since 1988, the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. has sponsored the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities to mark the legacy of Hurston. Teacher and Florida native Sharon Johnston describes the town:

In areas of Eatonville, I see the front porches, the country store, the pear trees, the pine trees, and the oaks that serve as the backdrop for Hurston stories. Although dramatic physical changes have occurred with the paving of the streets, the interstate cutting through the town, and the opening of the Catherine Alexander Post Office, the traditional African American culture still exists as evidenced in the prominence of the Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church where Hurston's father and brother were pastors, the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts, and the vendors on street corners offering delicious pitgrilled barbecue and fried fish. (Johnston, AP Central website)

The quiet of this small town of approximately 3,000 residents changes dramatically during the last week of each January. What began as a modest gathering of Zora devotees has turned into a multidisciplinary, multiday event that draws more than 50,000 locals and tourists, along with celebrities and artists, from around the world. Dubbed "ZORA! Festival," this event has grown from lectures and discussions of Hurston and her work to a celebration of black art, history, and culture with participation of such well-known figures as Ruby Dee, Danny Glover, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Al Jarreau, and John Hope Franklin. The 2007 festival included topics and exhibits from "African Metalwork and Currency of the Igbo Peoples of Nigeria" to "The Eatonville Quilters: A Celebration of Community Tradition."

In 1990, author and arts advocate Marita Golden and bibliophile Clyde McElvene founded the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation with the mission "to preserve the legacy and ensure the future of black writers and the literature they produced" (http://www.hurston-wright.org). This foundation, along with its partners, presents \$240,000 in prize money to writers who compete for the annual Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, offers workshops to both practicing and neophyte writers, and

develops creative writing programs for middle and high school students. In an email interview, Golden comments that Hurston was "40 years ahead of her time. The changes in the world brought by the Civil Rights and Women's Movements finally caught up with where Zora had been all along." She explains that she began the foundation "as a way to nurture talented African American writers who need institutional support for the task of finding, developing, and honoring their voice" and believes that the foundation's "focus on honoring and protecting the unique black aesthetic and worldview makes it complimentary with Zora's spirit" (email interview, 23 October 2007).

In recent years, another "Zora fest" has begun in Fort Pierce, Florida, where Hurston is buried. At the end of March, scholars, teachers, and readers of Hurston gather to discuss and celebrate her life and work. Jody Bonet, director of St. Lucie County Cultural Affairs, initiated the Zora Neale Hurston Dust Tracks Heritage Trail "to bring a sense of pride to the community and spread Zora's universal theme of 'jump at de sun'" (email interview, 2 January 2008). Officially dedicated in 2004, the Heritage Trail has the long-term goal of establishing stops all over Florida and in other parts of the country where Hurston spent time and made an impact. St. Lucie County recently received a grant to produce a documentary on Hurston that will, according to Bonet, include "recordings of reenactments and interviews with people who knew Zora."

Collaborative Activity

Working in groups, research one of the Zora festivals, events, or foundations and develop a proposal for a group of students in your school to travel and learn more about Hurston and her work. Be specific about where you would go and what you would learn (e.g., a writing workshop in Washington, D.C., a walk down the Dust Tracks Heritage Trail in Fort Pierce, Florida). Keep in mind that you are essentially writing an argument for the worthwhile nature and educational value of the activity or event you choose. (You might even consider a specific audience for financial support, such as a local business or a parent group.) Conduct your research online and organize your findings as a PowerPoint presentation.

Perhaps the clearest sign that Hurston has become an essential part of the national landscape was the National Endowment for the Arts selection of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for its 2007 Big Read. Communities all across the United States celebrated Hurston and her novel with activities ranging from discussion groups (face-to-face and online) to storytelling and writing workshops to films to poetry slams and concerts. The *Washington Post* reported on Washington, D.C.'s month-long celebration and published poetry written by twenty-first-century students—a testimony to Hurston's continuing inspiration and vitality.

In subsequent chapters, we focus primarily on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's most widely read and taught novel, and the recent film version of it. We also have developed strategies for teaching two of her most popular short stories and a sampling of her anthologized nonfiction.

ith the publication of her landmark novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston has become a widely taught author in English classrooms across the nation. The authentic voices of her fiction and nonfiction embrace colloquial dialect and explore universal themes of relationships, self-discovery, race, and identity.

In Zora Neale Hurston in the Classroom, the eleventh book in the NCTE High School Literature Series, teachers will discover new ways to share the work of this important author with students. The book offers a practical approach to Hurston using a range of student-centered activities for teaching Hurston's nonfiction, short stories, and the print and film versions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

This volume features numerous resources and strategies for helping students engage with Hurston's writing. Highlights include biographical information, critical analysis, teacher-tested activities, writing assignments and student models, and discussion strategies and questions.

Zora Neale Hurston in the Classroom: "With a harp and a sword in my hands" is a useful resource that will enliven any literature classroom with exciting and enriching ideas and activities.

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