

# Zora Neale Hurston in the Classroom

“With a harp and a sword in my hands”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Renée H. Shea and  
Deborah L. Wilchek

# Contents



<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	<i>xi</i>
<b>1. Where Life and Art Intersect</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Two Short Stories: Using “Spunk” and “Sweat” to Access Hurston.</b> . . . . .	<b>14</b>
<b>3. Giving Voice to Their Eyes Were Watching God: Discussion Strategies</b> . . . . .	<b>29</b>
<b>4. Writing about Their Eyes Were Watching God: The Thesis-Driven Essay</b> . . . . .	<b>45</b>
<b>5. From Print to Celluloid: The Film of Their Eyes Were Watching God.</b> . . . . .	<b>61</b>
<b>6. Hurston’s Nonfiction: A Study in Close Reading</b> . . . . .	<b>74</b>
<b>7. Making Connections.</b> . . . . .	<b>91</b>
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i> . . . . .	<i>97</i>











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 self-assertion 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





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 pit-grilled 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







With 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.

National Council of Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road

Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870

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