

**How do the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes share similarities and differ in their depictions of African-American Life?**

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### Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are revered for their artistic accomplishments and contributions during the Harlem Renaissance. During the time that these authors wrote, African-Americans were severely mistreated and discriminated against. These artists both helped shed light on the problems and issues that African-Americans faced in society. This essay focuses on the two authors and their depictions of African-American life: How do the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes share similarities and differ in their depictions of African-American Life? It can be argued that Hurston and Hughes have more differences in their depiction of African-American life than similarities.

The scope of the essay is limited to two of Hurston's works, and three of Hughes' works. The essay also includes some secondary materials in order to provide more insight into the Harlem Renaissance and the authors' lives, philosophies, and backgrounds. Limitations of the essay are that it does not expand on the implications of Hughes and Hurston's depictions of African-American life. The essay provides key differences and similarities between the chosen works of both authors. The essay identifies that there are more differences in the authors' depiction of African-American life than similarities. The essay consults novels, poems, short stories, and scholarly articles.

The conclusion of the essay is that the authors are more different in their depictions of African-American life than they are similar. The key similarity present in the authors' works is an overarching depiction of African-American life as a hardship and struggle. The authors differ greatly mainly because Hughes writes in a more racially-charged manner than Hurston, and Hurston work contains many feminist undertones.

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Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are two of the most influential and well-respected authors of the Harlem Renaissance. "The Harlem Renaissance was the name given to the cultural, social and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the middle of the 1930's. During this period Harlem was a cultural center, drawing black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets and scholars." (pbs.org). These authors lived during this era. Naturally, it makes sense that their works contain similar events and themes, as they both wrote about the struggles that African-Americans faced during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some of the recurring themes include racism, sexism, prejudice and unequal treatment. During the early 1900's, racism was prevalent and adversely affected African-Americans in the United States and both Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes' writings offer insightful glimpses into not only the suffering and despair of the time, but also the hope, determination and resiliency of the people. Zora Neale Hurston's depiction of African-American life often includes a woman as the protagonist. Hurston's depiction of African-American life is interesting because many of her characters are females who deal with oppressive forces, such as men or society. Hughes often writes in a more racially and politically charged tone than Hurston. Many of the challenges that his characters face are a result of racism in America, simply put. It can be argued that Hurston and Hughes have more differences in their depiction of African-American life than similarities. Hurston and Hughes use their works to depict African-American life in a realistic and poignant manner. As a result, they are hailed as two of the best and most influential writers from the Harlem Renaissance era.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written by Zora Neale Hurston, and was published in 1937. During this time, African-Americans were subjected to an enormous amount of racism, and segregation was in place. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes place in the South during

the early 1900s. The protagonist of the story is Janie. She lives in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town to incorporate in the United States. She is a beautiful woman who wants to find a loving partner who will treat her as an equal. This mentality confuses some around her, because the gender norms that are in place contradict her beliefs. Janie gets married three times and all of her marriages are flawed and problematic in some ways. Janie marries her first husband, Logan, because her grandmother arranges it. Her grandmother wants her to be with a man who is financially secure, and against Janie's wishes, she marries him. Janie resents her marriage to him because he is unattractive, he expects her to be a submissive wife, and he shows little respect for her. Janie leaves Logan for Jody, and she travels to Eatonville. Jody is attractive, a successful politician and business-owner, but he does not treat Janie as an equal. He treats her like a trophy, expects her to be submissive. These factors cause Janie to regret her marriage to him. After Jody dies, Janie meets Tea Cake. She eventually marries him, and considers him the only man that she ever loves. Her relationship with Tea Cake mirrors what she hopes for in a relationship. He treats her as an equal, he is attractive, and they form a close bond. Despite this, he physically abuses her and steals from her. She has to kill Tea Cake during a time when her life is in jeopardy, and this moment is pivotal. It shows that Janie is self-aware, and is not dependent on any person. She is not afraid or ashamed to put herself above anyone, not even her husband. Hurston's depiction of African-American life in this novel is interesting, and has a large focus on an African-American woman's life. During the early 1900s, women were largely viewed as inferior to men. This is illustrated throughout the novel, as Janie is mistreated by her husbands and other men in the novel. An important quote that exemplifies that black women were often at the bottom of the class system can be shown through Nanny's lines:

"So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule ud de world so fur as Ah can see." (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 2.44)

Black people were treated extremely poorly during the time period that the novel takes place, but black women were often treated with less respect than men. Also, it was acceptable for black men to tell their wives or other women what to do, and black women were expected to be submissive and follow their demands. This is because misogynistic and sexist attitudes were quite prevalent during this time. These attitudes were not questioned by a majority of people, so these attitudes were not really questioned or highly criticized. By analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, many conclusions about African-American life can be drawn. One conclusion is that black people, as a whole, face great disadvantages throughout society. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that black women's lives are often made harder by black men. Hurston's novel definitely hones in on race relations in America, especially in the South, as the characters live in Florida. It is evident that race plays a huge role in American life, and that blacks have different lives than whites. This idea that black people are at the bottom of the class structure, with black women being subordinate to black men is also present in other Hurston works.

Hurston's "Sweat" explores African-American life through a black woman's experiences. It can be argued that race plays a bigger role in "Sweat" than in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, race plays significant roles in both works. In the short story, Delia is a washerwoman who works for an affluent white family. She has to deal with an insufferable marriage to Sykes, who verbally and physically abuses her frequently. Delia also has to deal with her husband's infidelity throughout the story, in addition to his abusive habits. Delia's turbulent relationship with her husband can be seen in the following passage, "She seized the iron skillet from the stove

and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did” (Hurston 2). This takes place when Sykes and Delia are arguing, and Sykes seems as if he is going to hit Delia. The quote is important because it demonstrates that Sykes’ abusive nature is a recurring part of his marriage to Delia. Because Delia makes the decision, Sykes does not strike her. This event is a key to a shift in Delia’s attitude. After years of putting up with Sykes’ abuse, Delia starts to realize that she does not need to allow Sykes’ mistreatment, and begins to realize her self-worth. Her reasoning for allowing Sykes’ behavior is explained when she says, “Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing” (Hurston 3). This quote may shed light on a common belief held by many African-Americans who were religious or spiritual. Many people believed that if they could not be treated fairly or properly, those who mistreated them would receive punishment by a higher power. This idea was more than likely common because during this time, African Americans were subjected to mistreatment and were not usually benefactors of justice. As a result, it was believed that justice would be served eventually, in some form - by a higher power. The quote also foreshadows Sykes’ death, after being bitten by a rattlesnake. Sykes’ death is basically relief for Delia, because now she does not have to be abused by him anymore. One of the key differences in Hurston’s and Hughes’ depictions of African-American life is the emphasis on gender. Hurston allows gender to play a crucial role in her works, because she often focuses more attention on the mistreatment of African-American women than blacks as a whole. Langston Hughes seems to write with focuses on both genders, as his stories share a mixture of focuses on men and women. As a result, Hughes’ work seems to focus on the problems of the African-American community as a whole.

Langston Hughes is known for writing racially charged literary works. In his poem, “I Too, Sing America” there is a focus on the struggles that a black man faces in America. The speaker of the poem resents the fact that he is not treated equally by whites, but he has hope that the country will change into a less peaceful place. This poem depicts America as a racist nation, which concurs with Hurston’s portrayal of America. The speaker of the poem has hope that America will change, and become a less racist place. Hurston and Hughes’ depiction of African-American life hold many commonalities. The strongest similarity between the two works is that they display that African-Americans deal with a large amount of racism and prejudices that negatively affects their well-being. *The Ways of White Folks* contains fourteen short stories written by Langston Hughes, with a large focus on African-American plight during the 1900s. One poem with an interesting take on African-American life is “Passing.” The poem is about a very light-skinned man who is able to pass as a white man in Chicago. The narrator does not tell others that his mother is black, so that he can continue to live a privileged life. He has to avoid his family in public, and this brings him some sorrow. “I felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you” (Hughes 1). This quote illustrates the fact that associating with African-Americans could lead to mistreatment and harsh treatment from whites. Hughes depicts African-American life as a hardship in this story. The narrator’s siblings are just as qualified for jobs and intelligent as him, but they have to work menial jobs because of their skin tone. It is also told from a man’s perspective, which is different from the Hurston work discussed above. Having a “passing” man’s point of view in a story is important because it allows readers to read about African-American life in a manner that is not discussed or written about often.

Hughes' short story "Cora Unashamed" is about a black woman in a predominately white small town of Melton. Cora is a servant for the Studevart family, and is not treated well by the majority of the family. The only person in the Studevart family that treats her nicely is Jesse, a high-school student, who Cora has a strong bond with. Cora deals with disrespect from her employers, as well as the loss of her daughter Hurston and Hughes often have their women characters working for white families, because this an accurate reflection of African-American life during the early 1900s. African-American women who did have jobs were often maids for white families. The short story shows Cora as a woman who is comfortable with herself, despite the fact that her white counterparts do not like or respect her. Hughes is able to convey a message of self-pride throughout his characterization of Cora. These messages of self pride are evident in both Hurston's and Hughes' literary works. These messages were important because they were able to resonate with African-Americans during a time when they were often treated as if they did not matter in the United States.

Hughes and Hurston both have distinct writing styles that make their works distinguishable from other writers. Hughes often writes in a more literal manner, while Hurston uses more symbolism in her works. For example, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contains a large amount of symbolism. The moment when the flower is pollinated represents the loving relationship that Janie hopes to achieve with a man, and she finally experiences that relationship with Tea Cake. The rabid dog in the novel represents the violent and indiscriminate manner that hate can affect humans. Hughes' works seem to be more literal in nature, and identifying symbolism is harder to do. However, symbolism can be identified in the poem *Harlem*. Hughes uses strong imagery to convey a sense of defeat amongst many African-Americans. Hughes compares "a dream deferred" to a raisin in the sun, a sore, and rotten meat. This poem invokes a

strong emotional response from readers because of its imagery. Overall, the poem is about the struggles and hardships that African-Americans face while living in the United States. The recurring themes of hardships are present in both of the authors' works. This is because it is an accurate reflection of African-American life during the early twentieth century. This style of writing allows the readers to gain a clear understanding of the poems' content, which can help readers connect more to the work.

Hughes' writing also seems to contain more political viewpoints than Hurston's writing. Langston Hughes was known for his affiliation with the Communist party, although he denied ever being a member of the party. A shift in his political views can be examined by reading some of his literary works later in his life, as it contains more radical views. Hughes' frustration with America can clearly be identified by analyzing his poem, *Let America Be America Again*. In the poem, the narrator identifies himself as other races besides black. He calls himself a "poor white," a "red man," and as an "immigrant." Even though Hughes focuses on other people besides African-Americans, it is clear that his sentiments are the same for the different types of people. He is frustrated that all types of Americans rights' are being infringed upon, and that they are not free. The strong language used by Hughes creates a critical tone. This poem illustrates a sense of frustration and distrust of the American government. This stance on politics is different from Hurston's works, because her works generally do not contain political viewpoints. However, in the 1995 article by Susan Meisenhelder "Gender, Race & Class in Zora Neale Hurston's Politics", Ms. Meisenhelder attempts to dispel the political image of Hurston as "a flamboyant naïf or embarrassing conservative." Langston Hughes himself even criticized Ms. Hurston in his autobiography "The Big Sea" when he writes about Zora and the Harlem Renaissance period,

"Of this 'niggerati,' Zora Neale Hurston was certainly the most amusing. Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books--because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the south as a daughter of a travelling minister.....To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie,' in the nice meaning they give the term--that is a naive, childlike, sweetly humorous, and highly colored Negro (Meisenhelder 238-39).

Meisenhelder further illustrates that Hurston's dependence on funding from white patrons often forced her to censor her political views in published works in white periodicals and publishing houses, including her autobiography. However, Meisenhelder's article cites several letters and manuscripts, many published in non-white periodicals which clearly demonstrate that Hurston picked up on relationships between race, class and gender in ways that few acknowledge.

The research question of this essay is: How do the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes share similarities and differ in their depictions of African-American Life? The Harlem Renaissance occurred during the early nineteenth century, and it marked a period during which African-American art finally received proper acclaim and recognition. Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes were two of the most distinguished authors from this period, and it is no coincidence. Their writing is unique, but there are also many commonalities present between their works. The greatest similarity present is in the authors' depiction of African-American life as a hardship and struggle. Although their works depicted African-American life as a struggle, their works also contain messages of hope and perseverance. These messages were important,

especially for the oppressed, because they create a sense of self-pride. Hurston's writing is distinctive from Hughes' because it contains feminist undertones. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Sweat" both contain strong female protagonists who do not allow their worth to be determined or undermined by men. Differences present in their popular works include Hughes' more intense focus on race relations in America. Though Hughes writes in a more critical manner about race relations, Hurston's writing also contains messages and analysis of race relations in America. Hughes also put more political viewpoints into his work, which is not apparent in Hurston's work. Both authors were undoubtedly integral parts of the Harlem Renaissance, and so were their depictions of African-American life in the United States.

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