

# ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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**Abramović, Marija**

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## **Zora Neale Hurston and Harlem Renaissance**

Diplomski rad

Student:

Marija Abramović

Mentor:

izv.prof.dr.sc. Gordan Matas

Split, 2021.

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
Department of English

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States of America has always been a multicultural society inhabited by different nations and races. One of these races were Blacks, who were brought to America with only one goal, to be slaves. Because of their strong spirit and character, they have survived all of the hardships that befell them when they came to the "promised" land. African - Americans have contributed with their hard physical work, not only to American economy, but also to American culture and art production.

The main focus of this thesis is precisely on African - American art production during the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. the period of the political and cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance or Negro Renaissance. In order for everything to function as a whole, the thesis starts with a historical background where it is explained how African - Americans came to America, and in what conditions they lived for several decades. After that, we deal with the topic of the Great Migration, as one of the most significant moments for American history. Great Migration greatly influenced the improvement of the quality of life of African - Americans, it completely changed their lives. Moving to the North of the United States, African - Americans begin their long battle for equality. The Harlem Renaissance is, as we see in this thesis, one of the greatest African - American movements that changed the structure of American literature and art in general. The focus of this thesis is also, on one of the greatest writers of the movement, Zora Neale Hurston, a woman who has become one of the most influential African - American women from this period of history, and who changed the stereotypical image of black literature.

The thesis further deals with the influence of Zora Neale Hurston on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, and with topics on which black literature is based on, during this time of struggle against racism. These topics will be analyzed through her most important works, supporting each thesis with quotations from the each work. We will also compare works with each other and make an analysis of the characters from her works, in order to establish the pattern that Zora uses to write about topics that are of great importance to her and her race. The topic, that will be mentioned first, is the topic of Black identity and racism. It will be discussed the importance of revival of Black identity as a way of fighting against the racism. In relation with this, the next topic is going to describe the importance of using black dialect, as a great part of African - American identity. Furthermore we will deal with the topic of black folklore tradition and religion. The thesis will end with the topic of feminism, which

was portrayed in Hurston's works, through gender discrimination of African - American women. An analysis of Hurston's literature, in this thesis, has been done through her several works, but mostly through her fiction and her folklore collections. Zora's works, that will be most used in this thesis are novels: "Jonah's Gourd Vine" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God", and folklore collections: "Mules and Men" and "Tell My Horse".

## **SLAVERY**

Black people were not immigrants like other people that came willingly to America in search for better life, they came by force. The slavery system wanted to erase and destroy their African heritage, everything that had to do with their tradition, their religion, their language.

The first boat with slaves from Africa came in America in 1619. It came to Jamestown in Virginia with 20 "Negers". Their arrival aroused interest among the inhabitants of Jamestown, because of their looks, black skin, athletic and strong appearance. The inhabitants quickly realized that they could be of great help to them, as there was so much work to be done in the new colonies. It was not long before people realized that they could make a good profit from the slave trade: as already mentioned, new colonies needed laborers, but as there was shortage of those who came to work voluntarily, many were willing to buy slaves. Slave ships had their ways of collecting slaves from Africa. Often sailing the west coast of Africa, they would stop in small villages, where they would bribe the residents, with whiskey, knives, mirrors and in exchange for gifts, they would give them few slaves. This was a slower way of collecting slaves. More often, in order to collect as many slaves as possible and to earn as much as possible, the sailors would organize kidnapping expeditions. The most common places that slaves were brought from are: Congo, Golden Coast, Gabon. (Shippen 2017: 133-135)

Once the slave ships came to America, an auction would be announced, and people, who needed cheap labor, would come from nearby areas. Healthy and strong African men and women were worth from one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars; children about fifty dollars. These were the prices until the cotton industry became the main industry in the South. After the bloom of the industry, prices rose; healthy African men and women were worth up to twelve hundred dollars, and sometimes the price would even reach eighteen hundred dollars. After the auction the planters would bring the slaves to their plantations. They were

trained and exercised in order to get to hard and tiring physical work, and to forget where they came from; their homeland, their language, their traditions. The living conditions were awful and dwellings in which they lived resembled animal stables, as we can see from the testimony of a former Texas slave:

“We had old ragged huts made out of poles, and some of the cracks were filled with mud and moss, and some weren’t. We didn’t have any good beds, just scaffolds nailed up to the wall made out of poles and old ragged bedding thrown on them. That sure was hard sleeping, but even that felt good to our weary bones after those long hard days of work in the fields.”<sup>1</sup> These awful conditions were the reasons why many of the slaves would get sick very soon and would die in agony. (Shippen 2017: 136)

This period of adjustment to the new way of life was very difficult for Negros. During the adjustment to the situation in which they found themselves, they began to lose and forget the customs and traditions of their African tribes, even their language. They completely lost touch with their homeland and their heritage trying to fit into a white society that viewed them only as cheap workforce. When it comes to religion, they adopted Christianity; they joined the Baptist Church in great number, because the rite of baptism by immersion reminded them of their old customs and ceremonies that took place on the shores of the Niger. Even though they had forgotten most of their customs and traditions, they still believed in magic.

The Blacks mostly worked in the cotton and rice fields. Despite the fact that some slaves also worked as domestic servants, and they were treated well, most of them did hard physical labor in inhumane conditions, all day in the field, under the hot Southern sun. This situation began to stimulate them, little by little, to revolt. They wanted to be free people again. There were three main slave revolts in America. The first one was in Virginia and it was very well planned, but the plan was discovered by the slave - owners, and these slaves were killed. The second revolt was organized in South Carolina in 1822 by a slave named Vesey, who bought his freedom, which he lost very quickly. Vesey wanted to take over Charleston in July, when white residents would go away to escape the heat. He and his followers were exposed and hanged. The last attempt was very different from the previous, because the initiator was a Baptist minister, Nat Turner, who thought that the Negros could reach their freedom only by violence, by killing their masters, as he did. This attempt to break free also ended up with Nat and his followers getting caught and being hanged.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.educatingexcellence.com/uploads/1/2/3/2/12327484/usi\\_sh\\_19\\_quotes\\_and\\_creating\\_a\\_slave\\_journal.pdf](http://www.educatingexcellence.com/uploads/1/2/3/2/12327484/usi_sh_19_quotes_and_creating_a_slave_journal.pdf)

After all of these attempts there were many slaves that would escape on their own; the runaway slaves would reunite and live together in small communities in the forests. Runaway slaves would often escape to the North, although Congress issued the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), which gave Whites who found runaway slaves the right to return them back to South, to their masters. Despite this, they continued to arrive in greater numbers. (Shippen 2017: 137-140)

The Blacks who had escaped from the South really wanted to help the rest of those who failed to escape, with the help of a group of Northerners, who thought that slavery was the most serious form of human rights violation, named Abolitionists<sup>2</sup>. The Abolitionists had made a route which they named the Underground Railroad. Along that route there were special places where slaves, travelling from South to North, would stop to get some sleep or eat something in order to gather strength. Many brave Negroes helped with the Abolition movement, but we need to mention two key women figures. The first woman that greatly contributed to the movement was Sojourner Truth, who, wherever she went, spoke out against slavery and who established new stops along the Underground Railroad. The other female figure was Harriet Tubman who has helped about three hundred slaves to finally regain their freedom. On the other hand, most of the slaves remained in the South, still doing hard physical work, not knowing at all what was going on around them.

The Civil War <sup>3</sup>(1861-1865) gave the Negroes their freedom; President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation<sup>4</sup>. With this document the president did not free all four million slaves, but only those in the Confederacy, excluding those who lived in border states that remained loyal to the Union. The Negroes encountering freedom for the first time, did not know how to react. Unaware of the difference between freedom and slavery, most of them decided to stay with their masters and continue to work for small wages, while some of them ran away, scared of becoming slaves again. Despite these social and political changes, southern whites did their best to prevent the Negroes to achieve equality: they did

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<sup>2</sup> The abolitionist movement was an organized effort to end the practice of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> The Civil War in the United States began in 1861, after decades of simmering tensions between northern and southern states over slavery, states' rights and westward expansion.

<sup>4</sup> On September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that as of January 1, 1863, all enslaved people in the states currently engaged in rebellion against the Union "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."



not have the right to vote, their schools were poor, they were lynched by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>5</sup> All the troubles and misfortunes that they survived in the South, failed to stimulate the Negroes to emigrate to North. They decided to stay on their land and do what they knew best, always hoping for a better life (Shippen 2017: 142-145).

It can be said that slavery was the “original sin” of the American society. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in one of his essays:

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” (Du Bois 1903: 15)

Du Bois wanted to point out the injustice that African - Americans experienced from American society and politics during that period of the history. As a member of that society, he wanted to raise awareness that this awful injustice would cause wars and cast a stain on America and its history. As a consequence, just as Du Bois had announced, the Civil War happened and the nation suffered great damage. The reputation of America, a nation that was said to be based on freedom and in which immigrants had the same rights as American citizens, was destroyed. After slavery ended, it was only then that African - Americans realized their path to liberation was going to be very long and very difficult. They needed to be mentally ready for the tedious and long struggle for equality and freedom. Freedom sometimes seemed impossible to reach because whenever they took a step forward in the struggle for it, the prejudices that they would constantly encounter, would bring them one step back. It was like they were in one big vicious circle from which they could not get out, up until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Slavery will forever remain one of the biggest stains in American history, as one of the worst forms of human rights violations.

## **THE GREAT MIGRATION**

Before the World War I, black Americans had moved North in small percentage, but that is because they were limited based on their economic condition. There were more than 335 000 southern-born black Americans already living in the North and West in 1900. In

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<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1865, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) extended into almost every southern state by 1870 and became a vehicle for white southern resistance to the Republican Party's Reconstruction-era policies aimed at establishing political and economic equality for Black Americans.

addition to escaping from the South to free themselves from the slavery, African - Americans also left for other reasons. Before the Civil War, some of them had moved west with their slave -owners, most often to California, Kansas, New York, Massachusetts. A large number of freed slaves, after 1830, settled in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. New York and Philadelphia received thousands of liberated African-Americans from Virginia after the Civil War (Gregory 2005: 36-37).

During this period, the segregation and the slavery were still strongly present in American society, despite the creation of the organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People <sup>6</sup>(1909) and National Urban League<sup>7</sup> (1910). There wasn't even a sign of equality for black Americans in social, economic and political aspects. Everything started to change with the beginning of the World War I, when African Americans saw the way to their freedom. Applying to volunteer and going to war, they wanted to prove their patriotism and their devotion to their nation. African American saw the chance to take this opportunity to finally gain the long-awaited freedom. In 1917 U. S. Congress passed the Selective Service Act, which required men aged 21 – 35 to apply for military duty. During the day of registration 700, 000 African Americans registered. Even during this terrible war they experienced segregation as U. S. military formed all-black units. They were not allowed to enter the Marine Corps or the Air Corps and in the U. S. army they were given only irrelevant jobs, which caused their fight to create a black officer training program. <sup>8</sup>

The most important change in U. S. society during the Great War was the Great Migration of African - Americans, mostly rural farm laborers from the South that went northwards and westwards in search of better paid industrial jobs and better political and social environment and opportunities. Most of the African - Americans that lived in the rural areas in the South did not own the land that they worked on. The best solution they had was to rent it from the white landowners or to work at their farms. This is when a system called sharecropping appears. It was a system in which the landowner would give the part of their land for free, in exchange for share of the crop. This system was very attractive to African - Americans who started from scratch and had no money for any other options. Many ex -

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<sup>6</sup> Interracial American organization created to work for the abolition of segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation; to oppose racism; and to ensure African Americans their constitutional rights.

<sup>7</sup> American service agency founded for the purpose of eliminating racial segregation and discrimination and helping African Americans and other minorities to participate in all phases of American life.

<sup>8</sup> <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/World-War-I-And-Great-Migration/>

slaves decided to rent the land from white landowners with hope to finally start their independent lives and to be financially stable. Due to lack of equipment and tools they were forced to rent the equipment from the landowners such as seeds, fertilizer, food and other things on credit until the harvest season. Floods, bad crop years or low crop prices would often destroy their profit and would leave them in debt to the landowner. The law protected landowners by prohibiting sharecroppers from selling the crop to anyone other than their landowners and from moving until they paid off debt. In order to avoid the prison, they would agree to work a couple more years until they would eventually pay off the debt, but this was almost impossible.<sup>9</sup> In this very cunning way, Whites managed to retain labor, giving African - Americans only the illusion of freedom. The worst thing is that despite the cessation and abolition of slavery, Blacks were still slaves, oppressed and controlled by Whites. In this situation migration was seen as a chance to escape the oppressiveness of the South and as a new beginning.

As soon as the World War I started and the job market begun to change, the hope for better future and new life was born in every African - American that dared to take his life into his hands. But the problem with this was, even though there were so many job opportunities, those jobs were at the lower end of the occupational ladder. Northern labor unions did not accept African-Americans in general, and this made things very difficult for them. Even when they managed to get better paying jobs during the World War I, many of them had to leave those jobs after the war. African - Americans would mostly do hard physical and low-paying jobs that no one else wanted to do. More than eight of every ten African - American men worked mostly as laborers in meat-packing companies, in the building trades, or as servants, janitors, cooks etc. On the other hand, African - American women were even more limited with job opportunities. They would work as seamstresses and steam laundries, but mostly as domestic servants. Even though now they had better paid jobs, the cost of living in the North was significantly higher, including rents, prices in stores for food or clothing. (Crew 1987: 34 -35)

One of the reasons for migration was also a better educational opportunity, which immediately implied greater freedom and independence. With good education, African - Americans wanted to improve their economic status and destroy every discrimination they had to live with. In the South, African - American children would attend special, inferior

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/sharecropping/>

schools, up to sixth grade, after which they would leave school and go work on farms, as their parents did before them. In the North, cities invested more in educational system and children were encouraged to stay in school longer. This gave young African - Americans, and their parents, hope for a better and brighter future. (Litwack 2009: 128- 130)

Society in North was very different and modern, African - Americans were not overlooked and insulted as they were in South. They were able to walk around town freely, without feeling the fear that they constantly felt before they migrated to the North. This was an enormous change of lifestyle for African - Americans. Finally, they could allow themselves to dream of one day being completely free and equal with white people.

## **THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

The term ‘‘Harlem Renaissance’’ refers to the birth of African - American cultural production that took place in New York City during the 1920s and early 1930s. The other term used is "New Negro Renaissance", a term which includes all African - Americans, who took part in this cultural evolution. This cultural movement that promoted greater involvement and recognition of African - Americans as citizens of equal rights was widespread, but the nucleus was in New York, more precisely in Harlem. The beginning of the Harlem Renaissance coincided with the time of the Great Migration of black Americans from the South of the country to the North. As already mentioned, they moved to North during World War I hoping for a better life and greater freedom and above all for better education. In cities like Detroit and Chicago, they had jobs in meat-packing factories or in automobile factories. But with all their contributions in these areas of work, African - Americans have had a huge cultural impact, especially in New York, where an explosion of artistic expression and creativity took place. (Nash 2003: 153)

Before 1920s Harlem was predominantly a white residential district. In New York during the 1910 Negroes represented less than 2 % of the population. In 1920 this number increased by 1%, and by the end of the 1920s, the Negro population doubled. Taking this fact into account, we can say that Harlem became the Negro capital of the world. Rudolph Fisher, in his short story ‘‘The City of Refuge‘‘, describes Harlem's Negroes:

‘‘Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones;

men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle trapping about the sidewalks; here and there a white face drifting along, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was "Negro Harlem." (Fisher 1987: 76-77)

One of Harlem's most vivid descriptions was given to us by James Weldon Johnson, a key figure in Harlem's cultural flourishing:

"Harlem is not merely a Negro Colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city. It is not a "quarter" or dilapidated tenements but is made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well paved and well lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters, and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth." (Johnson 1925)

During the first half of the 1920s, black-owned newspaper started to appear, which were very important for the expansion and development of this movement. One of the first important magazines, who advocated and presented the ideas of this movement, was *The Crisis*, published for the first time in 1910, by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was a leading magazine dealing with social and political topics for black Americans. By the beginning of the 1920s the magazine had monthly circulation of 100,000. W.E.B. Du Bois, the editor of the magazine hired Jessie Edmond Fauset as literary editor, who promoted African - American writers and their work (Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes etc.)

Another magazine that needs to be mentioned is *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, an official magazine of the National Urban League (NUL). The magazine first came out in 1923, publishing only researches and essays. From 1925, the editor of the magazine, Charles Spurgeon Johnson began publishing literary works by new, young authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston; he also organized literary competitions, featuring names such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Cauntee Cullen. *The Negro World*, the newspaper of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)<sup>10</sup>, also had an important role. It was a weekly newspaper and it was published in French, English and Spanish. Its editor and publisher was Marcus Garvey, the founder of UNIA and a public speaker, activist who encouraged African - Americans to return to their homeland, Africa. This is the period when the *Back to Africa*<sup>11</sup> movement was established; Garvey even organized the Black Star Line,

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<sup>10</sup> Organization founded by Marcus Garvey, dedicated to racial pride, economic self-sufficiency, and the formation of an independent Black nation in Africa.

<sup>11</sup> Also known as Black Zionism. It encouraged Afro – Americans to return to their homeland, Africa.

to provide safe transportation to Africa. His goal was to unite Negro race and to build their own nation on the African continent, as we can see from one of his speeches:

“If you believe that the Negro has a soul, if you believe that the Negro is a man, if you believe the Negro was endowed with the senses commonly given to other men by the Creator, then you must acknowledge that what other men have done, Negroes can do. We want to build up cities, nations, governments, industries of our own in Africa, so that we will be able to have a chance to rise from the lowest to the highest position in the African Commonwealth.”<sup>12</sup> This was a turning point for African - American artistic production, their opportunity to stand on their own feet and show their full artistic potential.

## **Negro Art**

In the beginning of the 1920s we can see an increase in the creative artistic activity and production of African - Americans, including musicians, writers, painters, sculptors and others who actively worked and used their talent to fight for the equal rights.

Before the World War I, African - American painters and sculptors had no interest in African - American tradition and motifs as an inspiration for their art. There was a change in the 1920s when black artist started to create new styles related to African - American tradition. An important name that we need to mention while talking about the beginnings of the development of new styles is Meta Warrick Fuller and her sculpture “Ethiopia Awakening” from 1914. The peculiarity of this sculpture lied in the fact that it looked like a typical Egyptian-style sculpture depicting a African woman, wrapped like a mummy from the waist down while the upper part was released, predicting rebirth. During the 1920s African art gained respect in American art circles and from then on stars to develop insanely.

One of the major artists of the Harlem Renaissance was Aaron Douglas, who, after moving from the South to New York, completely changed his painting style. Before his moving to New York he did traditional landscape painting, that coming to the center of Black artistic Renaissance, completely changed. He developed his own style in which he used geometric shapes to depict elements of African - American culture and tradition. His works were in line with his racial pride, and were credibly representing the ideas that the Harlem Renaissance brought into black artistic production. While he was doing the illustrations for Johnson’s book “God’s Trombones”, Douglas completely changed white Christian iconography, replacing it with Black subjects instead. This way, Douglas wanted to compare the violence and

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<sup>12</sup> <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5124>

oppression that African – Americans had experienced, with the suffering of Jesus. During the 1930s we can see the influence that Marxism had on its artistic style, especially in the 1934, in “Aspects of Negro Life”.

The most prominent painters of the Harlem Renaissance were: Archibald John Motley, who was known for his vivid paintings of Harlem nightlife, and the painter Palmer Hayden who distinguished himself with paintings of the black working class. As for sculptors, it is important to mention Augusta Savage and Richmond Barthé. After the Great Depression, artists who went to Europe during the early 1920s, in order to get the best possible education, returned to America. It was during this period, in the early 1930s, that New York became a center of artistic creation. Numerous galleries and museums were opening, including the *Museum of Modern Art*. This is how the development of “Negro art” began, which has finally shown its true potential, and will continue to show it.<sup>13</sup>

## **Music**

Music has always been important to Negroes. When mentioning Afro - American music, we need to talk about Spiritual, a type of religious folksong that is connected with African slaves brought to the American South. The production of the Spirituals was increasing in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. African - American spiritual music is very important for black culture, it is the originator of African- American music production. The African slaves in the American South had been introduced, for the first time, to Christianity during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At first, Africans were reluctant to embrace the new faith, but over time, fascinated by biblical stories they could sometimes identify with, they created spirituals that retold many of those stories. With the help of Spirituals, just as they embraced the new faith, African Christians expressed their new faith, their new hopes, but at the same time their sorrows. Spiritual was also used as a codified song by the slaves that wanted to escape from the South. One of the most popular ones was "Go down, Moses". The lyrics of this Spiritual refer to Harriet Tubman (code name: Moses), a black woman who helped hundreds of slaves to escape from the shackles of slavery:

“Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt's Land. Tell ol' Pharaoh, Let my people go. We need not always weep and mourn, Let my people go, and wear these slavery chains forlorn, Let my people go.”

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Visual-art>

After the 1860s collections of Spirituals began to appear. Spirituals became a symbol of African culture and the foundation for future black music genres like jazz and blues.<sup>14</sup>

Harlem's cultural renaissance attracted worldwide attention, but firstly it attracted white New Yorkers, especially the middle class who came 'uptown' to experience and witness "black lifestyle" and art. The reason for this is the popularization of the black music, especially two musical genres: blues and jazz. The "race record" industry started to grow from the moment when "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith<sup>15</sup> was recorded. The audience was introduced for the first time with this genre of music and they loved it. Musicians such as Clara Smith, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, who previously had been struggling to make a living, became famous. Black writers considered blues to be a very important form of artistic expression, which, with its originality and purity, attracted both whites and blacks. The black music expressed their sorrows, their aspirations and their hopes in an ironic way. Another genre, which has its roots in blues, is jazz. Jazz is perhaps the most popular African American genre of music that has been constantly evolving from the first time it appeared in 1920s. It is musical genre that is the result of the mixture of black and white folk music. During the 1920s, jazz orchestras incorporated new instruments and changed performance methods. One of the most important names of the jazz music that needs to be mentioned is Louis Armstrong that became first jazz soloist. Jazz has become a very popular and respected music genre and was also associated with dance forms such as charleston and tap dance.<sup>16</sup>

This interaction of black and the white culture, that took place in Harlem, contributed to the development of new relationships and the creation of new friendships between black and white artists and musicians, and to the promotion of black art and talent by Whites in places where Blacks had not previously been allowed to enter. Blacks now had the opportunity to perform in Harlem's iconic nightclubs, such as Cotton Club and Café Society<sup>17</sup>, where until then, they could not even work as waiters:

"The most significant result of the Negro vogue was the encouragement that black musicians, writers, and other artists received from white audiences and important white individuals. Jazz and blues thrived and defined the mood of the period. Black musicians – Roland Hayes, Duke

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/spirituals/>

<sup>15</sup> Performing artist that made music history in 1920 recorded very first blues recording, "Crazy Blues".

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Black-heritage-and-American-culture>

<sup>17</sup> Legendary nightclubs in Harlem where Black musicians performed for white audience.



Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, among others – came to public attention.“  
(Karmer and Russ 1997: 61)

This was the beginning of the invasion of Afro - American culture that will greatly affect not only the culture of New York, but American culture in general. This musical renaissance was an introduction to the literary renaissance, which resulted in many great and important literary works.

## **Literature**

Members and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance would meet very often at New York Public Library, where they would exchange ideas and thoughts. Even though the movement was built on earlier traditions of African - Americans, it was greatly affected by trends, for example primitivism, that was present in white intellectual circles. Modernist primitivism considered that “primitive” people had better relationship with the nature than “overcivilized” Whites. Some artists thought that the only way to gain artistic originality is to observe this "primitive race". This interest of the European and American white artistic circles for African culture encouraged African - Americans to reflect on their own culture and its value, of which they were not aware until this moment. They felt the need to reconnect with their roots and with their heritage which they had previously neglected.<sup>18</sup>

The root of African American literary production during this period lies in Negro Folk Literature that is in African American folktales<sup>19</sup>. This literature was a great inspiration for the New Negro writers. The most important and the most represented literary genres were: poetry, fiction and drama. The most appreciated and talented writers were poets Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and novelists Jean Toomer, Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston. It is also very important to mention one of the greatest black intellectuals from this period, Alain Locke, best known as a leader and chief interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>20</sup>. In his anthology “The New Negro: An Interpretation” that was published in 1925, Locke collected the most important works of the most talented young writers of the movement. In his anthology he wrote about the differences between the "Old Negro" and the "New Negro": the "New Negro", Locke thought, had much more confidence. Black artists started to question white literary standards as they were becoming more aware of the worth of

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Poetry>

<sup>19</sup> Storytelling tradition that appeared among African slaves during 18th and 19th century

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alain-Locke>

their talent and uniqueness. Common themes of the Harlem Renaissance were: alienation, marginality, the use of folk material, race issues etc.

## Poetry

One of the most popular literary genres was poetry. There are so many African - American poets that changed the way that the rest of the world perceived their literary production. First name that we need to mention is Countee Cullen, who felt that his race should not restrict his artistic and creative freedom and that the Anglo - American poetic tradition belongs, equally to the Blacks and the Whites. On the other hand, another important figure, Langston Hughes, believed that Negro artists should create their original art in order to show the world the importance and specificity of their art. In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain“, we can see his concern for the future of the Negro and the Negro art:

“One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously, “I would like to be a white poet”; meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.” And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” (Hughes 1926: 692)

Wanting to go back to "authentic" Afro - American artistic forms, Black writers focused on the folk. One of the first writers that used this traditional Negro folk scheme was James Weldon Johnson, with his poem “The Creation” (1920). Another poet that was inspired by Negro folk songs and jazz was Jean Toomer, who tried to modify the prose form in his book “Cane” (1923). Toomer was very interested in the theme of white supremacy<sup>21</sup> and refused to be labeled as Negro because he found it inappropriate and offensive.<sup>22</sup> The last poet that needs to be mentioned is Claude McKay, who used classic European forms (sonnet) mixed with the theme of the resistance in his poem “If We Must Die” (1919).

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<sup>21</sup> Beliefs and ideas advocating natural superiority of the lighter-skinned, or “white,” human races over other racial groups.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Fiction>

Although men dominated poetry, we must mention a few members of women's black poetry, such as Anne Spencer, Helene Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Alice Dunbar Nelson. Among all these woman poets, only Georgia Douglas Johnson has published several volumes of poetry such as "The Heart of a Woman" (1918) and "Bronze" (1922) etc. Women poets had the intention to fight against stereotypical opinions on black women, and against various other difficulties and obstacles that they, as women had to encounter. They wanted to combat racial and gender discrimination, through their intellectual work.

## **Drama**

As for the Harlem Renaissance drama, African - American playwrights had to fight the image and stereotypes created about their culture by the blackface minstrelsy, which was popular among the Whites for many decades before. Blackface minstrelsy was a caricatured depiction of the "Negro experience" by Whites, whose sole purpose was to ridicule and underestimate the importance of Black culture. This inspired African - American dramatists to finally describe and present the real "Negro experience". Most important were; Eugene O'Neill, "The Emperor Jones" (1921), Paul Green, "In Abraham's Bosom" (1927), Ridgely Torrence, "Plays for a Negro Theater" (1917). These plays were very popular, especially among the African - American audience as they were very authentic "Negro plays".

Alain Locke considered that Black drama should originate from the "folk play" and deal with topics related to the spirit and the tradition of black people, rather than discuss political issues, such as racism. Black - authored drama reached its peak between 1917 and 1937. The most important playwrights of the period were: Eulalie Spence, Marita Bonner, Willis Richardson, Frank Wilson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Hurston, Thurman etc. The most productive among them was Willis Richardson, who was strongly influenced by Alain Locke, especially in the beginning of his career when he wrote mostly about "Negro experience" in the South. His play, which became very popular, unexpectedly was "The Chip Woman's Fortune" (1923) that became the first Black - authored nonmusical drama on Broadway. Other Richardson's plays that became very popular among the audience were "Compromise: A Folk Play" (1925) and "Broken Banjo" (1925).

Another name that stands out is Georgia Douglas Johnson, an author of many plays with central themes such as: folk experience, racism, the position of black women in society. When it comes to politically radical black novels of the Harlem Renaissance, we need mention another author inspired by Locke's ideas. Despite Locke's view that simplicity and symmetry

on stage are very important, Hurston considered that mimicry, angular movement and playfulness were the foundations for African - American folk expression.

Another play that changed Black drama was “Harlem” written by Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp. It was a “risky” play because it depicted the harsh life of lower - class Blacks in Harlem during this period of the history. It was very popular on Broadway among the white audience, while Blacks criticized it for its stereotypical portrayal of blacks as criminals. The most important Harlem Renaissance play was Langston Hugh's “Mulatto” (1931). Black drama authors really wanted to describe the "Negro experience" within the American society, and the prejudices that they had to face on a daily basis because of the unfounded stereotypes.<sup>23</sup>

## **Fiction**

The key characteristic of the fiction during this period was the concentration on modern life, that is, on modernity. First black novels were James Weldon Johnson's “The Autobiography of an Ex -Colored Man” (1912) and Du Bois's “The Quest of the Silver Fleec” (1911). Black novelists of the Harlem Renaissance dealt with topics of different "Negro experiences", based on class, race, gender, at the same time protesting against racism. Jessie Redmond Fauset in his novel “There Is Confusion” (1927) puts forward a theory of how much American culture has changed since the appearance of Black artists and the Black middle class, wanting to introduce themes like patriotism, Black solidarity.

Another novel worth mentioning is Walter White’s “The Fire in the Flint” (1924), in which he wanted to describe the real position of black veterans after the Great War. He wanted to describe the racism, prejudice and violence that African - Americans experienced every day and to draw attention to black intellectuals, which didn’t have the opportunity to reach their full potential because of these prejudices. All the novels mentioned were the biggest proof that Black writers were very much capable of publishing a successful book that would stimulate interest in its readers.

It is very important to mention two novelists, Rudolph Fisher and Nella Larsen, who included in the Black novel themes such as sexuality, racial psychology, class division in society. Nella Larsen, in her novels “Quicksand” (1928) and “Passing” (1929) explored racial consciousness, and she was very interested in the topic of black women's sexuality within

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Fiction>

social, racial norms. On the other hand, Rudolph Fisher preferred themes regarding the Harlem modernity; he wrote about the cultural diversity present in Harlem at that time. He is also considered to be the originator of the Black Detective Novel with “The Walls of Jerricho” (1928) and “The Conjure Man Dies” (1923).

Two important names that need to be mentioned when it comes to anti – racist political movement are McKay and his novel “Banjo” (1929) and Du Bois and his novel “Dark Princess” (1928). These authors wrote about the strong influence of the anti-imperialist movements and Marxism during the 20th century, at the same time hoping that a change would come, and things would become easier for African - Americans in the future. Early 1920s was the period of the satire and one of the most important editors and satirists, H. L. Mecken was a key figure for inspiring young black intellectuals and writers such as Wallace Thurman and George Schuyler. George Schuyler writes a novel “Black No More” (1931) in which he shows the new direction of satirical fiction, addressing the racial issues in America. Wallace Thurman in his novel “The Blacker the Berry” (1929) also addresses the racial issues and the contradictions inside the predominantly white society and inside the Harlem Renaissance movement.

During the early 1920s, the interest for so-called "folk fiction" was increasing, especially that about “Negro experience” in the South. Julia Peterkin and Paul Green were white authors that had great success writing about “Negro experience” from their point of view, as white, privileged individuals. Black writers believed that only blacks could describe a true black experience. It was in that moment that one of the most important female black novelists, Zora Neale Hurston appeared.<sup>24</sup>

## **ZORA NEALE HURSTON**

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most important and the most productive black female writers of the Harlem Renaissance. She was born on January 7, 1891, in Alabama, but she moved with her family to Eatonville, Florida when she was still a baby. Even though she was born in Alabama, we can see in her writings that she always considered Eatonville her home.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art/Fiction>

Once she described Eatonville, which was the nation's first black township, as: “a city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse.” (Hurston 1935: 27)

In such a black, indigenous setting, Hurston could witness the actions of strong black figures and admire them. She thus witnessed the breaking of stereotypes about Blacks; her father John Hurston was one of the city councillors who passed the new Eatonville law and her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston was a strong woman who was involved in directing the Christian curricula. Hurston was actually a child of wealthy, educated parents. She grew up in a black neighborhood, in a big house, on a large estate, and had a very happy childhood despite some quarrels she had with her father who wanted to tame her unbridled, wild spirit. On the other hand, her mother encouraged her and her seven siblings to always strive to be better and to never give up on their dreams and their hopes for a better future. Hurston's happy childhood was abruptly interrupted in 1904, when her mother died. This was a period when Hurston felt really lost and lonely, her "wanderings" began.

After her mother's death, her father relatively quickly remarried a woman with whom Zora did not get along at all, and who she almost killed in a fight. Zora struggled, doing more jobs to cover her school expenses, and at one point joined the traveling troupe, *Gilbert & Sullivan*, as a maid to the lead singer. In 1917 she moved to Baltimore; she was 26 at the time but had not yet finished high school. The only way for her to get free schooling was to pretend to be a teenager. Because of this, she began to present herself ten years younger than she actually was. Zora attended Howard University from 1921 to 1924, after which she moved to New York, and became a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. <sup>25</sup>

Hurston was also a very intelligent woman with an amazing sense of humor, which people liked very much. Using her humor, and her excellent social skills, she managed to break through among the greatest writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Her best friends, from that circle, who need to be mentioned are, actress Ethel Waters, poet Langston Hughes and writer Sterling Brown. Her active social life never stood in the way of her productivity, but it actually inspired, and encouraged her to be the best writer she could possibly be.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.zoranealehurston.com/>

In 1928 Zora graduated from Barnard College, where she studied anthropology, under Franz Boas<sup>26</sup> and went for graduate studies in anthropology at Columbia University. Her teacher, Franz Boas, the Father of American Anthropology, strongly believed that in order to be excellent at something, one has to constantly work on his/her skills. His ideas really inspired Hurston to start immediately with her fieldwork expedition. First she went back home in Eatonville, Florida when she realized that everything has changed and that she needed to get used to it and blend in order to end her fieldwork successfully. After that Hurston decided to go to New Orleans to explore the African - American traditional spiritual practices voodoo. In order to blend in the circle of spirituals and to gain their trust and respect, she was fasting for days and laid naked at the altar for 69 hours. This shows her passion and devotion to collecting African - American folklore and incorporating it into the modern literature in order to preserve it and keep it alive and relevant. In 1936 Zora went to Jamaica and Haiti to study magic and voodoo where she learned a lot about folk medicine and voodoo rituals. It can be said that she was one of the greatest collectors and custodians of African - American folklore, as it can be also seen in all of her works.<sup>27</sup> Her devotion and passion for anthropology can best be seen in her statement:

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.”  
(Hurston 1942: 143)

By 1935 she had published numerous articles, short stories and a novel “Jonah’s Gourd Vine”, as well as a collection of black folklore “Mules and Men”. But for her literary productivity the period between the 1930s and 1940s is crucial. In 1930 she collaborated with her friend Langston Hughes on a play “Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts”, which was published posthumously in 1991. Zora published her first novel “Jonah's Gourd Vine”, which was well received by readers and critics for describing the "Negro experience" in a unique, original way. Another important novel that needs to be mentioned is “Mules and Men” (1935), which describes the African American folk culture in Florida. In 1937 she published her most important novel, her masterwork “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, followed by “Tell My Horse” published in 1938, a blend of anthropology and travel writing; another excellent novel “Moses, Man of the Mountain” published in 1939.

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<sup>26</sup> German-born American anthropologist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the founder of the relativistic, culture-centred school of American anthropology that became dominant in the 20th century.

<sup>27</sup> <https://why.org/segments/novelist-zora-neale-hurston-was-a-cultural-anthropologist-first/>

Zora Neal Hurston spent several years on the faculty Of North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham. The same year that Hurston published her autobiography “Dust Tracks on a Road” (1942), she was included in “Who's Who in America”, “Current Biography” and “Twentieth Century Authors”. After this she decided to write and to publish another novel “Seraph on the Suwanee”, in 1948. Hurston never received a large sum of money that publishing companies owed her. Because of this, her neighbors and friends, when she died on January 28, 1960, had to raise money to be able to bury her. As there was not enough money to make a tombstone, Hurston's tomb remained unmarked until 1973; she was buried in Florida on a segregated cemetery, *Garden of Heavenly Rest*.

At the end of the 20th century, the reading public, again, began to show interest in the works of this genius writer. In addition to the already mentioned “Mule Bone”, other collections were posthumously published, such as “Spunk: The Selected Stories” (1985), “The Complete Stories” (1995) and & “Every Tongue Got to Confess” (2001).<sup>28</sup> The fact that the Hurston and her works were recognized and appreciated only several decades after her death, and that are still highly appreciated testifies to the importance of this literary figure, one of the central figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

Zora Neale Hurston was a great figure not just because she was a female writer, but because she was a black female writer. She was a role model for oppressed women, black women who did not have any rights and who were convinced that they were created only for marriage and housework as society had convinced them. Hurston was a leading black feminist during the Harlem Renaissance, who continued to inspire women, especially black women for decades. Her role in black literature and in feminist movement is simply undeniable.

## **BLACK IDENTITY AND RACISM**

The revival of the Black identity was one of the key goals of the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston was one of the greatest activists among black writers who, in her novels, wanted to emphasize the importance of reviving and elevating Black identity. The main reason for this was a desire to combat racism, as the greatest "disease" in the history of American society, which has not yet abated. There are many historians and critics that think

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zora-Neale-Hurston>



that Hurston didn't have the right to write about "Negro experience" because of the fact that she was born and raised in family with an excellent economic condition (her family was a part of Black elite of Eatonville) and that she lived in all – black town, where she never had the opportunity to feel segregated. In Eatonville she was isolated from the rest of the Southern Blacks that were oppressed for so many years; it can be said that she didn't actually know that racism existed, at least until she left her hometown.

It can be said, observing her work, that she was more invested in describing the quality of black people's lives in general, during this period of the history, than in the racial inferiority.

Robert Hemenway in an interview for the Public Radio International said:

“If you’re a black woman or a black person of any gender in the United States of America in the first fifty or so years of the twentieth century you’re going to encounter segregation, you’re going to encounter racism, you’re going to encounter what you could call the ‘race problem.’ But Hurston’s point was that there’s so much more to life as a black person than just the race problem, and that’s the way whites tend to define black people, tend to define black people in terms of what’s their position on the race problem, how are they interacting with the White world. Hurston was less interested in how somebody was interacting with the white world than she was in how people were just plain living their lives. Hurston was writing about the black community from within. She wasn’t writing protests as some black writers of the time were doing. The conflicts that she ran into about her own work tended to be conflicts over why wasn’t she writing a protest novel like Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, or why was she just talking about people having a good time when we’re living in a country where full citizenship rights to black people were being denied... where black people in the South could lose their lives if they impacted on the white community in the wrong way.” (Hemenway 2007)

Her autobiography „*Dust Tracks on a Road*“ is full of contradictions because, although she lived in a time of race riots and Ku Klux Klan incidents, she does not mention any bad experience or case of race discrimination. On the contrary, she mentions how all white people that she met through her young life were the nicest people that treated her as equal and motivated her to fight against racism she will experience at some point in her life. We can find one of this examples in her autobiography, where she describes how on one occasion, when she was eight years old, an old white man took her fishing and gave her advices that will change her life:

„Snidlits, don't be a nigger“, he would say to me over and over. „Niggers lie and lie! Any time you catch folks lying, they are skeered of something. Lying is dodging. Pople with guts don't lie. They tell the truth and then if they have to, they fight it out. You lay yourself open ny lying. The other fellow knows right off that you are skeered of him and he's more'n apt to tackle you. If he does not do anything, he starts to looking down on you from then on. Trugh is a letter from courage. I want you to grow guts as you go along. So don't you let me hear of

you lying. You'll get 'long all right if you do like I tell you. Nothing can't lick you if you never get skeered.“(Hurston 1942: 9)

Racism and slavery are also main themes in Hurston's debut novel “Jonah's Gourd Vine”, a semi - autobiographical story about her father and his path from slave's son to free independent man. Racism is seen in the attitude of plantation owners towards their female slaves who are treated as sex slaves. From this kind relationship was born Jonah, the protagonist of this novel, who all his life was judged and segregated for being a "mulatto".<sup>29</sup> He first experiences hatred from his stepfather, who could not accept the fact that his stepson is a "mulatto". This can be seen in novel, in the part where Jonah raises his hand on his stepfather, who angrily throws him out of the house:

"Dese white folks orta know and dey say dese half – white niggers got de worst part uh bofe de white and de black folks.“ (Hurston 1934: 28)

The character of Ned, Jonah's stepfather is the representation of typical rural slave from the South, who is frustrated by the condition in which oppressed African - Americans find themselves, but too focused on self – pity, does nothing to change it.

In her best known novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, Black identity and racism are not central themes, but they are widely represented. Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance wrote mainly about racist issues and how African - Americans suffered because of the racial prejudice and racist laws, hoping that one day they will take an equal place in a society that still underestimates them. This is why many critics and African - American writers felt that the theme of racism was not sufficiently represented in this novel, as it should be, as the basis of black literature of this period of literary creation. Michael Awkward in his “New essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God” discusses how Hurston, because of her less aggressive approach to racism, was accused by fellow writers of wanting to be a 'perfect darkie' with the goal to meet the needs of the white audiences. (Awkward, 1990:3)

The main character of this masterpiece is Janie, a girl of mixed race fights prejudice and segregation through the plot. There is a racial incident that stands out the most; Janie's debate with Mrs. Turner in Chapter 16, where we can see black women with racist views, convinced in the inferiority of Black people. Mrs. Turner considered that mixed race people should be separated and treated differently from Black people, because they are practically white:

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<sup>29</sup> Term used to refer to people of mixed African and European ancestry

“Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness. Like the pecking-order in a chicken yard. Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can't. Once having set up her idols and built altars to them it was inevitable that she would worship there. It was inevitable that she should accept any inconsistency and cruelty from her deity as all good worshippers do from theirs” (Hurston 1937: 188).

In this quote we can see the racist views expressed by a black woman, against black people, and her opinion that white people have the right to treat black people the way they treat them because caucasians<sup>30</sup> are superior race by birth. This is shocking and at the same time contradictory, as reader can ask himself is it possible to be racist towards one's own race. As we already mentioned, Zora Neale Hurston has never been a victim of racist incidents, but in her works, when she describes racist incidents in more detail, they are mostly racist outbursts by Blacks against Blacks; this is the reason why many critics have called her out, saying that she is not competent enough to write about the real "Negro experience". She was a proud black woman, but her attitude towards racism was influenced mostly by Whites. One of these Whites was Franz Boas, her university professor, “the father of anthropology”, who believed that the term race is a culturally constructed term; different skin color does not indicate any innate difference.

After graduating from Barnard, Hurston wrote in 1928 an essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me”, in which she states that she first realized that she was colored the day she left her hometown Eatonville, an all-black town, at the age of thirteen; until that moment, she had rarely seen Whites, who came to Eatonville only if they were passing by, going to other neighboring towns. Her desire for knowledge, to get the best education, and to rise above racism and segregation was stronger, so much that she never allowed the color of her skin to affect the quality of her life and her relationship with people of other races, as we can see from the quote:

„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 low – down 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 more or less. No, I don't weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife“(Hurston 1928).

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<sup>30</sup> A white person , person with European origin

Zora Neale Hurston was the first black writer to have a positive attitude toward the position of African - Americans in society, at least that is what an average reader could conclude while reading her essay. But Hurston was more complex than that; her finest assets were a good sense of humor and irony. It can be said, observing her works, which she, to some extent, subconsciously wrote for a white audience. This theory can be supported by the fact that she described her "Negro experience" in humoristic and ironic way.

Hurston's novel that needs to be mentioned in term of the theme of Black identity and racism is "Moses, Man of the Mountain" (1939). In this novel, Hurston's intention was to compare the Egyptian slavery of the Hebrews with the African - American slavery. Moses is a character who in a certain part of the plot realizes that he lived all the time as part of a community that oppressed his people, the Hebrews, who had been under Egyptian slavery for centuries. After finding out his origin he does everything to liberate his people. This is where we can compare Moses with the Zora Neale Hurston, who, after becoming part of the white community, decides to free her people from racism. Her way to free her people from racism and oppression was to raise awareness among, not only African Americans, but also Whites about the importance and richness of African - American culture through her writing and her work as a human rights activist. Acts of violence against slaves are very realistically and brutally described, and can be compared to violence that African - American slaves, who were also punished by slave - owners in the most brutal ways such as flogging. Just as in the story Pharaoh and his people have a tragic end, so the Whites will have their tragic end. Using one of the greatest biblical stories, Zora cunningly wanted to bring the "Negro experience" closer to white audiences, and explain to them that throughout history such inhumane acts have been punished in the most horrible way possible by God. She wanted to warn Whites of the consequences of their horrific treatment of African - Americans, and in a way invite them to fight racism together.

Zora Neale Hurston was a black intellectual who was very aware of her identity, and the terrible situation in which her people were. Although she has never personally experienced racist outbursts, she sympathized with other African - Americans who were victims of them on a daily basis. By including the theme of Black identity and racism in her works, she wanted to raise awareness of a "disease" called racism, which needed to be eradicated from American society. She wanted to contribute to the fight against racism with her writing and her unique approach to such sensitive topic as racism.

## THE ROLE OF DIALECT

The black dialect, later known as African - American Vernacular English (AAVE), played a big role in the literary production of Harlem Renaissance. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as already mentioned, emphasized the importance of reviving the Black identity for the purpose of combating racism and segregation. The use of black dialects, as a cultural feature of an entire race, played a major role in the revival of Black identity.

During the 1920s and 1930s, there was great interest among white audiences in the black dialect. Only a few African - American writers have decided to incorporate the original black dialect into their works. The white audience was interested and fascinated with the black dialect because they thought it showed their intellectual inferiority, because of the way they were spelling and using grammar. Zora Neale Hurston was one of the Harlem Renaissance writers, who recognized the importance of using the black or Negro dialect as an identifying mark of African - American culture. For her it was very important to keep this dialect alive, as a tribute to all African - Americans that were brought to this country as slaves. As an anthropologist and folklorist she felt the need to explore all kinds of black dialect, mostly in the South.

Hurston spent her childhood in an all-black town, Eatonville, where she was surrounded by a rich black culture, including the pure and original black dialect of that city. After this, when she leaves her hometown, traveling all around the continent she get the opportunity to encounter and to learn about various black dialect, in which, as anthropologist, was very interested. This greatly influenced her writing style, as she used black dialect of Eatonville in her works, especially in her fiction and folklore collections. We can also see this in the example when after graduating from Barnard, she decided, as a folklorist and anthropologist, to travel to the Caribbean, wanting to explore the language and culture of the black population. Zora Neale Hurston considered very important, in the process of writing, to think about the origin and language, that is, the dialect of characters, in order to be able to credibly describe their origin and their culture.

During her period of research at the Caribbean, she wrote, in one of her letters to her professor, Franz Boas, that during her writing and research she wanted to „keep to the exact dialect“, meaning she wanted to keep it in order to describe the culture of this people as vivid as possible. (Ribeiro 2014: 46)

Hurston used black dialect characteristic for each area of her research. She wanted to present, with her ethnographic writing, specific verbal communication within the black community. Hurston's works, which are richest with black dialect are her folklore collections "Mules and Men" (1935) and "Tell My Horse" (1938), where she wanted to convey to the reader two completely different black dialects. In order to study the language of the inhabitants of the specific areas she researched, as authentically as possible, she would fit into the community and take time to study their verbal expression skills. She used dialect in all of her works as a weapon to describe different cultural experiences, different "Negro experience".

In almost all cases it repeats the same scheme; when retelling or describing uses Standard English, while folktales are narrated in dialect. This is seen in "Mules and Men", in which the narration begins in SE. The moment she starts with folk tales, she sinks back into her original shape, using her Eatonville dialect. When in the work the character of a black man speaks, he speaks in a black dialect, as we can see in the example from "Mules and Men":

„Good mawnin', Ole Father." "Howdy man. Whut you doin' 'round my throne so soon dis mawnin'.^" "Ah'm troubled in mind, and nobody can't ease mah spirit 'ceptin'." (Hurston 1935: 31)

Here we have a small piece of black man's interaction with God, from which we can see that this man uses black dialect, apparent in specific vocabulary and grammar. The underlined words and expressions show specificity of this dialect. In this work Hurston uses the rural black dialect of Eatonville and New Orleans, which is, at the same time, her dialect. Her role as an insider gives this work importance, because the reader does not have to doubt the authenticity of the language used, as she was born into this community and was part of it for a long period of her life. This dialect was a language of common working people from this area. Unlike "Mules and Men", in the folklore collection "Tell My Horse", where Hurston studied the tradition and the language of the black population in Jamaica and Haiti, the use of the dialect is minimal (Hurston used SE). The reason for this is the fact that Hurston was not familiar with this dialect, that is, with Jamaican Creole<sup>31</sup>, until the moment she decided to live in this community. This collection, as "Mules and Men", was written in the first person singular.

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<sup>31</sup> English – based language, with African influence, used and spoken in Jamaica

“Tell My Horse” is a collection that is considered to be written for bigger audience, that is, that the target group of readers were mainly white people.

Zora's usage of dialect culminates in her novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God”. The dialect again serves as a means by which Hurston gives life to the characters in the story. The introduction of the dialect into the story happens gradually; this is how Hurston wanted to introduce readers to a very complex and specific language. The novel contains a spoken version of the dialect, with its specific vocabulary and grammar.

Some of the characteristics of black dialect, i.e. AAVE are:

- initial and final consonant are dropped ( you – yuh)
- the omission of auxiliary verbs ( He a good man)
- incorrect use of past tenses ( lack of grammar knowledge)
- double negatives ( „ Ah don't know nobdy.“)
- cancelation of final "r" ( mo'- more)
- vowel shift ( lak – like)

The character of Tea Cake is the best representative of a typical African - American from the South. We can notice, comparing his speech with other characters from the novel, that he is representative of a speaker who is a part of lower class, i.e. working class, as we can see from this example from the novel:

„Put dat two hundred back wid de rest, Janie. Mah dice. Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain't got nothin' you don't git nothin'.” ( Hurston 1937: 170)

His education and his verbal skills support the stereotypical theory that an incomprehensible black dialect is an indicator of an inferior intellect. But Hurston, including characters from every social ladder African - American dialects offers to her readers a rich representation of African - American culture and heritage. Zora Neale Hurston is one of the few writers of the Harlem Renaissance who has managed to convey the authenticity of the black dialect in her works.

In her essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression“ ( 1934), Hurston tried to prove that black literary production was not the result of copying White literature. She wanted to describe and explain the specificity of African - American literature, language and above all culture. She draws a parallel by comparing money with language:

„Language is like money. In primitive communities actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later, even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later cheques for certain usages.“(Hurston 1934)

Hurston analyzes writing style of African - American writers, including her own, mentioning various stylistic figures such as: metaphor and simile, the double descriptive, nouns derived from verbs etc. She also mentions the central goals and motifs in writing: originality, use of dialect, revival of black identity. Hurston's opinion on the importance of the use of dialect and on accusations by Whites, that their literature is non-original and the result of copying can be summarized with sentences from her essay:

„If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of "lms" and "Ises." Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.“(Hurston 1934)

## **FOLKLORE AND RELIGION**

Every nation and every culture has its own folklore. Folklore, as a term, consists of two words: *folk*, which means rural people and *lore*, which means stories. This means folklore represents the stories of the rural inhabitants of the specific area, which have traditionally been passed down, from generation to generation by oral transmission.<sup>32</sup> Folklore is mostly used to describe the tradition and religious beliefs of a particular culture. There are various types of folklore, but the type of folklore that Zora Neale Hurston uses the most is the *folktale*. During the Harlem Renaissance, black writers struggled with the question, what is the original African culture and how should it be kept alive. This is the time when writers, like Hurston, intervened with their interest in folklore, considering it an inevitable and essential part of African culture and heritage. But the problem with this was that the majority of black writers struggled to define the real African - American culture, often describing in a stereotypical way, undermining themselves and distorting the true image of themselves and their heritage.

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first black writers to incorporate black folk tradition and religion into modern literature. She narrated, in her works, especially in plays and fiction,

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<sup>32</sup> <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/what-is-folklore-meaning-types-and-examples.html>



everyday life of African - Americans and the way that folk tradition has stood the test of time. We can see how Zora Neale Hurston pointed out the importance of black folk tradition, as the foundation of black literature from her quote:

„Folklore is the boiled – down juice or pot – likker, of human living!“

Zora Neale Hurston was born during the period of folktales and folk tradition and her whole life was surrounded by rich Black culture, which has greatly influenced her writing interests. Folklore really influenced her literary production, including: fiction, non – fiction, autobiography, plays, essays, folklore anthologies, etc. All of these works were written with the purpose of presenting and describing the rich and complex Afro - American culture and tradition from Zora's point of view. She fulfilled this goal, mostly in her fiction and ethnography, in which she presented the experiences of Blacks in American society in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two sides of Zora Neale Hurston that are constantly intertwining are fiction and folklore: her creative side and her anthropological side. (Ribeiro 2014: 23)

The presence of themes such as folklore tradition and religion can be seen in Hurston's first novel “Jonah's Gourd Vine”(1934). First of all, the title of the novel testifies to the fact that religion is one of the main themes of the Black literature of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as an important part of the African American tradition. The title of novel comes from the biblical verse, in which God gave Jonah a plant to cover his face, in order to help him fall asleep. But soon after he gave the plant to Jonah, he took it, sending worms to eat and destroy it. Jonah, shocked by this move, expresses his displeasure to God who tells him that he cannot be ungrateful, for he has neither planted nor cultivated that plant. (Bible; Jonah 4: 6-10) The metaphor for the 'gourd vine' in the novel is Jonah's wife Lucy, who was "given" to him as a gift from God; before his wife he was wandering lost and sinful. Her intelligence, her kindness, her support made him change his life and the way he saw things, but not for long; God takes this gift from him, as quickly as he gave it to him and Jonah returned to his old, sinful habits.

There are numerous allusions to Bible in this novel. The symbol that stands out is the symbol of snake that is mentioned twice; first time when Jonah tried to impress Lucy and second time in his dream. The story from the Bible where snake is mentioned for the first time is the story about Adam and Eve, when snake convinces them to take the Forbidden fruit. The snake is a metaphor for the mankind's downfall, both in the Bible and in this novel. Jonah's downfall

began the moment he returned to a sinful, fornicating life, causing him to lose his 'gourd vine', his wife Lucy. The second time that snakes gets mentioned in Bible, is with the story of Moses and the Bronze Serpent, when God punishes people by sending poisonous snakes, because of their lack of faith. After this God commanded Moses to make a serpent out of bronze; injured people who would look at this snake would heal immediately. (Bible; [John 3:1-21](#)) In this story the snake holds the metaphor for mental and physical healing, as it holds in the novel when it appears for the first time when Jonah tried to impress Lucy. Lucy healed Jonah's mind, Jonah's heart, but most of all Jonah's faith, so much that he became a preacher in the Baptist church.

Another symbol in the novel that represents African heritage and tradition are African drums. They are mentioned twice in the novel: first time during the celebration and second time at Jonah's funeral. As we already know, music was a very important part of everyday life for African - Americans; from the slavery period, when music served them as an escape from reality, all the way to the Harlem Renaissance when it reached its peak. Harlem Renaissance writers pointed out the importance of incorporating music into literary works because it is a great part of black identity and black culture. The drums actually symbolize Jonah's African heritage, his identity, his roots.

"Jonah's Gourd Vine" is fictional autobiographical novel about Hurston's father and his physical and spiritual journey. This novel narrates her family life and folklore tradition, with which she was surrounded throughout her childhood, as she grew up in the all-black town, Eatonville. Her goal was to describe "Negro experience" and black life, wanting to to incorporate traditional folklore forms into the modernist literature.

Her ethnographical collection of African - American folktales "Mules and Men" (1935), is a proof of her love for African – American heritage. When Zora Neale Hurston decided to return in 1930 to her hometown, Eatonville, she began to collect folk tales, typical of Blacks from the South, the same ones she had heard from African – Americans when she was a child. The Hurston's goal, while writing this book, was to describe the life in small all – black town during the 1930s. The collection "Mules and Men" is based on the mixture of African – American heritage, the position of African – Americans in American society and folktales narrating the life of slaves in the South.

The very title of this collection introduces us to the "Negro experience" of Southern rural blacks; Mules representing Black treated as mules by their slave - owners (buying and taking

advantage of them), thus degrading their culture and tradition by considering it primitive. In this novel one of the main motifs of the folklore tradition is related to religion, more specifically to the folk religion called hoodoo. Hoodoo is a great part of folklore tradition, and is often stigmatized by white people as evil and black magic. But hoodoo was, as the original religion that slaves brought with them from Africa, a great part of African - American identity and everything that Zora Neale Hurston, as well as other black writers of Harlem Renaissance, wanted to preserve and present as Black cultural heritage worth writing about:

„Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself, such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism. Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.“ (Hurston 1938: 183)

The people in Eatonville narrate their folktales about slavery, at the same time expressing their superstitious beliefs. Other motifs that are connected with the religion, but this time with Christianity (later adopted by African – Americans) are motifs of God and Devil, representing good and evil. While writing this book, Zora Neale Hurston was writing it from two perspectives; firstly from the perspective of an insider, as a member of the African – American society and secondly, from the perspective of an outsider, an objective anthropologist.

As a black woman with an unusually good experience, she was criticized from whatever perspective she would use to write her works. Writing and describing the „Negro experience“ and African - American culture, many have criticized her for not including enough, in her works the theme of racism and racial issues. Writing from a perspective of an outsider, readers may have been skeptical, because of her good education and rich lifestyle, which was mostly unreachable for an average African – American during this period of history. „Mules and Men“ is a perfect humorous representation of „Negro experience“ in the South. (Reburn, 2008)

Hurston decided to go to Haiti, Jamaica and the Bahamas for a deeper study of black culture during the 1930s. Her second collection of folktales “Tell My Horse” (1938) was created there; it describes the culture of these islands, their religious beliefs and their political affiliation. This collection is the result of Zora’s anthropological research of the spiritual world of Blacks, and their social status, with an emphasis on the racist issues that have been present on these islands since colonization. Here, the black folklore tradition and religion was

much purer and closer to the original tradition and religion than the one in the South that Hurston described in “Mules and Men”. Zora describes her life as a part of island society; her role in this book is, unlike the last, the role of an outsider, because she approached this research primary as an anthropologist and someone who was not part of this community. The title of the collection derives from a hoodoo belief that Guedé, one of African Gods, rides a horse and speaks through him after uttering a certain phrase, as some sort of spell. The majority of Blacks on the islands continued to practice black magic and hoodoo beliefs, but there were also those who did not see the point of pagan hoodoo rituals as we see in the book:

„Some of the other men of education in Haiti who have given time to the study of Voodoo esoterics do not see such deep meanings in Voodoo practices. They see only a pagan religion with an African pantheon. And right here, let it be said that the Haitian gods, mysteres, or loa are not the Catholic calendar of saints done over in black as has been stated by casual observers loa.“ (Hurston 1938: 114)

“Every Tongue Got to Confess” is Hurston's third published collection of folktales, which she wrote during the late 1920s, after she graduated from Barnard. The collection got published in 2003, when the manuscript, after being lost for a long time, was found by writers John Edgar Wideman and Carla Kaplan in the archive of Smithsonian Institute. Her collection consists of folktales, narrated by slaves from the Southern Guelf states<sup>33</sup>, which are described using humor and sarcasm. Zora Neale Hurston, known as a fun and humorous persona, often used humor to alleviate the difficult and tragic stories of African-Americans of the time.

Once again, in this novel, the title introduces the theme of religion as the main theme. The book is arranged by subjects, and some of them, treating African - American folk tradition and religion are: “God Tales”, “Preacher Tales”, “Devil Tales” “Witch and Hant Tales”, “Heaven Tales”. Hurston’s effort to promote and to preserve the traditional African - American oral storytelling was best described by John Edgar Wideman, who states:

“In her fiction, and collections of African-American narratives, Hurston provides models of good old-time tale-telling sessions. With the resources of written language, she seeks to recover, uncover, discover the techniques oral bards employed to enchant and teach their audiences. Like African-American instrumental jazz, Hurston’s writing imitates the human voice. At the bottom in the gut of jazz if you listen closely you can hear - no matter how complexly, obliquely, mysteriously stylized—somebody talking, crying, growling, singing, farting, praying, stomping, voicing in all those modes through which our bodies communicate some tale about how it feels to be here on earth or leaving, or about the sweet pain of hanging on between the coming and going.”(Wideman 2003)

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<sup>33</sup> Southern United States that are next to the Guelf of Mexico

In her masterpiece, a classic of the Harlem Renaissance, "Their Eyes Were Watching God", folklore tradition and religion is presented in the most intense way. As it can be seen, the title indicates the importance and the role of the God in this novel. God is not described as the God of the Christians, but as a supernatural force that manifests through nature and weather changes. This is evident in the way Hurston describes nature (moon, sky, stars, wind, etc.) in a way that is, we can say, mystical and divine. At the same time, this natural phenomenon awakens in the novel's protagonist, Janie, a sense of fear and admiration, and through the novel she struggles to find her place in the world and learn to coexist with the divine force.

Hurston places emphasis on spirituality and mysticism, which is a great part of the African - American tradition and faith, as we have already established, she does not mention "organized" religion, such as Christianity. One of the symbols from the novel, representing the divine force, which is seen in the nature is the hurricane. In the Chapter 18, there is an episode describing the destructive force of hurricane as a metaphor for God's rage and chaos that cannot be controlled by a man, that is helpless and worthless compared with the divine force. The protagonist of the novel Janie and her husband Tea Cake, together with other workers, did not succeed to escape the area before the hurricane, and they were left with a probability of being killed by a hurricane, they hoped for God's mercy, and their eyes, as the title says, were watching God:

"The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." (Hurston 1935: 204)

The next novel that needs to be mentioned, which also includes the theme of religion in the title itself, is "Moses, Man of the Mountain" (1939). In this novel, Hurston tells the story of Moses, a biblical character who, with the help of his faith, wanted to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery. Hurston, in addition to the Jewish religion, also draws a parallel with African - American voodoo and magic, which can be seen through the novel in several situations. One of these situations happens when Moses meets Jethro, a priest. Jethro was also a magician from which Moses learns magic tricks, after which he goes to Koptos where he fights dragons. The dragon that Moses killed kept The Book of the Thoth from which Moses learns greater truths about the deity and about his origin. After returning to Egypt, learning of his origins, Moses requires Pharaoh to free the Hebrews. Meanwhile, the Hebrews begin to

consider converting to Jethro's religion, and Moses supports them. This way, Hurston wanted to incorporate the African - American folk tradition, comparing the Jewish religion to magic and voodoo. He introduces mythical creatures such as dragons, and mentions various magic tricks, wanting to create as much contrast as possible between the two beliefs. Another situation in which he draws a parallel between Judaism and magic, or voodoo, is when Pharaoh refuses to liberate the Hebrews, and Moses lets the Biblical plagues on Egypt. Biblical plagues are described as magical tricks that Moses learned from his teacher, the magician Jethro, and not as a divine intervention. Moses controls his powers so as not to hastily destroy Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Zora Neale Hurston took one of the most famous biblical stories, the story of Moses to draw a parallel with traditional African - American beliefs such as voodoo and magic to highlight its importance for African - American culture and identity. As in any culture, so in the culture and tradition of African – Americans, religion is one of the identifying marks that determines its uniqueness and diversity. That is why Hurston wanted to give importance to the beliefs of her own people, wanting to preserve that part of her own culture and history forever.

In her last novel “Seraph of the Suwanee” (1948) Hurston points out the importance of African - American folklore and religion. Religion is the main theme of the novel, it initiates and shapes the plot. The protagonist of this novel is Arvay, a poor white woman that lives in the South, who finds a way out of her monotonous and unhappy life in faith. Her obsession with faith can also be seen in the fact that she falls in love with her sister’s husband who is a Baptist preacher. In this novel Hurston decides to put a white woman as protagonist in order to describe the importance that religion has in white people's lives. She describes the importance of Baptist Church, not only as a religious center, but also as central place for socializing inside community. Faith played a big part in Arvay’s life. From an early age, she was involved in all kinds of church activities, and she even played the organ. At one point, she even decided to become a missionary and be ordained a nun, but this changed when she met Jim. Arvay has spent his whole life looking at the Bible as a guiding star and sees in it consolation and protection from the outside world which is immoral and evil. She seeks signs of God's presence in everyday life, such as finding her husband Jim, who enters her life when she decides to become a nun:

“This was miracle right out of the Bible” (Hurston 1948: 750)

Although the Bible was her guiding star through life, Arvey was also a woman who sinned. One of those sins was her falling in love with her brother-in-law, which haunted her all her life. After her son Earl was born sick, she felt it was the result of her sinful thoughts about her brother-in-law, which confirms the fact that her whole life actually revolved around religion, belief, and fear of God. In this novel Hurston wanted to go beyond her own framework and describe the importance of religion in the white community wanting to show his flexibility and creativity in writing.

Zora Neal Hurston was a declared atheist, which is almost impossible to believe, since her father was a Baptist preacher. By taking into consideration this fact, it is obvious why in her books, when she discuss her beliefs, she spoke more about spirituality and mysticism than about, for example, Christianity, which she did not acknowledge. She nurtured her interest in ancient African beliefs, including hoodoo and black magic, because they are part of her African - American culture and identity.

## **FEMINISM**

Feminism, as a movement, already existed at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, but Black Feminism was at its beginnings, developing as a movement that would forever change the lives of African - American women. Black feminism is a movement that that has its focus on the experience of African - American women, taking into consideration their underestimated position in society.

African - American women were not allowed to participate in feminist movement because of their race and also they couldn't be a part of fight for black rights because of their gender. Black feminism started to develop with the beginning of the second wave of feminism that took place during the 1960s. In 1973, one of the most important organizations for Black feminism, the National Black Feminist Organization, was founded in New York. One of the famous black feminists of the second wave of feminism that needs to be mentioned is Angela Yvonne Davis. Davis is a political activist, above all a feminist who has distinguished herself by her radical actions in the fight for black rights. She has written over ten books on feminism and race. She was a member of the Communist Party of the USA, which strongly influenced her style of fighting against social norms. In the 1970s, she was accused of participating in an armed attack on a California courthouse in which four people were killed.

It can be said that it differs from other feminists in its radical way of fighting injustice, racial and gender discrimination. We can see her radical approach to feminism in this quote:

“Radical simply means "grasping things at the root.”<sup>34</sup>

Her book “Woman, Race and Class” provides insight into her view of the situation in which black women found themselves at the time, and how they were treated by American society. We can say that she is one of the most important and prominent successors of the founders of Black Feminism, among whom was Zora Neale Hurston, who also, only in a less radical way, fought for the same goals.<sup>35</sup>

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first black feminists, born during the Harlem Renaissance. She was a part of black aspect of feminism, that in the 1970s a black author and social activist, Alice Walker, named “womanism”. The term “womanist” was defined by Walker herself:

From womanish. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.<sup>36</sup>

It is when Alice Walker came across Zora’s most famous novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, that she realized the greatness, the importance and the genius of this black powerful feminist, who was always ahead of her time. Walker identified with Hurston and her style of writing, and the need to fight for the rights of her race and the rights of African - American women. She admired Zora, considering her one of the first black feminists who really wanted to change the destiny and path of young black women with her work. Her interest for Hurston was shown in her essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (1975), where she explored the influence that Zora’s hometown Eatonville had on her work. When she realized that her grave was unmarked, she bought her a headstone. She was shocked by the fact that the grave of an avant-garde figure, such as Zora Neale Hurston, was neglected and unmarked. In this way, she wanted to pay tribute to her and show how much she meant to black culture and black literature.

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<sup>34</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5863103.Angela\\_Y\\_Davis](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5863103.Angela_Y_Davis)

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/15/angela-davis-on-george-floyd-as-long-as-the-violence-of-racism-remains-no-one-is-safe>

<sup>36</sup> <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/wc/resource-collection/womanist>



Zora was one of the few successful black female writers, who did not allow racial and gender prejudices to prevent her in her intention to become one of the most distinguished writers of African - American literature. The position of women in American society, during this period of history was awful, women were oppressed and considered to be inferior by the authorities, meaning by men. Being a woman in American society was very difficult, and moreover being a black woman meant that you were at the bottom of the social ladder.

Hurston was a strong female figure of the Harlem Renaissance and African-American literature in general, who also had a need to address, in her works, in addition to racial prejudice and issues, the topic of gender prejudice and discrimination. She wanted to present, in her works, strong female personalities, giving each of them some of her own personality traits, such as the ability to fight the constant prejudices about black women in the environment by being reasonable while keeping her eyes on the prize.

We can find such strong black women in her first novel, "Jonah's Gourd Vine," but the most important is Jonah's wife Lucy, who changes his life the moment she meets Jonah. She changes a lost man and puts him back on the right path with the help of her strong character, her sacrifice and her generosity. In the beginning of "Jonah's Gourd Vine" there is the description of Lucy as a girl with "petit figure", but with big sparkly eyes. Although she was small, and at first glance weak, she was always a group leader in both school and church, her character was the complete opposite of her physical appearance. When Lucy met Jonah, she realized how much he needed her help, her perseverance, and her love to change his life for the better. Lucy leaves her family to be with her beloved Jonah which, at the time, was a very brave venture for a woman, especially for a black woman. With her help Jonah becomes a Baptist preacher, and changes his life, going from one extreme to another. Lucy had the role of his "guiding star" up until the moment he decides to return to his sinful life, after which she, as an extremely strong and determined character, leaves him and dies alone.

Another strong female character that took care of Jonah and had a great impact on his life is Sally. She was the one who supported him when he decided to preach again, she even found him a job. As she was in healthy financial situation, she provided for him and took care of his finances. This situation describes one of the goals of advocating feminism, financial security and stability of a black woman, who as an independent capable and smart woman manages her life and does only what she wants to do. Sally, like Lucy before her, was born to stand out, to go beyond the social frameworks in which men placed women, wanting to restrict their

freedom and their spirit. Although Jonah was a male character, he was not presented as the strong one in the family, as expected. On the contrary, whenever he has to face some difficulty he seeks help from strong female characters, such as Sally and Lucy, which somehow manage to get him back on track.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote a short story “Sweat” in 1926, which is the result of her feminist mindset. It is a story that describes the lives of black women from their own perspective. The protagonist of this story is woman called Delia, who worked as washerwoman from Florida. The central theme of this story is marriage, the husband’s violent relationship with his wife, and the oppression of women within marriage, which is seen by feminists, as a social construct created by men who wanted to keep women under control, considering them inferior beings.

In the story we can see the relationship between Delia and her violent husband Sykes, who physically and mentally abuses her, cheats on her and spends her money. As in “Jonah’s Gourd Vine,” the woman is portrayed as a stronger link in the marriage. Unlike her husband, who is not unemployed, Delia is a strong and independent woman who earns her own money. Her husband is portrayed as a weak, violent character who, like a leech, sucks both money and life out of her. One of the worst incidents in their relationship happens when Sykes brings a snake into the house with the intent to abuse and scare his wife. The snake eventually bites and poisons Sykes, who dies before Delia's eyes. Delia doesn’t even try to help him, she leaves him to die in agony, and takes revenge on him for everything she went through for him, wanting to justify her decision, as we can see at the end of the story:

“She saw him on his hands and Knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two towards her – all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew” (Hurston 1926: 8).

Here we see feminine pride, feminine character, and determination to finally change her life and to punish the one who has molested her for years. “Sweat” is a story which describes experience of African - American women; the attitude of society, but also of the closest people towards them. Violence was, unfortunately, a very common behavior not only of Whites towards black women, but also of black people towards black women. Men, both white and black treated black women as if they were animals, inferior beings who didn't have

emotions. Stories which have the theme of violence against women are frustrating for the reader, but especially for female readers, which was Hurston's goal in writing this story. She wanted to portray the lives of oppressed African - Americans in a cruel and brutal way and to awaken in reader's emotions, especially anger and a desire to right the injustice that black women have been trying to fight all their lives.

Among all Zora's works, the one that best describes the life of an African - American woman and exudes the idea of feminism, then it would certainly be her most famous novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God". The main character of Janie Crawford, an attractive, strong black woman, appears in this novel. Her strong character is due to her grandmother and her mother, who were slaves on plantations in the South. To ensure good social status and safety for her daughter, her mother persuades her to marry farmer Logan Killicks. In Chapter 2, her grandmother convinces her to do so, explaining her that their race, especially their gender does not give them right to choose for themselves:

"Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you." (Hurston 1937: 47)

This is a very frustrating and emotional moment in the novel, where the reader can see and feel the kind of cruelty and psychological abuse African - American women had to deal with. Nanny describes black women as "the mules of the world", which is shocking, but the ugly truth that they had to live with.

After this, Janie gives in, but very quickly, when she realizes that Logan treats her like one of the animals from the farm, runs away with Joe Starks, a man with great ambitions. Together they go to the all-black town of Eatonville, where Jody pursues a career as a successful politician. After a while, Janie realizes that her life has become monotonous, she wants to participate in social life, but Jody prevents her from coming into contact with people of lower social status. Jody treats her like a lower being, serving only to show off, she is a trophy for him. After almost 20 years of marriage, Janie decides to take her life into her own hands and attacks her husband in front of the citizens saying how ugly and incompetent he is. After this Jody beats Janie, and she leaves him. Again, as in Hurston's previous works, we have a picture of violence against women, violence as the only possible response by a man whose

ego is hurt, and who does not accept women's opinion, because of strongly beliefs that women are inferior beings who are not entitled to their opinion.

After Jody's death, Janie decides to enjoy her freedom and independence she has never experienced before. But shortly after her husband's death, she meets Tea Cake, twelve years her junior, with whom she ends her relationship in an even more violent way. After being bitten by a rabid dog during Hurricane, Tea Cake gets sick and shoots at Janie, who shoots him to survive.

As we can see, this story provides the most realistic description of life of black women from the South, their oppression, their constant fear for their own lives that was threatened by men at all times. It is no longer just about racism and the attitude of Whites towards Blacks, but about the attitude of the whole society towards African - American women. As it can be seen from Janie's example, the only periods in her life in which she felt safe and free were when she was alone. In every relationship with a man, she was a victim of violence, because of her passion, because of her desire to express her opinion and to be able to resist to take the roles that society assigned to black women.

Due to this position of women in society, feminism emerged as a movement that fights for women's equality. Unfortunately, the position of women in society today is not what it should be, as Zora Neale Hurston had hoped. A few decades after the Harlem Renaissance, the position of African - American women in American society was best described by a well - known African - American human rights activist Malcolm X, who stated in one of his speeches:

„ The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected woman in America is the Black woman.“<sup>37</sup>

Zora's idea of feminism was very clear. In almost all of her works, the protagonists are strong female characters, and men are described in a negative light, as a burden that women carry all their lives on their backs. Women spend their whole lives trying to get rid of this "burden" that hinders them on the way to their freedom and independence. It can be said that the life of Zora Neale Hurston, as one of the most important African - American women writers, is proof that women can cope with the social norms that are imposed on them all their lives. Her role in a

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/black-women-deserve-better-will-2019-be-the-year-of-change>

movement, such as the Harlem Renaissance, is undeniable, as is her role in the struggle for women's rights. Her need to speak about gender discrimination is seen in her statement:

“If you are silent about your pain they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The United States of America has always been a country of immigrants, but only African - Americans are immigrants who came to the USA by force. They were brought to America to make up for the labor shortage at the time of the construction and development of the country. As slaves that didn't have any human rights, they lived in awful conditions, experiencing violence by their slave - owners. Over time, Blacks began to escape the farms and plantations where they worked, wanting to resist the way they were treated in the South. After the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln granted them freedom by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1862, which applied only to the slaves who lived within the Confederacy.

A more important change for African - Americans occurs at the time of the Great Migration. By leaving the South, they wanted to change their lives by escaping the violence and the discrimination they had to deal with. Also, the social status of African - Americans is experiencing a major shift. When the Great War started, many of them volunteered and went to war and those who remained got new job opportunities, due to lack of manpower. In the middle of these changes, that have occurred as a result of the Great Migration, a political and cultural movement called the “Harlem Renaissance” and “New Negro Renaissance” was born in New York, more precisely in Harlem. Harlem was a gathering place for all kinds of African - American artists during the 1920s and 1930s, and was also known as the “Negro capital”. These artists were motivated by the idea of long-awaited equality, and the desire for recognition of African - American talent and culture. Racism was in fact the drive force of this rich explosion of artistic creation in which they showed their talent and potential.

During this period, Harlem became the center of the culture of the North. The flourishing Negro art included musicians, writers, painters, and many other artists. Music was very important for Blacks, because it always accompanied them, in days of happiness and in days of sorrow. Literature was, of course, one of the most represented art forms of the movement. The most prolific genres of literature were poetry, drama, and fiction. We can find

all of the most important African - American literary works and writers of the Harlem Renaissance in “The New Negro”, an anthology edited by the Alain Locke. This anthology of fiction poetry and essays included one of the most famous African - American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was a famous anthropologist and folklorist who, in her works, wanted to describe the specificity of her race and culture. Through her works we can see how strong her interest for anthropology and black folklore really was. Ever since she was a child, she absorbed black culture and the customs with which she grew up. The fact that she lived in an all-black town in the South is very important, because it is considered to be one of the main factors that shaped and directed Hurston's interests from a very young age. Her love for her hometown, for her race, motivated her to become an anthropologist, and to dedicate her life to collecting parts of the African-American tradition in order to preserve it.

One of the goals of the Harlem Renaissance was to revive the Black identity in order to combat the racism. Black writers wanted to change the stereotypical opinion of the rest of the world towards Negro art and literature, seen as inferior and primitive. Zora Neale Hurston chose humor and sarcasm as her tool for combating prejudice, which is why both white and black audiences loved her. Many of her fellow writers criticized her for writing with the style that white audience prefers, selling her “Negro soul” for success. They also criticized her as someone who is not relevant to write about racial issues, because she herself has never been a victim of a racist outburst.

At the beginning of his literary career, Hurston wrote short stories and essays, and gradually switched to writing her fiction. As a folklorist, she had a very great influence on the preservation of folklore tradition by incorporating it into modern literature. The most famous are her folklore collections: “Mules and Men” (1935) and “Tell My Horse“ (1938). Her masterpiece is considered to be her fiction novel „Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) which is a perfect representation of the Black identity and black folklore tradition. Zora also emphasizes the importance of using the black dialect as a large part of black identity and culture which it can be seen from the fact that almost all of her works are written in black dialect. For her, language was one of the key points of African - American culture, because language is something that distinguishes one nation from another and makes it special. Her need to collect and write stories about her ancestors was so strong and powerful, as we can see from her autobiography “Dust Tracks on a Road” (1942) where she wrote:

“There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you” (Hurston 1942: 139)

Her biggest fear was the fear of failure, the fear of failing to collect and preserve what was left of African-American culture, and the fear that all her efforts would be in vain.

Another theme that dominated in her works was the theme of violence against African - American. Hurston draws her feminist ideas through the brutal portrayal of oppressed African - American women. She considered that women must fight for their rights, because no one else will do it for them. As a black woman, she always ran away from social frameworks, and through her work she tried to inspire women to do the same. Through characters like Janie from “Their Eyes Were Watching God” she wanted to first portray the harsh reality in which the women of that era lived, then invite women to change their destiny, as well as the protagonist of the novel did it herself. She wanted women to take matters into their own hands, just the way she took them and take control of their own lives.

In this thesis, the goal was to determine and analyze Hurston's writing pattern through her works and the way in which her artistic work fits into the ideology and the concept of the Harlem Renaissance as a cultural and political movement. In her works, she also wanted to point out the problems that bothered her and her race within the society, through the characters from her works. In order to substantiate all the theses with evidence, quotations from her works were used. Her works were also compared with each other, in order to understand better her style and formula of writing. Zora's works which were used in this thesis the most are novels: “Jonah's Gourd Vine” and “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, and folklore collections: “Mules and Men” and “Tell My Horse”.

It can be said that all those problems that Zora Neale Hurston struggled with during the Harlem Renaissance are still present. Racism and sexism are present in today's society, as we can see, to a large extent, witnessing the fact that the human race has not changed for the better. This can be seen from the the fact that some women are still paid less than men for the same amount of work and are still considered less capable than men. As far as racism is concerned, we can see that America is still center of this incurable social disease. This is evidenced by the Black Lives Matter, a movement that has re-raised the issue of oppression of African – Americans in society. Unfortunately for us, the fight against racism, of which Hurston was a part, has been present for centuries, since the beginning of slavery, and will be for many more years. Still, we are left with the hope that there will always be people who, on behalf of many who do not have the right or the power to express their opinion, will fight against social divisions and discrimination for the benefit of humanity, as Zora Neale Hurston

did in her day. Zora is proof that every woman, every black woman, with a strong character and a strong will, can step out of the social frameworks they were put in by white people. Zora Neale Hurston is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest guardians of the folklore tradition, but at the same time one of the most innovative writers of Black literature, which with its style of writing influenced many generations of writers.



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## **ABSTRACT**

The migration of Africans to America, unlike the migration of other nations and races, was forced. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were abducted from their homeland, as traders and sailors brought them to America with the intention of selling them into slavery, as cheap labor. The social status of African - Americans, after the Great Migration, experiences a turnaround. In the heart of New York, specifically in Harlem, a cultural movement is born under the name of the „Harlem Renaissance“, which will subsequently turn out to be the culmination of African - American artistic production. One of the most important and productive authors of this movement was Zora Neale Hurston, a successful anthropologist and folklorist. She included, in her literary works, the central themes of the Harlem Renaissance, such as the importance of reviving black identity, along with the inevitable theme of racism. As folklorist, she highlights the importance of black tradition and heritage, including the use of black dialects in literary works. One of the themes is gender discrimination of African - American women, and the importance of feminism in the fight against it. Zora Neale Hurston was one of the greatest African - American writers and modernist of the Harlem Renaissance.

Key words: slavery, African - Americans, migration, Negro experience, Harlem Renaissance, literature, black identity, language, folklore, racism, feminism, religion

## SAŽETAK

Imigracija Afrikanaca u Ameriku, je za razliku od imigracija drugih naroda i rasa, bila prisilna. Oni su u 19. stoljeću bili otimani iz svoje domovine, te su ih trgovci i pomorci dovozili u Ameriku s namjerom da ih prodaju u roblje, kao jeftinu radnu snagu. Društveni status Afro – Amerikanaca nakon Velike migracije, doživljava preokret. U srcu New Yorka, točnije u Harlemu, se rađa kulturni pokret pod nazivom Harlemska renesansa, koja će se naknadno ispostaviti kao vrhunac crnačkog umjetničkog stvaralaštva. Jedna od najvažnijih i najproduktivnijih spisateljica tog pokreta je bila Zora Neale Hurston, uspješna antropologinja i folkloristica. U svojim književnim djelima uključuje centralne teme Harlemske renesanse kao što je važnost oživljavanja crnačkog identiteta, skupa s neizbježnom temom rasizma. Kao folklorist ističe važnost crnačke tradicije i nasljeđa, među ostalim i korištenje crnačkog dijalekta u književnim djelima. Jedna od tema je i diskriminacija ženskog spola, te važnost feminizma u borbi protiv iste. Zora Neale Hurston jedna od najvećih Afro - Američkih spisateljica i modernistkinja Harlemske renesanse.

Ključne riječi: robstvo, Afro – amerikanci, migracija, Crnačko iskustvo, Harlemska renesansa, književnost, crnački identitet, jezik, folklor, feminizam, religija

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