**Zora Neale Hurston & the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance was the African-American age of enlightenment. A time of great success and growth in music, art, and the identity of African- Americans in the United States. This is a time that African-Americans introduced jazz and blues music to the public and start to play in more public areas. It was in this era that we meet some of the greats; people like Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington and Nella Larsen. Although these names are famous, they don’t quite stand out as much as the name Zora Neale Hurston. You may call Hurston a novelist, an essayist, and anthropologist, a playwright, or an icon of the Harlem Renaissance, but none of these titles could fully give us an essence of her immense career.

Hurston was born January 7th, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama to John and Lizzie Potts Hurston. Not long after, her father moved them all to Eatonville, Florida, the oldest incorporated, self-governed, black town in America. Hurston would later describe it as a city of 5 lakes, 3 croquet ports, 300 brown skins, 300 good swimmers, plenty guavas, 2 schools, and no jailhouse. When Hurston was 13 her mother died. Afterwards, her father married Mattie Mobe, a woman only 6 years older than Hurston. Hurston and her stepmother hated each other and it only took a few years before Hurston had had enough. As a teen, she left Eatonville and started working odd jobs to support herself. In 1917, Hurston moved to Baltimore, Maryland and was eager to enroll at the public high school but Hurston was 26 years old. Too old to qualify for free public education. Hurston then lied about her age, claiming she was 16, saying what she needed to say to get what she wanted. Even if it didn’t exactly fit with the facts which would happen time and time again throughout the years in her life. She stuck with this false birth date for the rest of her life.

Hurston completed high school in only a year and enrolled at Howard University in Washington D.C., the nation’s most prestigious black college. In 1921, Howard’s literary magazine “*Stylus”*, published her first short story “John Redding Goes to See”. Three years later, another short story drenched in light, appeared in the journal opportunity, launching Hurston’s long career as a published author. In 1925, she won second place in 2 categories in a literary contest earning her recognition among the black literary community. She also won a scholarship and transferred to New York City’s Barnard College. At Barnard she met Franz Boas who became a mentor and a major influence on Hurston’s career. In 1926, Boas asked Hurston to go to Harlem to conduct field of research on the black community. There, Hurston and Harlem would never be the same. Hurston arrived in Harlem when she was 35 years old, claiming to be 26, with no job, no friends, and a lot of hope. Harlem was the epicenter of black music, literature, and culture in the 1920’s, later known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hurston lived in a series of rented rooms including a boarding house at 267 West 136 Street that allowed artists to live for free of charge. There she met the poets Langston Hughes and Kathy Poland, both of whom would become close friends with her later in life. Together, Hurston and Hughes founded the literary journal *FIRE*, a publication devoted to the work of young black artists. The journal boldly explored topics like homosexuality, jazz, and the black ideals of beauty. The first issue carried Hurston’s play *COLOR STRUCK* and her short story *Sweat.* In 1928 Hurston published an essay in the *“World Tomorrow”* called “*How It Feels to Be Colored Me”*. Black critics were outraged by her views on slavery. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it no one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. She kicked and spat upon what she saw as a stereotype of black life created by literature. She said, “ I am NOT tragically colored. 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 but about it, even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life. I have seen that world is to the strong, regardless of a little pigmentation. More or less, this period also saw the end of Hurston’s friendship with Langston Hughes, one of the greatest disappointments in Hurston’s life. In 1930, the two collaborated on a play entitled *MILLE BONE*, a work about racial identity. The pair argued over who would get credit for writing the play and as a result, their friendship ended and the play was never performed.

By 1934, Hurston’s career was growing with essays and short stories published in several journals. She also published her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. She followed that up a year later with *MULES and MEN,* a collection of black, folklore. While traveling in Haiti, she wrote the manuscript for a novel entitled *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel was published the 18th of September in 1937 just after Hurston returned to the United States. Black critics slammed the book as offensive to the African-American community. Her use of language encouraged the public’s views on how black people talk. Hurston was deeply wounded by the attacks but would not renounce her work. She refused to allow her own experience as an African-American to be molded by others. Her views on the race fostered, keeping her out of the society of great black daily writers.

During this time, Hurston had a stroke. She was very poor and was forced to accept public assistance and move into the St. Lucy County Welfare Home in Florida. On the 28th of January of 1950, a few weeks after her 69th birthday, Hurston died of heart disease at the welfare home. Her neighbors were able to raise enough money to cover the cost of her funeral, but not for a headstone.

Even though she is a much celebrated figurehead of the Harlem Renaissance, today we may not have remembered Zora Neale Hurston, if it wasn’t for Alice Walker, the author of “*The Color Purple”.* In 1973, while conducting research, Alice Walker came across *MULES and MEN,* a book by Zora Neale Hurston. By the book’s end, Walker found herself more interested in the author of the book, than its subject. She did a little digging and found another book by Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Although Hurston had died years before, Walker felt a connection to her and set out to find more information on the late author. Posing as Hurston and a bit of acting that Hurston herself would surely have approved of Walker track down the field in Florida where Hurston had been buried in an unmarked grave, more than a decade before. She would later purchase a headstone reading, *Zora Neale Hurston; a genius of the south* for the gravesite and begin to restore Hurston to her rightful place as one of America’s greatest writers. Without Alice Walker, the world may never have rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston through *Their Eyes are Watching God* is celebrated today as a classic and Hurston is acknowledged as an icon of the Harlem Renaissance. During her lifetime, her unorthodox politics put her at odds with many of her fellow black artists. The fierce fully individualistic Hurston lived life on her own terms and as a result she sacrificed the full recognition she might have otherwise earned. She was a head of her time and is now considered one of the most important African-American women of the 20th century for her daring views on politics and her courage for writing outside of the common African-American stereotype. She will forever be remembered as one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, leaving an influence not only only in history, but also on later generations of women writers. Zora Neale Hurston may have died in obscurity but her works live on as true statements of that time that was the surge of culture in Harlem.

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