

This essay examines Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God," exploring how her use of dialect, symbolism, and Black Southern cultural tradition embodies the principles of the Harlem Renaissance.

© Claire Tomasiak, 2025 | clairetomasiak.com

Hurston's Embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of remarkable artistic growth in African American literature from 1919 to 1940. It marked a deliberate reclaiming of cultural identity and creative autonomy, as writers used folklore, dialect, and lived experience to challenge dominant narratives about Black life and redefine the possibilities of American literature. Among the most influential voices of this movement was Zora Neale Hurston, whose fiction celebrated Black Southern culture while offering a deeply human exploration of identity and experience. Hurston's commitment to cultural authenticity positioned her as a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and her works continue to exemplify its core values. Zora Neale Hurston's works, *Sweat* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, embody the main principles of the Harlem Renaissance by blending folkloric writing with deep reflections on autonomy, identity, and moral justice. Through her use of dialect, symbolism, and Black Southern cultural traditions, Hurston challenges dominant narratives about African American life while also maintaining a universal vision of the human experience, making her work both politically significant and artistically revolutionary.

Hurston played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance because her writing centered on Black cultural traditions and challenged the expectation that African American literature should

imitate white standards. She spent time at Columbia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, studying anthropology and developing a deep love and interest in folktales and oral traditions (Gates 1048). This shaped her approach to writing and allowed her to weave everyday speech, humor, and collective traditions into her narratives with a truth and intimacy that set her apart from many of her peers. Instead of calling for protests, she celebrated Black culture through her works, focusing on the real “lived” lives of African Americans. She refused to portray African Americans under the white literary standards of the time or reduce them to stand-ins for oppression, choosing to show them as fully realized individuals with their own desires, traditions, and worldly problems. Through her work, we can see that Hurston calls for a deeper and more realistic portrayal of African American culture, where literature “holds up a mirror to nature” by offering more realistic and culturally rooted representations of Black communities, and making her storytelling revolutionary within the Harlem Renaissance (Jones 68).

By grounding her stories in the rhythms of Black Southern dialect, Hurston gives her characters a vivid sense of humanity and autonomy, allowing their experiences to resonate beyond racial boundaries. Dialect should not be considered “incorrect English,” but seen as an intentional linguistic choice that can reflect culture and lived experience. Hurston specifically uses this as a tool to show authenticity and identity within Black southern culture. We see this use of dialect in *Sweat* when Sykes says, “Some day Ah’m gointuh drop dead from some of yo’ foolishness. ’Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin’ wid no bull whip.” (Hurston 1058). It also appears in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as Janie tells her story, saying, “Dey didn’t tell about how he wuz seen tryin’ tuh git in touch wid mah mama later on so he could marry her.” (Hurston 1101). Instead of playing into a stereotype, she uses this artistic style to challenge the dominant narrative, becoming “a foundational and

transformative force” within the Harlem Renaissance movement (Housseyn). During the Jim Crow Era, Black writers were often expected to frame their work as sociological evidence of racial suffering. Here Hurston’s focus on joy, conflict, and interiority was itself a radical intervention and it “challenged master narratives, articulated complex understandings of identity, exposed the legacies of colonialism and systemic racism, and anticipated postmodern critiques of essentialism, meta-narratives, and fixed categories.” (Housseyn).

Hurston uses symbolism in *Sweat* to explore themes of autonomy, oppression, and moral justice, allowing objects and natural elements to reflect the inner lives of her characters. The rattlesnake, for example, functions as a symbol of Sykes’s cruelty and the danger he poses to Delia, while also foreshadowing his eventual self-destruction. We can see this when Sykes confronts the snake, and her seeing “his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs,” mirrors his original immoral intentions, and brings about a justice to the horrors he inflicted upon Delia (Hurston 1066). Delia’s laundry, especially the white clothes she carefully washes, symbolizes her moral purity, labor, and the life she builds independently of Sykes’s abuse and torment. Through these symbols, Hurston portrays Delia’s endurance and the reclamation of her agency, demonstrating that moral justice is both a personal and spiritual force. Sykes’ death at the end not only enacts literal justice but also reinforces the philosophical idea that wrongdoing and cruelty ultimately carry consequences. By rooting these symbols in the realities of Black Southern life and work, Hurston elevates ordinary objects into expressions of ethical and emotional truth, blending folklore and lived experience in a way that reflects the Harlem Renaissance’s goal of celebrating authentic African American culture.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's symbolism expands to reflect universal themes of identity, desire, and human longing. The pear tree represents Janie's ideal vision of love and harmony, embodying her aspirations for personal and romantic fulfillment. When Janie notes the, "thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from the root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!" (Hurston 1102). The tree functions as a symbol of her lifelong pursuit of autonomy and self-realization, representing both possibility and challenge. In contrast, the depiction of the transition from winter to spring reminds us as readers of the impartial power of nature, "From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously." (Hurston 1101). The world moves on, and there are limits to human control, illustrating that identity and desire are constantly tested by external forces. By embedding these symbols in the vernacular and culturally specific context of Eatonville and the Black South, Hurston bridges the personal and the universal, showing how her characters' experiences resonate beyond racial and regional boundaries. Scholars Jones and Housseyn note that Hurston's culturally grounded storytelling achieves universal philosophical resonance, demonstrating that Black folklore and local tradition can carry profound human truths.

Hurston's work consistently integrates folklore, community rituals, and Southern traditions as central forces shaping her characters' identities. Porch-sitting storytelling, spiritual practices, and folk beliefs appear throughout her works, providing context for social interaction, moral instruction, and personal reflection. For example, in *Sweat*, Delia's neighbors comment and gossip from their porches, creating a communal narrative that situates her personal struggle within a larger social fabric. We can see this in the way they discuss Delia's marital life, with Moss saying, "Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to huh he

aint.” (Hurstons 1060). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storytelling and ritual underscore generational knowledge and the rhythm of daily life. This reflects Hurston’s anthropological training and her commitment to recording Black Southern culture in an authentic way. By focusing on everyday life, on things like labor, speech, ritual, and conflict, Hurston is able to assert cultural pride while resisting the expectation that African American literature should conform to white literary norms and stereotypes. Her careful integration of these traditions demonstrates how folklore and community are not mere background but essential to her artistic and cultural vision.

Hurston’s artistic choices were politically significant because they challenged prevailing stereotypes of African American life in a segregated society. By portraying Black characters as fully human, complex, and culturally grounded, she reframed African American literature as a space for cultural celebration rather than social problem narratives. Her commitment to authenticity made her fiction a powerful form of cultural resistance. Housseyn notes that Black literature, including Hurston’s work, reshapes dominant narratives and offers transformative perspectives on cultural identity. Similarly, Jones emphasizes that Hurston calls for a deeper, realistic portrayal of African American culture, positioning her fiction as revolutionary not through overt political messaging but through the dignified representation of Black life. In doing so, Hurston demonstrates that literature itself can assert political and cultural agency, validating lived experience and contributing to the Harlem Renaissance’s broader goals of artistic and social transformation.

Zora Neale Hurston’s work demonstrates the revolutionary and artistic vision of the Harlem Renaissance through her intentional use of dialect, symbolism, and culturally grounded storytelling. Her works celebrate Black Southern culture while also engaging the

universal themes of autonomy, identity, and moral justice. By defending the legitimacy of Black voices and traditions in literature, Hurston challenged dominant cultural narratives and expanded the possibilities of American fiction. Her legacy shows that cultural authenticity and universal human experiences do coexist, making her work both artistically and politically transformative. Hurston's legacy continues to matter in a modern literary world where marginalized voices are still often expected to explain or justify their existence. Her refusal to translate Black life for white approval affirms the enduring importance of cultural self-definition and reminds readers that representation itself remains a powerful form of resistance.

Works Cited:

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "A Cultural Flowering." And "Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith. Fourth Edition. Volume 1. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 955-958, 1047-1050.

Housseyn, Halimi. "Black Literature and the Reshaping of Critical Theory and Postmodern Approaches." Digibug. Universidad De Granada. (2025).

<https://digibug.ugr.es/handle/10481/103828>

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Sweat*. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith. Fourth Edition. Volume 1. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp 1058-1066.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith. Fourth Edition. Volume 1. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp 1096-1105.

Jones, Sharon L. *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2002.

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=X7TOEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP10&dq=%E2%80%9CZora+Neale+Hurston%E2%80%9D+%E2%80%9CHarlem+Renaissance%22&ots=xR6gFOYVvq&sig=c0n6-rCIE8hy_6YzFXRuoduI3lY#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CZora%20Neale%20Hurston%E2%80%9D%20%E2%80%9CHarlem%20Renaissance%22&f=false