

Zora neale hurstons spunk and the harlem renaissance essay examples

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Zora Neale Hurston, one of the most influential female writers of her time, published a short story called “ Spunk” focused on a rural, all-black town in the south during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. The fact that Zora had the courage and determination to publish such an influential piece of work, far removed from the urban renaissance she would later be credited with revolutionizing, is another testament of this author’s phenomenal literary ability and personal tenacity.

was born in 1891 in a small town in rural Alabama. When Zora was three, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black towns to be incorporated. There, at the age of nine, she was introduced by northern teachers to books - and her life was forever changed. Zora’s mother encouraged Zora’s love of reading and learning, but when her mother died, Zora fell on hard times. Sent away to boarding school, where she was then financially abandoned by her father and stepmother, Zora described the years that follows as “ a jumble of service jobs and intense poverty relieved occasionally by periods of happiness” (Trubek 40).

Eventually, Zora reappeared when she enrolled in Morgan Academy, located in Baltimore, Maryland. After excelling there, Zora moved to Howard Prep and finally received an associate’s degree from Howard University in 1920. This is when Zora began writing, publishing some short stories in magazines and received admission to Barnard College, where she studied with a leading anthropologist, Franz Boas. It was around this time that Zora began her legendary work in the Harlem Renaissance. She cooked for the likes of Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman (among others), often holding parties at her own apartment. Yet, even in the midst of a cultural movement

such as the Harlem Renaissance, Zora did not stay still for very long. Instead, she spent several years conducting field work in anthropology, moving constantly, from New Orleans to the Bahamas, Jamaica and Haiti. In such mysterious places, Zora often undertook study of zombies, voodoo, witch doctors, and other dangerous topics that most people today would never even dream of attempting (Trubek 41).

Yet, although Zora moved on from the Harlem Renaissance, the renaissance did not move on from her. The Harlem Renaissance arrived with “Alain Locke’s groundbreaking anthology *The New Negro*” in 1925, including the writing of several Caribbean immigrants such as Claude McKay and Eric Walrond (Phillipson 145). At the time, Harlem’s Black population was made up of nearly 25 percent immigrants, a great majority of whom came from the Caribbean (Phillipson 146). With such rich influence, the West Indian population of Harlem was instrumental in radical circles, literary societies, and “brought to African American intellectual thought a postcolonial perspective that shaped the ideology of the Harlem Renaissance in fundamental ways” (Phillipson 146).

Part of the West Indian and Caribbean influence of such radical, outspoken, and educated community leaders helped to shape the idea that Blacks being “under the indefinite – and presumably benign – tutelage of the white races” was inherently destructive and unacceptable by the community at large (Phillipson 146). As the historical significance of the Harlem Renaissance grew and flourished, it brought along with some very important opportunities for Blacks: a place to publish writings about life under the constant oppression of imperial rule, allowed continuance and growth of thought and

resistance to American context, and provided inspiration for those in postcolonial struggles (Phillipson 146).

The Harlem Renaissance was bolstered by the writings from three different areas: Britain, France, and America. Yet, despite all of the overwhelming influence from writers of British and French empirical descent, American writers were largely unorganized and lacking a central unifying them. Zora's story "Spunk" was entered into a 1925 contest hosted by Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life, where it took second prize, and published in the June 1925 issue of the magazine (Carpio and Sollors). Interestingly, Zora also wrote three other short stories around the same time - in 1927 - called "Book of Harlem" (subtitle "Chapter I."); "Monkey Junk: A Satire on Modern Divorce"; and "the Back Room" which are primarily unpublished (Carpio and Sollors). Each of these stories show a depiction of New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, which is "important because they provide fuller insight into Hurston's engagement with urban black life that Harlem was of more than just passing interest to the author" (Carpio and Sollors).

In and of itself, "Spunk" is a vibrant depiction of rural life at a time when most African American writers were almost completely focused on the new, urban life of Harlem and its glittering possibilities. The parallels between Zora's hometown of Eatonville and the rural, black Southern town in the story are almost tangible. The older men in the story - Walter and Elijah - are reminiscent of the older black men from Zora's childhood, sitting on the porch and gossiping or causing a ruckus if people didn't do things 'their way'. Joe, the cuckolded husband of Lena (who goes into the bushes with Spunk, another man) responds to the taunts of Walter and Elijah as many of

the Black men in Zora's childhood town would have: with anger, violence, and vengeance. Although this story is completely divergent from the Black urban stories of her contemporary colleagues at the time, it was extremely successful upon publishing. In fact, as " a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was very much part of the modern ambience" yet overtly downplayed any urban life she had in Harlem at the time (Carpio and Sollors).

Despite Zora Neal Hurston being listed among the most influential literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, her story " Spunk" is proof positive that she always remained true to herself. And, in doing so, Zora remained true to her heritage and the people who grew to admire her writing for decades to come.

Works Cited

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