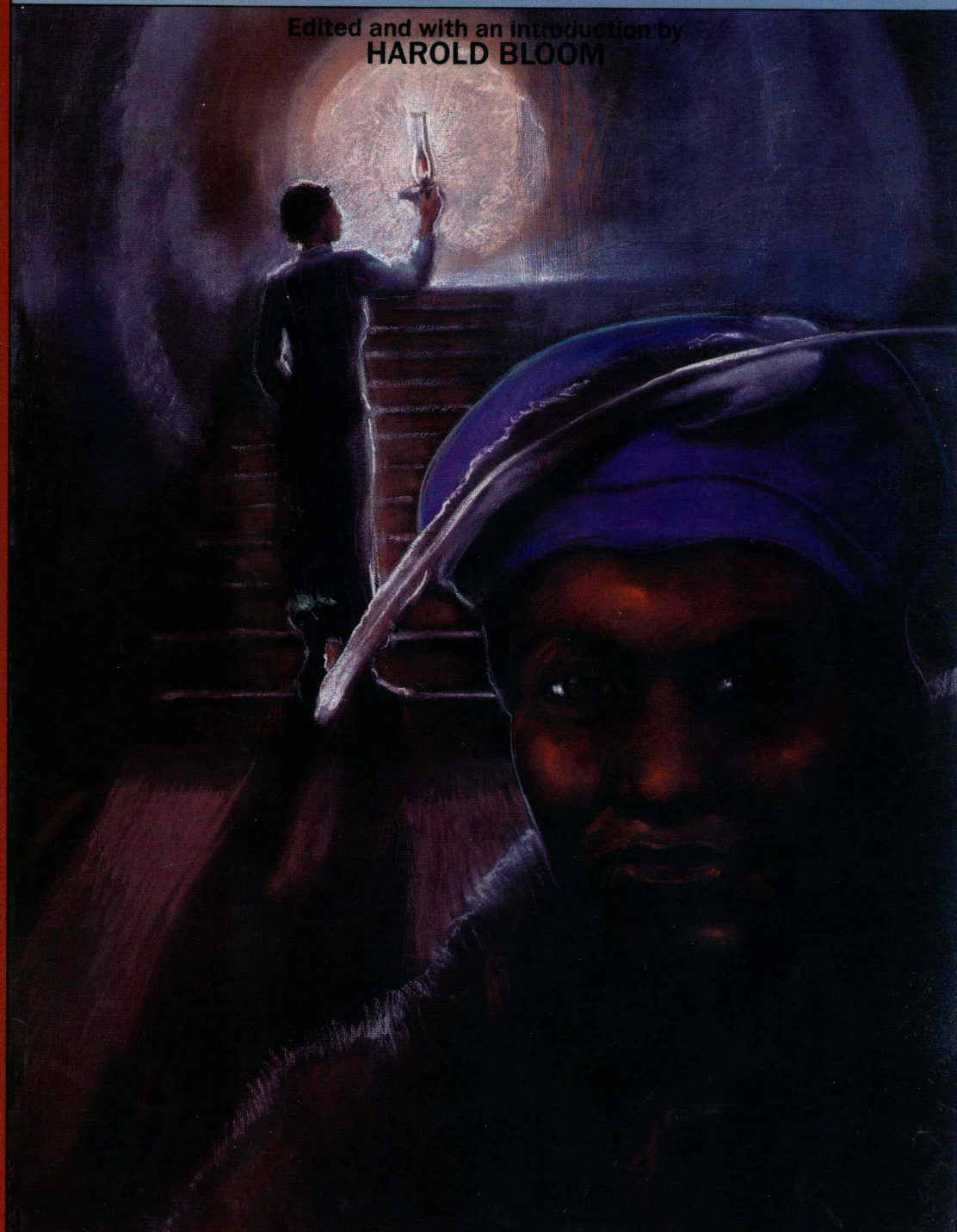


*Modern Critical Views*

**ZORA NEALE  
HURSTON**

Edited and with an introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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*Modern Critical Views*

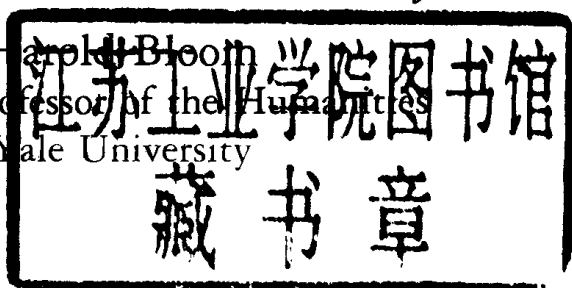
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# ZORA NEALE HURSTON

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*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University



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Philadelphia

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William Carlos Williams  
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Virginia Woolf  
William Wordsworth  
Jay Wright  
Richard Wright  
William Butler Yeats  
A. B. Yehoshua  
Emile Zola

## Editor's Note

This book gathers together what seems to me the most useful criticism so far available on the work of Zora Neale Hurston, arranged in the chronological order of its publication. I am grateful to Nancy Sales for her erudition and insight in helping to edit this volume.

The editor's introduction centers upon Hurston's best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and particularly upon the heroic vitalism that constitutes the author's and the heroine's stance, experiential and rhetorical. Franz Boas, Hurston's great teacher in anthropology, appropriately begins the chronological sequence with his brief preface to her classic study, *Mules and Men*. With Nick Aaron Ford's account of a meeting with Hurston, we enter upon the immensely complex and controversial question of her position in relation to the fictive presentation of black life in America. An excerpt from Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro Genius* provides an early example of the rather conventional responses that initially greeted Hurston's genius.

Langston Hughes, poet and chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance, contributes an anecdote to the ever-burgeoning Hurston legend. The pioneering critical remarks upon *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Robert Bone accurately urge us to apprehend the strength of Hurston's style. They are followed here by the novelist Fannie Hurst's vivid "personality sketch" of her one-time secretary, and by Larry Neal's brief tribute to Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. With Roger Rosenblatt's eloquent overview of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we are given the useful insight that Janie and Tea Cake are closer to lovers in folklore than to lovers in the tradition of naturalistic fiction. Addison Gayle, analyzing both *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, provides a more sociologically oriented reading than Rosenblatt's. Another interesting contrast is provided by Theresa R. Love's survey, which convincingly contextualizes itself in Hurston's own professional perspective as an anthropologist and folklorist.

Alice Walker, who takes Hurston as novelistic precursor, is represented

in this book by three pieces, the first being a passionate defense of the ways in which Hurston became a cultural revolutionary merely by being herself. A biographical reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Robert E. Hemenway is supplemented here by his equally informative introduction to *Mules and Men*. Sherley Anne Williams, introducing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, provides a fiercely feminist reading of Janie's burden and of her heroic effort to surmount that barrier to a more abundant existence. In both of the following pieces, Alice Walker again achieves an eloquent identification with Hurston's life and writings.

Mary Helen Washington, exploring Hurston's critical representation and misrepresentation, makes another high tribute to the seriousness of the novelist-anthropologist's creative exuberance. A more analytical account of that exuberance is provided by the critical sensibility of Michael G. Cooke, a distinguished scholar of Romantic and modern literature. Cooke rightly emphasizes how self-realization had to be problematic in Hurston's work, and how astonishing her achievement therefore is. Introducing *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Blyden Jackson reminds us that: "Hurston was no social visionary," but wrote more in the spirit of Aristophanes and W. S. Gilbert. Finally, in the most advanced critical essay yet devoted to Hurston, Barbara Johnson subjects *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to a strict rhetorical analysis that aids us immensely in appreciating how extraordinary Hurston's linguistic art truly will continue to seem, the more deeply we ponder its resources.

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## Introduction

### I

Extra-literary factors have entered into the process of even secular canonization from Hellenistic Alexandria into the High Modernist Era of Eliot and Pound, so that it need not much dismay us if contemporary work by women and by minority writers becomes esteemed on grounds other than aesthetic. When the High Modernist critic Hugh Kenner assures us of the permanent eminence of the novelist and polemicist Wyndham Lewis, we can be persuaded, unless of course we actually read books like *Tarr* and *Hitler*. Reading Lewis is a rather painful experience, and makes me skeptical of Kenner's canonical assertions. In the matter of Zora Neale Hurston, I have had a contrary experience, starting with skepticism when I first encountered essays by her admirers, let alone by her idolators. Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* dispels all skepticism. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is an impressive book in its mode and ambitions, but a mixed achievement, unable to resolve problems of diction and of rhetorical stance. Essentially, Hurston is the author of one superb and moving novel, unique not in its kind but in its isolated excellence among other stories of the kind.

The wistful opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* pragmatically affirms greater repression in women as opposed to men, by which I mean "repression" only in Freud's sense: unconscious yet purposeful forgetting:

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

Hurston's Janie is now necessarily a paradigm for women, of whatever race, heroically attempting to assert their own individuality in contexts that continue to resent and fear any consciousness that is not male. In a larger perspective, should the contexts modify, the representation of Janie will

take its significant place in a long tradition of such representations in English and American fiction. This tradition extends from Samuel Richardson to Doris Lessing and other contemporaries, but only rarely has been able to visualize authentically strong women who begin with all the deprivations that circumstance assigns to Janie. It is a crucial aspect of Hurston's subtle sense of limits that the largest limitation is that imposed upon Janie by her grandmother, who loves her best, yet fears for her the most.

As a former slave, the grandmother, Nanny, is haunted by the compensatory dream of making first her daughter, and then her granddaughter, something other than "the mule of the world," customary fate of the black woman. The dream is both powerful enough, and sufficiently unitary, to have driven Janie's mother away, and to condemn Janie herself to a double disaster of marriages, before the tragic happiness of her third match completes as much of her story as Hurston desires to give us. As readers, we carry away with us what Janie never quite loses, the vivid pathos of her grandmother's superb and desperate displacement of hope:

"And, Janie, maybe it wasn't much, but Ah done de best Ah kin by you. Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folks' yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillun at school. Dat was all right when you was little. But when you got big enough to understand things, Ah wanted you to look upon yo'self. Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' up things in yo' face. And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate."

## II

Hurston's rhetorical strength, even in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is frequently too overt, and threatens an excess, when contrasted with the painful simplicity of her narrative line and the reductive tendency at work in all her characters except for Janie and Nanny. Yet the excess works, partly because Hurston is so considerable and knowing a mythologist. Hovering in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the Mosaic myth of deliverance, the pattern of revolution and exodus that Hurston reimagines as her prime trope of power:

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character.

They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are the legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws down from Sinai. No, he is revered because he had the power to go up the mountain and to bring them down. Many men could climb mountains. Anyone could bring down laws that had been handed to them. But who can talk with God face to face? Who has the power to command God to go to a peak of a mountain and there demand of Him laws with which to govern a nation? What other man has ever commanded the wind and the hail? The light and darkness? That calls for power, and that is what Africa sees in Moses to worship. For he is worshipped as a god.

Power in Hurston is always *potentia*, the demand for life, for more life. Despite the differences in temperament, Hurston has affinities both with Dreiser and with Lawrence, heroic vitalists. Her art, like theirs, exalts an exuberance that is beauty, a difficult beauty because it participates in reality-testing. What is strongest in Janie is a persistence akin to Dreiser's Carrie and Lawrence's Ursula and Gudrun, a drive to survive in one's own fashion. Nietzsche's vitalistic injunction, that we must try to live as though it were morning, is the implicit basis of Hurston's true religion, which in its American formulation (Thoreau's), reminds us that only that day dawns to which we are alive. Something of Lawrence's incessant sense of the sun is paralleled by Hurston's trope of the solar trajectory, in a cosmos where: "They sat on the boarding house porch and saw the sun plunge into the same crack in the earth from which the night emerged" and where: "Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town to the sun."

Janie's perpetual sense of the possibilities of another day propels her from Nanny's vision of safety first to the catastrophe of Joe Starks and then to the love of Tea Cake, her true husband. But to live in a way that starts with the sun is to become pragmatically doom-eager, since mere life is deprecated in contrast to the possibility of glory, of life more abundant, rather than Nanny's dream of a refuge from exploitation. Hurston's most effective irony is that Janie's drive towards her own erotic potential should transcend her grandmother's categories, since the marriage with Tea Cake is also Janie's pragmatic liberation from bondage towards men. When he tells her, in all truth, that she has the keys to the kingdom, he frees her from living in her grandmother's way.

A more pungent irony drove Hurston herself to end Janie's idyll with Tea Cake's illness and the ferocity of his subsequent madness. The impulse of her own vitalism compels Janie to kill him in self-defense, thus ending necessarily life and love in the name of the possibility of more life again. The novel's conclusion is at once an elegy and a vision of achieved peace, an intense realization that indeed we are all asleep in the outer life:

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.

### III

Hurston herself was refreshingly free of all the ideologies that currently obscure the reception of her best book. Her sense of power has nothing in common with politics of any persuasion, with contemporary modes of feminism, or even with those questers who search for a black aesthetic. As a vitalist, she was of the line of the Wife of Bath and Sir John Falstaff and Mynheer Peeperkorn. Like them, she was outrageous, heroically larger than life, witty in herself and the cause of wit in others. She belongs now to literary legend, which is as it should be. Her famous remark in response to Carl Van Vechten's photographs is truly the epigraph to her life and work: "I love myself when I am laughing. And then again when I am looking mean and impressive." Walt Whitman would have delighted in that as in her assertion: "When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue . . . the cosmic Zora emerges. . . . How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me." With Whitman, Hurston herself is now an image of American literary vitality, and a part also of the American mythology of exodus, of the power to choose the party of Eros, of more life.

FRANZ BOAS

*Preface to*  
Mules and Men

Ever since the time of Uncle Remus, Negro folk-lore has exerted a strong attraction upon the imagination of the American public. Negro tales, songs and sayings without end, as well as descriptions of Negro magic and voodoo, have appeared; but in all of them the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro has been given very inadequately.

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. Miss Hurston has been equally successful in gaining the confidence of the voodoo doctors and she gives us much that throws a new light upon the much discussed voodoo beliefs and practices. Added to all this is the charm of a loveable personality and of a revealing style which makes Miss Hurston's work an unusual contribution to our knowledge of the true inner life of the Negro.

To the student of cultural history the material presented is valuable not only by giving the Negro's reaction to every day events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions, but it throws into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the importance of which diminishes with increasing distance from the south.

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From *Mules and Men*. © 1935 by Zora Neale Hurston, renewed 1963 by John C. Hurston and Joel Hurston. Indiana University Press, 1978. Originally entitled "Preface."



NICK AARON FORD

*A Study in Race Relations—A Meeting  
with Zora Neale Hurston*

Can a leopard change his spots? Any school boy can give a satisfactory answer to such a hackneyed question. But the puzzle worded in a different manner may serve to ensnare a few who consider themselves wise in the ways of the world.

Is a Negro always a Negro? Here you have a question which requires the tact of an Abraham Lincoln, the courage of a Theodore Roosevelt, and the wisdom of a Solomon to answer satisfactorily to all concerned. To the white man it is as preposterous as the first, but to many Negroes it is freighted with the eternal issues of life and death.

A few months ago a friend and I were motoring leisurely through Central Florida. As we neared an insignificant crossroad, we noticed a narrow signboard pointing toward the west with the name "Longwood" written upon it. Ordinarily such a sign would have made no impression upon our consciousness, but it so happened that we had just finished discussing a novel written by a certain Zora Neale Hurston who lived in that vicinity.

What of it? you say. There are hundreds of novelists in America; they are more common than millionaires. Yes, but this one is a Negro—a rare species of novelist! There are scarcely two dozens of them now living in America.

"Shall we turn in?" asked my friend, who was at the wheel.

"Of course," I counselled. "It will be my second opportunity of seeing a live one." (I had met Langston Hughes several years before.)

When we reached the little village we were informed that Miss Hurston



lived a few miles out on the banks of Longwood's only lake. Although we accepted the information without comment, we were rather dubious of finding a Negro woman occupying a cottage in an exclusive neighborhood on the banks of a lake in the state of Florida. But we did. She was not at home when we arrived, so we inquired from the next door neighbor (white) whether or not a Miss Hurston lived in the little cottage in whose yard our Ford was timidly standing with the engine still purring.

It was a kindly, gray-haired, red-faced man who ejaculated shrilly, "Yes, she lives right there! And by God, she is a mighty fine girl!"

We were not quite prepared for the final observation of our temporary host; for when he began with "By God!," we thought it was the prelude to "Get the h—l out of my yard." Although we are professors at a respectable Negro college, we knew that such an insult even to men of our training and sensibilities could be easily given in certain sections of our state on similar provocation.

After making a cursory examination of Miss Hurston's premises, we started back to the highway, disappointed in our failure to meet the author of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. We had gone but a short distance when we caught sight of a brown Chevrolet coupe coming toward us. My friend's intuition prompted him to believe that it was the much-talked-of novelist. And so it was. She pulled on the side of the road and stopped, as if she knew our mission.

After a brief introduction she talked as freely as if she had known us for years.

"Many Negroes criticise my book," she said, as the conversation drifted to literature, "because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem."

"Well, why didn't you?" I asked.

"Because," she replied simply, "I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology. There is where many Negro novelists make their mistakes. They confuse art with sociology."

"But," I said, "how can you write without being forever conscious of your race and the multitude of injustices which is heaped upon it in our present social order?"

She smiled a bit condescendingly. "You see," she began benignantly, "I have ceased to think in terms of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a *Negro* man but as a *man*. I am not interested in the *race* problem, but I am interested in the problems of *individuals*, white ones and black ones."

This statement unnerved me. I did not care to answer it, for it had started a trend of thought in my own mind which I dared not interrupt