

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 9: Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

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"I have been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands." - ZNH

Hurston, who has undergone a revival in the last twenty-five years, celebrated the courage and the struggle of African Americans in the rural South in the early years of the past century. A contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's chief interest was in folklore which she collected and published under various titles.

| [Top](#) | Primary Works

*Jonah's Gourd Wine* (novel), 1934; *Mules and Men* (folklore), 1935; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (novel), 1937; *Tell My Horse* (Caribbean travel book), 1938; *Moses: Man of the Mountain* (novel), 1939; *Dust Tracks on a Road* (autobiography), 1942; *Seraph on the Swanee*, 1948; *I Love Myself When I am Laughing ... & Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (ed. Alice Walker), 1979; *The Sanctified Church* (ed. Toni Cade Bambara), 1981; *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of ZNH*, 1985.

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| [Top](#) | Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Kathryn Gonzales

In the small town of Notasulga, Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891. She was the fifth of eight children and one of the only two girls. After her birth, Hurston's family moved to the town of Eatonville, Florida. Eatonville was a newly established town founded in 1887, just a few years prior to the Hurston's arrival. Upon hearing that the town consisted solely of African-Americans, Hurston's father, John, felt it held the best opportunities to enable him to care for his large family. He soon found a place for himself playing several roles in the community. He became the local minister and was elected mayor for three concurrent terms. A very serious man, he was often at odds with his strong-willed daughter, Zora. John and Zora's mother, Lucy, were complete opposites in disposition and it was from Lucy that Zora seemed to acquire her adventuresome and questioning spirit. While John was demanding meekness from his family, Lucy was always encouraging her children to "jump at de sun"(Boyd 27). Lucy rationalized that "we might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground"(27).

During her early years, Zora's only real trouble came from relations with her father. The family wanted for little; they

lived on five acres of land in an eight-room house and always had plenty of food. Additionally, the promise of the town of Eatonville, for Zora, lay within its roots of the rich folk culture that Zora would later become well known for writing about. On the front porch of Joe Clarke's general store, Zora received an education that would serve her well in the years to come. There, Zora and her siblings heard tales about how black folks got their color and were introduced to wily characters such as Brer Rabbit and Sis Cat (38).

Sadly, Zora's mother died when she was thirteen and Zora's life took a drastic turn (Kaplan 38). No longer getting along with her father and new step-mother, Zora took to the road and began the journey that would eventually lead her to Harlem. The years following her mother's death, 1905-1912, are often referred to as the "lost years" as no one quite knows how Zora spent this time. She first rambled from town to town and relative to relative, until she finally found a job as a maid working for a singer, Miss M, in the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire company. Zora fell so in love with the atmosphere of the stage that she toured with the company for the next year and a half. Zora's time spent with the troupe served to teach her many new things. She read books handed down to her by the company's tenor, an ex-Harvard man, she gave manicures and acquired an extensive education in music and stage production. When the troupe stopped in Baltimore, Miss M encouraged Zora to quit the company and go get an education. Her new friend gave her a hug and a bit of money and then sent her on her way.

Once situated in Baltimore, Zora made plans to finish her high school education. However, by this time it was 1917 and Zora was twenty-six years old. The Maryland Code promised free admission to public schools for "all colored youths between six and twenty years of age" (Boyd 75). So, Hurston decided to tell a little white lie. She deceived Baltimore school officials into believing she was ten years younger than she really was and reentered high school at the age of twenty-six. She did very well in her classes and began working toward her diploma from Morgan Academy. However, after being encouraged to attend Howard University, Hurston quickly switched from Morgan to Howard Academy where she'd be able to take the proper college prep courses for her desired university. In May of 1919, Hurston finally received her diploma from Howard Academy, and, later that fall, began college classes at Howard University.

At Howard, Hurston became a member of the staff of *The Stylus*, the annual literary journal published by Howard's literary club. Her first short story publication in May of 1921, "John Redding Goes to Sea" caught the attention of writer and professor, Alain Locke. Fortunately for Hurston, Locke was a close acquaintance of *Opportunity* editor, Dr. Charles S. Johnson. Impressed with Hurston's storytelling ability, Locke recommended her work to Johnson. After reading "John Redding Goes to Sea," Johnson wrote to Zora, inviting her to submit material to *Opportunity* (91). Zora sent, "Drenched in Light" and was published in the December 1924 issue of *Opportunity*. At Johnson's urging, Zora packed her manuscripts and clothes and headed to New York. She arrived with only \$1.50 in cash and, as she remembers, with "no job, no friends and a lot of hope" (Marks 53).

Hurston's arrival in Harlem spawned her writing career. At the first official awards banquet hosted by the *Opportunity*, Zora won two 2<sup>nd</sup> place prizes in drama and fiction and two Honorable Mentions for her other works. She met other writers such as Langston Hughes and Fannie Hurst. Before long, Zora became embedded in the chaos that was Harlema attending rent parties and hanging out with the other newly well-known personalities such as Carl Van Vechten, Countee Cullen, and Claude McCay. Zora was seen as clever, witty and out-going. People wanted to know her. Fannie Hurst said Hurston had the gift of "walking into our hearts" (Boyd 100).

During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's, Zora published little. She wrote short stories and essays which were published in journals like *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. Hurston made very little money from these publications and had to rely on a patron of the arts for sustenance. Charlotte Osgood Mason was an elderly white woman who lived up on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and took a keen interest in "primitive" art. She employed Hurston at \$200 a month to gather folk-tales and history of the African Americans of the south. This relationship with Mason was rather stifling to Hurston. She could only write on subject matter that was previously approved by Mason. This hunt for primitive folk lore, led Zora throughout the south during the latter part of the twenties. Hurston's financial arrangement finally came to an end in September of 1932, giving Zora the freedom to publish the material from her travels. The stories that Zora wrote during the Harlem Renaissance were often criticized by the intelligentsia of the era because, as friend and fellow writer, Langston Hughes, stated, "[she] did not write fiction in the protest tradition" (Marks 59). Instead, Zora focused on what she knew of the southern Black existence and tried to create characters and storylines that truly reflected black life.

It isn't until the mid thirties that Zora's studies and persistence finally paid off. Lippincott Company publisher, after reviewing and liking some of Zora's work, asked Hurston if she had a novel ready for publishing. No novel in sight, Zora excitedly answered yes, and an amazing nine weeks later, her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was completed. In a mere four more months, Hurston's second book came out in which she used the research she'd obtained while in the south. Continuing in her anthropological studies, Hurston made her way to Haiti and Jamaica. This trip yielded two more books, totaling five for the decade. Although, she was successfully publishing, Hurston could not make a living off book sales alone. Zora traveled, researched, worked as a teacher and competed for grant money to survive.

The forties led to bleaker times for Zora. She only published two books during this time and failed to come up with the

money for research expeditions she'd hoped to take. She learned of the deaths of two loved ones, her long-time friend, Countee Cullen and her previous patron, Charlotte Mason. She signed on with a new publisher and just when the book was about to be released, Hurston was charged with a fraudulent sex scandal. She was accused of molesting three 10-year-old boys. Eventually, the charges were dropped, but not before they had taken a toll on both her health and her emotional state.

In 1950, Hurston finally settled in Florida where she had been living off and on for years. She loved the climate and didn't want to be taken from the sun anymore. She found a job as a maid for \$30 a week plus room and board. This time spent as a maid after such big success was used to "shift gears." Hurston explained that a "writer has to stop writing every now and then and just live" (Boyd 404). But really, Hurston ditched the housework "as soon as she could afford writing paper again" and found a new place to live (406). Her new landlord, a generous man who just happened to remember Zora's father, waived the rent and here Zora stayed and attempted to focus on her writing once again. Unfortunately, Hurston was suffering from hypertensive heart disease which, although treatable, is known to lead to heart failure or stroke. In October of 1959, Zora suffered a stroke and was admitted to Fort Pierce Memorial for medical attention. She was later released into the care of Lincoln Park Nursing Home where she made her new and last home. The stroke affected her mental abilities. She could no longer think for long periods of time and was unable to write. Still, family members say Zora was feisty as ever, refusing gifts or giving them away to other patients. Zora felt she'd led a full life and deserved no special treatment. She once wrote, "I have loved unselfishly with all the love and ardor of a strong heart, and I have hated with all the power of my soul. [Ö] But already I have touched the four corners of the horizon for from hard searching it seems to me that tears and laughter, love and hate, make up the sum of life" and that seemed to be enough for her (Hurston 348). On January 28, 1960, Zora Hurston had another stroke and was pronounced dead on arrival at Fort Pierce Memorial.

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## Study Questions

1. How do Hurston's stories demonstrate the complexity of the lives of common folks and the richness of their folk culture?
2. Compare and contrast Hurston's Janie with Jean Toomer's Fern. Consider especially the development of "conscious life" for each character.
3. Finish reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Analyze Janie's development as an independent person in light of class discussion of Chapter 2. Comment further on the relationship between Janie and her listening friend, Pheoby. Or trace Hurston's use of folklore through the novel and comment on its significance.
4. One of the commonplaces about American slavery is that slaveholders often separated members of slave families from each other. Analyze the excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Hurston's attempt to heal the lingering impact of separation imposed by slavery and sexism.

## MLA Style Citation of this Web Page:

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 9: Zora Neale Hurston " *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. WWW URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/hurston.html> (provide page date or date of your login).