

# Zora Neale Hurston: Fighting Jim Crow through the All-Black Community

By Virginia Brackett, Ph.D

## Overview

Denied their rights in white-run society, African Americans created their own institutions -- churches, schools, businesses and clubs--to create for themselves the things that white society tried to deny them: education, work and hope for the future.

This lesson is best used with *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow, Program Two: Was There Ever a Time So Dark? (1898-1917)* due to Hurston's all-black settings in many of her works. Her short stories, "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," both exemplify the statement that "African Americans created their own institutions ... to create for themselves the things white society tried to deny them." Teachers may introduce Hurston's biography with the above quotation. Because she did believe in segregation, claiming that blacks did not need whites to gain education or to succeed, she offers an excellent contrast to writers such as Ralph Ellison and others who used their fiction to make overt political statements against the separate but equal philosophy. This lesson designed for middle and high school students offers a variety of paths for students to demonstrate their new-found knowledge on Hurston and the times in which she lived.

## Curriculum Standards

Students will:

- Gain an understanding for a specific culture through reading fiction
- Apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts
- Draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features
- Conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems
- Apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions in an accepted essay format

## Time Required

Preparation time will include reading one or both stories by Hurston (these can be assigned as homework), and a review of laws/customs required by Jim Crow at <http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>

Debate Forum: If the reading material is used as the basis for a debate, the debate will require one hour of class time for preparation and one hour of class time for the debate itself.

Essay Assignment: If the reading material is used as the basis for an essay, the essay may be written outside of class. One hour of class time will be used for discussion of the essays.

Creative Activity: The creative activity should be planned during an hour of class time. An additional hour of class time may be used for presentation of the activities.

## Materials Needed

- Biography of **Zora Neale Hurston**
- "Sweat" by Zora Neale Hurston  
[<http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlpart/alra/hurston.htm#Sweat>]
- "Gilded Six-Bits"  
[<http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlpart/alra/hurston.htm#Gilded%20Six-Bits>"]

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

1. Quick-Write assignment: Many African-American fiction writers during the Jim Crow era created stories that showed the racism that whites exercised against blacks. Zora Neale Hurston, however, created fiction that centered on all-black communities. Rarely were white characters even included. How could her approach also serve to fight the attitudes of the Jim Crow era?
2. Web Site visit: Have students view the caricatures of blacks on-line at the Ferris Museum: <http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>
3. Discuss how black fiction writers might counteract such stereotypes

Point out this is what happened in South after the Civil War. African Americans were granted freedoms which were gradually reduced and eventually eliminated. This was done in both legal and illegal ways.

### Procedures

1. Read the biography of Zora Neale Hurston.
2. Review with students the **Jim Crow laws**.
3. Discuss Hurston's biography with students, emphasizing her childhood in an all-black community in Florida and her later interest as an anthropologist in cultures and their stories. Ask the following questions, and ask older students to write down their answers:
  - A. How might Hurston's upbringing in such a community have affected her?
  - B. What would be some of the positive aspects of being a black child raised in a segregated community during Jim Crow?
  - C. What would be some of the negative aspects of being a black child raised in a segregated community during Jim Crow?
  - D. Why would some of Hurston's fellow writers and readers be upset that she featured all-black communities?
4. Assign one or both stories by Hurston for student reading outside of class.
5. Discuss the stories read to determine a basic understanding by students. Focus on:
  - A. Characterization: Who are the main characters? Who are the minor characters? What conflicts exist in the story? What are the minor characters' attitudes toward the major characters?
  - B. Setting: Describe the place where the story occurs. In "Sweat," be sure students understand that the main character did laundry for whites.
  - C. Symbols: Discuss biblical references and references to new life.
  - D. Plot: Discuss the events in the stories. Identify the climax.
  - E. Theme: Discuss what the characters learned, and which characters changed.

6. Once the main discussion is finished, select one or more of the following ideas for an extension/culminating activity.

### **Debate Activity**

Charge: Zora Neale Hurston is a traitor to her race.

Reasons: She does not include material about racism in her stories, so they do not help readers better understand racism. Whites won't even read her stories, because the all-black characters will not interest them.

Assignment: Class divides into two groups. One group defends Hurston against the charge, while the other attempts to prove the charge legitimate. The teacher may say which side "won," explaining why, or she may leave the debate as a draw, emphasizing the balanced points presented. Then discuss the fact that in present day, Hurston is viewed as a marvel, simply for the amount of writing and publishing that she did and for her depiction of strong moral black characters.

### **Essay Writing Activity**

Sample Assignment: Write a five-paragraph essay in which you try to convince the reader that Hurston's method during Jim Crow was a good one. In the first paragraph, remember to state your main point clearly. You might write, "Zora Neale Hurston's use of an all-black community in her stories was an excellent way to fight Jim Crow ideas." In the three paragraphs that follow, support your idea by using examples from Hurston's stories. In your concluding paragraph, remember to summarize your main points. Bring your essay to class and be prepared to share your thesis statement and the examples that you used to support that idea.

### **Creative Activity**

One student will pretend to be a white person visiting an all-black town during the Jim Crow era. The other students in the group will portray the members of the town. Remind students that in an all-black community, Jim Crow laws would not have been followed. Students should construct a skit in which the visitor reacts to certain activities witnessed in the all-black community. Portray the visitor as having changed his/her opinion in some way when the visit concludes. Call for discussion on the part of the class at the end of each skit to check for understanding. Using some of the students' specific actions, ask the "audience" what their thoughts are about those actions. Ask the audience to imagine a not-so-happy interaction.

### **Assessment**

Participation points may be awarded in the debate and for the creative activity. Essays may be evaluated for a point grade, based on criteria given to the students.

This lesson was submitted by Virginia Brackett, Ph.D., a professor at Triton College.