

# Zora Neale Hurston



# Early Life

- Hurston was the fifth of eight children of John Hurston and Lucy Ann Hurston. Her father was a Baptist preacher, tenant farmer, and carpenter, and her mother was a school teacher.
- She was born in Notasulga, Alabama, on January 7, 1891, where her father grew up and her grandfather was the preacher of a Baptist church. Her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-Black towns to be incorporated in the United States, when she was three.
- Hurston said she always felt that Eatonville was "home" to her and sometimes claimed it as her birthplace.



# Early Life

- Her father later became mayor of the town, which Hurston would glorify in her stories as a place where African Americans could live as they desired, independent of white society.
- In 1901, some northern schoolteachers visited Eatonville and gave Hurston a number of books that opened her mind to literature, and this may be why she sometimes describes her "birth" as taking place in that year.
- Hurston spent the remainder of her childhood in Eatonville, and describes the experience of growing up in Eatonville in her 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me".



# Early Life

- In 1904, Hurston's mother died and her father remarried, to Matte Moge, almost immediately, considered something of a minor scandal as it was rumored he had relations with Moge before Lucy died.
- Hurston's father and new stepmother sent her away to a boarding school in Jacksonville, Florida, but they eventually stopped paying her tuition and the school expelled her. She later worked as a maid to the lead singer in a traveling Gilbert & Sullivan theatrical company.
- In 1917, Hurston began attending Morgan Academy, the high school division of the historically African-American Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland.



# Early Life

- In 1918, Hurston began undergraduate studies at Howard University, where she became one of the earliest initiates of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and co-founded The Hilltop, the university's student newspaper.
- While there, she took courses in Spanish, English, Greek and public speaking and earned an Associate's Degree in 1920.
- In 1921, she wrote a short story, John Redding Goes to Sea, which qualified her to become a member of Alaine Locke's literary club, The Stylus. Hurston left Howard in 1924 and in 1925 was offered a scholarship to Barnard College, Columbia University where she was the college's sole black student.



# Influences

- The first influence was Hurston's childhood town of Eatonville and its economic situation. Hurston's town was ideal for a young African-American girl in the early nineteenth century, providing a safe haven from restrictions of race.
- The town also preserved its African-American culture and history due to its seclusion from Winter Park.
- "Sweat" reveals much of Hurston's nostalgic memories, though it primarily focuses on Eatonville's economic dependence on the neighboring town of Winter Park.



# Influences

- The "Gilded Six Bits," written in 1933, was influenced by Hurston's anthropological studies and her rocky relationships in marriage.
- Hurston first began her anthropological studies after she graduated with a B.A. Degree in 1928, from Barnard College.
- Hurston had been advised to take anthropology classes to broaden her education. Dr. Franz Boas, a professor of anthropology at Barnard, took Hurston under his wing and "made an anthropologist out of her," giving her analytical tools for returning south to gather black folklore



# Influences

- Hurston's stories "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits" are influenced by her life as an African-American woman in the Harlem Renaissance.
- The greatest influence in Hurston's life for "Sweat" was the economical situation in her small childhood town of Eatonville and her relationship with her patron, Fannie Hurst.
- "The Gilded Six-Bits" was influenced by her educational endeavors in anthropology and her unsuccessful marriage with Herbert Sheen.



# Influences

- Zora Neale Hurston had a sense of humor about women's issues. A lighthearted attitude was almost necessary for an African American woman in the period following the Reconstruction, as such existence meant twofold discrimination.
- Much of the art produced during this time therefore expresses issues of feminine identity during this period of change and instability.
- During the 1920s and '30s, African American culture was undergoing a shift of domestic dynamics. In the ages of slave labor, African American families were generally matriarchal—led by the female members.



# Goals

- Her own goals were eschew of those of most of the others in the Harlem Renaissance. Everybody else was trying to create New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C. as the centers of all interesting things. She was not interested in that. She is interested in rural, southern, illiterate black culture.
- While in New York, Hurston became a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. The black literary establishment of the time, who Hurston dubbed "The Niggerati," led by figures such as Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois, felt that black writers should use their talent for political aims.



# Goals

- Zora Neale Hurston was very interested in preserving African heritage and identity through art and music during the Harlem Renaissance. Art during this time reflected the desire to use music to keep African heritage alive. Jacob Lawrence's painting Jazz typifies the growing expression of music in African American communities, especially through jazz.
- On May 1, 1925, at a literary awards dinner sponsored by Opportunity magazine, the earthy Harlem newcomer turned heads and raised eyebrows as she claimed four awards: a second-place fiction prize for her short story "Spunk," a second-place award in drama for her play Color Struck, and two honorable mentions.



# Goals

- Hurston's contribution to anthropology was not merely in her superior ability to provide vivid imagery of Black culture, but also in her pioneering efforts toward theorizing the African diaspora, and her methodological innovations.
- As anthropologist Irma McClaurin notes " Hurston's research was deeply rooted in a Diaspora paradigm, which stressed an examination of the cultural continuities and differences that emerged when Blacks were scattered across the Americas and Europe as a consequence of slavery."



# Social Significance

- Many readers objected to the representation of African-American dialect in Hurston's novels, given the racially charged history of dialect fiction in American literature. Her stylistic choices in terms of dialogue were influenced by her academic experiences. Thinking like a folklorist, Hurston strove to represent speech patterns of the period which she documented through ethnographic research.
- For example, a character in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* expresses herself in this manner: *"Dat's a big ole resurrection lie, Ned. Uh slew-foot, drag-leg lie at dat, and Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. You know Ahm uh fightin' dawg and mah hide is worth money. Hit me if you dare! Ah'll wash yo' tub uh 'gator guts and dat quick."*



# Social Significance

- John McWhorter has called Hurston "America's favorite black conservative" while David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito have argued that she can better be characterized as a "libertarian." She was a Republican who was generally sympathetic to the foreign policy non-interventionism of the Old Right and a fan of Booker T. Washington's self-help politics.
- She disagreed with the philosophies (including Communism and the New Deal) supported by many of her colleagues in the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, who was in the 1930s a supporter of the Soviet Union and praised it in several of his poems.
- Despite much common ground with the Old Right in domestic and foreign policy, Hurston was not a social conservative. Her writings show skepticism toward traditional religion and affinity for feminist individualism.



# Social Significance

- In 1952, Hurston supported the presidential campaign of Senator Robert A. Taft. Like Taft, Hurston was against Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. She also shared his opposition to Roosevelt and Truman's interventionist foreign policy.
- In the original draft of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston compared the United States government to a "fence" in stolen goods and to a Mafia-like protection racket.
- Hurston thought it ironic that the same "people who claim that it is a noble thing to die for freedom and democracy ... wax frothy if anyone points out the inconsistency of their morals...."



# Social Significance

- Hurston opposed the Supreme Court ruling in the Brown v. Board of Education case of 1954.
- She felt that if separate schools were truly equal (and she believed that they were rapidly becoming so), educating black students in physical proximity to white students would not result in better education.
- In addition, she worried about the demise of black schools and black teachers as a way to pass on cultural tradition to future generations of African Americans. She voiced this opposition in a letter, "Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix", that was published in the Orlando Sentinel in August 1955.



# Legacy

- As the civil rights revolution marched on, Hurston's views began to go out of favor, and her career suffered because of them. She spent the last 10 years of her life working as a maid, substitute teacher, and librarian.
- During a period of financial and medical difficulties, Hurston was forced to enter St. Lucie County Welfare Home, where she suffered a stroke; she died of hypertensive heart disease on January 28, 1960, and was buried at the Garden of Heavenly Rest in Fort Pierce, Florida.
- Her remains were in an unmarked grave until 1973, when novelist Alice Walker and literary scholar Charlotte Hunt found an unmarked grave in the general area where Hurston had been buried, and decided to mark it as hers.



# Legacy

- Their Eyes Were Watching God
- Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* over seven weeks in Haiti. The novel was published in 1937. Though the novel was written while abroad, Hurston's home base was actually New York, where she played a prominent role in what we now call the Harlem Renaissance – a time of immense literary, musical, and artistic creativity in the black community of Harlem.
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Hurston's most famous novel. The storyline follows the life of Janie Crawford, a black woman in search of true love and her true self. Both the novel and Hurston were not very well known until 1975, when another African American female writer, Alice Walker, wrote an article entitled "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." This piece resulted in a renewed interest in Hurston and her writing.





# Legacy

- Although Hurston remains a controversial figure, she is remembered for her ability to make herself heard at a time when most women—especially African American women—were expected to be silent and submissive. The Florida cities of Fort Pierce and Eatonville now host annual festivals to commemorate Hurston's life and literary achievements. Her short story "The Gilded Six Bits" was made into a short film in 2001, and her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was released as a film for television in 2005. Hurston's life was marked by triumph and disappointment.
- During the turbulent years of the Great Depression, she produced five of her seven books, but by the time of her death, none remained in print. Due in large part to the efforts of Alice Walker, Hurston scholarship has been revived. Once denounced as entertainment fiction, Hurston's work now enjoys a secure place in twentieth-century literature.

