



# PREPARING to Read

## How It Feels to Be Colored Me

Essay by ZORA NEALE HURSTON

### Connect to Your Life

**Your Individuality** Imagine that you are filling out a college application and that one of the questions asks you to describe what makes you a unique individual. On a sheet of paper, list three or four qualities that you would attribute to yourself in such a description. Compare your list with a partner's.

### Build Background

**Flamboyant Personality** From the time she moved to Harlem in 1925 until her death in 1960, Zora Neale Hurston was the most prolific African-American woman writer. She was also a popular figure on the social scene during the Harlem Renaissance. According to her biographer Robert Hemenway, Hurston "acquired an instant reputation in New York for her high spirits and side-splitting tales of Eatonville," her Florida hometown. Like other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, Hurston searched within herself for her identity rather than defining herself according to the racial stereotypes of her day. In this essay, first published in 1928, she uses several unique images to convey her individuality.

#### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

deplete      rend      venerate  
extenuating      specter

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY** An essay is a short work of nonfiction that deals with a single subject. In an **autobiographical essay**, that subject is some aspect of the writer's life. The subject of Hurston's essay is her sense of herself as an individual and an African American.

**ACTIVE READING DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT AUTHOR'S PURPOSES** A writer usually writes for one or more **purposes**—to inform, to entertain, to express himself or herself, or to persuade readers to believe or do something. In this autobiographical essay, Hurston writes for multiple purposes. To **draw conclusions** about them, use these tips:

- Identify passages that affect you strongly.
- In these passages, consider the kinds of experiences she relates—for example, painful ones or generally happy ones—and the descriptive details she provides. Note especially her direct statements and comparisons.
- Ask yourself why she includes these passages, and state your own conclusions.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read, use a chart to gather data about selected passages from the beginning, middle, and end of this essay. Then state your conclusion about Hurston's purposes for writing each one.

Hurston's Essay	
Passages	Purposes
1. Childhood in Eatonville	
2. Experiencing Live Jazz	
3. Comparison of People to Stuffed Bags	

# How It Feels to Be Colored Me

ZORA  
NEALE  
HURSTON

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses; the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box<sup>1</sup> for a born first-nighter.<sup>2</sup> Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually the automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things,

1. **proscenium** (prō-sē'nē-əm) **box**: a box seat near the stage.
2. **first-nighter**: a person who attends the opening performance of a play, an opera, or a similar show.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**extenuating** (ĭk-stĕn'yōō-ă'tĭng) *adj.* lessening a fault by serving as a partial excuse **extenuate** *v.*





*Skipping Along*, Stephen Scott Young. Copyright © Stephen Scott Young. Photo courtesy of John H. Surovek Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida.

which seemed strange to me, for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody's Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders,<sup>3</sup> as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change.<sup>4</sup> I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

**But** I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all

hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation<sup>5</sup> more or less. No, I cannot weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.<sup>6</sup>

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said, "On the line!" The Reconstruction said, "Get set!" and the generation before said, "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the

stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully<sup>7</sup> adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for an act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

3. **oleanders** (ō'lē-ăn'dərz): evergreen shrubs with fragrant flowers.

4. **sea change**: complete transformation.

5. **pigmentation**: darkness of skin coloration.

6. **oyster knife**: a reference to the saying "The world is my oyster," implying that the world contains treasure waiting to be taken, like the pearl in an oyster.

7. **bully**: excellent; splendid.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**deplore** (dĭ-plŏr') *v.* to feel strong disapproval of or deeply regret  
**specter** (spĕk'tər) *n.* a ghostly vision; phantom

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.<sup>8</sup> I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard.<sup>9</sup> “Beside the waters of the Hudson”<sup>10</sup> I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

## Sometimes

it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions,<sup>11</sup> but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai<sup>12</sup> above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeooww!* I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

“Good music they have here,” he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

**A**t certain times I have no race. I am *me*. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage,<sup>13</sup> knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic<sup>14</sup> Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes

8. **Hegira** (hĭ-jĭ'rə): journey (from the name given to Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Medina in 622).

9. **Barnard**: the college in New York City from which Hurston graduated in 1928.

10. “**Beside the waters of the Hudson**”: a reference to the first line of Barnard's school song.

11. **circumlocutions** (sŭr'kəm-lō-kyōō'shənz): unnecessary elaboration or “beating around the bush.”

12. **assegai** (ă's'ə-gĭ'): a light spear, especially one with a short shaft and long blade, used in southern Africa.

13. **Peggy Hopkins Joyce . . . carriage**: one of the richest women of Hurston's day, walking along the Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris, dressed in beautiful clothes, carrying herself like a queen.

14. **cosmic**: of or belonging to the universe.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**rend** (rĕnd) *v.* to tear or split apart violently

**veneer** (vē-nĭr') *n.* a thin surface layer that conceals what is below





*Bal Jeunesse* (about 1927), Palmer Hayden. Watercolor on paper, 14" × 17", collection of Meredith and Gail Wright Sirmans.

me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water<sup>15</sup> diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the

weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bag of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows? ♦

15. *first-water*: of the highest quality or purity.



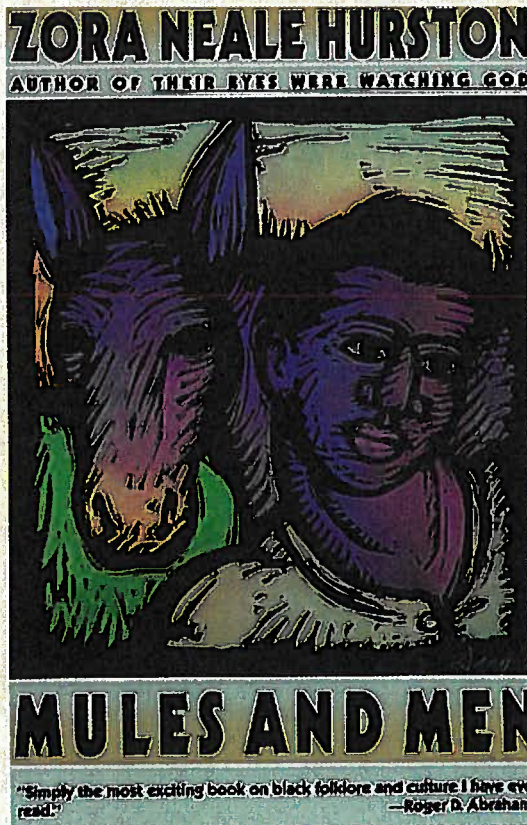
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## Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View

ALICE WALKER

*Novelist Alice Walker was responsible for rediscovering the writings of Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s and bringing her to the attention of a new generation of readers. In the following excerpt from an essay on Hurston, Walker discusses the impact of Hurston's collection of black folktales, *Mules and Men*, first published in 1935.*

... When I read *Mules and Men* I was delighted. Here was this perfect book! The "perfection" of which I immediately tested on my relatives, who are such typical black Americans they are useful for every sort of political, cultural, or economic survey. Very regular people from the South, rapidly forgetting their Southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, listening to each other read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained. For



as new sophisticates, and the lives their parents and grandparents lived, no matter

what Zora's book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed (told to us years ago by our parents and grandparents—not one of whom could *not* tell a story to make you weep, or laugh) and showed how marvelous, and, indeed, priceless, they are. This is not exaggerated. No matter how they read the stories Zora had collected, no matter how much distance they tried to maintain between themselves,



how they tried to remain cool toward all Zora revealed, in the end they could not hold back the smiles, the laughter, the joy over who she was showing them to be: descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious<sup>1</sup> and *bodacious*<sup>2</sup> company.

This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. (In my opinion, only Du Bois<sup>3</sup> showed an equally consistent delight in the beauty and spirit of black people, which is interesting when one considers that the angle of his vision was completely the opposite of Zora's.) Zora's pride in black people was so pronounced in the ersatz<sup>4</sup> black twenties that it made other blacks suspicious and perhaps uncomfortable (after all, *they* were still infatuated<sup>5</sup> with things European). Zora was interested in Africa, Haiti, Jamaica, and—for a little racial diversity (Indians)—Honduras. She also had a confidence in herself as an individual that few people (anyone?), black or white, understood. This was because Zora grew up in a community of black people who had enormous respect for themselves and for their ability to govern themselves. Her own father had written the Eatonville town laws. This community affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of its self. For how many other black Americans is this true? It certainly isn't true for any that I know. In her easy self-acceptance, Zora

was more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them.

On the contrary, Zora's early work shows she grew up pitying whites because the ones she saw lacked "light" and soul. It is impossible to imagine Zora envying anyone (except tongue in cheek), and least of all a white person for being white. Which is, after all, if one is black, a clear and present calamity of the mind.

Condemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's: *Mules and Men*, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. *There is no book more important to me than this one. . . .* ♦

1. *loquacious* (lō-kwā'shəs): very talkative.
2. *bodacious* (bō-dā'shəs): a Southern dialect term meaning "remarkable" or "spirited."
3. *Du Bois* (doo bois'): the U.S. civil rights leader, editor, and author W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963).
4. *ersatz* (ēr'zäts'): artificial; imitation.
5. *infatuated* (ĭn-fäch'ōō-ā'tīd): carried away by a foolish attraction.



Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

If you had met Zora Neale Hurston, would you have liked her?

Comprehension Check

- What kind of community was Eatonville, Florida?
- What was the "sea change" Zora suffered at the age of 13?

Think Critically

2.

**ACTIVE READING** DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT AUTHOR'S PURPOSES

What conclusions did you draw about Hurston's purposes for writing this essay? Refer to the chart in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK** to support your conclusions.

3. Why do you think Hurston concludes this essay by comparing people to stuffed bags?

4. What do you think Hurston's cultural identity meant to her?

THINK ABOUT

- her statement "I am not tragically colored"
- when she was aware of her color and when she forgot it
- her views of slavery, discrimination, and the United States
- her response to jazz

Extend Interpretations

5. **Comparing Texts** In the Literary Link on page 955, Alice Walker identifies qualities she feels are characteristic of Hurston's writing. Which, if any, of these qualities do you detect in Hurston's essay? Explain your answer.

6. **Critic's Corner** Alice Walker, one of Hurston's greatest admirers, had this to say about Hurston's essay:

*"How It Feels to Be Colored Me" is an excellent example of Zora Neale Hurston at her most exasperating. Published in 1928, near the beginning of Hurston's career, this essay presents two stereotypes: the "happy ducky" who sings and dances for white folks, for money and for joy; and the educated black person who is, underneath the thin veneer of civilization, still a "heathen."*

Do you agree with Walker's views? Why or why not?

7. **Connect to Life** Which of the ideas expressed in Hurston's essay do you think might be controversial today?

Literary Analysis

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY**

An **autobiographical essay** is a short work of nonfiction that focuses on an aspect of the writer's life. One of the challenges is to combine objective description with the expression of subjective feelings. For example, at the beginning of this essay, Hurston uses objective language to describe the white people passing through Eatonville: "The native whites rode dusty horses; the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles." In contrast, when relating her own subjective feelings about watching these people, Hurston uses a figurative expression and emotionally charged words: "My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it."

**Activity** Reread the passage in which Hurston describes her reaction to jazz at The New World Cabaret. Then fill in a chart like the following, distinguishing the objective description from the subjective expression.

Objective Description	Subjective Expression

**REVIEW TONE**

What **tone** is conveyed by Hurston's comparisons of life to a "show," a "game," and a "bully adventure"? Compare her attitude toward being African American with the attitudes of the other Harlem Renaissance writers you've read.



## Writing Options

**1. Proposal for School Assembly** Write a proposal to a committee planning a school assembly in honor of famous African Americans. In your proposal, present reasons why Hurston's essay should be read at the assembly.

### Writing Handbook

See page 1285: Persuasive Writing.

**2. Autobiographical Essay** Imagine that an organization whose purpose is to foster racial or ethnic pride will award a scholarship to the applicant who best expresses an appreciation of his or her heritage. Draft an autobiographical essay, modeled after Hurston's, expressing your views about your heritage.



## Zora Neale Hurston

1891?–1960

### Other Works

*Jonah's Gourd Vine*  
*Moses, Man of the Mountain*  
*Tell My Horse*  
 "Sweat"  
 "The Gilded Six-Bits"

**Arrival in Harlem** Born in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, Zora Neale Hurston took her mother's advice to "jump at de sun" and overcome poverty and prejudice. She entered Harlem society in 1925, arriving with "\$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope." After she had won two second prizes—one for a short story and one for a play—in a literary contest sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine, Hurston came to the attention of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. In the New York City of the 1920s, Hurston soon became known for her flamboyant, theatrical personality as well as for her short stories.

**Folklorist** In 1928, after graduating from Barnard College, where she had studied with the renowned anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston returned to her

## Vocabulary in Action

**EXERCISE: MEANING CLUES** Answer these questions.

1. What attraction at an amusement park would probably involve a **specter**—a roller coaster, a ring-toss game, or a haunted house?
2. If you said that someone had a **vener** of friendliness, would you be suggesting that the person was eager, was hesitant, or was insincere?
3. If you were to **rend** a curtain, would you be closing it, ripping it, or hanging it?
4. Which would be an **extenuating** circumstance for being tardy for school—that you dawdled on the way, that the bus broke down, or that you thought it was Saturday?
5. Is an action that you **deplore** one that you find horrible, one that you find amusing, or one that you find boring?

### Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth study of word connotation and denotation, see page 908.

native South to collect African-American folklore. "I had to go back, dress as they did, talk as they did, live their life," she said, "so I could get into my stories the world I knew as a child."

**Literary Success** Over the next two decades, Hurston built her reputation as the best African-American woman writer of her time with a steady stream of publications. Among her prominent works were the folklore collection *Mules and Men*, the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

**Final Years** During the last 20 years of her life, Hurston struggled with financial and health problems. She died in poverty and was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. Many readers have rediscovered Hurston in recent years, however—largely because of the African-American writer Alice Walker's efforts to publicize her life and work.

## Author Activity

Give a dramatic reading of one of the folktales in Hurston's *Mules and Men*, a book that Alice Walker said she would take with her to a desert island.