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## A WRITER'S MODEL

Folklore into Fiction:

The Writings of Zora Neale Hurston

In 1973, Alice Walker, an author and poet, made a sentimental visit to the African American city of Eatonville, Florida. Her goal was to find the grave of a writer she greatly admired, Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, died in poverty in 1960 (“Hurston, Zora Neale, [Microsoft Encarta](#)). Walker found no grave or marker in Eatonville, Hurston’s hometown. Instead, she learned that her literary idol had been buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida. She commissioned a headstone for the site:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

“A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH”

NOVELIST

FOLKLORIST

ANTHROPOLOGIST

1901

1960

It is significant that Alice Walker—poet, novelist, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in fiction—would add “folklorist” and “anthropologist” to her description of the neglected author, for Zora Neale Hurston was more than a gifted novelist. She was also a perceptive student of her own culture, an author of two notable books of folklore, a member of the American Folklore Society, the American Ethnological Society, and the American Anthropological Society (Hurston, [Dust Tracks](#) 171). Hurston’s work as an anthropologist

is, in fact, directly related to her creative writing. The connection is clear in many elements of her fiction.

Hurston's life story begins in Eatonville, Florida, near Orlando. Eatonville was originally incorporated as an African-American town—a unique situation that had an impact throughout Hurston's life. Her hometown was also her earliest training ground (although she could hardly have realized it at the time) in black Southern folklore, the place where she heard the local storytellers tell their big “lies” (Hurston, Dust Tracks 197).

Young Zora, whose father was a Baptist preacher, received little formal education and worked at menial jobs. However, she read whenever and whatever she could, and her great goal was education.

Paying her own way, Hurston was able to study at Morgan College and Howard University. By that time she was already a writer, using folk tales and her hometown in her fiction. At Howard she wrote “John Redding Goes to Sea,” which had “black folk beliefs” about witches' curses and screech owls (Ikonné 185–186). Another early short story, “Spunk,” was set in “an unnamed village that is obviously Eatonville” (Hemenway 41, 77–78).

Then came a turning point in her life. In 1925 she was admitted to prestigious Barnard College in New York City—its first African American student (Howard, “Being Herself” 101–02). At Barnard, Hurston studied anthropology under Ruth Benedict. Just before Hurston graduated, Franz Boas of Columbia University, another eminent anthropologist, read one of her term papers. Boas invited Hurston to study with him and gave her another way to look at the Eatonville tales she loved to tell. According to Lillie Howard, “She learned to view the good old lies and racy, sidesplitting anecdotes . . . as invaluable folklore, creative material that continued the African oral tradition . . .” (“Hurston” 135). Hurston decided then to become a serious social scientist. In 1927 Boas

recommended her for the first of several grants she was to receive. She went south to gather folklore.

Clearly, Hurston's attraction to her culture's stories was always intertwined with her fiction. Anthropology simply made her natural attention to African American folklore and culture more systematic and intensive; as she said, "research is formalized curiosity" (qtd. in Chamberlain).

After she began doing fieldwork, she alternated between anthropological and creative writing. Her study of Eatonville folk tales and New Orleans hoodoo (voodoo) in 1927 and 1928 resulted in the book of folk tales Mules and Men, and she wrote her first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, soon after. Many critics have noted that all of Hurston's novels showed the effects of her study of anthropology, and one of the most obvious connections between the two appears in her fiction's plots and characters.

Just one example of how Hurston's research worked into the plot of Jonah's Gourd Vine is the "bitter bone" that An' Dangie uses in a ritual to make Hattie invisible (200). In Mules and Men, Hurston reported how she underwent a whole ceremony to get the "Black Cat Bone," or bitter bone, of invisibility (272).

In later books, too, these connections occur. A field trip to Haiti and Jamaica in 1937 produced Tell My Horse, another study of voodoo. A year after its appearance she published the novel Moses, Man of the Mountain, which has been described as a blend of "fiction, folklore, religion, and comedy" (Howard, "Hurston" 140). In it, Moses is a "hoodoo man," an idea that also appears in Jonah's Gourd Vine (231).

Dialect and black idiom are also important parts of both Hurston's scientific work and her creative writing. She worked into her fiction the words she heard and researched in the field. According to her biographer, Robert Hemenway, the long sermon that is the climax of Jonah's Gourd Vine "was taken almost verbatim from Hurston's field notes"

(197). The novel, in fact, contains so many folk sayings that Robert Bone has claimed “. . . they are too nonfunctional, too anthropological . . .” (127).

Most critics have agreed with Darryl Pinckney that Hurston’s “ear for the vernacular of folk speech is impeccable” (56). Even a critic in 1937 who found Hurston’s dialect “less convincing” than another writer’s suggested that Hurston’s dialect might be more realistic (Thompson). Her excellent ear and her “skill at transcribing” (Young 220) made the language in her first novel something new and therefore somewhat hard to read:

“Iss uh shame, Sister. Ah’d cut down dat Jonah’s gourd vine in uh minute, if Ah had all de say-so. You know Ah would, but de majority of ‘em don’t keer whut he do, some uh dese people stands in wid it. De man mus’ is got roots uh got piece uh dey tails buried by his doorstep. . . .” (230)

However, some African American writers of Hurston’s time disapproved of her “playing the minstrel” in her fiction’s use of southern black dialect—and in other ways as well. Zora Neale Hurston was in fact a controversial figure within the Harlem Renaissance. She was attacked for her novels’ picture of black life, and this portrayal is another connection between her anthropology work and her fiction (Howard, “Being Herself” 156).

Hurston came to New York when the Harlem Renaissance was in full bloom. This literary movement of the 1920s included such noted writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, and Arna Bontemps. They, too, were celebrating blackness and bringing it to the public, but they saw their mission as “a guiding elite” for other African Americans who were not as liberated (Pinckney 55). They didn’t want to support a stereotyped image in art. Sterling Brown even attacked Hurston’s nonfiction. He said that “Mules and Men should be more bitter” (qtd in Howard, “Hurston” 139).

Hurston, on the other hand, believed she was serving an unmet need. African American folklore had always fascinated the American public; but it had been presented mostly by white writers (such as Joel Chandler Harris), and to her it seemed either patronizing or inadequate (Wilson 109). She wanted to put it in its true social context.

Moreover, Hurston felt her picture of blacks in Jonah's Gourd Vine and in Their Eyes Were Watching God, generally regarded as her finest novel, was thoroughly realistic. She felt that the Harlem Renaissance writers were unfairly criticizing her fiction because it didn't have a political message. She said they believed ". . . Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem," while her intent in Jonah's Gourd Vine was "to tell . . . a story about a man" (Dust Tracks 214).

Hurston did not intend to be a reformer if it meant falsifying what she saw as a scientist and wanted to achieve as an artist. Through her fieldwork she knew intimately the everyday, "normal life of Negroes of the South," and that's what she focused on in much of her fiction (Thompson). Also, her study of many cultures showed her that folk tales functioned, in part, the same way all over the world, as "communal tradition in which distinctive ways of behaving and coping with life were orally transmitted" (Pinckney 56). Hurston thought the tales were sophisticated and important and should be shown as they were. Margaret Wilson sums up Hurston's anthropological and fictional beliefs this way: "She saw people as people" (110).

So even though critics like Richard Wright, Alain Locke, and Sterling Brown objected to the "minstrel image" of blacks in a novel such as Their Eyes Were Watching God, other critics saw both a realistic, vibrant main character (Janie) and Hurston's "fullest description of the mores [customs and values] in Eatonville" (Hemenway 241-42; Pinckney 56). Perhaps Hurston would have been more "race conscious" if she had not grown up in and studied Eatonville, a wholly self-governing black town; but that does not

negate the reality of what she observed and transformed into fiction (Wilson 109; Pinckney 56).

For better or worse, Hurston's fictional world—its plots, characters, language, and picture of life—grew out of the folklore she had heard as a child and then studied as a professional. Like the fine anthropologist she was, Zora Neale Hurston intended to get that world down on paper, and to get it down right.

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