

Literary TOOLS

ARCHETYPE. An archetype is an inherited, often unconscious, ancestral memory or motif that recurs throughout history or literature. One archetypal theme found throughout literature is the fall from a state of innocence to a state of experience. An early work in which this theme occurs is the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis in the Bible. As you read, note how this archetype relates to Hurston's life.

SYMBOL AND THEME. A symbol is a thing that stands for or represents something else. A theme is a central idea in a literary work. As you read, pay careful attention to a symbol Hurston uses at the end—a bag filled with different objects. Make a cluster chart listing the contents of the bag. One example has been done for you. What do the contents of the bag symbolize?

"first-water diamond"

Brown Bag



Reader's Journal

When have you maintained a positive attitude to get through a difficult experience?

"How It Feels to Be Colored Me"

BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

About the AUTHOR

Zora Neale Hurston (c.1901–1960), writer and folklorist, was born and raised in the African-American town of Eatonville, Florida. Educated at Howard University, Barnard College, and Columbia University, Hurston began her career as a folklorist. *Mules and Men* (1935), one of her best-known folklore collections, was based on her field research in the American South. *Tell My Horse* (1938) describes folk customs in Haiti and Jamaica.



As a novelist, Hurston is noted for her storytelling abilities, use of metaphoric language, and celebration of Southern African-American culture. Her writing influenced the Harlem Renaissance writers of the 1930s, as well as later African-American writers, such as Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), her most famous novel, is widely read in college classes. Other novels include *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934); *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939); and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). A prolific writer, Hurston also wrote short stories, plays, journal articles, and an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

Hurston died in a county welfare home and was buried in an unmarked grave. Interest in her has only recently been revived after decades of neglect by the literary community. A new generation of African-American writers is recognizing her contributions to African-American literature. Many of Hurston's writings were republished in the 1970s, and in 1995 a two-volume set of her work, some previously unpublished, was released. In 1999 her writing from the 1930s Florida Federal Writer's Project was published in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water*, edited by Pamela Bordelon.

About the SELECTION

Published in 1928 in *World Tomorrow*, the essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" provides a remarkably contemporary view of what it feels like for one woman to be African American. The author uses personal anecdotes to discuss the issues of prejudice, discrimination, and equality in American society.



Woman Dancing in the Rain (Josephine Baker), 1929. Paul Colin. National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

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

What does Hurston say happened to her one day?

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 chewing¹ when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more

1. cane chewing. Chewing sugar cane; may also have a connotation similar to *chewing the fat*, meaning "making friendly, familiar conversation"

WORDS
FOR
EVERYDAY
USE

ex • ten • u • at • ing (ik sten' ya wāt in) *adj.*, lessening the seriousness of [a crime] by making, or serving as, an excuse. *The defense attorney argued that the defendant's desire to reform should be considered an extenuating circumstance in the case.*

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.

Where did Hurston grow up? In what way did the town residents' reaction to the two groups of white people differ?

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat² to me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box³ for a born first-nighter.⁴ 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.

What did Hurston do when Northerners passed through town?

What transformation did Hurston undergo at thirteen?

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"⁵ and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do

What distinction did Hurston make between white people and the African Americans she knew? What did Hurston do for the white people?

How does Hurston feel about being "colored"?

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,⁶ as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change.⁷ I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast⁸ 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

2. gallery seat. Seat in the highest balcony in a theater, commonly having the cheapest seats
3. proscenium box. Compartment of theater seats having a good view of the proscenium or stage
4. born first-nighter. Someone born to attend the opening night of plays at theaters; a true lover of theater
5. speak pieces. Recite familiar examples of poetry or prose
6. oleanders. Evergreen shrubs with fragrant white to red flowers
7. suffered a sea change. Allusion to these lines from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "But doth suffer a sea change / Into something rich and strange"
8. fast. Firmly fixed

WORDS FOR EVERYDAY USE

ven • ture • some (ven[t]ʃər səm) *adj.*, daring; inclined to incur risk or danger. *In the novel Tom Sawyer, a group of venturesome children explore an old mine.*
 de • plore (di plɔr) *vt.*, regret strongly; consider unfortunate or deserving of criticism. *Before the Civil War, many abolitionists deplored slavery and spoke out against it.*
 dis • em • bark (di sɛm bɑrk) *vi.*, leave a ship to go ashore. *The captain of the ship told us to watch our step as we disembarked.*
 hel • ter • skel • ter (hel' tər skel' tər) *adj.*, marked by a lack of order or plan; haphazard. *The many toys strewn about the girls' room contributed to its helter-skelter appearance.*
 skir • mish (skɪr' mɪʃ) *n.*, minor fight in war; minor dispute or contest between opposing parties. *The skirmish between British soldiers and Massachusetts townspeople in Concord and Lexington started the American Revolutionary War.*

the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.⁹

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register¹⁰ depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is 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 bully¹¹ 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 any 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.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.¹² I feel

most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard.¹³ “Beside the waters of the Hudson” I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am 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 Cabaret¹⁴ 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, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax¹⁵ and splits the heart with its tempo¹⁶ 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 heathen¹⁷—follow them exultingly. I dance

What fact about being an African American does Hurston find exciting?

How does Hurston describe the jazz music?

When does Hurston feel most “colored”?

9. oyster knife. Knife used to pry open the shellfish
10. register. Make or convey an impression of
11. bully. Excellent or first-rate
12. Hegira. Journey undertaken to escape from a dangerous or undesirable situation; the flight of Muhammad from Mecca in AD 622
13. Barnard. College in New York City
14. New World Cabaret. Jazz club
15. thorax. Part of the body between the neck and abdomen
16. tempo. Rate of speed of a musical piece
17. heathen. Uncivilized people

WORDS FOR EVERYDAY USE

ebb (eb) *n.*, flowing back of the tide toward the sea. *The ebb of the ocean exposed a sandy stretch of sea treasures.*
cir • cum • lo • cu • tion (sar kam lo kyū shən) *n.*, use of an unnecessarily large number of words to express an idea. *The union workers were already committed to the strike and did not want to hear their leader's circumlocutions.*
ram • bunc • tious (ram banj'k shəs) *adj.*, marked by uncontrollable enthusiasm; unruly. *The babysitter could not control the rambunctious children who ran through the house in a whirlwind of motion.*
ex • ult • ing • ly (ig zalt'ing lē) *adv.*, in a joyful manner. *The congregation sang the Easter hymn exultingly.*

wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai¹⁸ above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeoorww!* 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 vener we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

How does Hurston describe herself at the New World Cabaret?

“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.

At 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 Mich¹⁹ with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

When is Hurston unconscious of her race? How does she see herself?

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

What is Hurston's reaction when she feels discriminated against?

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 diamond,²⁰ an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knifeblade, 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 bit 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? ■

To what does Hurston compare herself? In what ways are the bags of different colors alike?

18. *assegai*. Slender hardwood spear tipped with iron used in southern Africa

19. *Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich*. A famous beauty of the 1920s walking down the Boulevard Saint Michel, a fashionable street in Paris

20. *first-water diamond*. Diamond of the highest quality and purest luster

WORDS FOR EVERYDAY USE

ve • neer (və nīr') *n.*, superficial or deceptively attractive appearance, display, or effect. *Although the host made some very cutting remarks at dinner, the guests retained a veneer of politeness.*

saun • ter (sɒn' tər; sən' tər) *vi.*, walk about in an idle or leisurely manner. *Confident of his performance, Miguel sauntered to the front of the room to turn in his college board exam before the time was up.*

rai • ment (rā'mənt) *n.*, clothing. *In Europe, purple was usually reserved for the raiment of kings.*

car • riage (kar'ij) *n.*, manner of bearing the body; posture. *The gentleman's carriage on horseback was stately and dignified.*

mis • cel • la • ny (mī'sə lā' nē) *n.*, mixture of various things. *The miscellany of items spread across Leon's desk prevented me from finding the plane tickets.*

Respond to the

SELECTION

Do Hurston's feelings about her ethnic heritage surprise you in any way? Explain why or why not.

INVESTIGATE

Inquire

Imagine

Recall: GATHERING FACTS

- 1a. What does Hurston say happened to her when she moved to Jacksonville?
- 2a. What is Hurston's reaction when someone reminds her that she is the granddaughter of a slave? What does she think is thrilling? According to Hurston, whose position is more difficult than her own?
- 3a. When does Hurston feel most colored? What example does she provide of a time when she feels this way? What other example does she provide of a situation when it is "the other way around"?

→ Interpret: FINDING MEANING

- 1b. What forces did Hurston become aware of when she went away to school?
- 2b. What does Hurston mean by the statement "I am not tragically colored"? In what way does her attitude toward her position as the granddaughter of a slave support this statement? Why does she believe the position of white people is more difficult than her own?
- 3b. Explain why both examples make Hurston aware of her race.

Analyze: TAKING THINGS APART

- 4a. Identify the different attitudes toward race that Hurston reveals in this essay.

→ Synthesize: BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

- 4b. Why does Hurston see the bags of different colors as all being essentially alike? What inner resources do her attitudes about color reveal?

Evaluate: MAKING JUDGMENTS

- 5a. Do you find Hurston's attitude toward her race and toward discrimination outdated, or do you think it holds true today? Using evidence from the text, state whether or not you think Hurston's attitude about race is healthy.

→ Extend: CONNECTING IDEAS

- 5b. What other attitudes about race and discrimination have you encountered in literature, films, or everyday life? In what way do these attitudes compare and contrast with Hurston's?

Understanding Literature

ARCHETYPE. Review the definition for **archetype** in Literary Tools on page 658. What fall from innocence to experience did Hurston undergo? Explain to what extent, if any, she ascribes tragic consequences to this event.

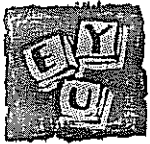
SYMBOL AND THEME. Review the definitions for **symbol** and **theme** in the Handbook of Literary Terms and the graphic organizer you made for Literary Tools on page 658. What do the bags of different colors Hurston mentions at the end of the selection represent? What do their contents represent? What or who does the "Great Stuffer of Bags" symbolize? Considering such symbolism, what do you believe is the theme of this selection?

WRITER'S JOURNAL



1. Write a personal **anecdote**, focusing on what it means to be you by describing a specific aspect of your background, upbringing, or personality.
2. Imagine you are the thirteen-year-old Hurston in Jacksonville. Write a **journal entry** in which you describe how you once saw yourself and how you see yourself through others' eyes now.
3. Write a **paragraph** describing your reaction to a musical experience.

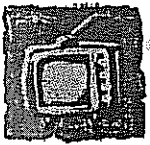
Integrating the LANGUAGE ARTS



Vocabulary

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION. You may have noticed that in this selection Hurston uses terms for African Americans that are considered to be inappropriate or offensive today, namely *colored* and *Negro*. These terms were replaced by the term *black* in the 1970s, and today, the term *African American* is more commonly used. These words all have connotations that have changed over time. Because English is a fluid language, not only are new words constantly being added and deleted, but shifts in denotation and connotation of established words occur over time. Review the Language Arts Survey 1.24, "Connotation and Denotation." A pair of words with essentially the same denotation is provided in each numbered item below. Choose which word has the more positive connotation and which the more negative connotation.

1. thin; skinny
2. obese; stout
3. stingy; frugal
4. easygoing; lazy
5. lie; fabrication



Media Literacy

EVALUATING INTERNET SITES. Working in small groups, use the Internet to research four sites that discuss Zora Neale Hurston's work. Read the information in each site. Then rate each site. Which is the most interesting? the most informative? the best constructed? the most accurate? Once you have compiled your evaluations, work together to chart your results, making your assessment as visually appealing as possible. Present your work to the class. See the Language Arts Survey 5.35, "How to Understand Internet Sites," for more information.

Study and Research



THE PARTS OF A DICTIONARY DEFINITION. In this essay, Hurston uses the word *hegira*, meaning "a journey undertaken to escape from a dangerous or undesirable situation." Review the Language Arts Survey 1.17, "Using a Dictionary." Then write out the dictionary entry for *hegira*, labeling each part.

1.21 Exploring Word Origins and Word Families

The English language gains new words from many different sources. One source is the names of people and places. Another source of words in the English language is **acronyms**. Acronyms are words formed from the first letter or letters of the major parts of terms.

EXAMPLES

sonar, from sound navigation ranging; NATO, from North Atlantic Treaty Organization; NASA, from National Aeronautic and Space Administration

Some words in the English language are **borrowed** from other languages.

EXAMPLES

deluxe (French), Gesundheit (German), kayak (Inuit)

Many words are formed by **shortening** longer words.

EXAMPLES

ad, from advertisement; auto, from automobile; lab, from laboratory; phone, from telephone; stereo, from stereophonic

Brand names are often taken into the English language. People begin to use these words as common nouns, even though most of them are still brand names.

EXAMPLES

Scotch tape, Xerox, Rollerblade

HAMBURGER

Originally known as "Hamburg steak," the hamburger takes its name from the city of Hamburg, Germany.

SPOONERISM

A slip of the tongue whereby the beginning sounds of words are switched; named after the Rev. William A. Spooner, who was noted for such slips. For example, after officiating at a wedding, he told the groom, "It is kistomary to cuss the bride."

1.22 Jargon and Gobbledygook

Jargon is the specialized vocabulary used by members of a profession. It tends to be difficult for people outside the profession to understand. A plumber may speak of a "hubless fitting" or a

"street elbow" (kinds of pipe). A computer programmer may talk of "ram cache" (part of computer memory) or a "shell" (a type of operating software for computers).

Jargon is useful to writers who want to authentically describe situations in which jargon would naturally be used. A novel about fighter pilots would probably be full of aviation jargon. A science fiction film might include futuristic jargon about warps in space and energy shields.

Gobbledygook is unclear, wordy jargon used by bureaucrats, government officials, and others. For example, the failure of a program might be called an "incomplete success." A bureaucrat might say, "We are engaged in conducting a study with a view to ascertaining which employees might be assigned to the mobility pool and how we might create revenue enhancement" when he means, "We are planning to cut jobs and increase taxes." Gobbledygook should be avoided. Effective communication involves using precise language instead of muddy, vague vocabulary.

1.23 Clichés and Euphemisms

A **cliché** is an expression that has been used so often it has been colorless and uninteresting. The use of clichés instantly makes writing dull.

EXAMPLES

quick as a wink, pretty as a picture

A **euphemism** is an inoffensive term that substitutes for one considered offensive.

EXAMPLES

aerial mishap (for "plane crash")
building engineer (for "janitor")

1.24 Connotation and Denotation

A **connotation** of a word is all the associations it has in addition to its literal meaning. For example, the words *cheap* and *economical* both denote "inexpensive," but *cheap* connotes shoddy and inferior while *economical* connotes a good value for the money. A **denotation** of a word is its dictionary definition. Writers and speakers should be aware of the connotations as well as the denotations of the words they use.

EXAMPLES

curious: nosy, snoopy, prying, meddling