

# How it Feels to be Colored Me



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZORA HURSTON

Zora Neal Hurston was born in 1891 in Alabama, although her family moved shortly afterward to the thriving African-American community of Eatonville, Florida. Passionate and willful from a young age, Hurston was in frequent conflict with her father, a preacher. After the death of her mother in 1904, family discord drove Hurston to join a traveling theater troupe. She didn't finish high school until well into her twenties. Afterward, at Howard University, Hurston began to write and publish her first short stories. She started to attract widespread acclaim for her writing after moving to New York and linking up with several other prominent African-American writers and artists who together formed a movement called the Harlem Renaissance. While in New York, she also pursued further education in anthropology at Barnard College and made several trips to locations in the American south to study African-American history and folklore. In the '30s and '40s, Hurston published her most enduring novels, including [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#), but she never achieved her full due of financial security and recognition.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the Civil War, Union forces and congressional Republicans pushed to ensure a measure of financial and political agency for newly freed African-American southerners. By the 1870s, these efforts had stalled out in the face of white southern resistance and northern indifference, and white southerners filled the power vacuum with campaigns of terror against the black population. Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, a successful African-American town, and so was spared the worst of this discrimination in her early childhood, but she soon encountered various forms of explicit and implicit racism as she moved to other parts of the south and then north to Baltimore and Manhattan, which in turn influenced her work. While in New York, Hurston participated in the Harlem Renaissance, which created a community of talented African-American writers and eased her entry into the New York literary world.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Zora Neale Hurston was a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of art and literature in the predominantly African-American neighborhood of New York City in the 1920s and '30s. Hurston befriended and collaborated with many other figures in the movement, including poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, whose work both

celebrated and lamented the African-American experience in the early 20th century. Hurston also corresponded with W.E.B. DuBois, a towering figure for many African-American writers of the time whose essay collection [The Souls of Black Folk](#) investigates ways African-Americans navigate a racially stratified and oppressive society. Finally, Hurston's own study of the folklore, stories, and songs of black southerners proved an enduring influence on her work, including her most famous novel, [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** How It Feels To Be Colored Me
- **When Written:** 1928
- **Where Written:** Manhattan, New York
- **When Published:** 1928
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Personal Essay
- **Setting:** Eatonville, Florida; Manhattan, New York
- **Climax:** When Hurston brings a white friend to a jazz club in her black neighborhood, his drastically different response to the music highlights their racial difference in her eyes.
- **Antagonist:** None
- **Point of View:** 1st Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Masquerade for Education.** Hurston resolved to finish high school in Baltimore at age 26, which was too old to qualify for free public school. She posed as ten years younger to finish her education and then continued that ruse for the rest of her life.

**Literary Rediscovery.** Hurston's writing gained renewed interest in the 1970s when Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker rediscovered her work. Walker even bought a headstone for Hurston's formerly unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Zora Neale Hurston opens the essay by explicitly stating that she is "colored," or African-American, and that she has no desire to minimize that identity by claiming Native-American ancestry, as other African-Americans of her time might.

She remembers the first day she felt colored. Before then, Hurston grew up in the black town of Eatonville, Florida. The only white people she saw were passing through on their way to Orlando. Although the locals paid no special attention to

southern whites, who rode through on horses, they made a commotion over northern tourists who drove through in their cars, often coming out to the porch to observe them.

Growing up, Hurston relished the visits of these traveling white people and didn't bother with subtlety when watching them from her porch. She would even greet them and walk alongside them as they traveled, and she jokes that the Chamber of Commerce should have taken notice of her efforts.

Hurston recalls that, in her childhood, she didn't draw a distinction between white and colored people, only observing that the former rode through her town but never stopped. She would recite, sing, and dance for the travelers as she accompanied them, and was surprised when the travelers would sometimes give her a coin. The colored people in her town never paid her for her performances, but she nevertheless felt a sense of belonging there.

Her awakening as a "little colored girl" begins upon moving to Jacksonville at the age of thirteen. She describes a loss of identity: she's no longer Zora of Orange County, but an impulsive colored girl to be scolded and watched. However, in her present life, Hurston doesn't view her colored status as a tragedy. She contrasts herself with other African-Americans, who she says feel victimized by their oppression. Instead, she claims that life is dominated by the powerful, whether that power is applied on the basis of skin color or any other criteria.

Hurston complains about the tendency to overemphasize the legacy of slavery, which she dismisses by placing it "sixty years in the past." She describes the struggles of previous generations as a sacrifice for her current freedom, which she plans to use in pursuit of glory and adventure. In contrast, white people are haunted by the historical guilt of African-American slavery.

Hurston notes that she doesn't always "feel [her] race," but she feels it most often around white people, as she does at Barnard College in New York. But she describes the feeling in positive terms, as it brings her sense of self into greater relief.

She tells an anecdote about bringing a white friend to a jazz club in her black neighborhood. As the band strikes up, Hurston enters a trance where she makes contact with a more primitive, animal nature. She describes herself with painted skin brandishing an African spear. But when she returns to reality, her white friend merely compliments the music. Hurston pities him because what was an ecstatic experience to her is just "music" to him.

At times, Hurston feels she has no race but "Zora." She belongs to no specific place or time. She walks the streets of Manhattan as a mythic, cosmic figure. Although she experiences discrimination, she can't imagine why someone would deny themselves her company based on something so insubstantial as race.

To explain her point, Hurston poses a metaphor of **colored bags** that correspond to racial identity and skin color. What

draws her interest is not the appearance of the bags, but the contents, which she describes in deep and poignant detail. She claims that all the objects in these bags could be mixed up and replaced, with the contents of a white bag placed in a brown bag, without needing to tailor the contents to the color of the bag. And that might even be the original intent of the "Great Stuffer of Bags," the deity who filled the "bags" in the first place.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Zora Neale Hurston** – Zora Neale Hurston describes herself at various stages of her still young life: as a young black girl holding impromptu performances for white tourists, as a teenager encountering explicit discrimination for the first time, and as a student and writer in New York City. At the time of writing, Hurston is thoughtful and confident, and her account of how it feels to be "colored" in the 20th century is distinguished by its optimism. She's passionate and adventurous, convinced that the future will bring accomplishments and acclaim. At times her self-assurance crosses into mock-arrogance. In describing herself this way, Hurston signals that she's unapologetic about her own merit. It's also a way to highlight the absurdity of racism, that white Americans would ostracize talented and charming people for their skin color. As Hurston writes, "How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."

**The White Neighbor** – The abstract figure of the white neighbor stands in for white America as a whole. Hurston uses him to illustrate her unique take on American racial history. She almost pities this figure as she describes his slow but certain decline, which coincides with the eventual advancement of black citizens. The white neighbor is burdened by guilt over the centuries-long crime of black slavery.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**The White Friend** – Hurston's unnamed white friend who accompanies her to a jazz club is a figure much like to the white neighbor. The white friend's "civilized" and indifferent response to the music contrasts with the vitality of black culture that Hurston experiences.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## RACE AND DIFFERENCE

In her 1928 essay “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston argues that race isn’t an essential feature that a person is born with, but instead emerges in specific social contexts. Hurston introduces this theme by describing her childhood in the majority black town of Eatonville, Florida, where, until the age of thirteen, she was not yet “colored.” It was only when she moved to the more diverse Jacksonville and later to New York City that she became aware of her race. Crucially, she also drifts away from this awareness at times, when “the cosmic Zora emerges” and she assumes a more universal identity. In detailing a personal journey towards and then away from a racialized conception of her own identity, Hurston opposes the conventional wisdom of the time that race is an inherent characteristic that determines the personality, ability, and destiny of the individual. With time, she also gains the confidence to think of her race, which has so often been used as a weapon against African-Americans, as an asset.

Hurston becomes aware of her own status as “colored” through recognizing her difference from white people. The moments when Hurston says she can most keenly “feel [her] race” occur when she moves from a black to a white community, or when a member of a white community visits her own. This suggests that race is a social phenomenon—that is, something that originates in one’s relationships to others rather than something that is essential to a person or group of people. Until the age of 13, Hurston doesn’t consider herself “colored” because no one has given her cause to think of herself in those terms. For Hurston, “white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there.” Thus, young Hurston conceived of race as more of a socioeconomic distinction, a matter of differing circumstances, than an essential difference between people. Nevertheless, race as a category begins to feel real when Hurston moves to Jacksonville, where there are more white people: “I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways,” she writes. Hurston goes from not identifying with a racial category to identifying with one completely, showing that race is no less “real” just because it is based in social perception.

Even as she considers her identity as a black woman, with time, Hurston gains the power to minimize or refuse the concept of race. She frames this using the metaphor of the **bag**, the most crucial aspect of which is not its appearance but what it carries. She analogizes the varied contents of a bag to aspects of a personality, both positive and negative: “A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass.” Hurston’s point is that the exterior of a bag doesn’t affect what it contains, and in this way she uses the metaphor to combat popular conceptions of race as something that determines one’s intelligence, talent, or identity.

Later in her life, Hurston also learns to lean into her African-American identity, even when this identity is maligned or mocked by both black and white acquaintances. As a child, the forced awareness of herself as “colored,” a little girl “warranted not to rub or run,” makes her visible as a target of racial discrimination and control. As an adult, she begins to view this racial visibility as a distinction. That Hurston feels she can control not only whether to identify as African-American but whether that identity is positive or negative, in defiance of wider culture, illustrates the importance of perspective rather than biology when thinking through race. She opens her essay by invoking a stereotype about African-Americans: “I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief.” In a tongue-in-cheek way, she’s pointing to what she sees as a tendency on the part of African-Americans to minimize or dilute their blackness by inventing a different ancestry for themselves, thereby claiming a different cultural and ethnic heritage. To “extenuate” something is to make it seem less offensive—more forgivable—but Hurston argues that African descent needs no such apology. She undercuts the idea that her race should be a source of shame and pointedly shows that she embraces it fully.

Furthermore, rather than shying away from the persistent stereotype that people of African descent are somehow more “primitive” than people of European descent, Hurston embraces the stereotype. Describing a scene in which she listens to a jazz band with a white friend, she falls into an ecstatic trance marked by animalistic and tribal language and writes that the orchestra “rears on its hind legs,” “clawing” at the “tonal veil.” She shakes her “assegai,” a type of African spear. Afterward, her white friend meekly calls the performance “good music.” While satirizing the idea that black Americans are in touch with such primitive spiritual forces, Hurston also makes even this stereotyped identity seem powerful and vital. Her primitive fugue reveals her experience to be much richer and more passionate than that of her companion, who is “so pale with whiteness.”

Hurston’s essay uses the framing of her childhood to illustrate that race is a concept rooted in social context, contingent on environment and cultural reinforcement. This frees her to reimagine race for her own purposes, emphasizing her own subjectivity and self-worth by twisting the language of oppression into a language of empowerment.



## PERFORMANCE

From the beginning of her essay, Zora Neale Hurston’s ideas about race are bound up in creative performance. Her earliest experiences with white people are of singing and dancing for a white audience. Just as she reconfigures ideas of race to her advantage, she uses the

otherwise unwelcome scrutiny of white people as an opportunity for creative development. In this way, Hurston's essay is as much a story of her journey as an artist as it is an essay about race. From her first shows for a white audience in Eatonville to her later, more self-aware performances in Manhattan, Hurston turns the intrusive white gaze into a spotlight. The production of culture for white audiences, whether singing for tourists or playing jazz for white intellectuals, gives Hurston and black artists in general some control over their destinies. Hurston inverts a dynamic wherein white people observe from a position of power while black people are seen and helpless—and in doing so she's rewarded with money as well as a cautious respect.

Hurston recalls her early childhood to describe the ways in which white spectators objectify black performers, treating them as a something to ogle and applaud. This points to a more general power asymmetry between black and white people. For example, the white Northern tourists who drive through Eatonville freely gawk at the town's black residents, while many of Eatonville's residents don't feel secure enough to observe the white visitors in return. Hurston writes that white people who came to Eatonville "were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid." More "venturesome" residents would come out to the porch, thereby opening themselves up not only to a relationship of seeing and being seen, but also to the pleasure of watching the northerners. In her brazenness, the young Hurston even thinks of the northerners as being there for *her* amusement and is confident enough to show it: "Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it." Moreover, she's also willing to return the favor of being a spectacle, singing and dancing for the northerners while seeing nothing sordid or weak in the act of performance. Hurston is aware that there is a certain amount of power that white audiences wield over black performers through their spectatorship, but as she comes into her own as an artist, she begins to view the ability to command the audience's attention—to stand out and demand to be seen—as an equally powerful position.

The older Hurston also relishes being watched, even if her race is the reason. Describing herself against the "sharp white background" of Barnard College, she writes that, "among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself." She finds power in being noticeable in these moments because it secures her sense of self. Hurston's performative flair helps her project power as an object *worthy* of the attention she receives. When she walks down the street she "saunters" and is "as snooty as the lions." Furthermore, her bearing is "aristocratic," suggesting the privilege and power in attracting attention.

The pleasure Hurston takes in being seen awakens her identity as an artist. To hold the attention of others, whether tourists or her colleagues at the jazz club, she sings and dances, making a

spectacle of herself. Instead of feeling degraded by the attention of a white audience, this helps point her towards creative fulfillment. The approval and money Hurston receives from white tourists is her first indication that art and performance could be a livelihood. The tourists "gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things"—things that Hurston would do anyway. Embedded in this is a realization that her small personal joys can be converted into a vocation when performed in front of an audience, specifically a white one. All the while, she's aware that her white audiences are enraptured by her performances in part because, as a black woman, she is an exotic curiosity to them. But rather than allowing herself to feel objectified by their gaze, this just drives her to greater heights of achievement. She conceives of herself in history as an actor on a stage: "It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep." Notably, her language here is active rather than passive: she is not merely *seen* but *holds* center stage. In this way, she draws attention to her power as a performer in commanding the attention of her audience.

At a time when slavery was still a recent memory for many Americans and a new social order between races was slowly emerging, blacks and whites alike were intensely watchful of one another. Often it was white people who felt entitled to gaze at (and objectify) black bodies, while many black people, by contrast, remained fearful of what would happen if they tried assuming the position of the spectator themselves. Hurston, however, finds strength in being seen and watched. For her, being seen is not a sign of submission, but rather an indication of her power and her accomplishments—proof that her talent is too good to ignore.



## HISTORY AND OPPORTUNITY

When Zora Neale Hurston wrote this essay in the 1920s, the United States was only 60 years removed from the Civil War, making the end of slavery well within living memory. As such, any account of the African-American experience would have to reckon with that legacy. Hurston does this in a uniquely idiosyncratic way. While acknowledging the persistence of racial discrimination, she minimizes the impact of slavery on the current circumstances of African-Americans. Instead, she places herself at a pivotal time in history: after the end of slavery, but long before the arrival of anything resembling racial equality. Because the status of black Americans in a white-dominated country is the subject of national attention, Hurston has the most power to make her mark on what form these social relationships will take.

Hurston feels emboldened by the basic rights African-Americans had gained by the 1920s rather than dispirited by the true equality yet to be won. For her, the distance still to be traveled represents an opportunity. She uses a series of heroic

metaphors to situate her own time as an epoch of high adventure and glorious struggle, with herself as a primary protagonist. What's more, playing offense on social justice is a much more heroic challenge than playing defense. As she writes, "The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting." The former is a cheerless and doomed task, while the latter, however arduous, is thrilling. Even the fact of white racism heightens the sense of heroism. Hurston points out that white Americans tend to view individual African-Americans as perfect representatives of a larger racial group, but she sees this as an opportunity rather than a burden: "It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame."

For her "white neighbor," the story is different—in part because of white people's slowly diminishing societal power, but primarily because of well-deserved guilt. Hurston contends that the legacy of slavery hangs more heavily on white than black Americans. She has all the optimism and verve of a clean conscience, busy as she is "sharpening [her] oyster knife," and her vows to get the most out of life sparkle with words like "adventure" and "glory." White Americans, however, have to grapple with "brown specters" and "dark ghosts" that speak to the deepening guilt of hundreds of years of brutal slavery. Crucially, while Hurston seeks adventure and the stage, the white neighbor is interrupted by his ghosts while going about dour, domestic tasks. When these ghosts make a trial out of eating or sleeping, the kind of high drama that Hurston seeks seems unthinkable.

Hurston's dismissal of slavery's influence on her life seems premature to modern readers, especially in an essay written 40 years before the Civil Rights movement. But her refusal to "look behind and weep" plays to her strategic benefit as an artist coming into her own. She can place herself at the vanguard of a changing America with considerable freedom to accelerate and shape that change. Furthermore, she creates a sense that African-American history is new and vital, while the history of white America is heavy with the sins of the distant and recent past. This is a framing of racial history that expands her freedom to define herself as both an artist and a person.

in rapturous detail, mentioning objects both exceptional, such as a "first-water diamond," and mundane, such as "an empty spool." But even the worn or commonplace objects achieve pathos in Hurston's language, as she describes things such as "old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be." By privileging contents over outward appearance, Hurston draws attention to the hopes, memories, relationships, and challenges that might be found in any bag—and, it follows, human being. Suggesting that all the contents be "dumped in a single heap" may gesture towards a post-racial future where what is essential in human experience—namely personality, character, and history—transcends skin color.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Applewood Books edition of *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* published in 2015.

### How It Feels to Be Colored Me Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1

#### Explanation and Analysis

Hurston begins her essay with a biting refusal to offer conditions for being African-American, illustrating immediately how that racial identity was something many felt the need to minimize or excuse. The efforts she invokes to revise family heritage are meant to break the binary of black and white and to complicate American understanding of race. The fact that the categories "white" or "black" do a poor job of describing an individual's long and varied racial ancestry contributes to Hurston's claim that race is a social rather than a biological distinction.

Nevertheless, Hurston embraces the identity of "colored" or black wholeheartedly. Even though, especially in the 1920s when Hurston was writing, the terms of this identity were set more by white than by black people, she's willing to take up the label with pride, refusing to make the fine distinctions that she says other African-Americans make. This speaks to a specific kind of confidence and frankness about race.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BAGS

Zora Neale Hurston introduces bags as a symbol of her own experience of and thinking about race. She refers to "brown" and "white, red and yellow" bags that represent skin color, but that's the end of her description of the bags themselves. In contrast, Hurston describes their contents

☛ I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1-2

### Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after deeming herself “colored,” Hurston explains that this identity did not, as most would assume, begin at birth. Instead, Hurston places her first day as a black woman years later, after she turns thirteen. As a child, her deeper understanding of race was postponed while she lived in an “exclusively...colored town.” The suggestion is that race emerges less from the basic fact of skin color than it does from differences enforced by a larger society. While in an exclusively black town, “blackness” is a less, or not at all, important quality. Hurston thus shows how slippery race is as a concept. If someone can gain or lose a quality of “coloredness,” she suggests, perhaps it should not be treated as an ironclad feature of identity.

☛ The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

Here Hurston is describing how she would observe northern white tourists as they rolled through Eatonville on their way somewhere else. Previously, Hurston had set up a sort of hierarchy of attention: poor southern whites passing through were business as usual for Eatonville residents, but northern whites driving cars commanded a lot of attention. Many locals timidly observed the tourists from their windows, but Hurston is different in that she watches them while also letting them know she’s watching.

Throughout her essay, Hurston is forthright about race and her personal history. This extends to the relationship of observation and mutual curiosity between her and the white tourists. While tourists normally have the right of

observation, as they’re traveling to take in a foreign culture or place, Hurston reserves that right for herself. Using the language of the theater, she acts like the tourists are there for her entertainment rather than the reverse. By using the logic of performance, Hurston is able to erase or reverse the power difference between her and the northern white travelers.

☛ They liked to hear me “speak pieces” and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop, only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 4-5

### Explanation and Analysis

While Hurston views the northern tourists as entertainment for her, she also performs for them. For this, she’s rewarded with money, which surprises her. This speaks to a burgeoning awareness that performance and creativity can be not only emotionally but financially rewarding. The financial relationship collapses some of the distance between Hurston and the white tourists. There’s a sense, however, that while there may be an equalizing of power between them, this doesn’t bring them emotionally closer.

In contrast, the black residents of Eatonville don’t pay Hurston for her artistic efforts, and instead provide true affection and a sense of belonging. The connection between the young Hurston and her white audience is always adversarial in some way, as there’s an imbalance or distance that must be corrected. Where no such imbalance exists, as with her black community, there’s no need of monetary reward.

●● I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 6-7

### Explanation and Analysis

Here Hurston proposes a worldview that's based around power rather than race. In the process, she diminishes other African-Americans who attribute their adversities to slavery and persistent racism. Given that Hurston is advancing this view in the 1920s, when Jim Crow segregation laws were ascendant, it's a controversial read on history.

It's also an effort of will to turn herself towards the future and the possibility of increasing freedom and success. She doesn't deny that the world is full of injustice, no small part of it borne by African-Americans. She acknowledges that the "world is to the strong" and, as a result, resolves to be strong. Her violent or aggressive language, describing the "skirmish that is my life" or prying open the oyster with a knife, makes clear that the position of African-Americans in her time is a struggle. However, she finds that struggle easier if she believes it can be won.

●● It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 8-9

### Explanation and Analysis

Hurston's view of history is primarily an optimistic one. But here, she lays bare the risk of failure, noting she may get

"twice as much blame" or that the spectators may "weep." Her assertion reflects the fact that African-Americans may be treated as representatives of their entire racial group rather than individuals. She places herself at the center of what's at once a stage and an arena, and she incorporates the possibility of tragedy and humiliating defeat.

What's exciting to Hurston is not only the attention of the country and of history, her "national stage," but also the quality of suspense at the beginning of her life and career. The indeterminacy, how both glory and shame could result, is emblematic of a kind of freedom African-Americans had not had prior to this point. The freedom to fail, to be applauded or jeered at even by a racist country, is the kind of freedom that she values most.

●● I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 9-10

### Explanation and Analysis

For the first thirteen years of her life, Hurston did not know what it meant to feel "colored." After her move to Jacksonville, she felt like her previous identity was erased and replaced with that of a "little colored girl." As an adult, Hurston moves between these poles, sometimes able to recover a racially neutral way of being and sometimes being forced to confront her race because of the way people impose it on her.

But at Barnard, amongst an overwhelmingly white population, she introduces a much more positive metaphor for feeling her race. While the "thousand white persons" are indistinguishable, flowing together en masse, Hurston is distinct and individual as a "dark rock." Further, that identity is one of solidity, and her racial identity helps her endure as herself in a foreign environment. Even "covered by the waters," Hurston issues the most basic and powerful assertion of being: "I am."

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

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker), The White Friend

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

While at the jazz club with her white friend, Hurston describes an animalistic trance in which she communes with the jungle and a warlike past, shaking a spear and beating a war drum. When she returns to herself, she finds that her companion has had nothing resembling the same experience. She echoes his reply, “good music,” in a way that seems contemptuous.

Her friend experiences the song as only something to be dimly entertained by, but for Hurston, it approaches what it means to live. Civilization, and the accompanying focus on rationality, stresses control of the emotions, but Hurston’s transporting experience shows how lifeless “civilization” can be in practice. The view “across the ocean and the continent” refers to the distance between Africa and the United States, and reflects her separation from her white friend. But Hurston gladly claims Africa for herself as a site of art, struggle, and joy. It is the other continent that seems cold and pitiable in comparison.

●● Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag.

**Related Characters:** Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

Hurston’s differently colored bags close the essay with a powerful symbol of an individual’s worth, which is deeper than outward appearance. “In your hand is the brown bag,” she writes, but the sheer number of contents overwhelms the importance of the bag’s color—a flat and singular detail representative of race, which has received so much attention throughout the history of the United States and the wider world. In Hurston’s language, even the “worthless” contents of the bag—that is, the inner world of human beings—are so specifically and lovingly detailed that the reader forgets even what color bag is being discussed. That last detail is a footnote, as, Hurston seems to say, it should be. The emotional weight of “old shoes saved for a road that never was” is profound, and though they’re no “first-water diamond,” they speak to the soul and worth of an individual just as well or better. Crucially, these objects could be found in any bag regardless of color, a reminder of shared humanity.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## HOW IT FEELS TO BE COLORED ME

Zora Neale Hurston states that she is “colored” and does so without any apology or “extenuating circumstances.” She won’t claim any distant Native-American ancestry to complicate her race, as other African-Americans might.

Hurston claims she remembers the first day she “became colored,” which occurred when she was thirteen.

Hurston describes her childhood growing up in Eatonville, Florida, a successful all-black community. The only time she saw white people was when they were traveling through their town on their way to or from Orlando. The people of the town were indifferent to southern whites on their horses, but northern whites who drove through in cars were a spectacle, and many ventured out to the porch to gawk at them.

Although some shied away from watching the tourists, Hurston loved to watch them and didn’t mind that the tourists noticed. She would speak and wave to them, sometimes walking alongside them as they passed through. She even jokes that the Chamber of Commerce should have taken notice of her efforts. But if her family noticed her welcoming the white travelers, she would have to stop.

*At the time Hurston was writing, African-Americans faced widespread racial discrimination from both individuals and educational, financial, and political institutions. Hurston describes a tendency for African-Americans to minimize or exoticize their racial identities to escape such discrimination or force others to treat them as individuals. The fact that claiming different ancestry is common and sometimes effective illustrates how vague and malleable racial identity can be. Nevertheless, Hurston chooses to run towards rather than away from her African-American identity.*



*Popular thought holds that race is an essential or biological characteristic of an individual. By stating that she “became colored,” Hurston argues that race can be more a matter of social reinforcement and changing perspective. In short, she was not colored until people made her feel that way.*



*Hurston introduces class and geography as crucial factors in her childhood understanding of race. This illustrates that the concept of race isn’t completely stable, as it’s affected by other factors of identity. Whether white people own horses or cars marks them as lower or upper class respectively. Southern whites, being closer socioeconomically to the black residents of Eatonville, can be freely be ignored, but northern whites, whose whiteness is amplified by wealth and geographic distance, are truly foreign and merit observation.*



*Hurston distinguishes between Eatonville residents confident enough to observe the white tourists and those who aren’t. The fact that the northern whites are tourists gives them the power to observe their surroundings, but young Zora reverses this power dynamic by acting like the tourists are there for her entertainment.*



When she was a child, Hurston believed the only difference between white and black people was that white people would pass through town but never stay. Even so, she would perform for the white tourists, singing and dancing, which they would sometimes reward with a dime. This surprised her because performing was something she would do anyway. The black locals would never pay her for a song, but she knew they cared about her nonetheless.

After Hurston turns thirteen, her family moves to Jacksonville, Florida, where the makeup of the community is very different. Here, she says, she stopped being “Zora” and turned into a “little colored girl.” Along with this recognition of her race comes a new sense of scrutiny and control from the community.

Hurston rejects the notion of being “tragically colored,” which she explains as nurturing a sense of grievance or victimhood for historical wrongs. She contrasts herself with other African-Americans, who she says feel victimized by their oppression. Instead, she claims the powerful work their will regardless of race, and she can’t be bothered to ruminate over the sins of the past when she’s so busy getting the most out of life.

Instead of a backward-looking worldview that focuses on past wrongs, Hurston looks to the future and the possibility of greater freedom and achievement. Hurston specifically complains about the tendency to overemphasize the legacy of slavery, which she dismisses by placing it “sixty years in the past.” She describes the centuries of slavery as a sacrifice so that African-Americans could gain freedom and opportunity, “the price paid for civilization.”

*As a child Hurston is protected from the worst indignities of racism, as she lives in an all-black town. But through her performance for the white tourists, she starts to detect a difference in the white visitors, namely that they have money and will pay for art and entertainment. This begins to stoke her awareness that art can be financially as well as personally rewarding. In contrast, the black residents of Eatonville won't pay her to sing, but they treat her with true affection—marking the difference between a community and an audience.*



*Hurston's move to Jacksonville inaugurates her “colored” life, as this presumably larger and whiter city recognizes and enforces racial distinctions that Eatonville doesn't. Crucially, she feels that she loses her identity as “Zora” and her former charmed childhood. Instead, she's stamped as one example of a larger category, which comes with a loss of the privileges she had in Eatonville. By postponing a racial awareness until a move in her thirteenth year, Hurston seems to say that race is a function of place and society.*



*Hurston again separates herself from a prevalent current of African-American thought. In place of a history of African-American oppression that pivots on race, she substitutes one that focuses on power. She doesn't dismiss the horror of slavery or the prevalence of racism, but still wants to think that the world is open to her, and that an African-American woman of supreme talents can still succeed. Her ambition clashes with what she calls the “sobbing school” of African-American thought, which leads her to a view of history that (intentionally or not) downplays the severity of racism and the legacy of slavery.*



*Elaborating on her view of history, Hurston suggests that people who emphasize the continuing impact of slavery may be hindering her by putting obstacles in her path. Her own history of race describes it as a steady evolution towards black freedom and empowerment. She acknowledges that this happened only through tremendous sacrifice. This transactional view of history diverges sharply from the views of many black thinkers, then and now, demonstrating a diversity of thought for African-American historians and anthropologists as well as a characteristic optimism and self-confidence.*



Hurston describes her experience now as an adventure and a grand opportunity for glory. As an African-American, she's viewed by whites as a representative of her race, which raises the stakes for her conduct and achievement. The scrutiny of white America creates a "national" stage on which Hurston can hold her performance.

*Here, the theme of performance is directly invoked as a way to understand race relations in the American 1920s. Whereas white people get the privilege of being treated as individuals whose conduct doesn't bear on their larger racial group, a single African-American's behavior will necessarily stand in for that of all African-Americans in the eyes of white America. Although this is generally understood as harmful discrimination, Hurston considers the attention positive and the wild swings of fortune exciting. Given her fruitful experience with a white audience as a child in Eatonville, she feels ready for the challenge.*



On the other hand, her "white neighbor," and white America as a whole, must bear the historical guilt of slavery. "Brown specters" and "dark ghosts" trouble the white neighbor as he tries to go about his life. His future task is to try to keep as much as he can of what he already has. Hurston's task is to win it for herself.

*Hurston makes a provocative point: the trajectory of African-American progress is just as important as its current position. Here, as elsewhere, she approaches black racial progress as a gladiator, hoping to win glory and spoils for herself. She's also unorthodox in evaluating the psychological and material condition of different social groups. Although white America holds most of the wealth and power, its "soul" is haunted by slavery, which will harm its future progress.*



That said, Hurston notes that she doesn't always feel "colored." She feels it most in white places like Barnard College in Manhattan, where she studies. There, she feels like a dark rock which the white sea breaks upon, but as the waves recede the rock still stands.

*Hurston echoes the idea that "coloredness" is a relative condition—that it's produced in majority-white environments where others, either explicitly or implicitly, enforce differences between white and black people. She also gives an indication of why she doesn't feel "tragically colored." Before, she felt as if her new identity "little colored girl" erased her identity as Zora. Now, her status as a black woman reinforces her identity, and she uses an image of solidity and perseverance to emphasize that. It's a way she can keep a sense of self in a foreign community.*



To illustrate this, Hurston tells a story about taking a white friend to a black jazz club. As the band plays, she experiences a sort of trance where she returns to a more primitive time, seeing a jungle and finding herself in tribal paint shaking a spear. She wants to "slaughter" something, to kill and give pain. Then the song ends, and she returns to "civilization."

*In the form of this anecdote, Hurston grapples with the persistent and vile stereotype that African-Americans are somehow more primitive and less civilized than other ethnicities. She recalls a tribal, warlike past, but she does so in writing that's poetic and thrilling. As a result, the less "civilized" life feels more vital than a modern one. By embracing the insult, Hurston removes some of its sting. This also implies a closer relationship to art, which Hurston views as one of the talents that allows her passage and privilege in white environments.*



While Hurston was in a trance, her friend had been smoking calmly. He seems untouched by the music, giving a bland compliment. Hurston sees him as if “across a continent” and describes him as “pale with his whiteness” in a way that lacks passion and vitality.

*While turning a racist trope into an asset, Hurston also inverts the supposed benefits of civilization that white people of her time were quick to claim. She places herself “across a continent” from her companion, the difference between Africa and Europe or America. But the composure and stoicism that are hallmarks of civilization look very different in the light of the jazz club. Civilization only gets in the way of a primal and direct experience with art. Here, “white” could be synonymous with cold and lifeless rather than the positive qualities that white America claimed for itself.*



At other times, Hurston feels like she has no race. She feels like the expression of an eternal femininity or just one fragment of a “Great Soul.” When she walks the streets, she feels “snooty” and “aristocratic.” Of course, she experiences racism, but she only pities the racist for depriving themselves of her company.

*Hurston isn't limited by her black identity, as she also embraces her female identity, or, at times, simply disavows identity altogether to be a piece of the “Great Soul.” Her efforts to pick up or put down identities at will benefits from a sort of performance. She describes walking down the street in Manhattan as an American aristocrat. Even when she mentions experiencing discrimination, she's haughty rather than hurt. This mock-arrogance too is performative, another identity that helps Hurston circumvent the racism of her time.*



Hurston describes herself as a brown **bag** among white, yellow, and red bags. Each bag has a jumble of contents both marvelous and ordinary, such as a “first-water diamond” or a “dried flower or two still a little fragrant.”

*The differently colored bags are Hurston's central metaphor for her mature understanding of race. The colors of the bag correspond to skin color and external appearance, and the varied contents represent thoughts, memories, emotions, and experiences particular to each individual. The contents Hurston describes are both beautiful and mundane, but they all surpass the exterior of the bags in specificity of detail. Hurston seems to say that this internal content is much more important and also much more interesting than a flat, one-word description of skin color.*



Although each **bag** has its own assortment of objects, they're often similar to the objects in differently colored bags. Hurston supposes that all the bags could be emptied and replaced at random without altering the contents of each to fit the bag. She even speculates that the “Great Stuffer of Bags,” might have originally filled the bags randomly.

*By stating that the objects in different-colored bags are similar, Hurston suggests that there's nothing about skin color that mandates certain thoughts, emotions, or talents. Non-white people can acquire the same experiences and abilities if allowed the personal freedom to do so. Hurston's final idea that the “Great Stuffer of Bags,” or god, distributed these qualities randomly regardless of race approaches satire because she phrases it as if it's an inflammatory suggestion. It's a completely reasonable idea that nevertheless would be controversial in Hurston's time.*





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