Zora Neale Hurston's views on men, women and love

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S VIEWS
ON
MEN, WOMEN AND LOVE

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INTRODUCTION

Writer Zora Neale Hurston, an ambitious proud, independent and talented idealist, lived her life well in terms of creative production. She left a valuable legacy of fictional characters who contribute greatly to our understanding of human experience. It was a distinct loss for American literature when the creative drive of this artist seemed abruptly to terminate in 1948 when she was only forty-five years old. The balance of her life, until she died in penniless obscurity at the age of fifty-seven, presents yet another enigma. During this later period, she forsook her usual haunts and old friends to engage in erratic employment as a domestic, as a feature writer for newspapers and magazines, and school as a teacher.¹

Miss Hurston may certainly be considered a major writer during the period immediately following the Harlem Renaissance when most of her works were produced. During the period of the 30's and 40's only a few black writers made their living by writing. Black writers did not receive big advances and publishers did not court them if their books were not about the race problem as Hurston's were not—they seldom sold well. Yet Zora Neale Hurston was a woman of fierce independence who lived for her writing. All of

her jobs were simply stop-gaps to support her between books. She never really compromised with the American economic system; and she spent a lifetime refusing to accept the roles prescribed for black women intellectuals.\(^2\)

Zora Neale Hurston's radiant, determined and intriguing personality often minimized the restrictions of discrimination and poverty. It is important to bear in mind Miss Hurston's personal literary philosophy as she expressed it in her conversation with Nick Aaron Ford when she discussed her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Many Negroes criticise my book... because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem. I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology. There is where many Negro novelists make their mistake. They confuse art with sociology... I have ceased to think in terms of race. I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now not as a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in problems of individuals, white ones and black ones.\(^3\)


In the previous quotation, Miss Hurston has made her purpose quite clear: she is interested in portraying man and his problems and emotions not as a member of the Negro race but as a universal figure. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore and evaluate the universal relationships of men and women and love which are a major theme in most of her writings.

Miss Hurston has recreated in her works a variety of marital relationships and liaisons between men and women who love or hate, or simply endure. Her exploration of these situations imbues her work with an unquestionable universality.

Her characters range from the strong and virtuous to those who are weak and lonely with broken dreams. Each character is a distinct individual who can be easily identified by his personal traits.

In the following order this paper will examine the autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942); "Spunk" (1925), "Muttsy" (1926), "Sweat" (1926), and "The Gilded Six Bits" (1933), short stories; *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) Novels; *Mules and Men* (1935), folktales.
CHAPTER I

DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD

By the year 1941 Zora Neale Hurston had become a talented and successful novelist, folklorist and short story writer. The recognition of her talents by most of the important people in the literary field had brought her fellowships to do research in the area of Negro folklore. She also received an invitation to write for Paramount Studios in California. During her stay in California she decided to write her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road. This award winning publication includes a chapter entitled "Love" in which one gets a glimpse into Miss Hurston's personal love life. But, in order to better understand Miss Hurston's attitude and reactions to adult romance and love, one must examine her early life. The reader must delve into her contacts and relationships with others as she grew toward adulthood.

Miss Hurston was born in a small country town in central Florida called Eatonville, an all black community settled by a few hundred people of similar backgrounds. These included sawmill workers, turpentine workers, railroad workers and farmers. Miss Hurston was one of eight children. Her father, a tall, big, light-complexioned man, was the minister of the only Baptist church in town and was also a carpenter. As a community leader he was a stern and forceful sort of man. Her mother was a small diminutive sort of person but yet a leader also in her own way. Miss Hurston noted at an early age that her
parents were quite jealous of each other, and they
sometimes quarreled, but her overall homelife atmosphere
was a happy one. Miss Hurston thought herself to be
her mother's favorite child especially so since her mother
took her side against the other children and her father.
Zora Neale was an outgoing child who had to be chastized
for many mischievous acts. Her father and grandmother
did not consider it nice for a little girl to be forward
and full of pranks. After intentionally taunting and
aggravating her father, Zora Neale was in the habit of
running to her mother who protected her from the father's
punishment. One concludes that Zora Neale's childhood
pranks were tolerated with patience and taken in stride.
As a child, Zora Neale had many friends despite the fact
that she attempted to dominate them. Zora Neale liked
one friend, Carrie Roberts, in particular because she
was easily dominated by Zora Neale. She also idolized a
man whom she described as a robust gray-haired white man
who helped her get born. This man took Zora Neale fishing
and gave her advice while she was growing up. He allowed
her the opportunity to express her feelings about various
things.

Reading became a very important part of Miss
Hurston's childhood. She admired David in the Bible for
his courage, but said her preference was to be like
Hercules of Greek mythology. Hercules who chose to
follow 'Duty' rather than 'Pleasure' in life impressed her highly. Some of her reading—a daily experience—caused her great anguish because she expected people to act like gods and they did not. In other words, Zora Neale Hurston was a dreamer, not a realist. This caused problems later in regard to her relationships and love of others.

As a teenager in a Jacksonville, Florida boarding school, Zora Neale came to greatly admire the president of the school and vowed to hurry to get grown so that she might marry him. This was not encouraged one bit by the president. Nevertheless, Zora Neale wrote love letters from him to her and buried them only to later dig them up a few days later. She was a great pretender because while reading the letters tears would well up in her eyes. She was extremely jealous of all the female teachers who came around him. This imagined love affair came to an abrupt end when President Collier punished her for putting a wet brick in one of the teacher's bed. Zora Neale was highly embarrassed and completely disillusioned by the president's action on the matter. Zora Neale expected him to put his arms around her and say that he understood because she did it all for him.

Miss Hurston would be disillusioned many times in life due in part to a lingering idea she had as a child. This belief was that the 'moon' waited for her to come
out and play and that it followed only her when she ran.

Miss Hurston had to leave boarding school for financial reasons. Having to find work, she tried several times as a maid. The domestic jobs were never long lasting because she put playing with the children or reading books first. During this period in her life she also realized that she could not live with her father who had lost his wife, Zora Neale's mother, whom she loved so much. Her father had remarried a woman whom Zora Neale hated and with whom she fought. She refused to stay with her brother and his wife because Zora Neale felt as if she was being imposed upon to baby sit. Even though staying with the brother would have given her a chance to attend school, Zora Neale rejected the idea and ran away from it all. Fifteen years old and alone Zora Neale acquired a job through a friend with a theater company as a lady's maid to a Miss M-, the star of the show. Miss M-, the 'Star' had a tremendous effect on Zora Neale from the very beginning of their relationship. The feeling was mutual. The company, being an all white cast from the North was very fascinated by Zora Neale and especially her speech and expressions. They all seemed to love her and treated her like a new 'play pretty.' The theater traveled from city to city living in hotels. Many nights Zora Neale stayed in the rooms of other girls rather than in Miss M-’s room. Miss M-
became upset about this after a while and ordered Zora Neale to stay in her room only. This job lasted for eighteen months, and all the attention and petting had spoiled Zora Neale until she became, as she stated in her autobiography "cocky as a sparrow on fifth avenue." The job came to an end when Miss M- decided to quit the stage to get married. Miss M- told Zora Neale that she did not want her to work for anyone else in the business or anywhere else. She asked Zora Neale to continue her education and before departing had found a school in Baltimore for Zora Neale to attend. Miss M- gave Zora Neale a big hug and all the money that she could spare and then she was gone.

While Zora Neale Hurston was with the company she read classical literature. She was also introduced to the classics in music, and light and grand opera. She came away from the theatre company a more mature person. She states that she had seen "folks substituting love for failure of career...and careers filling up empty holes left by love..." These experiences helped her to really see things around her and to think about them. She regretted leaving the company because it had given her peace, comfort and love, for before the job she was without these.

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2. Ibid., p. 142.
Zora Neale tried waiting tables for a living, but this did not work out well. She resented being patronized, the presumptuous looks, the accidental touch on the thigh and the nodding of the head to follow. Miss Hurston felt that out of this could not come the beauty of love or the material advantage because these people were usually the twenty-five cent meal eaters and nickel tippers.

After attending Baltimore night school, Miss Hurston decided to enter Morgan College's high school department. She was lucky enough after entering to get a sleep-in job in a college Trustee's home, which helped with her tuition. These were very trying times for Miss Hurston for she barely had a change of clothing. She was placed in a class of eleven girls and six boys all from elite families of Baltimore and surrounding areas. Zora Neale Hurston remembered that the class was said to be about the best looking group that ever happened to come together. The girls of this class were much sought after by all the fellows on campus, even the college seniors. Miss Hurston became very much a part of this little clique, and enjoyed the attention thoroughly. She made friends quickly with the girls in her class and this soon solved the clothing problem. The girls were always trying to lend her clothes. Miss Hurston was also proud of the way she got along with the boys on campus after having cornered Stanley James, a varsity football player,
and Douglas Canaper, a popular college senior. These men, and others Miss Hurston met while at Morgan, seemed to be just passing fancies, no real romance, no love. This was just the social aspect of college life. Miss Hurston was urged to go to Washington and attend Howard University. She was told by her two friends that she was "Howard material"\(^3\) because of her good marks and good looks. Miss Hurston was to stay at her friends home with their parents. The parents were also to help her find a job to help with the tuition. Taking her classmates' advice, Miss Hurston went to Washington and acquired a job as a manicurist, a skill learned while she was with the theater company. Her employer, Mr. Robinson, was a nice man of whom Zora thought highly. He was the kind of person who believed in helping others to get an education. Mr. Robinson, who did not have much education, owned six barber shops which employed black barbers. The shop catered to white customers only. Miss Hurston very much admired and respected the politicians and newsmen who patronized her. They were very well-read, worldly men in whose presence Zora Neale Hurston found great pleasure. The men talked of national and international matters in her presence. They sometimes talked to her personally and even asked her opinion on matters and as a result,

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 156
Miss Hurston felt particularly important.

A racial incident occurred in the shop where Miss Hurston worked which caused her to do some serious thinking. A would-be-customer, a black man, who refused to leave when asked was thrown bodily out into the middle of the street. This was done by the black barbers and white customers. They along with Miss Hurston thought that he got what he deserved. Later upon thinking about the incident, Miss Hurston concluded that:

"Self interest over rides all sorts of lines...and that there is something fiendish and loathsome about a person who threatens to deprive you of your way of making a living."  

Although she did not know it then, Miss Hurston would have to cope with this conclusion in later life. At the University Miss Hurston did very well in class and at making friends. Having to work after classes did not leave her much time for social affairs so she attended very few. At Howard Miss Hurston was very much impressed by her instructors, especially a Mr. E. C. Williams. Mr. Williams was cosmopolitan and a world traveler who possessed instant subtle wit. One day while talking with Zora Neale Hurston he commented that "flirtation with a coed was to him like playing with a teething ring--And that he preferred...

smart and sophisticated women." What effect, if any, this cutting remark had on Zora Neale Hurston cannot be readily determined at this point. She continued to go out for lunch with Mr. Williams and an associate of his, a Mr. Davis whose personality was completely different from Mr. Williams. Zora Neale recalled the time when he brought her roses in the hospital, staying half an hour or more just sitting and smiling.

While at Howard University Zora Neale Hurston joined a literary club, and it was through this club that she met the noted Dr. Charles Johnson, publisher of Opportunity Magazine. Dr. Johnson liked her writing and encouraged her to go to New York. Being out of funds and out of school for the same reason, Zora Neale Hurston decided to go to New York and try to get into school there. After arriving in New York, Zora Neale Hurston was befriended by the Johnsons who also gave her encouragement, car fare, and free meals when necessary. Miss Hurston came to worship the Johnsons.

Miss Hurston won a prize in 1925 for a short story published in Opportunity Magazine. Fannie Hurst was very much impressed with Miss Hurston and offered her a job as her secretary even though Zora Neale lacked experience. After receiving the secretary's job, Zora was aided in getting a scholarship by Ms. Anne Nathan Meyer. These

\[5\text{Ibid., p. 166.}\]
women were also responsible for teaching Zora Neale Hurston proper rules of etiquette, and Miss Hurston wanted them to always be a part of her.

Another very influential person in Zora Neale Hurston's life at school was Dr. Franz Boas, head of the department of anthropology. Dr. Boas was of German origin. Miss Hurston affectionately referred to him as Papa Franz. Once at a social gathering Dr. Boas was asked about his title, 'Papa Franz.' His reply was, "Of course Zora is my daughter. Certainly! Just one of my missteps that's all." Upon finishing Barnard Miss Hurston was offered a fellowship to go South and collect Negro folklore. This first attempt at research was a failure, and she returned very disillusioned. Miss Hurston's ego was deflated because she had not only let herself down but Dr. Boas as well. Dr. Boas revealed his disgust to her, and for a long time she felt 'out of his favor.' Zora got a second chance to do research shortly after her first attempt from Miss Mason. Miss Mason was very much interested in Negro folklore and took a special interest in Zora Neale Hurston. Miss Hurston referred to her as God mother. She was very strict with Miss Hurston after the contract was signed. Zora Neale Hurston left New York and went into the South to collect folklore material. She realized that her first attempt failed because she was not able at that time to

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6 Ibid., p. 170.
relate to the ordinary people. She was very successful while under contract with Miss Mason.

In Miss Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she stated:

Though I started falling in love before I was seven years old, I never had a fellow until I was nearly grown. I was a poor picker. I would have had much better luck if I had stuck to boys around my own age, but that would not do me. I wanted somebody with long pants on, and they acted as if they didn't know I was even born.  

However, during Zora Neale Hurston's freshman year in college she got really excited about a fellow student. She thought, "He could stomp a piano, sing a fair baritone and dance beautifully." He noticed her and she was really carried away. An affair was started and for the first time since her mother's death she felt really close and warm to someone. The affair continued throughout her college life and culminated in marriage shortly after graduation. On her wedding day in St. Augustine Zora Neale Hurston had doubts and began to think as Janie, her heroine, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of

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7Ibid., pp. 249-50.
8Ibid., p. 251.
the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun the day?...Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so....She wouldn't be lonely anymore.9

The beautiful setting in St. Augustine meant nothing to Miss Hurston. It was not a happy day for her because she could not see the occasion complementing the day. She states:

...The day and the occasion did not underscore any features of nature or circumstances...Who had cancelled the well advertized tour of the moon? Somebody had turned a hose on the sun. What was supposed to be an eternity turned out to be a moment walking in its sleep.10

Miss Hurston had many unpleasant memories of their past relationship. The thought of marrying a man with whom she had these experiences brought a chilling fog over her feelings, and she concluded that her dream was over. After getting married, Miss Hurston began to look for an easy way out of the situation. She would not tell her husband her true thoughts; instead she urged him to return to Chicago to continue his medical work while she went to New


10Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks..., p. 251.
York. Upon returning to New York Miss Hurston met the afore mentioned Miss Mason who gave her the chance to continue her research.

Miss Hurston accepted Miss Mason's offer and began to work vigorously, and it appeared as if she was using her work to fill the gap that was left by a loveless marriage. When she saw her ex-husband again, he had remarried. She secretly wished him happiness and blamed herself for having made a mess of things. She resolved at that point never to get involved again. Three years passed after which she was ready to compile her book of folklore.

A man whom Miss Hurston referred to as A.W.P. entered Miss Hurston's life in 1931. Miss Hurston commented: "The man who was to really lay me by the heels." A.W.P. was a dark brown man with a good looking face with a strong profile. He simply was a handsome man, and this attracted Miss Hurston to him. He was intellectually capable which made him even more appealing to her. Miss Hurston admired men who had more intelligence than she. She fell deeply in love with A.W.P., and according to Miss Hurston he fell in love with her. He was devoted to Zora Neale and attempted to do everything in his power to make her happy. He wanted her to always be on the receiving end of things, and he wanted to be recognized as the man. Miss Hurston realized this but, nevertheless, without thinking offered him car

\[11\] Ibid., p. 252.
fare home one night because she knew that he had no money. A.W.P. considered this to be an insult, and they both suffered from it. The love affair continued for two years before either verbally expressed his love for the other. They confessed that fear of being hurt was the reason for holding back. The same fear of encroachment was present in Miss Hurston's marriage. After they admitted their love for each other, A.W.P. hinted at getting married. He stated, however, that he did not want his wife to work because he wanted to supply her needs. This conversation began the real love affair of Zora Neale Hurston's life.

Miss Hurston felt that A.W.P. could give her everything except what her career could give. His thinking was that he should mean everything to her, and that a career was not necessary for her. The love affair continued with each one desperately afraid of losing the other. Eventually the smiles at others, a casual kiss on the cheek, a business meeting and the literary parties brought out very jealous reactions from both. Physical blows resulted from these reactions. Miss Hurston who was the aggressor often got the worst end of the exchange. She hated this part of the affair because she had never been able to accept being hit by anyone including her parents. The worst part of the affair was that neither could leave the other alone. They were two of the most miserable people and yet the happiest. But no matter how enchanted they were with each other, their
differences of opinion concerning Miss Hurston's career remained. Rather than sacrifice her career Miss Hurston looked for what appeared to be the easy way out of this love affair.

Eventually, Miss Hurston began to tell herself that their love was thwarting A.W.P.'s career and because of his degree, he should have accomplished bigger and better things. She further told herself that if he did not achieve his goals, he would blame her and later resent her. In the midst of unsettled ideas Miss Hurston received another fellowship which she readily accepted. This was her chance to release A.W.P. and also a chance to fight free of her obsession. Miss Hurston sailed to Jamaica where she worked hard at research in order to smother her feelings. She refused to write A.W.P. thinking that he would very quickly get over the hurt of the affair.

During the next two years while still in Jamaica, Miss Hurston wrote her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Miss Hurston stated concerning the novel: "I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for A.W.P." Upon returning to New York Miss Hurston found A.W.P. had left his phone number for her, but out of fear she refused to call for several months. Eventually she did call, and they met and talked. They were both stunned when they realized that they both had gone through a miserable period of separation. They found that they were still in love,

Ibid., p. 260.
but that the old stalemate still remained. Miss Hurston began to think, "perhaps the oath of Hercules shall always defeat me in love."\textsuperscript{13} As a young girl Miss Hurston had sworn the oath "to leave all pleasure and take the hard road of labor."\textsuperscript{14} She thought that maybe God made a note of her oath and was holding her to it; however, Miss Hurston felt that she was still very fortunate. She writes: "Be that as it may I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have loved and been loved by the perfect man."\textsuperscript{15}

In Miss Hurston's autobiography, the chapter on love reveals very little about her personal love life; however, when one looks at her overall personality and its development, much more is revealed. Miss Hurston states that her ideas about love are based on her experiences, and that her concepts are not to be used as profound statements to be used by others. She states that she understands the major courses of love as they happened to her, but cannot grasp the minor things. For example, how do individuals end an affair without being deceitful and still remain as friends, or how do individuals handle flirtations or propositions? Miss Hurston sums up her idea of love by quoting an old Negro folk rhyme which she thinks might tell all there is

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 261.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 262.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 262.
to know about love:

Love is a funny thing:

Love is a blossom: If you want your finger bit, poke it at a possum.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 265.
CHAPTER II

SHORT STORIES

"Spunk"

"Spunk" was first published in 1925 in Opportunity Magazine and was later reprinted in Alain Locke's The New Negro. "Spunk" is one of Miss Hurston's first short stories. She was awarded second prize for it at the first Opportunity Award dinner held May 1, 1925. Dr. Charles Johnson, founding father of Opportunity Magazine, was very much responsible for Zora Neale Hurston's literary talents being recognized.

"Spunk", which is only two and a half pages in length, explores the supernatural beliefs characteristic of black folklife. It is set in an unnamed town near Orlando, Florida. The town has all of the characteristics of Eatonville. The story is dramatically structured so that the village store occupies the set and all of the action takes place off stage. The store loafers tell the tale, and they become both chorus and catalyst for the action. The reader learns about the main characters and their relationship to each other by listening to the dialogue of the minor characters. The main characters, Lena Kanty, Joe Kan'ty and Spunk Banks, are involved in a love triangle.

Spunk Banks is a giant of a brown skinned man. He is a hard-living, fearless community hero who rides the logs down to the circle saw at the sawmill. Riding the
log to the saw is a very dangerous job, and all of the men respect and admire Spunk for his courage. Spunk has also done the daring thing of openly stealing Joe Kanty's wife, Lena. Spunk saunters up the street which passes the store with pretty Lena clinging lovingly to his arm. The store loafers are watching from the inside of the store. Elizah Mosely gleefully calls to the others: "Theah they go big as life and brassy as tacks." Walter Thomas is the first to attest to Spunk's boldness:

Now pee-eople will you look at em! But that's one thing ah likes about Spunk Banks—
he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green foot stool—nothin'!
He rides that log down at the saw mill just like he struts round wid another man's wife—
jus don't give a kitty.²

While the men are still testifying to Spunk's daring qualities, a small round shouldered man in overalls much too large nervously enters the store. This figure of a man is Joe Kanty. Joe orders a soda water, after which the men begin to tease him about his wife. They pretend not to know that Lena and Spunk have just passed the store together. However, Joe is aware that the men know, and the whole situation becomes very humiliating. Joe knows

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²Ibid., p. 171
that he is being laughed at. He is extremely nervous, and the pain is seen in his hands, his eyes and his face. Joe stands silently for a long time with only his Adams apple bobbing up and down his throat. He is aware that the other men view him as a coward who will not fight for his respect as Lena's husband. Joe can no longer delay in making the decision. He feels forced to make it. He turns to the men and says:

Well ah's goin' after her today, ah'm goin' to fetch her back. Spunk's done gone too fur.  

Joe pulls out his razor and checks the sharpness of it with his moistened thumb. He leaves the store with a dejected slump about his shoulders. There is general agreement from the group that the "rabbit-foot-colored-man" is not going to go near Spunk with that razor. The men laugh boisterously behind Joe's back and conclude that Joe would probably hide the razor behind the nearest palmetto tree. They decide that nothing was going to happen because Spunk has never been known to use his army 45 on an unarmed man.

A major confrontation took place two weeks before this date, and the store front regulars recall that Joe did nothing. Some of them believe that Joe is too timid,

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3Ibid., p. 171.

4Ibid., p. 171.
but Elizah feels that this is not the reason why he is being taken advantage of. He states that Spunk goes after what he wants, and if Joe were a pack of wild cats Spunk would go after Lena in the same manner. The confrontation had started when Spunk challenged Joe to call his wife. One man recalls that Joe takes up the challenge, and in a very mild mannered way whispers to Lena that she was his wife. Lena remains by Spunk's side unimpressed with Joe's overall reaction. Spunk then proceeds to tell Joe that he has claims on Lena. He offers to build her a house so that she can move out of the house from Joe. Lena in response replies that the house which she shares with Joe is actually hers. She looks at Joe disgustedly and walks away with love in her eyes for Spunk.

After wasting time recalling the confrontation, the men suddenly realize that it is time for Joe to return, but he never does. Instead Spunk enters with Lena clinging to his arm. Spunk reports that Joe attacked him from behind and he had no choice but to shoot him. The men are speechless at first because they feel that Joe went to prove something to them rather than to himself. Spunk pleads self defense and is set free. He immediately moves Lena into a new house and decides to marry her.

The first night in their new home brings a strange foreboding. A black bobcat appears and walks around the house howling. Spunk gets his gun but is afraid to shoot
because of the bobcat's stare. Spunk concludes that this cat is actually Joe who has returned from hell because Spunk has not reckoned with him. Several days later Spunk reports that Joe's spirit tried to push him into the circle saw. The third day Spunk dies. He falls onto the saw and dies spitting blood and cursing Joe for shoving him. The men agree that this invisible force is Joe's spirit.

The story ends on a note of continuity transcending the violence and tragedy of the moment and with perhaps an ironic comment on the fickleness of the mob.

"The women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered when would be Lena's next. The men whispered coarse conjecture between guzzles of whiskey."5

Folklore magic is the dominate factor in Miss Hurston's "Spunk." Despite Spunk's physical supremacy and Joe's seeming helplessness, a remedy is available to the cuckolded husband even if it can only function from beyond the grave. A supernatural force rights the wrong of the natural world.

"Muttsy"

In 1926 "Muttsy" was published in Opportunity Magazine. In "Muttsy" Miss Hurston documents the bewilderment of a naive migrant anticipating a city of refuge. Pinkie

5Ibid., p. 173.
Jones, a pretty young girl, enters Harlem with high hopes of very quickly finding a job and improving herself. On Pinkie's arrival in Harlem, Bluefront advises her to get a room at Ma Turner's house. Ma Turner has used up her youthfulness and her husband remembers that she was once a "forty-dollar-Kate."¹ That is to say that men at one time did not hesitate to spend forty dollars on her if they had it. However, Ma Turner ends up with a man about whom she thinks very little because he is not willing to work and support her. Ma Turner makes a statement to Pinkie saying, "Some folks has all de luck. Heah ah is got uh man dat hates work lak de devil hates holy water. Ah gotta make dis house pay!"² And because of this Ma Turner seems determined to demean Mr. Turner in every way. He makes an attempt to introduce himself to Pinkie when she arrives, and Ma Turner commands, "Now you jus shut up!... You sets on the stool un do nothin too much tuh have any-thing tuh talk over."³

Pinkie falls captive to Ma Turner's back parlor which is used by people who drink, dance, play and sing their blues and live hot intense lives. Muttsy Owens who is a very good looking gambler is much taken with the good looks and innocence of Pinkie. Pinkie is from the South and feels very uncomfortable around the people who frequent

²Ibid., p. 249.
³Ibid., p. 246.
the parlor. She feels contaminated just to be touched by Ma Turner especially when Ma smells of liquor. Pinkie's impression of Ma Turner on the first meeting is that she reminds her of the wolf in "Lil Red Riding Hood." From the onset Pinkie knows that she must escape Ma Turner, the roving eyes of the men and the jealous remarks of the women. She knows that there is no home to return to and there is no other place for her to go.

Pinkie's innocent resistance to Muttsy gives him the incentive to prove his worthiness and his manhood to her. Ma Turner and the others are amazed at Muttsy's patience with Pinkie because he is known to get what he wants and to leave it when he is through. Ma Turner remarks to Muttsy, "Everybody in this man's town knows you gets whut you wants."\(^4\) Muttsy is satisfied with just being in Pinkie's company. He pays her room and board and in return demands only her company. Pinkie does not see the change which has taken place in Muttsy because she feels surrounded by a class of people with low self-esteem. She thinks that Muttsy intends to use her as his woman. She sees all the people in Ma's parlor as using someone and being used themselves. She does not intend to allow this to happen to her. His being a gambler and not working makes her feelings even stronger against getting involved with him. She concludes

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 250.
that she just has to get a job in order to clear herself of people who live like those who frequent Ma Turner's.

A few weeks pass and the little confidence that she has in Muttsy begins to fade. He has not given her the information about the job which he promised her earlier. He simply tells her that money is no object for him. She becomes desperate and her desperation seems to be bringing her closer to accepting the things she hates. The hopelessness seen daily in the faces of the men and women of Ma Turner's parlor is beginning to take a hold on Pinkie. Being depressed and disgusted she even forces herself on one occasion to drink a toddy. She realizes how limited her opportunities are with only three dollars. She thinks:

If that job would only come on!
She felt shut in, imprisoned, walled in with these women who talked of nothing but men and the numbers and drink, and men who talked of nothing but the numbers and drink and women. 5

Pinkie is unaware of the influence she has on Muttsy, but he is aware of it. One night he tries to be his old self. He bribes Ma Turner to allow him to go to Pinkie's room since she has been refusing to see him for several weeks.

5Ibid., p. 249.
He intends to seduce her in her room where she is sleeping off the results of a toddy. Watching Pinkie makes him want to crush her in his love. He has a strong desire to crush her and hurt her against himself. But then another realization comes to him, he does not want her like this. Muttsy jerks his hand away from her breasts and says, "Ah ain't goin' ter play her wid no loaded dice." He merely kisses her lips and places his diamond ring on her engagement finger and leaves the room while Pinkie still sleeps.

After leaving Pinkie's room, Muttsy decides to approach the situation boldly and with a completely different outlook. He decides immediately that he had better marry Pinkie without delay. The next morning Muttsy arrives ready for marriage only to discover that Pinkie had fled Ma Turner's house earlier. She knows nothing of his intentions and had left with only three dollars to find a job. Two weeks later Muttsy luckily finds Pinkie on 125th Street and tells her about his steady job. He also tells her that he has stopped gambling. Pinkie has an employment card in her hand which is immediately torn up by Muttsy. He convinces her to marry him.

The story has a touch of irony, for the marriage does not lead to Muttsy's reformation. A month after the marriage Muttsy is tempted by one of his former gambling friends, and he returns to gambling. After being chided by his

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6Ibid., p. 249.
friend, Muttsy concludes, "What man can't keep one lil wife and two lil bones."  

"Sweat"

"Sweat" was published in Fire, a magazine devoted to the younger Negro artists. It was a quarterly magazine which had on its editorial board Zora Neale Hurston along with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce, Aaron Douglas and John Davis. This is one of her most dramatic short stories. "Sweat" is filled with hate and disgust shared by the two characters. The reader also feels the emotional build-up experienced by the characters, Delia and Sykes, from the beginning to the end. In "Sweat," Miss Hurston narrates the relationship between husband and wife which ends in the reversal of a vengeful death plot. It is a relationship which begins with love, becomes tarnished through cruelty and unfaithfulness and ends in disgust, indifference and destructive hate.

The mood for the story is set in the opening passages when the reader meets the heroine, Delia, who begins her sweaty work as a wash woman in the bedroom of their little home on a Sunday evening, just before her husband, Sykes, enters, frightening her with a snake-like whip. One under-

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7Ibid., p. 267.
stands the texture of the marriage relationship when Delia and Sykes begin bickering, and Delia berates Sykes for using the pony and carriage for which she has paid. Sykes reprimands her for bringing "white folks clothes" into the house. As they continue to needle each other, Delia summarizes what the marriage is and has been:

Ah been married to you fur fifteen years and
ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years.
Sweat, sweat...work and sweat, cry and sweat
pray and sweat!\(^1\)

Delia has reached a point of resignation and indifference, and she asks only for peace and the right to remain in her hard-earned house until death. Delia is an empty, broken woman who has been aged by poverty and too many "other women."\(^2\) All of these are the cause of her feeling that love is dead and so is her marriage. Delia feels that little is left for life to offer so she passively waits for Sykes to reap what he has sown, but never realizes that she will have a hand in the eventual retribution.

Sykes is now making promises to Bertha, who is a heavy set, rather unattractive woman. Bertha is new in town and is not well accepted by the townfolks. Sykes


\(^2\)Ibid., p. 110.
promises Bertha that she can move into his house after he disposes of his wife. The reader learns things about Delia, Bertha, and Sykes by listening to the conversation of the store front regulars.

"Yet," Joe Lindsay agreed, "Hot or col', rain or shine, jes ef reg'lar as de weeks roll roun' Delia carries 'em an' fetches em on Sat'day."

"She better if she wanter eat," said Moses. "Syke Jones ain't wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to huh he ain't."

"He sho' ain't," Walter Thomas chimed in. "It's too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he go huh...

"Too much knockin' will ruin any 'oman. He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks," said Elizah Mosely. "How Syke kin stommuch dat big black greasy mogul he's layin' roun' wid, gits me...

"Aw, she's fat, thass how come. He's allus been crazy 'bout fat women," put Merchant. "He'd been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a found one tuh have him...

"There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He ain't fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear."³

Delia has failed at, what was from the onset, a seemingly

³Ibid., pp. 111-113.
impossible task. Sykes has not respected his own marriage, and according to Merchant, one of the store front regulars, he did not respect the marriage of others. He was said to be the kind to make passes at every woman he saw. Sykes has exploited his wife and perhaps hates her for allowing the exploitation. He is now ready to boastfully toss her aside for another woman. He purchases Bertha anything she wants in grand style at the store and pays her rent.

It is stated that Sykes worked and spent his money on other women during the first year of their marriage so it can be assumed that he still works. Sykes' reason for spending his money outside the home can only be theorized. The reason might be that with this woman he can gain some semblance of the masculine pride which he has lost with Delia forever due to his dependency on her and on the washing, a symbol of subjection to other people. The story also fails to answer the question as to why Delia remains with Sykes despite his disreputable behavior which started shortly after their marriage. Delia states several times that the house is her own and that Sykes owns no part of it. This may account for her living under the same roof with him. Nothing was left but her home. She had planted trees and flowers to make it beautiful for her old age. "It was lovely to her lovely." Based on Sykes' reaction

4Ibid., p. 110.
to Delia's statement about his leaving one would think that she had never asked him to leave before. Delia states:

...Ah hates you Sykes...Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat ah useter love yuh...Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck...Ah don't wantuh see yuh roun' me a tall...Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog. Sykes almost let a huge wad of cornbread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.\(^5\)

Due to Delia's financial situation, she has to work on the Sabbath, possibly compromising her religious beliefs if she is an extremely religious person. One might also consider that Delia's religious involvement may possibly be a respectable covering for all of the suffering and sacrificing that she has done for the last fifteen years. "Delia begins to build a spiritual earth works against her husband."\(^6\) Delia built this spiritual barrier in order to protect herself from Sykes' "doings." At

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 119.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 110.
the beginning of the story Delia has just returned from church, and although humming mournfully, she is sorting clothes in a very practical manner and thinking about where Sykes has taken her pony and carriage.

One is drawn to speculate what the sexual life of a man is like who must wait for his wife to sort out dirty clothes when they return from church. When the story opens Delia states that she has been doing washings for fifteen years, and their marriage is fifteen years old. It could not have been pleasant for a man, like Sykes, who appeared to have needed the intimate aspect of their relationship to see and smell in the santity of his bedroom a constant reminder of his wife's dependence upon white people. Sykes declares:

You sho is one aggravatin'nigger woman...Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house.  

The clothes come to symbolize all the barriers between the two of them and, indirectly, to symbolize the rebellious and proud spirit of Delia, which even her husband cannot destroy.

Finally, although physically diminutive, Delia is not a weak woman. She does not cower at Sykes' threat of physical violence. It is she who is more aggressively

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7Ibid., p. 105.
assertive, even defiant and her "habitual meekness" according to Miss Hurston can "slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf." This does not seem to be a normal reaction for a woman who has been violently beaten for fifteen years. There is also villager Thomas' comment about the young Delia and Sykes:

...he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil 'oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen years ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind.

According to the story Delia brings love to the marriage along with a soft young body, but now it appears that Delia is not very attractive. She thinks of herself in bed one night as being knotty and muscular with harsh knuckly hands.

As their situation steadily worsens with quarrels reigning uninterruptedly, and Bertha openly coming to the house to summon him, Sykes embarks on a desperate and deliberate path to dispose of Delia by mental torture or murder. Ironcially, he falls victim to his own plot.

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8Ibid., p. 107.
9Ibid., p. 112.
Sykes captures and brings to the house a rattlesnake which he keeps in a grated box despite Delia's frightened pleas that he get rid of it. When her fear reaches the saturation point, torment gives way to passionate anger and a calmer hatred, which spurs Sykes on to a final desperate act: Delia declares:

...Don't think ahm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay your han's on me. Muh cup is done ru ovah.10

Delia shows no sign of fear when Sykes departs the house threatening her. Yet he makes not the slightest move to carry out any of his threats.

In the raw climax which follows, Delia returns home from church to find Sykes gone. When she attempts to start the habitual clothes sorting, the snake is nestling free in the top of the laundry basket. Delia's wild terror carries her out of the house and into the barn where her fear, contemplation and rage bring her to the awful, calm knowledge that she will not warn Sykes:

...Ah done de' bes' ah could. If things ain't right, Gawd knows tain't mah fault.11

As an unsuspecting Sykes returns at dawn and enters the

10Ibid., p. 121.

11Ibid. p. 124.
house, Delia creeps out of the barn to wait beneath the bedroom window. Miss Hurston masterfully handles the suspenseful situation where Sykes looks for a match in the darkened house, hears the snake rattle and begins to know that somehow he is to be the victim rather than Delia. Retribution is complete as the dying Sykes calls out, but receives no help from Delia. Just before the end, she goes to the door and is moved finally to pity. The dying Sykes, who with one eye open, cannot fail to see the wash tubs in the house and the lamp outside the door which tells him of Delia's knowledge and her role in the act of his death. The washtub has come to symbolize Delia and at this point it serves to indicate her victory over her husband. Delia's explanation would be that good triumphs over evil because earlier in the line of events she states:

> Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is goin'ter reap his sowing.\(^\text{12}\)

This story represents a classic love-hate relationship between husband and wife who appear in dual roles as victim and executioner and both, in the final outcome, are destroyed by hatred. Miss Hurston's skill is such that she leaves the reader still caught up in the web she wove around her protagonist, Delia.

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 110.}\)
The snake is a symbol used by Miss Hurston in several of her works. Snakes are symbolically associated with sin, deceit and temptation. However, Miss Hurston reminds us that snakes have a marvelous ability to shed their skins. All of Miss Hurston's snakes tend to be used as instruments for stripping away and exposing the inner agonies of those involved. In her later novel, Seraph on the Suwanee, a snake almost causes a husband's death, and the snake is the instrument through which he is confronted with the awesome extent of neurotic fears governing his wife.

"The Gilded Six Bits"

This story was published seven years after "Sweat," in the now defunct Story Magazine and is cast in Eatonville, the all-black town in which Miss Hurston was born. Shortly after its publication in 1933, "Sweat" won the notice of J. B. Lippincott and Company publishers, who invited Miss Hurston to write a novel for them. Her first major novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, based upon her parents' lives and after the acceptance and publication of this novel in 1934, Lippincott continued as the sole publishers of Miss Hurston's major works.

Miss Hurston was a more mature person when she wrote

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"The Gilded Six Bits." She had graduated from Bernard College, married and separated from her husband and had traveled extensively for purposes of anthropological research. "The Gilded Six Bits" presages the intimate clarity which she is to invest in her later novels about marriage relationships. The story describes a love which matures after the woman's greed, vanity, and pride, linked with the man's credulity, almost destroy it. It reveals too, that innocent, but unwise, love need not turn into hatred and vengeance when it is exposed to adverse experience.

The story begins on a Saturday payday in Florida where there:

...was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G. and G. Fertilizer works for its support...  

The reader is impressed with a well organized household with cleanliness from the front gate to the privy house, run by an orderly structured young woman who is hastening her bath to be dressed in time for her husband's arrival. The beginning of an oft-played game between the young couple is signalled by the sound of nine silver dollars flung through the door by Joe, the husband. This incident is followed by mock anger and a frolicsome love battle with

\[3\]Langston Hughes, p. 74.
Missie, his wife. Their perfect, innocent, fragile love in this perfect little house fills the reader with a strange foreboding of pain to come for it is the nature of things that such perfection is short-lived.

Joe, the doting husband, has remembered to bring the little surprises which an idolized wife expects, and Missie attends to his physical needs with efficient attention to every detail. The outward demonstrations of love are all there. The "Gilded Six Bits" is a story of immaturity yielding to growth. It is not a story of individual growth of a couple and of their marriage. The test of their inner love comes in the person of a new man from Chicago with a mouth full of gold, who has opened an ice cream parlor in town.

Credulous Joe is highly impressed by what he has seen and heard of the man. He also has a strong desire to be like him, believing him to be worldly, rich and successful. Unfortunately for Joe, as Charles Lamb said, "Credulity is the man's weakness but the child's strength." Missie, less credulous and more practical, reiterates her satisfaction with Joe just as he is giving some insight into the heights of her pride, admiration and divine thoughts about her own man.

Ah's satisfied wid you jus' lak you is, Baby.

God took pattern after a pine tree and built you noble. Youse a pritty man, and if ah

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knowed anyway to make you mo pritty still, ah'd take and do it.⁵

Joe then reveals his lack of self-confidence and seems to be tempting the fates which govern Missie's love for him. It is almost as if he holds out Mr. Slemmon's attractiveness as a measuring rod to discover the extent of her love for him.

Ah can't hold no light to Otis D. Slemmons. Ah ain't never been nowhere and ah ain't got nothin' but you...All de women's is crazy bout him everywhere he go.⁶

When Missie scoffs at this as one of Mr. Slemmons' tall tales, Joe gets excited to the point of using divine reference, "Good Lawd Missie"⁷ in reporting the gold which Slemmons displays - a five dollar gold piece tie-stick pin and a ten dollar gold piece on his watch chain. When he adds that the newcomer has money accumulated, given to him by women and that Chicago white women were donors of the gold, common sense Missie ridicules Joe's gullibility and wonders why Slemmons didn't stay in Chicago. After visiting the ice cream parlor, Joe's impressions about Slemmons become more worshipful while Missie, who has never seen gold money before, is impressed and frankly covetous for similar decoration for Joe.

⁵Langston Hughes, p. 77.
⁶Ibid., p. 77.
⁷Ibid., p. 77.
Yet in practical fashion, she seeks reassurance that the gold will not change Joe: "And then if we wuz to find it, you could wear some 'thout havin' no gang of women's lak dat Slemmon's say he got."Ironically, this gold is to be the source of change and growth in both of them. This growth is in the form of maturity and independence, a pair of traits missing from their relationship in part. Their marriage, while solid and without visible flaw, leaves neither Joe nor Missie room for human error and imperfection.

Some time later, the plant closes down early and our hero, on his way home, thinks complacently about the year's marriage with Missie, the money saved and the possibility of their having a baby, hopefully a boy. Thinking it would be a pleasant surprise to Missie, he arrives home early and decides to go around behind the house, clean the dust off himself, go quietly into the kitchen and slip into bed next to his sleeping wife before she realized he was home. His whole plan is disrupted when he hears loud noises and gasps of fright from the bedroom. When Joe, alarmed by the thought of a prowler attacking Missie, rushes into the bedroom, he encounters Slemmons who is hastily attempting to replace his pants. At this point, the author's comments identify the real threat to the couple's marriage:

He had both chance and time to kill the

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8Ibid., p. 79.
intruder in his helpless condition...but he was too weak to take action...The shapeless enemies of humanity that live in houses of Time had waylaid Joe. He was assaulted in his weakness. Like Samson awakening after his hair cut.⁹

Perhaps Joe's adoration of Missie was in part responsible for her brief encounter with Slemmons. Missy was perfect in Joe's eyes, and he admired her. Yet she needed someone to admire, someone who could accept her human failings. Her encounter with Slemmons proves her humaness to herself and to Joe.

In a state of shock, Joe scuffles briefly with Slemmons, hastening Slemmons' departure, and he returns to his bedroom with hollow laughter and the gold watch charm entangled in his fist. Instead of becoming angry and leaving the house, Joe laughs at the whole ridiculous situation and gets in bed with his wife. The conversation which Joe and Missie have in bed tells us a great deal about both of them, coming as it does under such crushing emotional strain. Joe says:

Missie May, whut you crying for? Cause ah love you so hard and ah know you don't love me no mo: You don't know de feelings of dat yet, Missie...

⁹Ibid., p. 80
Missie May replies, "...honey, he said he wuz gointer give me dat gold money and he jes kept on after me." This statement by Joe, "You don't know the feelings of dat yet Missie May," is obviously a sort of reprimand and a reminder that their relationship is not yet resolved. There are other repercussions from her act of infidelity that might affect her feelings if she knew for a fact that he did not love her anymore. In fact, our heroine has not yet engaged in the totality of a giving love, nor has she experienced what it will be like without Joe's love. Joe placed her on a pedestal and made her the spoiled child that she is, as indicated earlier in her reply to Joe as to why she did the act. Joe's sarcastic reply was, "Well don't cry no mo Missie May, ah got yo gold piece for you." This reply further widens the gap between them.

Joe remains silent, while weak Missie gives up easily to self-pitying attitudes, lacking genuine contrition. She begins to shift the blame onto Joe and contemplates running away from the problem.

With this strange man in her bed she felt embarrassed to get up and dress...decided to wait till he had dressed and gone. Then she would get up dress quickly and be gone forever.

10Ibid., p. 81
11Ibid., p. 81.
12Ibid., p. 82.
Joe then asks, "Missie...ain't you gonna fix me no breakfus."\textsuperscript{13} Seemingly, Joe has not changed and Missie, being hopeful but yet doubting is still prepared to run away from the problem. However, feeling that Joe needs her at least for a few more minutes, she eagerly springs out of bed and busies herself preparing an elaborate meal for Joe. While serving Joe, she notices a gold coin on the table placed there by Joe presumably to force her to face the situation with maturity. This act is taken by Missie as one to demean or torment her. She responds with tears and a solemn vow to run away from the situation as soon as Joe leaves the house. Thus, she has chosen not to step across the border to maturity but to remain with her childlike actions. In urging her to stop crying at breakfast Joe said..."Missie May, you cry too much. Don't look back lak Lot's wife and turn to salt."\textsuperscript{14}

The stalemate continues. Missie belatedly realizes that she loves Joe too much to leave him. Yet, the yellow coin looms as a barrier between them. She finds the coin under her pillow shortly after she and Joe have been intimate following a three month period of abstinence. Her close examination reveals the coin as only a gilded half-dollar, and she fully realizes how foolish she has been.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 82
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 83.
Torn between the thought that Joe has left the coin as a signal of reconciliation and the stronger belief that he has left it in payment for her services, as Slemmons would have, she prepares to leave Joe. However, meeting her mother-in-law, she returns home vowing that the outside show of the marriage will remain even though the substance is no longer there. Our heroine begins to feel that it is she who has committed the wrong for which Joe has the alternative of leaving her. She feels that if he does not choose to do so then it is her obligation to remain and fulfill her vows.

After Missie becomes pregnant and is delivered of a boy who is "the spittin' image" of Joe, a chance remark of his mother encourages Joe to forgive Missie completely:

Son, Ah never thought well of you marryin'
Missie May cause her Ma used tuh fan her foot round right smart and Ah been mighty skeered dat Missie May was gointer git misput on her road.  

Joe realizes that he has placed Missie on a pedestal from which she was destined to fall. He also realizes that he, too, is at fault for exposing her to the enemy without first being certain that she had the strength to resist.

\[15\]Ibid., p. 84.
\[16\]Ibid., p. 84
his blandishments. Joe's other failing was his lack of confidence in his overall self. He made Missie think that Slemmons had everything and he had nothing.

Just before Joe and Missie reach a complete reconciliation, a shop keeper, who serves Joe, turns to a customer and remarks:

Wisht I could be like those darkies.

Laughin' all the time. Nothing worries 'em.

The irony of this statement is a poignant truth. However, Joe and Missie have dealt with the most serious problem their marriage has faced or is likely to face, in such a way that the outside world remains unaware of this brief barrier between them. It is their private knowledge and is something only they will share.

In this story, Miss Hurston has certainly been successful in weaving an intense design of human interaction, where a relationship between a man and a woman is enlarged rather than destroyed by an experience which was painful, but maturing to both.

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17 Ibid., p. 85.
CHAPTER IV

JONAH'S GOURD VINE

In Jonah's Gourd Vine Miss Hurston has captured the spirit, poetry and dialect of black culture in a story about men and women loving, hating, dreaming and dying. This is Miss Hurston's first novel and it is autobiographical, but it should not be used as a document for understanding the Hurston's private life. Jonah's Gourd Vine is usually dealt with as a fictionalization of her parents' marriage which reveals the philandering nature of her father and the steady strength of her mother. It reveals also Zora Neale Hurston's reaction to both mother and father. The main characters in the novel are John and Lucy. Their history is the Hurston's family history. The story takes John Buddy from life on an Alabama plantation to a ministerial position in Eatonville, Florida. Zora Neale Hurston even uses the deathbed scene that she remembered as a major trauma of her youth, when her dying mother asked her to stop the neighbors from removing her pillow at the moment of her passing. The story also portrays Lucy in ways in which Miss Hurston apparently never thought of her parents. The plot of the novel does not follow exactly the family story.

The novel is basically John's story. John is the bastard child of Amy Crittenden, a slave on the Pearson plantation before Emancipation. His father was probably the master, Alf Pearson, but John never knows it and, Amy never admits it. After the Civil War Amy struggles to
make a life with her cruel husband, Ned, and it is his rejection of John that causes the teenager to leave home for work at Pearson's. John is such a strong, handsome, striking figure that he is soon sent to school and put in a position of responsibility. He also falls in love with his school mate, Lucy Potts, who is the smartest girl in the class.

John rises from a life as an illiterate laborer to become moderator of a Baptist convention in central Florida. The seeds of his tragedy are sown early. He has a weakness for women and lacks the ability to resist their temptation. He is otherwise a powerful man of God when he is in the pulpit. He is a man among women when his inspiration ends. In the end a worldly woman causes John Pearson's downfall. Miss Hurston portrays Lucy as the strong woman who is John's backbone. She is the mainstay and cohesive force for her family.

Miss Hurston created a John Pearson who seems too lovable and even after he marries Lucy Potts women are still eager to have John. John is always eager to be had. Miss Hurston explores the effects of a man's spiritual immaturity on his life. John does not allow himself to be the virtuous model for the community that he can be. Lucy asks John why did he "fool wid scrubs lak Big 'Oman." John answers, "Dats de brute beast in
me, but ah sho aim tuh live clean from dis on!"\(^1\) It is not very long after John confesses that he gets involved with another woman and begins to neglect Lucy and the children. He even stops going to church which beforehand was a major part of his life.

Lucy has now begun to realize that John does have an uncontrollable passion for women and tries to protect him in the eyes of others. Alf Pearson comes looking for John, and Lucy pretends not to know that he is out on a binge with a woman. Pearson also knows more about John's character than he is willing to reveal. Pearson advises Lucy:

"Lucy, you oughta take a green club and frail John good. No matter what I put in his way he flings it away on some slut. You take a plowline and half kill him."\(^2\)

Lucy all but wills John the support necessary to rise in the world. After John gets settled in Florida, he sends for his wife and children. Shortly after Lucy's arrival she encourages John to use his carpentry skills to make a living. They are soon able to buy land and a house. Lucy is John's 'spunk' and everyone begins to


\(^2\)Ibid., p. 146.
recognize this. The men constantly tell John how lucky he is to have a good wife like Lucy.

John becomes pastor of the church and his members feel that he is the best preacher on this side of heaven. All of the members admire him, but he gets special attention from the women. He begins to run around with Hattie Tyson, which starts a lot of talk in the church. The reader can see the maturity in Lucy and the lack of maturity in John in the following conversation:

"John," Lucy began abruptly one day, "You kin keep from fallin' in love wid anybody, if you start in time."

"Now whut you drivin' at?" John asks. Lucy answers, "You either got tuh stop lovin' Hattie Tyson uh you got tuh stop preachin'. Dat's whut de people say." 3

John denies that he is involved, but because Lucy knows him and his weakness, she continues:

...Don't you break uh breath on de subjick. Face 'em out, and if dey wants tuh handle yuh in conference, go dere totin' uh high head and ah'll be right dere 'long side of yuh. 4

Lucy's presence with John on conference night made them appear united, and the subject was not broached.

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3 Ibid., p. 193.
Lucy continues to serve as John's armor against himself and the outside world until her death.

Shortly after Lucy's death John and Hattie Tyson are married. However, it does not take John long to realize that Hattie was of no value to him.

...Youse jus lak uh blowfly, spoil eve' ything you touch. You sho ain't no Lucy Ann. Hattie replies, "Ah ain't no Miss Lucy, cause ah ain't goin' tuh cloak yo dirt fuh yuh. Ah ain't goin' tuh take offa yuh what she took so you kin set up and be uh big nigger over mah bones." 5

John's downfall is inevitable from this point because he has allowed lust to predominate. They both are aware that the spirit of the marriage has vanished. Hattie begins to see other men and makes plans to maliciously hurt John. Her scheming leads eventually to John's being rejected by the congregation of the church.

John goes to Plant City, Florida and meets Sally who is very much like Lucy in that she is protective of John. He feels that somehow God has seen fit to send Lucy back to him in the form of Sally. They have a beautiful relationship but despite this, as time passes, John gets the urge to return to Eatonville. While in Eatonville John encounters Ora Patton a young girl who has always

5Ibid., p. 227.
aimed to win him over physically. He has a new car bought by Sally, and Ora is even more determined to be entertained by him. John puts up a weak fight to get rid of her, but because his old weakness, lustfulness, is still a part of him he gave in to his feelings. "Two hours later John found himself dressing in a dingy back room...he was mad--made at his weakness--mad at Ora,... 'I hope you never rise in judgment.'" Ora grabbed up her dress and dashed after John. By the time she reached the car John had the motor running. She jumped on the running-board and John viciously thrust her away from him without uttering a word. Ora fell into the irrigation ditch and wondered what got into John. She could not understand his behavior. She was unaware that John's experience with her helped him to focus on his weakness. John rushed away from that sordid scene with full realization of what he was all about. While driving he was thinking of good, clean Sally who loved and comforted him. He did not see the train as he approached the tracks. Before he realized what was about to happen, the engine struck the car, and he was thrown out. John died and his death came just as he had begun to understand both his success and his failure.

\[\text{Ibid., p. 307}\]
CHAPTER V

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

In 1936 the Guggenheim Foundation awarded Miss Hurston a fellowship which she used for travel to Jamaica and Haiti, both to work and to escape the love affair which threatened to overwhelm her. Miss Hurston says in her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, that while writing Their Eyes Were Watching God she tried to embalm in it all the tenderness of her passion for the one man she loved, but for whom she would not sacrifice her work. The driven female-author was successful in her attempt, for the novel has its own inner fluidity, not only of the tenderness of passion, but also of its wildness, its cruelty, its triumph and the smoldering ashes of its death. The character portrayed in this novel is vivid, as are the descriptions of natural phenomena, and there is abundant evidence of Miss Hurston's continuing interest in folklore and her recreation of folkways. Miss Hurston's imagery is in places a new spontaneous and very moving kind of poetry.

The major theme of this novel is a woman's search for a total love which can become the very essence of life itself, yet allow her to retain her individuality as a person and find fulfillment as a woman. The quest leads her through three different kinds of relationships with men of varying character until at the end she is once again alone, though fulfilled and alive with her memories. The novel also skillfully juxtaposes the human drive for material
things against the pursuit of spiritual and emotional fulfillment.

The first chapter of this novel, so complete in itself, has been published separately as a short story.¹ It describes the return of Janie (the heroine) alone to her hometown of Eatonville after burning her third husband. She is reunited with an old friend to whom she tells the story of her life as it is recorded in the chapters which follow. Because this is to be a story of men and women, Miss Hurston makes an important thematic statement about the lives of each which is phrased with haunting simplicity:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others, they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. So the beginning of this was a woman...²

¹Lindsay, Patterson, (ed.), An Introduction to Black Literature in America from 1746 to present (New York: Publishers Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 138-41.

A well-dressed Janie had eloped with a propertyless young lover shortly after the death of her second husband, who was the town's mayor, and now returns alone after two years in a faded shirt and muddy overalls. The townspeople quiver collectively with unanswered questions, suppositions, judgments and past rememberances. The reaction of the men differs from that of the women. The men recall "her firm buttocks...great rope of black hair...her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt...saving with the mind what they lost with the eye."\(^3\) The women, however, have already begun to forget those things they do not want to see and instead...

Took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for rememberance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day.\(^4\)

However, it is to Pheoby, the 'kissin-friend,'\(^5\) who comes to bring food that Janie gives a marvelous tale in return: the story of a girl and a woman whose three marriages were to men of property, power, and understanding respectively. It is the story of triumph by a woman who sought endlessly for a total relationship of love with a

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\(^3\)Ibid., p. 11.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 11.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 19.
man. Once found, the relationship reveals a love which exalts them both beyond the level of human miseries. And, as with all total love, this love has the power to touch those with whom it comes in contact. Pheoby is deeply affected by hearing Janie's story:

Lawl!...Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satis-fied wid mahself no mo. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this... 6

Janie views her life as a widespread, rooted tree. The tree's leaves represent suffering, enjoyment, tasks completed and uncompleted, while its branches represent awakening and death. Janie's family tree consists of a grandmother sexually abused by a slave-master. Janie's mother, a result of that union, suffered rape by a school master which resulted in Janie's birth. Following the subsequent deterioration of Janie's mother, the protective grandmother rears Janie, transferring the ambitions she had for herself and Janie's mother onto her grandchild.

The pear tree in Janie's backyard never impressed her before to the degree that it did when she was sixteen. While her grandmother was asleep, Janie was stretched out on her back...

...beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the

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sun and the panting breath of the breeze
when the inaudible voice of it all came to
her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into
the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-
calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and
the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to
tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and
frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!
She had been summoned to behold a revelation.⁷

After witnessing nature's beautiful revelation Janie thinks
to herself...

Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!
With kissing bees singing of the beginning
of the world! She was sixteen. She had
glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted
to struggle with life but it seemed to elude
her.⁸

On this same lush spring day, Nanny, the grandmother catches
Janie kissing "shiftless Johnny Taylor over the gatepost."⁹

This escapade marks Janie's new receptiveness to the awakening
of nature and the blooming of her womanhood—the beginning
of Janie's search for love and fulfillment. Janie remembers
this as "...the end of her childhood" and the time when

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⁷Ibid., p. 24.
⁸Ibid., p. 25.
⁹Ibid., p. 25.
"her conscious life had commenced."¹⁰ Protectively alert, Nanny has already made arrangements for her to marry the mature, responsible Logan Killicko, owner of sixty acres. Despite Janie's anguished appraisal of Logan as an "ole skullhead" coupled with her visualizing him "desecrating the pear tree"¹¹ of her life, Nanny insists that she consent to marry Logan and explains to her...

T'aint Logan Killicko ah wants you to have...
it's protection...mah daily prayer now is
tuh let dese golden moments roll on for a
few days longer till ah see you safe in life...
Neither can you stand alone by yo'self...De
thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar
tuh post is uh hurtin' thing...¹²

The attitude with which Janie enters marriage is brought out before the wedding when she wonders if the loneliness of the unmated ends with marriage. She wonders whether marriage automatically brings love. During the days before the marriage, she makes many trips to the pear tree and concludes that "husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant...Janie felt glad of the thought...She wouldn't be lonely anymore."¹³

¹¹Ibid., p. 28.
¹²Ibid., pp. 30-32.
¹³Ibid., p. 38
Miss Hurston's message of the material values displacing spiritual values is clearly evident in the character of Logan Killicko. Logan seems to be a dry, unimaginative man who is self-satisfied. He is concerned more about the maintenance and progress of his sixty acres of land than about any other facet of his life. As a result, his house is lonesome and lacks the warmth of love. Nevertheless, he does chop the wood and bring it to his young wife for cooking. Even though he keeps the water buckets full, he neglects washing his feet in the water which Janie prepares for him. Thus their bed is constantly permeated with a foul odor. Logan says and does nothing to inspire affection and he himself, is the cause of Janie's bitterness: "Some folks was never meant to be loved and he's one of 'em." The innocent young Janie, believing that love goes with marriage: returns once with her disillusion to Nanny: "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think..."

As this first dream dies, Janie becomes a woman,... unhappily married to a man who feels that he has legitimately purchased her and that she has no resort other than to show her appreciation of his material worth by dutiful and obsequious behavior. But this is not for the proud Janie who recognizes the poverty of life without love. Logan recog-

\[14\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 42.}\]
\[15\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 43}\]
nizes only the bargain he has made with Janie's grandmother, and he is inconsiderate of Janie's emotional and spiritual needs. He is proud of his possessions, of which he considers Janie one, but frightened that she will leave him. When he realizes that she is not the kind of woman who will build a life on pride in the status which comes from ownership of material things, he attempts to break her spirit. Although it is doubtful that Janie would have stayed with Logan very long, it is a fact that in his fear of losing her he begins to do the very things which would most surely alienate her and destroy any feelings of loyalty, respect or pity which might have held her to him. He reviles her background and reminds her that his first wife did heavy chores, suggesting that Janie begin to do the same, as well as help with field work and plowing.

Through Janie the realization of Logan's dream materializes, yet he lacks the knowledge, which comes with understanding the needs of others, to grasp and hold it secure. Logan brings to this marriage the experience of a previous marriage, but he obviously did not gain from his experience the maturity and understanding needed to cement his marriage to Janie.

While Logan is away one day purchasing a mule in order that Janie can help with the plowing, young Jody Starks comes along. Joe comes from Georgia with dreams, ideas, and three hundred dollars to invest in the building
of a new black township in Florida. Moreover:

He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves...He meant to git dere whilst de town wuf yet a baby. He meant to buy in big. It had always been his wish and desire to be a big voice and he had live nearly thirty years to find a chance.16

Janie recognizes that Joe's soaring ambition and dreams of success have little to do with her need for..."sunup and pollen and blooming trees..."17 and even suspects that as a man, he will be too busy with other things to live a life constructed around love; nevertheless, she runs away with him as a possible chance for finding fulfillment in the dream beyond the horizon. Janie leaves Logan with an emptiness which comes with the possession of only material things. However, she holds fast to her dreams.

After marriage, Janie finds the dynamic Joe as good as the ambitious dreams he had planned, for he walks into Eatonville with a powerful self-confidence and almost singlehandedly enters into a whirlwind of business negotiations and activity. Shortly after he is established

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16 Ibid., p. 48.
17 Ibid., p. 50.
as the town's leading citizen and drafted as its mayor, the first cold breath of estrangement between them appears as his big voice begins to threaten her individuality:

...May wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech makin'...She's uh woman and her place is in de home...\textsuperscript{18}

Seeing and hearing this side of Joe for the first time, Janie realizes that she is still missing that freedom of individuality which one finds in true love.

...She had never thought of making a speech...the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything...took the bloom off of things...He strode along, invested with his new dignity, thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts.\textsuperscript{19}

Joe is an aggressive, independent lover whose life is built around goals of power, rule, control and ambition. These goals are an all-consuming need of the man, and everything else is relegated around these things in an orderly fashion. Janie, on the other hand, seeks the all-encompassing love which will overshadow all other activities as the major essence of life. Joe leans more to the material side of life and does not consider Janie's needs. Joe commands her services as mistress of his store. In his

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 69.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., pp. 69-70.
blind insensitivity to human beings, he is unaware that she is sickened by the waste of life and time involved in selling things and tallying abstract figures. Joe would use his power to change things as well as people, and he expects to change her mind just as he has changed her physical appearance by making her dress in a certain manner. He also insists that she keep her beautiful hair covered. Selfishly aware of position as a mayor determinant in the game of life, he forbids her the warmth of human interaction with the store porch regulars. Jody behaves like a majestic despot who knows only of taking and giving but not of sharing. He cannot bear to admit to any human weakness or failing and deplores it in others.

Their relationship deteriorates as Joe seeks to force twenty-four year old Janie to be a submissive matron, content to rest upon the pedestal he erects and receive the honors he bestows. Out of their clash of values Janie realizes that her second marriage has brought her other things, but still left her as lonely and unsatisfied as the first, with "the spirit of marriage moving out of the bedroom and into the parlor" for display purposes. The marriage is practically demolished when Jody slaps Janie..."until she had a ringing sound in her ears..." because dinner was not properly prepared on his arrival. After the slap he makes negative statements about her intelligence and stalks back

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20Ibid., p. 111

21Ibid., p. 112.
to the store. Janie stands where he left her until something falls off the shelf inside of her. She goes inside and concludes:

It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered...She saw that it was never the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over...She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him...numeros emotions she had never let Jody know about...things sacked up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them...She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen..."22

Ten years pass and Janie's disappointments are masked under a staid exterior of indifference. She decides that she has an inside and an outside which she is not to mix. All the fight leaves Janie's face, and at times she thinks it has left her soul. Then one day she imagines herself under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes. She begins to dream again and this is her escape from loneliness. Joe is aware of his failure with Janie and is increasingly threatened by a new thing he cannot control...his deteriorating physical condition resulting from a terminal disease. Joe, who is fifteen

22Ibid., p. 112.
years older than Janie, has a proud, independent nature. Joe's pride will not allow him to admit to Janie that he has faults. It is just as impossible for him to express his fears to Janie as it is for him to turn to her for comfort and solace. Neurotically, he turns away from the real culprit as his dreams are mocked to death by Time, and he seeks to victimize Janie.

Attempting to will the reality he wishes to see and, at the same time, divert attention from his own deterioration, Joe utilizes every opportunity to comment publicly about Janie's age in the creation of the myth that time has caught up with her but not him.

Maybe, he had seen it long before Janie did, and had been fearing for her to see...Because he began to talk of her age all the time as if he didn't want her to stay young while he grew old. It was always 'You oughta throw somethin' over yo' shoulders befo' you go outside. You ain't no young pullet no mo'. You se uh ole hen now.' One day he called her off the croquet grounds. "Dat's somethin' for de young folks, Janie you out dere jumpin' round and wont be able tuh git out de bed tuhmorrer... If he thought to deceive her, he was wrong.23

23Ibid., p. 120.
Passionate antagonism replaces indifference when he crudely refers to the change age has made upon her body. Janie's temper can no longer be subdued. After Joe states publicly...

I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store til she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' popeyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!"

Janie replies:

Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.

Joe is taken back by Janie's reply, and he continues to downgrade her:

'Taint no use in getting all mad Janie, cause ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is.24

In reply Janie utters a truth about Joe's physical capabilities which robs Joe of his illusions, his vanity, his masculine pride, and renders his power pitiable in the

24 Ibid., pp. 121-123.
face of his greater weakness as a male when she says:

You bin-belliies round here and put out
a lot of brag, but 'taint nothin' to it
but yo' big voice...When you pull down yo'
britches, you look lak de change of life.25

Joe's inability to realize what he had done and is still
doing to their relationship drives Janie onward with the
unforgivable desire to belittle and to still Joe's big
voice.

Until almost the end Joe relies on his own imagined
invincibility. Joe refuses to accept the medical doctor's
advice and calls in a conjure man for advice. Janie thinks
that his is unusual because she recalls that when Joe was
in good health, he was scornful of root-doctors. She
notices that the root-doctor is at their house almost
daily. The talk between the root-doctor and Joe is always
low, and when she appears, most times it stops altogether.
He was not eating her food but paying another lady to cook
for him. The truth hits Janie when she decides to buy a
beef-bone and make soup for Joe.

"Naw, thank you" he told her shortly. "Ah'm
havin' uh hard enough time tuh try and get well
as it is."26

25Ibid., p. 123.
26Ibid., p. 126.
At first Janie is stunned and then she becomes hurt. She goes to her friend Phoeby Watson and tells about it. Phoeby answers:

Janie ah thought maybe de thing would die down and you never would know nothin'bout it, but it's been singin' round here ever since de big fuss in de store dat Joe was 'fixed' and you wuz de one dat did it.27

Janie is compassionate but is also upset in her humanity over what she sees as wasted years and a wasted life. She poignantly tries to make Joe face reality and understand that his inhuman drives brought emptiness to their marriage:

Ah'm just trying tuh make you know what kind of a person ah is befo' its too late...
You done lived wid me fur twenty years and you don't half know me a tall. And you could have but you was so busy worshippin' de works of yo' own hands...Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in a wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way I was...Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me...you ain't tried tuh pacify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice.28

27Ibid., p. 127.
28Ibid., p. 133.
After Joe's death, Janie feels belated pity for the man who spent so much of his life becoming a big voice that he was deaf to other human voices crying out around him for concern and understanding. His values were wrapped up in the accoutrements of power, and these were the only things he knew how to give Janie. In return, he demanded only obedience from her; however, he received a much less valuable item than the love and sympathy which would have formed the budding yeast of their marriage if he could have shared Janie's dream.

Independent, attractive, and well-off at thirty-five, Janie basks in her new freedom to be a simple, living creature among others of like desires. She once again measures the realities against the old dreams to find that the latter still gleam more brightly. She is indifferent to the plays of numerous suitors who speak to her of honor and respect rather than of love and desire, reminding her either of Logan or of Joe.

Tea Cake enters Janie's life and Miss Hurston uses Janie and Tea Cake's relationship to reveal the capability of humans to love sincerely. One evening this young man of twenty-five comes into the store. He inspires Janie's laughter and teaches her to play checkers, something she had never been allowed to do. Tea Cake is a simple man who is at home with the world and with living creatures. He is a simple man who is more successful at the business of living unpretentiously and with a quick self-assurance
than anything else. In the warm, communicative and sharing courtship which ensues, Tea Cake is to Janie the reality of her dream of complete happiness. Neither of Janie's former husbands had the time or inclination to weave the totality of a loved and loving life because each of them felt the need to enhance the incomplete part of himself with the garments of property and power. Logan, the first husband, felt that property was the thing which brought everything and everyone to him. Joe acquired power and this he thought completed his character.

Janie asks Hezekiah, a helper in the store, to tell her something about Tea Cake. Hezekiah replies:

...Nobody wouldn't marry Tea Cake tuh
starve tuh death lessen it's somebody jes
lak him...ain't used to nothin'. Course
he always keep hisself in changin' clothes...
Tea Cake ain't got doodly squat. He ain't
got no business makin' hisself familiar wid
nobody lak you.29

But Janie has found the kind of love she has been seeking all her life as she and Tea Cake share life in all its dimensions. Despite the difference in their ages and status and the dire warning of her friend along with the townpeople, Janie joins Tea Cake in a marriage which is heightened by passion, devotion, honesty, sharing, and

29Ibid., p. 156.
communication unlike anything she has known in her other marriages. Janie... felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place. Janie decides to start over in Tea Cake's way. She thinks to herself:

Dis ain't no business proposition
and no race after property and titles.
Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way now I means tuh live mine.³⁰

Indeed, it is in the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake that Miss Hurston's artistry is clearly seen because she has created for the reader two vital and believable human beings sharing a marriage created out of the enduring fabric of total love. This relationship is unaffected by a twenty-four hour spree in which Tea Cake goes off with $188 of Janie's money only a week after they are married. Tea Cake returns and tells Janie about the big party that he sponsored with her money. Janie asks why he didn't ask her to accompany him. Tea Cake replies:

...Dem wurn't no high muckly mucks. Dem wuz railroad hands and dey womenfolks. You ain't usetuh folks lak dat and ah wuz skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin' you 'mongst 'em. But ah wanted yuh wid me jus' de same. Befo' us got married ah made up mah mind not tuh let you see no commonness

³⁰Ibid., p. 192.
in me. When ah git mad habits on, ah'd go off and keep it out of yo sight. 'Tain't mah notion tuh drag you down wid me.31

Janie's response is:

Looka heah, Tea Cake, if you ever go off from me and have a good time lak dat and then come back heah tellin' me how nice ah is, ah specks tuh kill uh dead. You heah me?

Tea Cake asks, "So you aim tuh partake wid everything, hunh?"

Janie answers, "Yeah, Tea Cake don't keer what is is."32

This answer pleases Tea Cake tremendously and he expresses deep satisfaction:

Dat's all ah wants tuh know. From now on you'se mah wif and mah woman and everything else in de world ah needs.33

Tea Cake no longer has the fear of losing her because of the commoness which is a part of him and the things he loves. He is also able to admit to Janie his weakness for gambling. Because they are both strong people, they are able to acknowledge their weaknesses, their need for each

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31 Ibid., p. 186.
32 Ibid., p. 186.
33 Ibid., p. 187.
other and their vulnerability without feeling threatened.

The simplicity with which understanding is reached where honesty reigns between two people is illustrated when Tea Cake returns after winning enough money to pay Janie back plus some extra. After they count the money, Janie tells Tea Cake about her money that is in the bank. Tea Cake replies:

"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 whatevah mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When ah ain't got nothin' you don't git nothin'."

Janie answers, "Dat's all right wid me."34 Tea Cake and Janie realize that any pain they cause to each other can only hurt more deeply each of them individually.

When Janie says that she wants to partake of everything with Tea Cake, this includes field work as a migrant farmer in the Everglades. However, the reason is primarily because this enables them to spend the most time together. Janie and Tea Cake have a hard life together, but they make the most of it, never letting things come between them. Janie does not miss the material luxuries to which she had been accustomed all her adult life for the dream had become the truth, and the truth is all she wants to remember.

34Ibid., p. 191.
Tea Cake's dream came in with the tide, and he moored it fast, but a tide stronger than his mortal means came with Time. While trying to save Janie from drowning in the flood waters of an awesome hurricane, Tea Cake is bitten by a hydrophobic dog. Janie, sharing in everything right up to the end, nurses Tea Cake and keeps him at home despite the doctor's warning that she would probably be the first person he tries to bite. A month had passed before medical help was sought. The disease was in a dangerous stage and no medicine could help. After Janie is told that Tea Cake has hydrophobia and will die, many thoughts run through her mind:

Well, she thought, that big old dawg with the hatred in his eyes had killed her after all. She wished she had slipped off that cow-tail and drowned then and there and been done. But to kill her through Tea Cake was too much to bear. Tea Cake, the son of Evening Sun had to die for loving her...was He noticing what was going on around here?35

When the madness comes, Janie is prepared to do the worst of all possible things. After a long sleep Tea Cake wakes up with the gun in his hand, Janie tries to reason with him but he accuses her of mistreating him and refusing to sleep with him. Just as Tea Cake pulls the trigger on the second

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snap, Janie aims the rifle, which was behind the stove and pulls the trigger. Afterwards, nestling the dead Tea Cake's head in her lap, Janie feels this to be "the mean-est moment of Eternity."  

Their farewells had been said weeks before, moments before the full fury of the hurricane which ended their idyll so tragically. Janie had said:

We been tuhgether round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never see de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door.

Janie, you meant whut you didn't say, cause ah never knowed you wuz so satisfied wid me lak dat. Ah kinda thought...

...They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God...  

This is easily the best novel among Miss Hurston's works, according to most critics and, indeed, deserves recognition as a literary classic of this period.

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36Ibid., p. 273.

37Ibid., p. 236
In her novel Seraph on the Suwanee, Zora Neale Hurston has explored the timeless themes of freedom, maturity and self expression as these ideas relate to love. Although Miss Hurston remains within her major thematic concentration in the realm of love and marriage, she chooses for the first time to portray a white family. In its treatment of a neurotic heroine this novel is somewhat more interwoven with passages of frank sexuality than any of her other novels.

The setting for the novel is near the Suwanee River in Western Florida which was immortalized by Stephen Foster as the Swanee River.

Seraph on the Suwanee is the story of a weak woman made strong by the love of a strong man who awakens and holds on to her passion until she is able to quell her fears and take her place beside him as a woman. Arvay, the heroine, is neurotic but beautiful. She is considered a poor white from a town rife with malaria and hookworms. The town's income is controlled by the sawmill and the turpentine farm. Arvay's older sister, Lorraine, has ensnared a young preacher about whom Arvay had romantic notions. As an outlet, the young, frustrated Arvay turns to the church and her dreams.

The young, twenty-one year old Arvay gives up this sinful and deceitful world and decides to give herself to God. When she turns herself over to God, she warns
the heathen of the danger of an everlasting hell. Arvay needs an outlet for her emotions brought on by her human desires to have sex. Arvay is given to fits and spasms and sometimes hysterical seizures. These fits or spasms always occur when Arvay feels she is placed in a compromising position. But instead of facing her true feelings during the time she has fits, Arvay begins to imagine that the pastor of her church, Rev. Carl Middleton, shows a particular interest in her. He singles her out for special duties and finds reasons to visit the Henson's home. Arvay falls in love with him and begins to live a sweet secret life inside. This goes on for months until Lorraine announces after being escorted home by the Rev. Middleton that they are to be married. Arvay feels that this must be a mistake, and this puts a larger gap in her feelings about her sister. She has always felt that Lorraine was considered special by everyone including her parents. Arvay feels that she is considered a second-rate person. Even after Carl and Raine (as Lorraine is called) are married, Arvay keeps her secret love for him and continues to build up dreams around him. She continues to have the fits and spells and reject all of the would-be suitors.

Then, handsome, young Jim Meserve comes to town. He is an impoverished heir of a former plantation owner possessed of a driving ambition to regain economic independence. Jim Meserve is imbued with formidable courage and
self-confidence. He is full of laughter and a sparkling zest for life. Jim reminds the reader of Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The two characters are alike in most ways except that Jim is well thought of by the people whereas Tea Cake is not considered up to Janie's standard. Like Tea Cake is about Janie, Jim is intrigued by Arvay's beauty but he mocks her supposed rejection of a worldly life. Jim's determined courtship ends with a seduction which fully exposes Arvay's repressed, but passionate nature and ends with their elopement.

Jim is a warm and successful husband who gives everything to his young wife. However, Arvay's neurotic fears never rest and throughout the years their marriage is threatened by her fears which block the understanding that should have developed between them. Arvay is now a married woman who is still frightened of her emotions and feels threatened by Jim's strength and self-confidence. His completely integrated personality arouses feelings of unworthiness in Arvay and inspires a continual fear that he may leave her. Their enduring marriage, Jim's attentiveness and the three children Arvay bears do nothing to dispel the fear of life that grows stronger in Arvay with each successful conquest by Jim over life's vicissitudes. Arvay is an illiterate woman with limited experience who finds it difficult to live with success. She
relies on her neurotic imagination to quell the fears which obsess her. "Arvay lived by her feelings and not by any conscious reasoning."¹

Arvay consistently refuses to face facts, particularly those which threaten her in any way. This is clearly obvious in her refusal to admit that Carl loves Raine, his wife and not her. It is seen in her refusal to accept the fact that her first son is demented. Arvay tries to shape his deformed head and feet hoping that this will make him normal, but deep down she knows that it will not change her son's mental capabilities. This is also revealed in her refusal to seek treatment or incarceration for their son. Jim does not insist on sending Earl away. He is continually hoping that Arvay will eventually gain enough strength to make the decision herself. But this is not to be and even after Earl, the son, has ravished a neighbor's young daughter and is killed by a posse, Arvay still exhibits reluctance to face the irrevocable reality of the situation. In a very moving scene, Jim holds Arvay and actually infuses her with his strength in order that she may accept the fact that Earl is dead. Miss Hurston describes the scene beautifully:

> Arvay felt the power of Jim coming over her.
> She rested her head on his shoulder for a moment then left the shelter of his arms

and moved forward...She saw the many wounds in the chest...The weak but handsome face was unmarred and was inhabited at last by a peace and a calm. Arvay passed her hand over it slowly as if to probe the mystery of the vanished life as well as to caress. Slowly now she stood erect and looked at Jim. She felt his arm beneath her shoulder just as plain as if he had been standing beside her. Arvay bowed her head and said softly, "Yes, now you can toll the bell. Toll the bell for my boy, somebody, please."²

It is much later before Arvay mentally releases Earl. Jim continues to be patient with her because he realizes and admits to himself that his love for Arvay is too great for him to consider leaving despite the lack of understanding in their marriage. Jim quivers at the thought of no longer being able to feel her soft body. He waits for the moment when her momentary unquenchable passion can become a permanent part of their lives. This momentary passion is marked by the change in the color of Arvay's eyes. Jim resigns to protect and care for the weak Arvay.

The situation changes radically, however, when Jim is attacked and almost killed by a huge rattlesnake. Jim captures the snake in order to impress Arvay, and he calls

²Ibid., p. 136.
to her. Arvay leaves the kitchen where she is preparing dinner and comes within thirty feet of Jim who has an eight foot snake hanging from his hand. Arvay has a deep-seated fear and dislike of snakes. Any kind of snakes frighten Arvay. She even runs from worms because they are shaped like snakes. The sight of Jim and the snake stifles Arvay and makes her heart thump. Jim looks at her and laughs, and Arvay knows that Jim wants her to be proud of him for what he is doing. Jim somehow loses control of the snake and calls out to her in agony. She is immovable and because of her fear she just stands there watching this horrible terrifying scene. Arvay has always been immature and unwilling to expose herself to any risk in life even as a young girl. She lacks the maturity which is necessary to self direction and direct action. Throughout Jim's fight with the snake for his life Arvay does not help him. She only imagines that she does help. Jeff, a caretaker, arrives back just in time to save Jim's life. Jim decides after this that he cannot live with Arvay and her emotional insecurities. Jim decides to go away and give her time to resolve these crucial inner conflicts. He sees this step as his only resort to force Arvay to overcome her psychological problems: Jim states:

I'm...tired of hauling and dragging you along...
I am tired of waiting for you to meet me on
some high place and locking arms with me and going my way...I am tired of hunting you and trying to free your soul...If I ever see any signs of your coming to be the woman I married you for I will be only too...willing to try it again.³

Jim distinctly avers his love and expresses his hope for an eventual reconciliation between the man and his woman. But, for Arvay, there is panic as her greatest fear finally becomes a reality. She has always thought that Jim was going to leave her. Unwillingly, she is deprived of all props and is forced to find the elusive meaning of life and love which has always evaded her.

It seems only natural that Arvay who has been characterized as a sexually repressed neurotic woman returns home to her mother and her 'beginnings.' Jim has left Arvay financially secure so that she is able to return to her roots without being trapped by them.

In this novel Arvay's beginnings are marked by a mulberry tree which is very special to Arvay. Miss Hurston uses the tree in this and other novels to represent life and love in the dreams of her female heroines. Arvay spends time under her special tree and with her mother while she tries to piece together the puzzle of her emotions. Maria, the mother, dies shortly after

³Ibid., pp. 233-34
Arvay arrives but not before she reveals to Arvay how she has been mistreated by Lorraine and her family. Arvay also realizes that Lorraine had delayed telling her about her mother's illness. This was done to alter the mother's loving feelings for Arvay. Arvay also learns that Carl really did love her years ago and that this was kept from her by Lorraine.

Eventually, Arvay is able to look about her and make comparisons. Pretenses are stripped away during her direct contact with the sordid life of her sister and brother-in-law. She recognizes that much of her fear and weakness stemmed from her neurotic attachment to the past which existed only in the tortured fragments of her imagination. After her jealously vindictive sister and brother-in-law make plans to set fire to the old house and to the special tree, Arvay suddenly finds herself making decisions and enjoying the sensation of her newfound strength. Finally, Arvay senses what Jim's expectations of her entail and she exults in a new intimately felt liberation.

Maturity is a key and constant element in the search of many of Miss Hurston's heroines. Arvay is no exception because when she is introduced in the novel, the reader senses her immaturity to handle life's problems. She is overflowing with fears about her feelings for others and theirs for her. Arvay after being in Sawley, her hometown,
for a while is free to take the initiative of going to her husband as a mature woman. Even though Arvay and Jim have a grown daughter and son who also have children, it is only at this point in Arvay's life that she is able to reach out generously and give without fearing the unknown.

Miss Hurston's extraordinary talents in character portrayal are once again evident as she invests the reunion love scene between middle-aged grandparents with a brilliant eroticism and splendid passion.

Arvay sat up and switched off the artificial light overhead, and met the look of the sun with confidence. Yes, she was doing what the big light had told her to do. She was serving and meant to serve.  

Arvay is at last at peace with herself and the world. The pen of a lesser writer might have easily rendered Jim and Arvay either ridiculous or distasteful at this point. Instead they gleam shinningly in memory as uncontrived, animated and natural examples of the possible heights which human experiences may reach.

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4Ibid., p. 311.
CHAPTER VI

MULES AND MEN

After having completed a great deal of related anthropological research between 1928 and 1932, Miss Hurston began work on Mules and Men, but then put it aside to finish Jonah's Gourd Vine which was published at least a year earlier. When Mules and Men was published, it received much more enthusiastic reviews than the first novel, and led to immediate recognition for Miss Hurston as a leading folklorist.

We know that Miss Hurston has great talents in the anthropological field and as a creator of her own tales. Dr. Franz Boas gave Miss Hurston great encouragement in the direction of anthropology while she was in college. Her folk tales in the collection entitled Mules and Men are not purely scientific participant-observer-recorder documents. They are authentic tales augmented by Miss Hurston's literary skills which she made evident in her fictional works long before she completed her anthropological training.

Miss Hurston has used her skills as a folklorist and a novelist to complement each other. It is no wonder, then, that we find haunting fragments of the tales woven into those of her works which deal with the major theme of love-marriage relationships. Indeed one of her critics refers to her writings as "...authentic
folk novels."¹ It, therefore, seems relevant for the purpose of this paper to mention some portions of Mules and Men since several of these tales deal with the relationship between men and women.

There is a tale in Zora Neale Hurston's Mules and Men entitled "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men." This story portrays a strong man and a strong woman who are married to each other, yet constantly fight over the assigned duties of each. Immediately the plot of Their Eyes Were Watching God is called to mind as well as the problems its heroine encounters in her first and second marriages. The tale goes on to describe how the balance of strength is removed when the man turns to God, only to be thwarted by the woman who then resorts to the Devil. The Devil gives her instructions about the acquisition and use of certain powerful keys which she is to receive from God. These keys control the kitchen and the bedroom, which is the cradle of future generations so that the man, despite his greater strength, must submit to the woman in order to have the doors opened. While the moral is obvious, the relationship of this tale to the plot of Their Eyes Were Watching God is made more evident in the passages where the strong Tea Cake acknowledges his weakness, with simplicity, to Janie on two

separate occasions "...Ah tol yo' before dat you got de keys tuh de kingdom."²

Also included in the collection is the tale of how a loving couple whose marriage withstood the blandishments of the Devil were finally parted by a woman wiser than the Devil. This woman appeals to the vanity of the wife and the jealousy of the husband at separate intervals. The unfortunate wife brags to this woman about her husband:

Ah thinks he's already de prettiest man in de world but if anything will make 'im mo' prettier still, ah will too gladly do it.³

The wife's vain desire to render her husband more handsome causes her, at the woman's suggestion, to approach her husband with a razor to remove a neck mole. However, the husband interprets this as proof of the wise woman's warning that his wife is attempting to dispose of him for another man; therefore, he leaves her. When one refers back to Miss Hurston's "The Gilded Six Bits," he is confronted with a marriage threatened by vanity and jealousy where the wife expresses the thought to her husband that:

Youse is a pritty man, and if ah knowed any way to make you mo' pritty still, ah


Among the hoodoo tales which are a part of the collection are the hopes of simple people who resort to the conjure doctors. (The reader has been introduced earlier to conjure men in love matters of _Jonah's Gourd Vine_ and _Their Eyes Were Watching God_.) There are women who visit these practitioners regularly in their quest for love or marriage. Particularly charming among these is the woman referred to in "Ritual—To Make Love Stronger." The woman is so much in love with her husband that she regularly visits the conjure woman to invest in various spells and roots to prevent those misfortunes which time may bring:

...I love him and I just want to make sure. Just you give me something to make his love more stronger.\(^5\)

No mention of the folk tales in a study concerned with love and marriage relationships between men and women would be complete without mention of the traveling preacher in _Mules and Men_ who sermonizes on what God intended the relationship between man and woman to be


\(^5\)Zora Neale Hurston, _Mules and Men_, p. 301.
"...that God put man to sleep to make woman and they have been sleeping together every since; that he took the creative bone neither from the backbone, which might have respectively indicated that woman should rule, should be a slave underfoot, or should stand behind man. But instead, the bone was taken from out of man's side because God meant that woman was to be always beside man."6

When one considers Miss Hurston's works, it is useful to remember that the author was born into this folk culture and that it constitutes no small part of her heritage. Her folk background colors her personality, her works, and the characters within her works. She brought a new part of the unmelted melting pot of America into perspective.

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6Ibid., pp. 181-82.
CONCLUSION

There seems to be general agreement that Miss Hurston was an exhilarating, spontaneous, and warm woman very much in love with life. That she was considered impractical and improvident is not surprising for one who must have felt that there were many more important things deserving of consideration in the world. One of these important things is people whom Miss Hurston referred to as "the godly demons who might breed a noble world."¹

Miss Hurston remained true to her literary philosophy and wrote about individuals and their interactions. She realized that it is in the most intimate of these relationships...love...that true knowledge about the individual may be gained and shared. She has, therefore, been able to bring us strong and weak characters, some mundane and some divinely exalted, but all of them examples of universal possibilities in the human race.

Zora Neale Hurston remembered everything she did not want to forget, and her dream became a partial truth. Some of her literary works are classics and deserve to endure in American literature.

January 7, 1903  Born in all-Negro town of Eatonville, Florida, chartered in 1886. One of 8 children, 6 boys, 2 girls. Father a carpenter, Baptist minister, mayor of Eatonville for 3 terms.

September 19, 1912  Mother died, Zora Neale Hurston sent to school in Jacksonville, Florida. Father remarried.

1913  Father lapsed in tuition payment. School paid her fare home. Stepmother not receptive to 8 children in family. Four older children left home and 4 youngest shifted to homes of relatives and friends for care. Zora Hurston's education as irregular as her existence.

1917  Seeking independence, Zora Neale Hurston held several jobs as a maid.

1918  Went to live with married brother but returned to father's home. After altercation with stepmother, left home again to seek employment. Went to live with older brother, Bob, and care for his children. Father and stepmother divorced.

1919  Became lady's maid to star of traveling Gilbert & Sullivan Repertory Company at $10 a week. Completed manicuring course. Traveled to Boston and Virginia.

1920  Migrated to Baltimore worked as a waitress. Underwent appendectomy in free ward of Maryland General Hospital. Attended night high school. Entered Morgan Academy. Father killed in an automobile accident.

1922  Completed secondary school at Morgan Academy. Now known as Morgan State College of Baltimore Maryland. Moved to Washington, D. C. Worked as waitress and manicurist to secure enough money to register at Howard through sophomore year. Joined "Styles" a college literary society under the guidance of Alaine Leroy Locke. Joined Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. Illness exhausted tuition fund and Zora was forced to leave Howard after a year and a half of study.
1924  Several short stories published in *Opportunity Magazine* edited by Dr. Charles S. Johnson, among them
"Drenched in Light" December 1924
"Spunk" June 1925
"John Redding Goes to Tea" January 1926
"Muttsy" August 1926

January 1925  Arrived in New York with $1.50 only. Assisted by Dr. and Mrs. Charles Johnson.


Fall 1925  Matriculated as Junior at Barnard College, Columbia University. Began as English major who wanted to become English professor. Switched to anthropology studies under Dr. Franz Boas.

1926  Founded *Fire Magazine* in collaboration with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman.

September 1926  "Possum and Pig" published in *Forum Magazine*.

November 1926  "Sweat" published in *Fire Magazine*.


1928  Received Baccalaureate from Barnard College with 'B' average. Married college sweetheart in St. Augustine, Florida, separated almost immediately, divorced and remarried. Continued to work under strict contract of Mrs. Mason, the godmother. Published essay "How It Feels to be Colored to Me" in May issue of *World Tomorrow*.

1929  Present during 5 day hurricane in Nassau Bahamas. This experience later recreated in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

January 10, 1931  Returned to New York.

1931  Wrote Mulebone, a play in collaboration with Langston Hughes. Produced collection of Bahaman and Negro songs, dances and folk sketches at John Golden Theatre, New York City. Later her group performed at Lowishan Stadium, New School of Social Research, Constitution Hall Washington, etc...

May 1932  Returned to Eatonville, Florida to begin work on Mules and Men.


Autumn 1933  Moved to Sanford, Florida. Began writing Jonah's Gourd Vine first published novel which was written in approximately 3 months.

October 16, 1933  Received eviction notice for overdue rent. Jonah's Gourd Vine accepted for publication by J. B. Lippincott Co. with $200 advance.


1935  Received fellowship from Rosenwald Foundation. Mules and Men published by Lippincott.


Spring 1936  Received fellowship from John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Traveled to Jamaica and Haiti.

1937  Their Eyes Were Watching God published by J. B. Lippincott Company.

1938  Returned to New York. Received Fellowship from Guggenheim Foundation.


1940-41 Spent winter in New York lecturing, visiting old friends and contemplating her next book.

1941 Traveled to California. Writer at Paramount Studios under Arthur Hornblower.

1942 Dust Tracks on a Road autobiography published by Lippincott Co. Reviewed Anisfield-Wolf Award for this work.


November 1942 Arna Bontemps reviewed Dust Tracks on a Road in New York Herald Tribune books section.

1944 Polk County: A comedy of Negro life in a sawmill camp. Written in collaboration with Dorothy Waring.

1948 Seraph on the Sewanee published by Lippincott Co.

1949 Wrote short story "Conscience of the Court."

1950 Employed as a domestic by white family of Miami Beach, Florida. Short story "Conscience of the Court" appeared in March Saturday Evening Post.


February 3, 1960 Zora Neale Hurston dies in penniless obscurity at Florida Memorial Hospital, Fort Pierce, Florida. Burial expenses paid by Lippincott Co.
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