



Zora Neale Hurston (Source: Carl Van Vechten, photographer, Library of Congress)

## How It Feels to Be Colored Me, by Zora Neale Hurston

"I remember the very day that I became colored"

*A genius of the South, novelist, folklorist, anthropologist"--those are the words that Alice Walker had inscribed on the tombstone of Zora Neale Hurston. In this essay (first published in The World Tomorrow, May 1928), the acclaimed author of Their Eyes Were Watching God explores her own sense of identity through a series of striking metaphors.*

<sup>1</sup> I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

<sup>2</sup> I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

<sup>3</sup> The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

<sup>4</sup> During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop, only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county--everybody's Zora.

<sup>5</sup> But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, a Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown--warranted not to rub nor run.

<sup>6</sup> But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but 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 do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

<sup>7</sup> Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!" and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a 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. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think--to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

<sup>8</sup> The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

<sup>9</sup> I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

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

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

<sup>12</sup> "Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

<sup>13</sup> Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

<sup>14</sup> At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner,

has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

<sup>15</sup> I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

<sup>17</sup> But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place--who knows?

(1928)

## Reading Quiz on "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" by Zora Neale Hurston

Author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston is best known today for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937. A decade earlier she wrote "[How It Feels to Be Colored Me](#)"<sup>1</sup>--an essay that might be characterized as both a letter of introduction and a personal declaration of independence.

1. According to Hurston, white people would pass through Eatonville on their way to or from what large Florida city?  
(A) Miami  
(B) Orlando  
(C) Tampa  
(D) Jacksonville  
(E) Hialeah
2. Hurston reports that she "lived in the little town of Eatonville, Florida" until she was how old?  
(A) 5 years  
(B) 7 years  
(C) 10 years  
(D) 13 years  
(E) 17 years
3. Hurston recalls that when greeting travelers as a child her "favorite place" to perch was atop  
(A) the gatepost  
(B) the horse  
(C) the automobile  
(D) the water barrel  
(E) her brother's shoulders
4. Hurston interprets her move from Eatonville to Jacksonville as a personal transformation: from "Zora of Orange County" to  
(A) Miss Hurston of the Atlantic Coast  
(B) Zora Neale of Duval County  
(C) a Florida author  
(D) an African-American leader  
(E) a little colored girl
5. Hurston employs a [metaphor](#)<sup>4</sup> to demonstrate that she does not accept the self-pitying role of a victim. What is that metaphor?  
(A) I am the queen of the hill.  
(B) I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.  
(C) I am the leader of the pack.  
(D) I am searching for treasure and digging for gold.  
(E) I am guided by the star--and by a still small voice.

6. Hurston employs another metaphor to evaluate the effects of slavery ("sixty years in the past") on her life. What is that metaphor?
- (A) One chapter has closed; another has begun.
  - (B) That dark road has led to a bright highway.
  - (C) The operation was successful, and the patient is doing well.
  - (D) That dark night of the soul has been transformed by a glorious sunrise.
  - (E) Sobbing ghosts in manacles and chains haunt me wherever I go.
7. When Hurston recalls sitting in The New World Cabaret, she introduces the metaphor of a wild animal, which "rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond." What is she describing with this metaphor?
- (A) a jazz orchestra
  - (B) the hatred felt by white people
  - (C) the hatred felt by black people
  - (D) the street noise of New York City
  - (E) race riots in major American cities in the 1920s
8. According to Hurston, how does her white male companion respond to the music that has affected her so deeply?
- (A) He weeps out of sorrow and joy.
  - (B) He says, "Good music they have here."
  - (C) He storms out of the club.
  - (D) He continues to talk about his stock options, oblivious to the music.
  - (E) "Music from hell," he says.
9. Toward the end of the essay, Hurston refers to Peggy Hopkins Joyce, an American actress known in the 1920s for her lavish lifestyle and scandalous affairs. In comparison to Joyce, Hurston says that she herself is
- (A) just a poor colored woman
  - (B) the cosmic Zora . . . the eternal feminine with its string of beads
  - (C) an invisible woman, unnoticed by fans and reporters
  - (D) a much more talented actress
  - (E) far more respectable
10. In the final paragraph of the essay, Hurston compares herself to
- (A) the Great Stuffer of Bags
  - (B) the ringmaster at a circus
  - (C) an actor in a play
  - (D) a brown bag of miscellany
  - (E) a beacon light of truth.

**Here are the answers to the Reading Quiz on "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" by Zora Neale Hurston.**

1. (D) 13 years
2. (B) Orlando
3. (A) the gatepost
4. (E) a little colored girl
5. (B) I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.
6. (C) The operation was successful, and the patient is doing well.
7. (A) a jazz orchestra
8. (B) He says, "Good music they have here."
9. (B) the cosmic Zora . . . the eternal feminine with its string of beads
10. (D) a brown bag of miscellany

## Discussion Questions For “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”

1. What point is Hurston trying to make in her first paragraph? Is she “the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was *not* an Indian chief”?
2. Consider Hurston’s use of imagination in her descriptions of the white neighbor, her experience at the jazz club, and in the final paragraph. How does she use specific details to ground these flights of imagination? How does she use the imaginative moments to make her points?
3. Name an African American writer who you think Hurston might include in what she calls “the sobbing school Neighborhood” (par. 6). How might he or she answer Hurston’s criticism?
4. How do you respond to the conception of race with which Hurston ends her essay? Does it agree with how you understand race?

“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” is a widely anthologized descriptive essay in which Zora Neale Hurston explores the discovery of her identity and self-pride. Following the conventions of description, Hurston employs colorful diction, imagery, and figurative language to take the reader on this journey. Using a conversational tone and multiple colloquialisms, Hurston at the beginning of the essay delves into her childhood in Eatonville, Florida, through anecdotes describing moments when she greeted neighbors, sang and danced in the streets, and viewed her surroundings from a comfortable spot on her front porch. Back then, she was “everybody’s Zora,” free from the alienating feeling of difference. However, when she was thirteen her mother passed away, and she left home to attend a boarding school in Jacksonville where she immediately became “colored.”

Hurston says she does not consider herself “tragically colored” and begins weaving together extended metaphors that suggest her self-pride. She is too busy “sharpening her oyster knife” to stop to think about the pain that discrimination may cause, and as a “dark rock surged upon” she emerges all the stronger for any hardships that she has had to endure. Hurston does, however, acknowledge moments when she feels her (or others’) racial difference, and her experience with a friend at a jazz club marks the distance between their lives.

At the end of the essay, Hurston develops an extended metaphor in which she compares herself to a brown bag stuffed with random bits and bobs. She likens all people to different colored bags that, if emptied into a large pile and re-stuffed, would not be much altered, suggesting that people of varying races are essentially of the same human character. Hurston concludes by asserting that "the Great Stuffer of Bags," the Creator, may have fashioned people in this way from the very beginning. Thus, Hurston fosters a perspective that looks beyond pride in one's race to pride in one's self.

Originally published in the May 1928 edition of *The World Tomorrow*, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" was a contentious essay that obviously did not fit with the ideologies of racial segregation, nor did it completely mesh with the flowering of black pride associated with the Harlem Renaissance. In the essay, Hurston divorces herself from "the sobbing school of Negrohood" that requires her to continually lay claim to past and present injustices. She can sleep at night knowing that she has lived a righteous life, never fearing that some "dark ghost" might end up next to her in bed. Through her witty words, Hurston delivers a powerful message to challenge the mind-sets of her, and our, time.

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## **A Literary Analysis of "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" by Mario Cortez**

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) writes in a time when racism had proven relentless and oppression undaunting. Yet, having been raised in Eatonville, "an all-black town," she was guarded against the cruelties of racialistic consequence (1982). In her short story, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, Hurston gives an autobiographical account of "the very day that [she] became colored" (1984). Hurston uses *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* as a vehicle to vividly describe the expressions of her self-realization.

"During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there", writes Hurston (1984). From her childhood she expresses the insignificance of the color of one's skin. She displays this in the story through the imagery of her sitting on the fence post being the first "welcome-to-our-state Floridian" (1984). Regardless of their color and all else, Hurston welcomes and in many cases entertains those who pass through Eatonville. She is not aware of the racial division that exists outside of her world. After realizing that she is of color,

Hurston never really places a significant emphasis on the racial inequalities that exist in America. This can be observed in many of her other works as well.

After making the realization that she is in fact of color and of the consequences regarding this fact, she makes a clear distinction between herself as a person of color and "the sobbing school of Negrohood" (1984). Here she exhibits an ambition that carries her past the obstacles that both then and now face African Americans in the course of their lifetimes. By having an outspoken, high spirited, and ambitious personality, Hurston is able to obtain an education and explore the complexities of African-American society through her research and writing.

It can be interpreted that much of her work is in fact autobiographical. Throughout her writings, many characters exude a strong sense of courage, determination, and willfulness to achieve their goals. These characters are often interpreted as having the attributes that are characteristic of Hurston. She also holds a high value of pride and appreciation for her people. *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* is only one piece that describes such emotions. She also recognizes African heritage as a significant factor in determining a cultural identity. Having lived in a world where color mattered, Zora Neale Hurston "[did] not always feel colored. Even [then she] often achieve[d] the unconscious Zora of Eatonville" (1985).