

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Prof. Andrew Goldstone (andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)

Office hours: Wednesday 12 p.m. in MU 019, or by appointment

TA: Ivana Onubogu (ivana.onubogu@rutgers.edu)

Office hours: Friday 9 a.m. by Zoom

November 30, 2023. Hurston, concluded; Tagore.

review: Hurston's social vision of the hurricane

- ▶ historical precision, but not a chronicle
- ▶ “natural” disaster reveals social division
- ▶ segregation is not immutable but coercively enforced
- ▶ it's...something to laugh about?

The novel maps south Florida's powerful economic position within an extended Caribbean—or alternatively, an extended South—characterized by transnational migrant labor.

Martyn Bone, “The (Extended) South of Black Folk,” *American Literature* 79, no. 4 (December 2007): 773.

mourning the Gulf

Since Tea Cake and Janie had friended with the Bahaman workers in the 'Glades, they, the "Saws," [i.e., people from Nassau], had been gradually drawn into the American crowd. (155)

One of the Bahaman boys stopped by Tea Cake's house in a car and hollered....

"De crow gahn up, man." ...

"If Ah never see you no mo' on earth, Ah'll meet you in Africa." (156)

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reader's position (I)

And twelve more white men had stopped whatever they were doing to listen and pass on what happened between Janie and Tea Cake Woods, and as to whether things were done right or not. That was funny too....

Then she saw all of the colored people standing up in the back of the courtroom. Packed tight like a case of celery, only much darker than that. They were all against her, she could see. (185)


“Gentlemen of the jury, it is for you to decide whether the defendant has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy.” (188)

reader's position (2)

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74/Ms.

IN SEARCH OF
ZORA NEALE HURSTON
BY ALICE WALKER



On January 16, 1959, Zora Neale Hurston, suffering from the effects of a stroke and writing painfully in long-hand, composed a letter to the "editorial department" of Harper & Brothers inquir-

three hundred brown skins,
three hundred good swimmers,
plenty guavas, two schools,
and no jailhouse." Of course I cannot see the guavas,
but the five lakes are still there,
and it is the lakes I

Ms. 3 (March, 1975): 74. Page image: Douglass Library, Rutgers.

reader's position (3)

The creation of a discourse of “the folk” as a *rural* people in Hurston's work in the 1920s and 1930s displaces the migration of black people to cities. (Carby, 76)

Her representation of Eatonville...is both an attempt to make the unknown known and a nostalgic attempt to preserve a disappearing folk culture. (80)

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The assertion of autonomy implicit in this figuration of a discourse that exists only for the pleasure of the self [at the end of *Their Eyes*] displaces the folk as community utterly and irrevocably. (87)

- ▶ Is an individual triumph a collective advance?

reader's position (4)

“Lawd!” Pheoby breathed out heavily, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin’.”

“Now, Pheoby, don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ’em ’cause dey’s parched up from not knowin’ things.” (192)

parallel histories

1891 Tagore, “poṣṭmāṣṭār”

1893 James, “The Middle Years”

1895 Tagore, “kṣudhita pāṣān”

1916 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*

1916 Tagore, *Hungry Stones and Other Stories*

1918 Tagore, *Mashi and Other Stories*

1923 Toomer, *Cane*

1923 Sayers, *Whose Body?*

1925 Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

1929 Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*

1930 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

1937 Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

discussion

- ▶ Does “The Postmaster” take Ratan’s side?

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Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She at once stepped into the post of mother. (164–65)

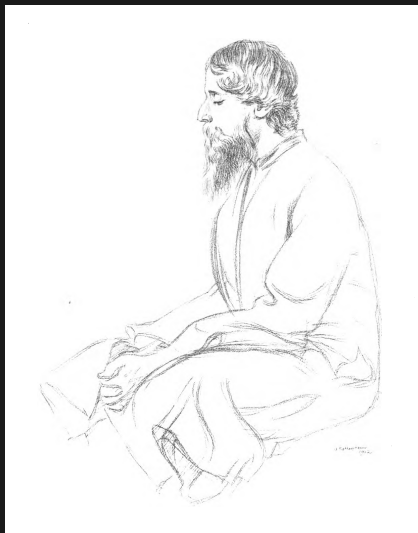
The master said: “You need not be anxious about my going away, Ratan; I shall tell my successor to look after you.” These words were kindly meant, no doubt: but inscrutable are the ways of a woman’s heart!... She burst out weeping. (167)

what literature is Tagore part of?

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It was not at all necessary for my own reputation that I should find my place in the history of your literature. It was an accident for which you were also responsible and possibly most of all was Yeats. But yet sometimes I feel almost ashamed that I whose undoubted claim has been recognized by my countrymen to a sovereignty in our world of letters should not have waited till it was discovered by the outside world in its true majesty and environment, that I should ever go out of my way to court the attention of others having their own language for their enjoyment and use.

Letter to William Rothenstein, November 26, 1932, in *The Essential Tagore*, ed. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakrabarthy (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 119.



William Rothenstein, illus. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (London: Macmillan, 1913), frontispiece. [HathiTrust](#).

modernity (1)

There was an indigo factory near by, and the proprietor, an Englishman, had managed to get a post office established. (159)

He at once wrote off to Calcutta an application for a transfer. (165)

If a Western literature should turn to this extraordinary literature in Bengali [the Bengal Renaissance] and expect to find some sort of simple response to colonialism, he or she will be disappointed; the response is complex, subtle, varied and profound; the colonial world is represented, in these fictions, as history, contemporaneity, memory and change, by, for instance, the post office and the railways, by the names of roads, by professions, and old and new ways of life, rather than the figure of the British oppressor. This peripherality of the Western figure might be unsettling to the Western reader.

Amit Chaudhuri, "Modernity and the Vernacular," in *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature* (New York: Vintage, 2004), xix–xx.

modernity (2)

That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy—such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the Arabian Nights had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and replaced them with a macadamised road, hiding the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.
(160)

modernity (3)

Such little incidents would drive out greater events from her mind.
(161)

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(161)

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 150)

Tagore: bare outlines

- 1861 b. Calcutta
 - 1878 1st visits England (briefly at UCL)
 - 1880 *Evening Songs* (Bengali debut volume)
 - 1883 m. Mrinalini Devi
 - 1901 founds Santiniketan school
 - 1902 wife dies
 - 1912 *Gitanjali* (English), introduction by W.B. Yeats
 - 1913 [Nobel Prize for Literature](#)
 - 1915 knighted
 - 1916 novel *The Home and the World* (Bengali, English)
 - 1916 travels: Japan, USA
 - 1919 returns knighthood after Amritsar massacre
 - 1921 founds Visva-Bharati university
 - 1941 d.
-

(more detail: see the [DNB](#))

Concerning our understanding of this poetry [*Gitanjali*, etc.], by no means exotic but truly universally human in character, the future will probably add to what we know now. We do know, however, that the poet's motivation extends to the effort of reconciling two spheres of civilization widely separated, which above all is the characteristic mark of our present epoch and constitutes its most important task and problem.

Harald Hjärne, Award Ceremony Speech, December 10, 1913. [nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org).

Tagore's "universal literature"

To see literature through the mirror of nation, time and people is to diminish it, not see it fully. If we understand that in literature the universal man (*vishva-manav*) expresses himself, then we can perceive what is truly worthy of observing in literature.

World literature [*viśva-sāhitya*] is not merely the sum of your writings, plus my writing, plus his writings. We generally see literature in this limited, provincial manner. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnectedness with every man's attempt at self-expression—that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to.

Tagore, "Visva Sahitya" (1907), trans. Rijula Das and Makarand R. Paranjape, in *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century*, ed. Debashish Banerji (New Delhi: Springer India, 2015), 286, 288.

So the traveller, borne on the bream of the swift-flowing river, consoled himself with philosophical reflections on the numberless meetings and partings going on in the world—on death, the great parting, from which none returns.

But Ratan had no philosophy. She was wandering about the post office in a flood of tears. It may be that she had still a lurking hope in some corner of her heart that her Dada would return, and that is why she could not tear herself away. Alas for the foolish human heart! (169)

“The Hungry Stones”

“The Hungry Stones”

- ▶ Are ghosts real? Consider how the story spells out the consequences for giving one answer or another.

systems of opposition

present	past
tax-collecting	palace recreation
Rs. 450/month	Mughal luxury
world of men	world of women
sola hat	paijamas
India	Persia, Arabia
comedy	desire
reality	illusion
illusion	reality

Call it reality or dream, the momentary glimpse of that far-off world, 250 years old, vanished in a flash. The mystic forms that brushed past me with their quick unbodied steps, and loud, voiceless laughter. (9)

That I...should be drawing a monthly salary...appeared to me such an astonishingly ludicrous illusion that I burst into a horse-laugh. (11)

My short English coat and tight breeches did not suit me in the least. (15–16)

Who am I? (19)

another opposition

present	past
tax-collecting	palace recreation
Rs. 450/month	Mughal luxury
world of men	world of women
sola hat	paijamas
India	Persia, Arabia
comedy	desire
reality	illusion
illusion	reality
frame narrator	inner narrator?

next

- ▶ Anand, *Untouchable* (focus on first half)