

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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December 3, 2025. Hurston (2).

evidence workshop

- ▶ improve the analyses
- ▶ give gifts
- ▶ saying “it’s good” is about as useful as giving the writer a penny
- ▶ if you, the writer, say “what I *meant* was...” maybe you need to revise to say that instead

review: three ambiguities

- ▶ Who narrates?
 - ▶ Janie tells/thinks her own story in the *fabula*
- ▶ Who perceives?
 - ▶ Janie is the CF...mostly
- ▶ What language is this book written in?
 - ▶ American, of course
 - ▶ two varieties: AAVE and SE
 - ▶ or perhaps: one language, two registers

The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression...The American Negro has done wonders to the English language.

Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in Nancy Cunard, ed., *Negro Anthology: 1931-1933* (London: Cunard, 1934), 39, NYPL.

review: quotation, Hurston-style

- ▶ reported speech is highly marked as AAVE

- ▶ Hurston's commitment to vernacular creativity
- ▶ dialect writing once again: risky

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” *New Masses*, October 5, 1937: 23.

- ▶ EN appears to be literary register, “poetic,” yet:
 - ▶ free indirect discourse models the collusion between EN and CF
 - ▶ “monstropolous”
 - ▶ embedded folk tale (“Bare, bare fat”; “de mule uh de world”)

“Oh, yes, de white folks did put us to work too,” said Jim Allen.

Know how it happened? After God got thru makin’ de world and de varmints and de folks, he made up a great big bundle and let it down in de middle of de road. It laid dere for thousands of years, then Ole Missus said to Ole Massa: “Go pick up dat box, Ah want to see whut’s in it.” Ole Massa look at de box and it look so heavy dat he says to de nigger, “Go fetch me dat big ole box out dere in de road.” De nigger been stumblin’ over de box a long time so he tell his wife:

“Oman, go git dat box.” So de nigger ’oman she runned to git de box. She says:

“Ah always lak to open up a big box ’cause there’s nearly always something good in great big boxes.” So she run and grabbed a-hold of de box and opened it up and it was full of hard work.

Dat’s de reason de sister in black works harder than anybody else in de world. De white man tells de nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935), in *Folk Tales, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), 76–77, [Alexander Street](#).

who will speak? (I)

It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life.

Franz Boas, preface to *Mules and Men* (1935), in *Folk Tales*, 5.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

who will speak? (2)

“Mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’.” (43)

“When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.”

“Great God from Zion!” Sam Watson gasped. “Y’all really playin’ de dozens tuhnight”...

Joe Starks didn’t know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store. (79–80)

is speech all?

Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought. Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees. (24)

She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (72)

Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a wall of stone and steel. The funeral was going on outside. All things concerning death and burial were said and done. Finish. End. Nevermore. Darkness. Deep hole. Dissolution. Eternity. Weeping and wailing outside. Inside the expensive black folds were resurrection and life. (89)

free indirect

Janie noted that while he didn't talk the mule himself, he sat and laughed at it....Joe would hustle her off inside the store to sell something. Look like he took pleasure in doing it. Why couldn't he go himself sometimes? She had come to hate the inside of that store anyway. That Post Office too. People always coming and asking for mail at the wrong time....

But Joe kept saying that she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted her to use her privileges. That was the rock she was battered against.
(54)

re-direct

At the newel post Janie whirled around and for the space of a thought she was lit up like a transfiguration. Her next thought brought her crashing down. He's just saying anything for the time being, feeling he's got me so I'll b'lieve him. The next thought buried her under tons of cold futility. He's trading on being younger than me. Getting ready to laugh at me for an old fool. But oh, what wouldn't I give to be twelve years younger so I could b'lieve him! (105)

The thing made itself into pictures and hung around Janie's bedside all night long. Anyhow, she wasn't going back to Eatonville to be laughed at and pitied. She had ten dollars in her pocket and twelve hundred in the bank. But oh God, don't let Tea Cake be off somewhere hurt and Ah not know nothing about it. And God, please suh, don't let him love nobody else but me. (120)

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“Evenin’, Mis’ Starks. Could yuh lemme have uh pound uh knuckle pud-
din’* till Saturday?” (98)

*A beating with the fist. (98n.)

is inner speech all?

Let the old hypocrites learn to mind their own business, and leave other folks alone. Tea Cake wasn't doing a bit more harm trying to win hisself a little money than they was always doing with their lying tongues. (126)

Discussion

- ▶ What side is Hurston's narrator on here?

feminist questions: the plot

She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman. (25)

The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. (87)

“Janie, you’s yo’ own woman, and Ah hope you know whut you doin’.
Ah sho hope you ain’t lak uh possum—de older you gits, de less sense yuh got.” (113)

So her soul crawled out from its hiding place. (128)

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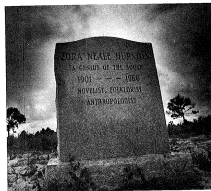
- Discussion: what is this novel doing with the coming-of-age plot? be specific.



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

Hurston in 1935, photographed by Carl Van Vechten, [Beinecke Library](#); Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," Ms. 3 (March, 1975): 74. Walker placed the marker and chose the inscription: "ZORA NEALE HURSTON | A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH | 1901 – – – 1960 | NOVELIST, FOLKLORIST | ANTHROPOLOGIST"

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- 1891 b. Notasulga, AL
- 1897 John Hurston elected mayor of Eatonville, FL
- 1918 at Howard U.
- 1925 at Barnard (BA, 1928); studies anthropology under Franz Boas
- 1925 "Spunk," *Opportunity*; rpt. in *The New Negro*, ed. Locke
- 1926 *Fire!!*, ed. Hurston, Hughes, Thurman
- 1931 "Hoodoo in America," *J. Am. Folklore*
- 1935 *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott)
Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre Project
- 1936 fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti (Guggenheim)
drafts *Their Eyes* in seven weeks
- 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Lippincott)
- 1942 *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Lippincott): memoir, success
- 1950 increasing poverty and obscurity
- 1960 d. Florida
- 1975 Walker, "In Search of ZNH," Ms.
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next

▶ finish *Their Eyes*