

Zora Neale Hurston

(c. 1891–1960)

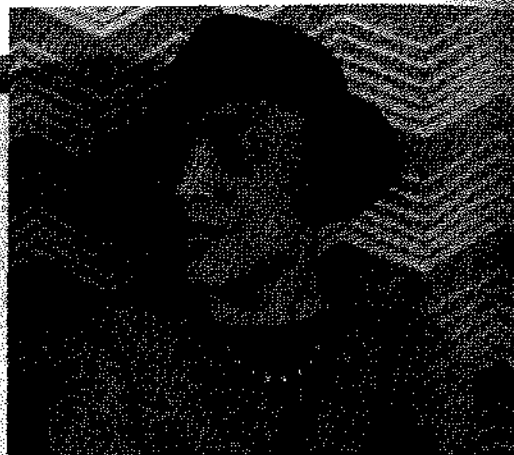
Although she claimed to have been born in Eatonville, Florida, in 1901, Zora Neale Hurston was actually born ten years earlier in Notsaluga, Alabama. Her family moved to the all-black town of Eatonville when she was very young. Her father was a preacher, and her mother, a schoolteacher, urged her talented daughter to "jump at the sun."

In her autobiography, Hurston recalls that as a young girl, "I used to climb to the top of one of the huge chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon. . . . It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like."

When Hurston was about fourteen, her mother died, and Zora was passed among relatives and family friends, supporting herself from her early teens on. Eventually, she enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she published her first story in 1921.

Four years later, she set out for New York City to attend Barnard College, arriving with a dollar and a half in her pocket. Hurston was soon in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, writing stories and plays that celebrated her African American heritage. She wore big hats and turbans, danced, gave parties, and sometimes shocked other African American artists.

At Barnard, Hurston met the anthropologist Franz Boas, who believed that Hurston's interest was in his field, the study of human social and cultural behavior. Indeed, Hurston, who became his protégé, did eventually make her reputation not just as a fiction writer but also as a folklorist. She traveled through Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana to gather material, using a scholar's eye to evaluate oral tales. Eventually, she gathered enough folklore to fill two groundbreaking collections, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). Alice



Zora Neale Hurston (detail) (1935) by Carl Van Vechten.

Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Van Vechten Trust.

Walker (page 1102) says that the stories in *Mules and Men* gave back to her own relatives in the South all the stories they'd forgotten or grown ashamed of.

Hurston also wrote musical revues portraying black folk culture, and these brought her initial success. But it was *Story* magazine's publication of her short story "The Gilded Six Bits" that launched her literary career. When the Philadelphia publisher J. B. Lippincott asked if she had a novel, Hurston promptly sat down and wrote *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, published in 1924. Three years later Hurston published her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the story of a young African American woman who strikes out for a life beyond a conventional marriage, much as Hurston herself had done.

Throughout the last twenty years of her life Hurston continued to produce fiction and nonfiction, including her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. But she began to have difficulty finding a market for her work, some of which was criticized in the African American community for celebrating the life of black people in the United States rather than confronting the white community for its discrimination.

In the late 1940s, Hurston left New York and returned to Florida. In 1960, she died, broke, in a Florida welfare home. A collection had to be taken up to pay for her funeral. Locally, in the years since her death, much of her work has been brought back into print, and Hurston is now recognized as the forerunner of such celebrated contemporary writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

Zora Neale Hurston

Dust Tracks on a Road



My grandmother
worried about my
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great deal.

I used to take a seat on top of the gatepost and watch the world go by. One way to Orlando ran past my house, so the carriages and cars would pass before me. The movement made me glad to see it. Often the white travelers would hail me, but more often I hailed them, and asked, "Don't you want me to go a piece of the way with you?"

They always did. I know now that I must have caused a great deal of amusement among them, but my self-assurance must have carried the point, for I was always invited to come along. I'd ride up the road for perhaps a half-mile, then walk back. I did not do this with the permission of my parents, nor with their foreknowledge. When they found out about it later, I usually got a whipping. My grandmother worried about my forward ways a great deal. She had known slavery and to her my brazenness was unthinkable.

"Git down offa dat gatepost! You li'l sow, you! Git down! Setting up dere looking dem white

Vocabulary

hail v.: greet.

brazenness (brā'zan-nis) n.: boldness.

Dunbar High School, Quincy, Florida (pages 837-839, 841, 842).

Florida State Archives.

folks right in de face! They's gowine¹ to lynch you, yet. And don't stand in dat doorway gazing out at 'em neither. Youse too brazen to live long."

Nevertheless, I kept right on gazing at them, and "going a piece of the way" whenever I could make it. The village seemed dull to me most of the time. If the village was singing a chorus, I must have missed the tune.

Perhaps a year before the old man² died, I came to know two other white people for myself. They were women.

It came about this way. The whites who came down from the North were often brought by their friends to visit the village school. A Negro school was something strange to them, and while they were always sympathetic and kind, curiosity must have been present, also. They came and went, came and went. Always, the room was hurriedly put in order, and we were threatened with a prompt and bloody death if we cut one caper while the visitors were present. We always sang a spiritual, led by Mr. Calhoun himself. Mrs. Calhoun always stood in the back, with a palmetto switch³ in her hand as a squelcher. We were all little angels for the duration, because we'd better be. She would cut her eyes⁴ and give us a glare that meant trouble, then turn her face toward the visitors and beam as much as to say it was a great privilege and pleasure to teach lovely children like us. They couldn't see that palmetto hickory in her hand behind all those benches, but we knew where our angelic behavior was coming from.

Usually, the visitors gave warning a day ahead and we would be cautioned to put on shoes, comb our heads, and see to ears and fingernails. There was a close inspection of every one of us before we marched in that morning. Knotty heads, dirty ears, and fingernails got hauled out

of line, strapped, and sent home to lick the calf over again.

This particular afternoon, the two young ladies just popped in. Mr. Calhoun was flustered but he put on the best show he could. He dismissed the class that he was teaching up at the front of the room, then called the fifth grade to reading. That was my class.

So we took our readers and went up front. We stood up in the usual line, and opened to the lesson. It was the story of Pluto and Persephone.⁶ It was new and hard to the class in general, and Mr. Calhoun was very uncomfortable as the readers stumbled along, spelling out words with their lips, and in mumbling undertones before they exposed them experimentally to the teacher's ears.

Then it came to me. I was fifth or sixth down the line. The story was not new to me, because I had read my reader through from lid to lid the first week that Papa had bought it for me.

That is how it was that my eyes were not in the book, working out the paragraph which I knew would be mine by counting the children ahead of me. I was observing our visitors, who held a book between them, following the lesson. They had shiny hair, mostly brownish. One had a looping gold chain around her neck. The other one was dressed all over in black and white with a pretty finger ring on her left hand. But the thing that held my eyes were their fingers. They were long and thin, and very white except up near the tips. There they were baby pink. I had never seen such hands. It was a fascinating discovery for me. I wondered how they felt. I would have given those hands more attention, but the child before me was almost

1. **gowine**: dialect for "going."

2. **old man**: white farmer who knew Hurston's family, took her fishing, and gave her advice.

3. **palmetto switch**: whip made from the stem of a large, fanlike leaf of a kind of palm tree. Teachers sometimes used these switches to discipline students.

4. **cut her eyes**: slang for "look scornfully."

5. **lick the calf**: slang for "wash up."

6. **Pluto and Persephone** (pär-sef'ə-nē): In classical mythology, Pluto, or Hades, is the god who rules the underworld; Persephone, also known as Proserpina, is his wife, queen of the underworld. In this version of the origin of the seasons, Hurston uses the names of Roman and Greek gods interchangeably.

Vocabulary

caper (kă'pär) *n.*: foolish prank.

My turn next, so I got on my mark, turning my eyes back to the book and made up my place. Some of the stories I had read several times, and this Greco-Roman myth was one of my favorites. I was exalted by it and that is the way I read my paragraph. "Jupiter⁷ had seen her (Persephone). He had seen the maiden picking flowers in the field. He had seen the chariot of the dark monarch pass by the maiden's side. He had seen him when he seized Persephone. He had seen the black horses leap down from Aetna's⁸ fiery throat. Persephone was now in Pluto's realm and he had made her his wife."

The two women looked at each other and then back to the book. Mr. Calhoun broke out with a proud smile beneath his bushy moustache, and instead of the next child taking up where I had ended, he nodded to me to go on. So I read on to the end, where fly Mercury, the messenger of the gods, brought Persephone back to the sunlit earth and returned her to the arms of her mother, Ceres, her mother, that the world might have springtime and summer flowers, autumn and harvest. But because she had bitten the pomegranate while in Pluto's kingdom, she must return to him for three months of each year, and so the queen. Then the world had winter, until spring returned to earth.

The class was dismissed and the visitors left us away and went into a low-voiced conversation with Mr. Calhoun for a few minutes. He glanced my way once or twice and I began to fidget. Not only was I barefooted, but my feet were dusty. My hair was more untidy than usual, and my nails were not shiny

clean. Oh, I'm going to catch it now. Those ladies saw me, too. Mr. Calhoun is promising to attend to me. So I thought.

Then Mr. Calhoun called me. I went up thinking how awful it was to get a whipping before company. Furthermore, I heard a snicker run over the room. Hennie Clark and Stell Brazzle did it out loud, so I would be sure to hear them. The smart aleck was going to get it. I slipped one hand behind me and switched my dress tail at them, indicating scorn.

"Come here, Zora Neale," Mr. Calhoun cooed as I reached the desk. He put his hand on my shoulder and gave me little pats. The ladies smiled and held out those flower-looking fingers toward me. I seized the opportunity for a good look.

"Shake hands with the ladies, Zora Neale," Mr. Calhoun prompted and they took my hand one after the other and smiled. They asked me if I loved school, and I lied that I did. There was *some* truth in it, because I liked geography and reading, and I liked to play at recess time. Whoever it



The ladies smiled and held out these flower-looking fingers toward me.

was invented writing and arithmetic got no thanks from me. Neither did I like the arrangement where the teacher could sit up there with a palmetto stem and lick me whenever he saw fit. I hated things I couldn't do anything about. But I knew better than to bring that up right there, so I said yes, I *loved* school.

"I can tell you do," Brown Taffeta gleamed. She patted my head, and was lucky enough not to get sandspurs in her hand. Children who roll and tumble in the grass in Florida are apt to get sandspurs in their hair. They shook hands with me again and I went back to my seat.

Vocabulary

exalted (eg-zôlt'id) *v.*: lifted up.
realm (reilm) *n.*: kingdom.

⁷Jupiter: In Roman mythology, king of the gods.
⁸Mount Aetna's: Mount Aetna (also spelled *Etna*) is a large volcano mountain in eastern Sicily.

When school let out at three o'clock, Mr. Calhoun told me to wait. When everybody had gone, he told me I was to go to the Park House, that was the hotel in Maitland, the next afternoon to call upon Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Hurd. I must tell Mama to see that I was clean and brushed from head to feet, and I must wear shoes and stockings. The ladies liked me, he said, and I must be on my best behavior.

The next day I was let out of school an hour early, and went home to be stood up in a tub of suds and be scrubbed and have my ears dug into. My sandy hair sported a red ribbon to match my red and white checked gingham dress, starched until it could stand alone. Mama saw to it that my shoes were on the right feet, since I was careless about left and right. Last thing, I was given a handkerchief to carry, warned again about my behavior, and sent off, with my big brother John to go as far as the hotel gate with me.

First thing, the ladies gave me strange things, like stuffed dates and preserved ginger, and encouraged me to eat all that I wanted. Then they showed me their Japanese dolls and just talked. I was then handed a copy of *Scribner's Magazine*, and asked to read a place that was pointed out to me. After a paragraph or two, I was told with smiles, that that would do.

I was led out on the grounds and they took my picture under a palm tree. They handed me what was to me then a heavy cylinder done up in fancy paper, tied with a ribbon, and they told me good-bye, asking me not to open it until I got home.

My brother was waiting for me down by the lake, and we hurried home, eager to see what was in the thing. It was too heavy to be candy or anything like that. John insisted on toting it for me.

My mother made John give it back to me and let me open it. Perhaps, I shall never experience

such joy again. The nearest thing to that moment was the telegram accepting my first book. One hundred goldy-new pennies rolled out of the cylinder. Their gleam lit up the world. It was an avarice that moved me. It was the beauty of the thing. I stood on the mountain. Mama let me play with my pennies for a while, then put them away for me to keep.


That was only the beginning. The next day I received an Episcopal hymnbook bound in white leather with golden cross stamped into the front cover, a copy of *The Story of the Family Robinson*, and a book of fairy tales.

I set about to commit the song words to memory. There was no music written there, just the words. But there was to my consciousness music between them just the same. "When I survey the Wondrous Cross" seemed the most beautiful to me, so I committed that to memory first of all. Some of them seemed dull and without life, and I pre-

tended they were not there. If white people liked trashy singing like that, there must be something funny about them that I had not noticed before. I stuck to the pretty ones where the words marched to a throb I could feel.

A month or so after the two young ladies returned to Minnesota, they sent me a huge box packed with clothes and books. The red coat with a wide circular collar and the red tam pleased me more than any of the other things. My chums pretended not to like anything that I had, but even then I knew that they were jealous. Old Smiarty had gotten by them again. The clothes were not new, but they were very nice. I shone like the morning sun.

But the books gave me more pleasure than



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such joy again.

Vocabulary

avarice (av'ə-ris) n.: greed.

...toes. I had never been too keen on dressing up. It called for hard scrubbings with Octagon soap suds getting in my eyes, and none too gentle fingers scrubbing my neck and gouging my ears.

In that box were *Gulliver's Travels*, Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, *Dick Whittington*, *Greek and Roman Tales*, and best of all, *Norse Tales*. Why did the Norse tales strike so deeply into my soul? I do not know, but they did. I seemed to remember Thor swing his mighty short-handled hammer as he sped across the sky in rumbling thunder, lightning flashing from the tread of his hooves and the wheels of his chariot. The great good Odin, who went down to the well of knowledge to drink, and was told that the price of drink from that fountain was an eye. Odin drank deeply, then plucked out one eye without a murmur and handed it to the grizzly keeper, and walked away. That held majesty for me.

Of the Greeks, Hercules moved me most. I followed him eagerly on his tasks. The story of the choice of Hercules as a boy when he met Pleasure and Duty, and put his hand in that of Duty and followed her steep way to the blue hills of fame and glory, which she pointed out at the top, moved me profoundly. I resolved to be like him. The tricks and turns of the other gods and goddesses left me cold. There were other thin books about this and that sweet and gentle little girl who gave up her heart to Christ and good books. Almost always they died from it, preaching as they passed. I was utterly indifferent to their deaths. In the first place I could not conceive of death, and in the next place they never had any funerals that amounted to a hill of beans, so I didn't care how soon they rolled up in their big, soulful, blue eyes and kicked the bucket. They had no meat on their bones.

But I also met Hans Andersen⁹ and Robert Louis Stevenson.¹⁰ They seemed to know what I

wanted to hear and said it in a way that tingled me. Just a little below these friends was Rudyard Kipling in his *Jungle Books*.¹¹ I loved his talking snakes as much as I did the hero.

I came to start reading the Bible through my mother. She gave me a licking one afternoon for repeating something I had overheard a neighbor telling her. She locked me in her room after the whipping, and the Bible was the only thing in there for me to read. I happened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested. David went here and he went there, and no matter where he went, he smote 'em hip and thigh. Then he sung songs to his harp awhile, and went out and smote some more. Not one time did David stop and preach about sins and things. All David wanted to know from God was who to kill and when. He took care of the other details himself. Never a quiet moment. I liked him a lot. So I read a great deal more in the Bible, hunting for some more active people like David. Except for the beautiful language of Luke and Paul, the New Testament still plays a poor second to the Old Testament for me. The Jews had a God who laid about Him¹² when they needed Him. I could see no use waiting till Judgment Day to see a man who was just crying for a good killing, to be told to go and roast.¹³ My idea was to give him a good killing first, and then if he got roasted later on, so much the better. ■

11. **Rudyard Kipling . . . Books:** Kipling (1865–1936) was an English writer born in India. His *Jungle Book* and *Second Jungle Book* contain stories of the adventures of Mowgli, a boy raised by animals in the jungles of India.

12. **laid about Him:** slang for “struck blows in every direction.”

13. **roast:** slang for “burn in hell.”

Vocabulary

tread (tred) *n.*: step; walk.

profoundly (prō-faund'fē) *adv.*: deeply.

resolved (ri-zälv'd) *v.*: made a decision; determined.

conceive (kən-sēv') *v.*: think; imagine.

Hans Andersen: Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), Danish writer known primarily for his fairy tales.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894): Scottish writer of adventure stories such as *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*.

Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. Why is Hurston's grandmother afraid of her granddaughter's boldness?
2. Who visits Zora's school?
3. What do the visitors send from Minnesota?
4. What are the narrator's favorite books?

Thinking Critically

5. Why do you think the two visitors come to Zora's school?
6. What does Zora feel about the two visitors? How do you know?
7. What do the visitors think of Zora? How do you know?

8. What do you think is the most lasting effect of Zora's encounter with the visitors? Do you think her life might have taken a different direction if this meeting had not taken place? Explain.

9. How would you describe the character of the narrator? Cite examples from the text that support your analysis, especially the passages in which Hurston talks about her favorite books.

10. What details from this autobiography shed light on why Zora became a writer when she grew up?

11. Hurston's unmistakable voice comes through very clearly in this autobiography. What tone do you hear in her story of the white visitors?

Literary Criticism

12. Philosophical approach. Some of Hurston's contemporaries criticized her for not emphasizing in her writing the oppression of African Americans by the white community. Using reference from this excerpt, explain whether or not you think this is a valid criticism. Would the quality of Hurston's work have been improved by comments on those political and social issues? Explain your response.

WRITING

Judging a Book by Its Cover

The title of an autobiography can reveal a great deal about how the writer views her or her own life. Write an essay in which you give your reactions to Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Use what you learn about Hurston from the biography on page 836 and from this autobiographical excerpt to speculate about why she chose this title. What does it reveal about Hurston's life experiences and her responses to them?

Writing

Choose a paragraph from "Dust Tracks on a Road." Indicate which paragraph you have chosen by recording the page number and the first and last sentence with an ellipsis (...) in between them.

Write a paragraph in which you describe how the author's diction reveals her tone. What is the overall meaning of the passage? How do the diction and tone help to reveal that meaning?

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Analyze an autobiography. Analyze the political and social influences of a historical period.

Writing Skills

Write an essay analyzing a title.

Vocabulary Skills

Create semantic maps.

INTERNET

Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE7 11-5