“A Unity of Opposites”

Learning Targets

- Evaluate a primary document as a source of insight into an author’s values and beliefs.
- Analyze how an author’s personal experiences inform writing.

Before Reading

1. Based on the following quote by Alice Walker, what can you infer about Zora Neale Hurston’s personality?
   “Hurston became an orphan at nine, a runaway at fourteen, maid and manicurist before she was twenty, and with one dress and a dream—managed to become Zora Neale Hurston, author and anthropologist.” —Alice Walker

During Reading

2. As you read “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” an essay written by Zora Neale Hurston in 1928, keep the following two questions in mind:
   - What aspects of the Harlem Renaissance affected the arts and beliefs of the time?
   - How did the creators—the artists and the politicians— influence the events of the time period?

3. Identify Hurston’s beliefs about herself and her world to understand how the historical context influenced her beliefs. What does Hurston say about the philosophy, arts, and daily life of the Harlem Renaissance?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) was a novelist, essayist, anthropologist, and a vibrant part of the Harlem Renaissance. She grew up in the small town of Eatonville, Florida—the first incorporated black township. Hurston’s idyllic childhood was interrupted by the death of her mother when Hurston was only 13. She struggled to finish high school, which she still had not accomplished by age 26. Despite her early struggles, Hurston went on to graduate from Barnard College in 1928. Their Eyes Were Watching God is considered her master work. “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” originally published in the May 1928 edition of The World Tomorrow, was a contentious essay that obviously did not fit with the ideologies of racial segregation, nor did it completely mesh with the flowering of black pride associated with the Harlem Renaissance.
“A Unity of Opposites”

Essay

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

by Zora Neale Hurston

1 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.

2 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. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses; the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

3 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. I usually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: “Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin’?” Usually the automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably “go a piece of the way” with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course, negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first “welcome-to-our-state” Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

4 During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. 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. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora.

5 But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

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KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
What is the tone of the first sentence of the essay? How does Hurston connect this sentence to the first sentence in Paragraph 2?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
In Paragraph 4, Hurston describes a practice by white people that is often viewed as demeaning and cruel. However, she says that she “needed bribing to stop.” What connections can you make to Alain Locke’s essay that you read in Activity 5.3? Why do the colored people give “no dimes”?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
How does Paragraph 5 serve as the end of the essay’s introduction and a transitional device?

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1 extenuating (v.): lessening or seeming to lessen the seriousness of by giving excuses
2 first-nighter (n.): a person who attends the opening performance of a play, opera, or similar production
3 oleanders (n.): evergreen shrubs with fragrant flowers of white, pink, or red
But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. 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 hurt 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.

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said, “On the line!” The Reconstruction said, “Get set!” and the generation before said, “Go!” I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. 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.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

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.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head. I hurl it true to the mark yeeccoooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something— give pain, give death to what, I do not know.

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4 pigmentation (n.): coloration due to the presence of pigments in the tissue
5 oyster knife: a reference to the saying “The world is my oyster.”
6 Hegira: Mohammed’s flight from Mecca to Medina in AD 622; hence, any trip or journey, especially one made to escape a dangerous or undesirable situation
7 Barnard: the college in New York City from which Hurston graduated in 1928
8 assegai (n.): a slender spear or javelin with an iron tip, used in southern Africa
12 But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. 
I creep back slowly to the veneer9 we call civilization with the last tone and find the 
white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

13 “Good music they have here,” he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

14 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 dimly across the ocean and 
the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then 
I am so colored.

15 At certain times I have no race. I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and 
saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the 
Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy 
Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees 
knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora 
emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

16 I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am 
merely a fragment of the great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right 
or wrong.

17 Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely 
astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's 
beyond me.

18 But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. 
Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the 
contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. 
A first-water10 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 a brown bag. On 
the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could 
they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without 
altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. 
Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—
who knows?

Secondary Source Reading

In his essay “Zora Neale Hurston: ‘A Negro Way of Speaking,’” Henry Louis Gates, 
Jr. says of Hurston:

“Virtually ignored after the early fifties, even by the Black Arts movement in 
the sixties, an otherwise noisy and intense spell of black image- and 
myth-making that rescued so many black writers from remaindered oblivion, 
Hurston embodied a more or less harmonious but nevertheless problematic 
unity of opposites. It is this complexity that refuses to lend itself to the glib 
categories of ‘radical’ or ‘conservative,’ ‘black’ or ‘Negro,’ ‘revolutionary’ 
or ‘Uncle Tom’—categories of little use in literary criticism. It is this same 
complexity, embodied in her fiction, that, until Alice Walker published her 
important essay (“In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”) in Ms. magazine in 1975, 
had made Hurston’s place in black literary history an ambiguous one at best.”

9 veneer (n.): a thick surface layer of fine wood or costly material laid over a base of common material; any attractive but superficial appearance
10 first-water (n.): of the best quality and purest luster
After Reading

4. Review your notes about the ideas and values of Harlem Renaissance. Then review your responses to the Key Ideas and Details associated with Hurston’s essay. Use this two-column note organizer to consider Hurston’s philosophy and to identify why Gates described Hurston as a “unity of opposites.” Enter inferences that you make from her text and cite textual evidence that supports your inferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What philosophies and beliefs did Hurston share with the Harlem Renaissance?</th>
<th>In what ways did Hurston follow her own path?</th>
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Check Your Understanding

Now that you have completed the two-column notes, write a brief explanation of the value of “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” as a primary source. Think about the knowledge and understanding that readers can gain from the study of a primary source.