

## THE TWENTIES

**Link to Literature**

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) spent much of her childhood in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town in America. Hurston is today considered one of the most important of the Harlem Renaissance writers, but at the time of her death she was unknown and impoverished. It was only after African American writers rediscovered her work in the 1970s that she became famous. In the 1930s, she collected folklore of the South and published it in a collection called *Mules and Men*. Much of Hurston's work reflects her effort to preserve African American culture and heritage through dialect and story. Her best-known work is a novel entitled *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about a Southern black woman's search for identity. It was adapted for film in 2005.

***Their Eyes Were Watching God***

In this selection, the novel's main character, Janie, who left her hometown with a younger man called Tea Cake, has returned to Eatonville alone. Although she greets a few people, Janie violates local social customs by going straight to her house and failing to explain Tea Cake's absence.

**Directions:** As you read the following excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, think about how a writer's heritage can influence his or her works. Then answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper.

... [N]obody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after the gate slammed behind her.

Pearl Stone opened her mouth and laughed real hard because she didn't know what else to do. She fell all over Mrs. Sumpkins while she laughed. Mrs. Sumpkins snorted violently and sucked her teeth.

"Humph! Y'all let her worry yuh. You ain't like me. Ah ain't got her to study 'bout. If she ain't got manners enough to stop and let folks know how she been malkin' out, let her g'wan!"

"She ain't even worth talkin' after." Lulu Moss drawled through her nose. "She sits high, but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys."

Pheoby Watson hitched her rocking chair forward before she spoke. "Well, nobody don't know if it's anything to tell or not. Me, Ah'm her best friend, and Ah don't know."

Source: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (Harper-Collins Publishers)

**Questions to Think About**

1. Who are the characters in this scene, and what are they doing?
2. What does Janie's best friend think of Janie's situation?
3. **Draw Inferences** What do you think Hurston wishes to convey by having her characters use dialect?