

## Exploring Zora Neale Hurston's Style

Hurston's writing relies on the following techniques:

Black English, including rhythm and word choice (such as Janie's conversation with Nanny in Chapter 2)

Oral features, or heard speech (such as the discussion of Matt Bonner's yellow mule on the store's porch in Chapter 6)

Colorful figurative language, in particular metaphors and imagery (such as the pear tree and blossoms in Chapter 2)

Personification (such as the description of the storm in Chapter 18)

Biblical images and references (such as "old as Methusalem" in Chapter 7 or the "Virgin Mary image" comparison in Chapter 6)

The following excerpt is from Chapter 1 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

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5 The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.

10 Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

15 "What she doin' coming back here in dem over-halls? Can't she find no dress to put on? — Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? — Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? — What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? — Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? — Thought she was going to marry? — Where he left *her*?— What he done wid all her money? — Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs—why she don't stay in her class? —"

20 When she go to where they were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy "good evenin'" and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking.

25 The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. 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.

30 But nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her.

(pp. 9-11, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1978)