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Folktales of Zora Neale Hurston

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Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1901 in Eatonville Florida. Eatonville is a community of black people that have enormous respect for themselves and for their ability to govern themselves. Growing up, Zora Neale Hurston experienced separate but equal politics of Eatonville. This experience deeply affected her outlook on racial issues.

Zora Neale Hurston's father, John Hurston, was a tenant farmer and a Baptist minister, as well as the mayor of Eatonville. His sermons were an important influence on her style of writing, Her mother, Lucy Ann Hurston, encouraged her to do her best and to challenge herself.

Today, she is a heroine to the people of Eatonville. Eatonville remains, today, an all black town which governs itself. The federal building in nearby Orlando, Florida is named after her.

I taught school at Hungerford Elementary School in Eatonville, Florida for two years from 1983 to 1985. In Florida, the school systems are divided up into counties. Eatonville schools are a part of Orange County Public Schools. This is where I first heard of Zora Neale Hurston.

I never read any of her works until I moved back to Connecticut. I picked up her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Dirt Road* in the Roberto Clemente Middle School Library. As I read it I was delighted to find that she described Eatonville, Florida beautifully.

I was born and raised in Connecticut. Eatonville is a town I would have had difficulty imagining or appreciating unless I had somehow been a part of it. There is no town like it in Connecticut. Very few white people ever get a chance to experience a town like Eatonville. I think that teachers at the Hungerford Elementary School and the Wymore Technical School may be the only whites employed in Eatonville due to the allocation of federal funds for education. This funding dictates racial quotas of teachers.

Hungerford Elementary School was a school dedicated to the education of the children of Eatonville. The principal of the school, Mr. Rufus Brooks, knew all of the townspeople. If there was a problem with any of the students, he would be at his or her home. The mayor of the town of Eatonville taught physical education. Each student had physical education every day. The town councilman, taught fifth grade with me. As you can see city politics and education were closely intertwined.

Hungerford Elementary School is a school that has two classrooms in each building. Because of the warm

climate, students walk in an outdoor corridor to go to the cafeteria, office, and lavatories. Physical education takes place in a field. on school property, there is a beautiful wooded lake where we took the children for science lessons.

I feel fortunate to have spent some time in Eatonville, Florida. I met many wonderful people and learned a lot from my experience. When I read any of Zora Neale Hurston's works I am vividly reminded of Eatonville, Florida.

Zora Neale Hurston left home at the age of fourteen. She began working as a maid for a Gilbert and Sullivan traveling theater group, which eventually brought her to Baltimore, Maryland. In Baltimore, she enrolled in and graduated from Morgan College Preparatory School. She furthered her education at Howard University. Her professors there encouraged her writing. In 1925, Zora Neale Hurston received a scholarship to Barnard College in New York. There she studied anthropology under Franz Boaz.

She was so adept at anthropology that she was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928, which she used to collect materials dealing with the traditional beliefs, legends, sayings and customs of the Afro-American culture. She wrote two collections of tales, four novels, an autobiography, a stage play and a number of essays.

Zora Neale Hurston's book *Mules and Men* is a book of Negro folklore. It is an invaluable piece of cultural history. This book contributes to the knowledge of the inner life of Southern blacks. In order to collect these folktales she moved back to Eatonville. She was accepted there as one of the townspeople. The townspeople of Eatonville are direct descendants of slaves. Most of the townspeople have never been outside the state of Florida. The farthest most of them may have been is Jacksonville which is four hours away. They have limited knowledge of the outside world. Eatonville is a rural Southern town. Eatonville is a tract of land that was purchased for the freed slaves by Samuel Eaton of Hartford, Connecticut.

In her book, *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston writes about the Southern Negro's reactions to everyday events, their emotional life, their humor and their passions. The title of the book, *Mules and Men*, describes the black woman's place as a mule—a beast of burden. This book includes many animal tales, stories of race relations, religious tales and voodoo practices. She uses the black dialect of the South when relating these folk tales. The story-telling sessions, or "lies," were usually held on the porch of Joe Clark's store on the main street of Eatonville.

Some of the "lies" are centered around the exploits of a folk hero, John. John is a slave figure who appears in a variety of situations which allow him to display the wit and cunning that enable him to overcome his enemies. John's master underestimates his cunning. His seeming humility and obedience allow him to pit himself successfully against stronger opponents. If circumstances warrant, John is not above using trickery.

In one tale John's horse is slaughtered by his master because of a rumor that he had been mistreating the horse. Pretending to accept this injustice, John, who is a fortune teller, skins the horse, cures its hide, wraps it around a stick, and goes about telling people the hide can tell fortunes. Playing on the superstitions of those who are willing to have their fortunes told, John becomes a rich man. John's master, not knowing the secrets of John's success, assumes he can do likewise. Consequently, he kills his own horse, cures its hide, and goes about lying to sell it for a high price. As time goes on, the master's greed, coupled with his blindness to John's tricks, lead to his death. John's revenge is complete.

Many of the folktales in *Mules and Men* are based on Biblical situations. An example is a tale about a

woodpecker on Noah's ark. The woodpecker was pecking wood while on Noah's ark. Noah warned him to stop pecking before he drilled a hole in the ark and caused it to sink. The bird continued to peck. Angered by the bird's disobedience, Noah hit him in head with a sledge hammer, and that's the reason a woodpecker has a red head today.

The possum also has an unfortunate incident on Noah's ark. Noah's son loved to play the banjo and the guitar. During the great flood, he ran out of strings. So he found the possum and shaved the hair off his tail to use for strings for his instruments. This is the reason that the possum's tail has no hair today.

In another folktale, God helps the snake, whom he made to crawl around the ground as a decoration. When men start treading on the defenseless creature God gives him poison to protect himself. He also gives him rings to rattle, as a warning that man is near. This is done so that man will not step on the snake. Only when man does not listen to the snake does the snake strike him.

As in the previous folktale, many tales in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* have moral lessons in which virtues are rewarded. There is the tale of the cat who eats nine fish. These fish were the only food of a starving family. The family dies of starvation. The cat dies because he ate too much. When the cat gets to heaven, God is so angry with the cat that he throws him out of heaven. The cat falls for nine days. The cat still has those nine lives in his belly and that is why you have to kill him nine times before he'll stay dead.

The folktale "Why the Waves Have Whitecaps" is an attempt to explain an element of nature. In this tale Mrs. Wind and Mrs. Water try to outdo each other by bragging about their children. Mrs. Water gets tired of Mrs. Wind's boasting and begins to hate Mrs. Wind's children so much that one day when they come over to her house for a drink of water, she grabs them and drowns them all. Mrs. Wind, grief stricken, goes over the ocean calling for them. Every time she does so, the white fringes of their caps rise, and that is why the waves have white caps. Whenever there's a storm at sea, it's the wind and the water fighting over their children.

One of the folktales in *Mules and Men* explains why the Negro race is black. In the beginning of time, God made people, but he did not make them completely. On certain days, he would call all the bodies together and hand out a body part. Finally, it was time to give out color. All the groups arrived but one. God sent the angels to look for them. The angels found a huge group of people asleep under the tree of life. When the angels called, they all jumped up and began to push and shove one another. Amid this chaos, God shouted "Get back! Get back!" Thinking that God was ordering them to get black, they all rushed forward and took it, and that is why the black man is black.

This is a small sampling of the delightful folktales in *Mules and Men* .

Here are several lesson plans for the Unit. I plan to use these stories as an ongoing part of my yearly Language Arts Program. I will work them into the literature portion of my program. Once a week I will read the class one of Zora Neale Hurston's folktales. I will type out the story and copy it for them so that they will each have a copy. The class will do one or more of the following activities after reading the folktales.

Lesson One

Class Discussion of Folktales

The objective of this activity is that the students will grow in the ability to understand and analyze folktales and the main characters in these folktales.

1. Have the students reread folktale silently.
2. Lead a class discussion using some or all of the following questions. Not all of the questions will apply to each story. Each teacher who uses this unit will come up with some new questions, as well.
 1. Why did this main character deserve what happened to him?
 2. What is the moral of this story?
 3. Which main character is your favorite? Why?
 4. Which main character is your least favorite? Why?
 5. Discuss the historical significance of the folktale. These folktales

Lesson Two

A Book of Folktales

This lesson can be used once each year. It is a multi-purpose lesson which involves many interrelated skills.

The main objective of this lesson is that the students will grow in their knowledge of Afro-American folktales of the South and of Latin America.

Another objective of this lesson is the students will grow in the understanding and appreciation of one another's cultures.

Another objective of this lesson is that the class will work together to compile a book of folktales.

1. Tell each student for homework to ask their parents or grandparents to tell them a folktale. Have students write down folktale and illustrate it.

2. Assign each student a day to read their folktale to the class.
3. Assign a team of students to run off copies of folktales and illustrations.
4. Assign a team of students to compile book.
5. Celebrate finished book with an international lunch. Have students bring in their favorite dish.
6. Organize a sale of the book of folktales in school cafeteria to raise money for a class trip.

Lesson Three

Class Play

The main objective of this lesson is that the students will grow in the ability to understand and interpret Zora Neale Hurston's folktales.

Another objective of this lesson is that the class will work together to produce a play.

Another objective of this lesson is that the students will grow in the ability to speak publicly.

1. Have the students vote on which of Zora Neale Hurston's folktales they wish to dramatize.
2. Choose a cast, stage crew, art team for scenery and any other teams the class feels is necessary.
3. Allocate 3 class periods and 2 after-school sessions a week for practice for a month.
4. Put on class play for other classes and possibly for the PTA.

Lesson Four

Folktale Illustration

The objective of this lesson is that students will learn to visually interpret one or more of Zora Neale Hurston's folktales.

Another objective is that students will learn to appreciate each other's interpretations.

1. Read aloud a folktale of Zora Neale Hurston.
2. Pass out white construction paper, 12" X 18" to each student. Pass out crayons and/or markers to each student.
3. Ask students to draw a picture illustrating the folktale they just heard.
4. Ask students to share their illustrations with the class. Discuss the differences in their illustrations, as well as their similarities.
5. Display illustrations on a bulletin board.

Lesson Five

Black Dialect of the Rural South

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the students with the phonological deviations of the blacks living in the rural south.

Another objective is to have the students develop an appreciation and an acceptance of this dialect as a part of their rich cultural heritage.

I have noticed that, as I have been reading these folktales to my class this year my students are very uncomfortable with this dialect. They do not want to identify themselves with this dialect.

1. Teach the phonological deviations of the speech of the characters in Zora Neale Hurston's folktales.
 1. substitution of "d" sound for "th" sound
 2. substitution of "k" sound for "c" (kin)
 3. the double negative ("Ah know you can't make none")
 4. the inflection of strong verbs as if they were weak. ("throwed")
 5. overinflection ("All turtles loves water")
 6. variant use of pronouns ("and scratched he head")
2. Have students listen to one of Zora Neale Hurston's folktales.
3. Have them jot down all the instances of black dialect that they hear.
4. Have the students discuss the words they have written down.

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