Their Eyes Were Watching God
by Zora Neale Hurston

Harlem Renaissance
- Hurston was a Harlem Renaissance writer.
- The Harlem Renaissance was an African American cultural movement — also known as the New Negro Movement — that centered in Harlem, New York City, and spanned about 1919 to 1940.
- It resulted from a great migration of blacks to the north escaping the oppressive racism of the south.
- Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson were the power behind the movement.

Harlem Renaissance
- The movement sought to use black cultural achievements to prove black equality to whites.
- Most of the art, literature, and music of the movement probed racial themes — black life in America.
- It sought to reclaim black history & culture, foster racial pride, and work toward a social and political equality with whites by proving an intellectual equality through cultural expression.

Literature in the Harlem Renaissance
- No common style or ideology, though some common themes emerged:
  - An interest in the roots of 20th century African American experience in Africa and the American South.
  - A strong sense of racial pride and a desire for social and political equality.
- Black writers disagreed over the purpose of African American literature:
  - Should it express inspirational, positive images of the black community?
  - Should it express “the reality” of the black community?

Major Writers of the Harlem Renaissance
- Langston Hughes
- James Weldon Johnson
- Zora Neale Hurston

Lighting Hughes  James Weldon Johnson Courtesy Cullen

Zora Neale Hurston

Slides should be read across the page, so the top two are slide #1 and #2, the next two are #3 and #4, and so on.
Harlem Renaissance

• Jazz and blues emerged as powerful forms of American music in the 1920s
• Harlem nightclubs attracted white, often wealthy patrons to hear leading black musicians, such as:
  – Duke Ellington
  – Cab Calloway
  – Louis Armstrong

Art in the Harlem Renaissance

• Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, black artists generally reflected a European aesthetic (style) because they were trained by white artists.
• With the rise of the Harlem Renaissance, artists began to portray black subjects, and an African and Caribbean aesthetic.

Archibald J. Motley, *Blues*, 1929

Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*, 1936

William H. Johnson, *Self Portrait*, 1934

Hale Woodruff, *The Amistad Murals*, 1938

*The Revolt*
The Court Scene

Back to Africa

Decline of the Harlem Renaissance
- Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience, but by and large black patrons were not permitted in the clubs featuring black music — overt racism continued.
- Groups like NAACP and Urban League shifted their emphasis to economic and social issues.
- Many influential black writers left NYC.
- Harlem riot of 1935 – 3 died, hundreds wounded, $2 million in damage.
  Symbolized that the optimism and hope that had fueled the Harlem Renaissance was dead.

Impact of the Harlem Renaissance
- Legitimized black art, literature, and music in the minds of white America.
- Public became more open to black literature; some white publishing houses published black authors.
- Black arts & culture gains a standing outside the U.S. as well, as European audiences embrace the works of the Harlem Renaissance.

Zora Neale Hurston
- Born Jan. 7, 1891 in Alabama.
- Moved as a young child to the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida.
- Attended Howard University and graduated from Barnard College in 1928.
- Was a pioneer in the study and documentation of black folklore.
- Studied under well-known anthropologist Franz Boas.
- Traveled throughout the south studying and chronicling such practices as voodoo.

Zora Neale Hurston
- Anthropologist Franz Boas sought to show the complexity of indigenous cultures, in contrast to the then-common impression of peoples beyond the First World as primitive.
  - Hurston’s study with Boas at Barnard became the defining experience of her life. Under his tutelage, Hurston learned that she had grown up in a culture as genuine as that of Native Americans—and decided that she wanted to explore it.
  - She returned to Florida to collect a corpus of rural black folktales that would form the basis of her career. Though Hurston would also hang out in New York with other writers, she spent most of her time doing fieldwork, in the deep South and in the Bahamas, and found true fulfillment in it.
  - Their Eyes Were Watching God uses much of this documentation of “real people” as they lived.
Eatonville, Florida

- The Eatonville of the story was real
- One of the first all-black towns to be formed after the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation
- The first all-black town to be incorporated in 1887
- Hurston grew up here

Lake Okeechobee

- Second largest freshwater lake in the Continental U.S. (Lake Michigan is first)
- Covers 730 square miles
- Shallow, with an average depth of only 9 feet
- Serves as the headwaters of the Florida Everglades, a subtropical wetland that encompasses much of South Florida.

Lake Okeechobee

- In 1928, the "Okeechobee Hurricane" came over the lake, resulting in floods that killed approximately 2,500 people.
- A significant scene in Eyes takes place at this time.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- Published in 1937
- Negative reactions were immediate
  - Criticized because she didn’t take an overt stance on racism and discrimination as most of the other black writers of that era did

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- In an essay titled "Blueprint for Negro Writers," Richard Wright argued that black writers should depict members of their race as the working class and middle class and promote black nationalism.
- Hurston and others rejected this idea and sought to portray blacks exactly as they lived, even if they were poor.
- In particular, Eyes was the first novel to acknowledge and celebrate the lives of black women, which many say also brought criticism from writers like Richard Wright who still held to an old fashioned male-female view that women belong in the home. All of the major critics of the time were men.
- Eyes uses African American English dialect.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- Though she was part of the Harlem Renaissance group of writers, Hurston had long been criticized by many in the group:
  - She rarely portrayed blacks as victims of racism, but rather wrote about their daily lives separate from white America. She wanted to show blacks laughing, celebrating, loving, and struggling.
  - She had a number of white wealthy patrons who supported her so she could write, which brought criticism, though others were supported by these patrons as well (Langston Hughes among them).
  - She remained a Republican while more and more blacks were turning to the Democratic party.
  - She subscribed to Booker T. Washington’s “self-help” politics; was essentially libertarian.
Their Eyes Were Watching God

“I saw that what was being written by Negro authors was all on the same theme—the race problem, and saturated with our sorrows. By the time I graduated from college, I had sensed the futility of the picture, because I did not find that sorrow. We talk about the race problem a great deal, but go on living and laughing and striving like everybody else. So I saw that what was being written and declaimed was a pose. A Negro writer or speaker was supposed to say those things. It has such a definite pattern as to become approximately folklore. So I made up my mind to write about my people as they are, and not to use the traditional lay figures.”
— from “Zora Neale Hurston on Zora Neale Hurston,” 1942

Richard Wright Responds to Eyes

“Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her work the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh... her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race.”

Their Eyes Were Watching God

“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...No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”
— From “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” 1928

Their Eyes Were Watching God

• She was harshly criticized when she rejected the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision (1954), saying it would hurt black schools, black teachers, and black children:

“How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?”

Their Eyes Were Watching God

• She believed blacks had been tricked into believing that anyone who called him or herself a "liberal" was a friend to blacks, but that they really weren’t because they generally didn’t believe blacks could make it on their own — without white help.

• She loudly opposed communism (which was popular in the 1930s/40s) and socialism, and instead embraced self-reliance and individual liberty as the keys to success for the black community, and indeed, all of America.

• These views brought her great criticism in the largely liberal world of the arts.

• And most of all, she didn’t care that she was criticized; she rarely changed her views to please others.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

• After the poor reception of Eyes, and because of her political views, her literary influence faded

• By the time of her death in January 1960 in a “welfare home” she was destitute and unknown, having most recently worked as a hotel maid.

• Buried without a headstone in Florida
Rediscovering Hurston

- Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) and other scholars of African-American fiction revived interest in Hurston’s work in the 1970s.
  - *Eyes* had been out-of-print for almost 30 yrs.

Hurston’s Grave

- In 1973, Alice Walker did research and discovered the location of Hurston’s unmarked grave.
- She published an essay in *Ms.* Magazine in 1975, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” which renewed interest in Hurston.
- Walker left a memorial stone at the grave which reads (in part):
  - A Genius of the South

The Genius of the South

- Even though critics at the time called this a negative, today critics consider her use of dialect important.
- Hurston’s use of African-American folklore traditions is also key to all works, but especially *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Hurston’s anthropological focus records life as she found it.
- Feminist viewpoint is unusual, especially for an African-American author of her time period.

Zora Neale Hurston

- Today, her works are considered equal to any of the other Harlem Renaissance writers and are studied and enjoyed by readers world-wide.
- Other major works:
  - Jonah’s Gourd Vine, 1934
  - *Mules and Men*, 1935
  - *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937
  - Moses, *Man of the Mountain*, 1939
  - Dust Tracks on the Road (autobiography), 1942

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- The story:
  - *Written in only seven weeks while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Haiti, Zora Neale Hurston’s novel chronicles the journey of Janie Mae Crawford from her grandmother’s plantation shack to Logan Killicks’ farm, to all-black Eatonville, to the Everglades — until a tragedy brings her back to Eatonville. From this vantage point, Janie narrates her life story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson, satisfying the “oldest human longing — self-revelation.”*

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- *Eyes* is a “frame story”:
  - The novel begins and ends with Janie telling her “life story” to her friend Pheoby on the porch.
  - The chapters in between are the story she tells.
- *Eyes uses a unique third person narrator*:
  - The novel opens with highly sophisticated prose in a third person omniscient voice.
  - While still using third person narration, the novel moves into using Janie’s voice.