

Integration and Action Paper

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In the readings, lectures and discussions regarding culturally responsive teaching, the main ideas have surfaced in the form of principles/guidelines that would be helpful for all teachers to know, understand and explore. Teachers want to make the best decisions for the students in their classrooms and this includes what materials those students have the opportunity to read. Literature choices have the potential to answer or ignore many of the principles mentioned in this course. It is important, therefore, that when we have an opportunity to make changes, we make them with these ideas in mind. The introduction of a new novel to the curriculum is a difficult task, and the argument for its inclusion should include such ideas as cultural viewpoint/transformational knowledge, cultural traditions, and gender balance amongst authors. If a high school English curriculum is dominated by renowned male authors, many of whom are white, it is important that female authors and authors of color be considered as enriching additions. A curriculum that included author's who were not male and not white it would provide students with a broader perspective on the richness of life. One such author who would be a strong representative of the principles of cultural tradition, dialect and transformational knowledge is Zora Neale Hurston, a fellow writer of Langston Hughes during the Harlem Renaissance. Her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers students a solid example of personal and cultural independence, feminine identity, and African American folklore tradition.

When students read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, they will have the opportunity to create transformational knowledge about the African American experience during the late 1800's and early 1900's, the era of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow Laws (1876-1965), in America. This will be an alternative perspective from the necessarily brief "coverage" in their social studies classes. Transformational knowledge, according to James Banks, "consists of concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon" (J.A. Banks, 1996, p.16). Zora Neale Hurston achieves this through the expectations others have for the main character, the character's struggle to find personal identity and the different settings in which the story takes place. For example, when Janie marries her first husband, they live in a sharecropping situation and she is socially and economically constrained. Then she attempts to marry up, only to find herself constrained by the expectations of her husband while she is living in an affluent all-black town. Her final adventures with Tea Cake represent her assuming the adventurous spirit that will bring her

personal freedom and allow her to see the world through her own eyes; a result that Schlesinger would argue moves students from thinking about the creation of “*unum*”. He argued that “while we heterogeneous Americans may staunchly adhere to our respective traditions and creeds, let us not forget that we are members one of another, Americans first and Americans last, tied together”, but in actuality Hurston’s writing creates a stronger individual who is capable of contributions to the common good (Schlesinger, 1998, p.25). Besides, in her final lecture, Dr. Mvududu points out, in reference to the Banks articles, that the unity that Schlesinger argues has been the glue of our nation was a forced unity for culture groups like the African Americans (Mvududu, slide 6). Hurston offers a character who is an individual first and a member of the community second. To highlight the illusion of imposed unity, Hurston begins by creating a setting to guide the reader through a post Civil War world that is seen through the lens of the African Americans that experienced it. There is a certain amount of romanticism involved, but if the students are taught to recognize that and see past it, they can pick through the information to find knowledge that transforms their idea of Post Civil War America and the limitations imposed on African Americans and women. These limitations add credence to Mvududu’s position that true unity was an illusion in the eyes of people of color.

Zora Neale Hurston is not the only author of color who has something to offer to American high school students, but the audience present in the student body of the school should dictate the choice. In the case of the African American experience in America, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would be a strong supplement to novels with decidedly white points of view regarding the African American perspective such as *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Both of these wonderful novels have African American characters that are recognized for their suffering, but their experiences are characterized by their suffering in the eyes and point of view of the white main characters. They are presented as being symbols of injustice. In order to understand the positionality of Hurston’s writing and how it was unique within the Harlem Renaissance movement, students would need to be made aware of the goals of the Harlem Renaissance and the different views of its participants, writers like W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes. Without this perspective, the students will not be able to transfer their learning to new situations. Students should recognize that Zora Neale Hurston’s novel is transformative because it allows readers to recognize that the injustice visited upon African

Americans is not the totality of their experience and her characters are not merely symbols of oppression. Her approach was much different from that of writers like Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and W.E.B. DuBois. She worked against the notion that black identity could be won only through the presentation of black suffering, a view present in Hughes' texts. She also avoids the "borderland stance" assumed by other writers like W.E.B. DuBois, what Cherry Banks says "DuBois termed double consciousness. DuBois (1903/1969) wrote, 'One ever feels his twoness, an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body'" (J.A. Banks, 1996, p.55). This idea was echoed in Langston Hughes writing, and is evident in his poem, for which the publication date is not known, "Cross":

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm going to die,
Being neither white nor black?

Zora Neale Hurston's voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be solidly characterized as African American and can be considered transformative because it is less focused on the suffering, like the poem by Langston Hughes, than on the totality of the African American experience. The main character, Janie, "saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (Hurston, 2006, p.8). Hurston's novel describes a character with many different layers, some which include suffering but joy is there as well. The setting of this novel takes place in a time that was pivotal not only for the experience of African Americans specifically; it was also the

beginning of a turning point for American women in general. Reading a book with such a setting and such a strong female character will open up students' eyes and help students realize that women, no matter what culture they identify with in the United States, have not always had the freedom that they do now. In fact, women struggled not only in the world of work but socially as well. It is also beneficial for students to read about African American women like the character Janie and real life heroes like Mary McLeod Bethune who were able to rise above the expectations and limitations of others (J.A. Banks, 1996, pp.251-277). This would be a point of connection for students who are white as well as students of color. The message that an individual has the ability to rise above their circumstances, though the road may be long and difficult, could be very powerful.

Zora Neale Hurston may focus her call for female independence on the women of African American culture; but, like Mary McLeod Bethune, her ideas about female identity can also cross cultural barriers (J.A. Banks, 1996, pp. 251-277). This is a strong argument for including Hurston's writing in English literature curriculum. Hurston establishes the "insider" identity and voice of the main character first as woman and then as an African American. In the novel, Janie is an "other" as a woman because she has not followed the dictates set out for women in her culture, though white culture is not mentioned it is also a reflection of the culture in power. The tale of her journey begins with her return. She comes walking into town and her female neighbors "had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had 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" (Hurston, 2006, p. 1). Janie's appearance is an affront to their way of life. She walks tall, proud and with dignity that comes from her own sense of self worth. She refuses to bow to their sense of propriety and walks past them, stopping only briefly in greeting, to her own house. While Janie may be an "other" amongst her female friends, she is an insider voice for female independence and identity. Janie's, three husbands represent the different phases of Janie's developing feminine identity, her transformation from dependence to independence and a celebration of individual experience. Her final emotions about her experiences involve a celebration of life in all its complexities, "here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and

draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (Hurstun, 2006, p.193). Hurstun values the life experience and doesn’t want to diminish it by only focusing on suffering. While the African American experience, in her mind, is unique, she calls to all people to appreciate the fullness of life and what it has to offer, including celebrating cultural heritage.

Zora Neale Hurstun grew up in Eatonville, Florida, a town where her own cultural heritage was celebrated and had power (Boyd, 2007). She saw evidence of successful African Americans all around her and this is portrayed in her main character’s living situation with her second husband. Janie lives, at this point in the novel, in an all black community very similar to the one in which Hurstun grew up. As a result, Hurstun is able to share with her readers aspects of her culture that she would like to see celebrated. In her writing, she captures both the dialect and the folklore that she grew up with. Hurstun weaves speech patterns into her writing that might be difficult at first for those who are unfamiliar with it, but are important to the telling of Janie’s story. Janie is sitting on her porch with her best friend Phoebe, telling her the story of her life. It is a long story, but an important one for her to impart. She says to her friend, “Ah know exactly what Ah got to tell yuh, but it’s hard to know where to start at” (Hurstun, 2006, p. 8). Hurstun’s use of a cultural dialect is the perfect opportunity to talk with students about *voice* and *diction* as effective literary tools. Many students are likely to stumble over the wording because it is unfamiliar and goes against many of the formal writing conventions that they have been taught. But, the story told by an honest voice of the culture adds further transformative power to her novel.

Hurstun’s use of dialect woven into modern prose is her way of sharing the oral storytelling style of folklore that she grew up hearing (Boyd, 2007). Her descriptions of the pear tree, for example, combined with her grandmother’s sudden desire for her to marry are prime examples of the mystical and fantastic folklore tradition blended into a “modern” telling of a young girl’s coming of age. Janie “was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. . .Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world!” (Hurstun, 2006, p. 11) Janie’s transition from a girl

to a young woman is marked by a personal revelation and then fortified by her grandmother's announcement, "Janie, youse got yo' womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin' up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away" (Hurstons, 2006, p.11). Her grandmother has good intentions; she wants Janie to be taken care of. The mystical aspect, like the description of the pear tree, as well as the use of dialect is a common element of the African American folklore tradition. This cultural literary tradition would be enriching for students and would also be a point of connection for any African American students in class. It would also provide the teacher with an opportunity to familiarize the students with that oral tradition. A wonderful resource that would provide some examples of the tradition that Hurston was pulling from would be a collection of stories written by Charles W. Chesnutt(1858-1932), one of the first literary figures whose unsentimental plantation stories that incorporated the mystical aspects of the African American folk legend tradition were the first to be accepted by the general public(Chesnutt, 1969, p. v). His *Conjure Woman* collection, first published in 1899, prepared the foundation for future African American writers like Zora Neale Hurston. The process of showing students how a literary movement emerged for a specific group in America would be an opportune time for encouraging students to discuss and share story traditions in their own families and cultures.

Zora Neale Hurston was a vibrant voice of the Harlem Renaissance and she enthusiastically contributed the Black Arts movement. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has since become a classic and would be a valuable and enriching addition to a high school English curriculum. It would provide a new voice and perspective through which students could hear and learn about the African American experience during a specific time in U.S. history. Providing students with diverse perspectives of meta-narratives in history is an important aspect of the principles of culturally responsive teaching. The setting of the novel would help transform student knowledge about the African American experience in Reconstruction America. The main character Janie would also be a strong female voice amongst predominantly white male authors and it would be a celebration of unique dialect and culture, which is important because it would make the curriculum more representative of the community in which students live. Adding Hurston's voice would be a connection point for female students, both white and of color and many of the messages would be universal to all students. It would help students practice

identifying points of view, voice, and influences of tradition so that they can recognize them in the future. All of these aspects of the novel respond to the call of culturally responsive teaching. This novel would be a starting point for encouraging students to explore their own personal and cultural identity and how that could be used to make positive contributions to their community.

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