

That Zora Sure Could Write

by Akua Duku Anokye, PhD

IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston begins, “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore.’” This statement epitomizes Hurston’s life and work. Hurston was a product of the folk about whom she most loved to write. She was a folklorist, scholar, anthropologist, and creative writer as well. The ability of a person to use active and copious verbal performance to achieve recognition within the group is widespread in the African American community, having its roots in African verbal art. For example, the ability to speak well, to “have mouth,” is often equated with intelligence and success among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. Hurston demonstrates as a means of survival this skill to “have mouth” to observe, collect, preserve, and perpetuate oral tradition and verbal art through her writings and her life.

As one of the folk, as well as a folklorist and creative writer, Hurston’s work has pedagogical implications. It demonstrates how a speaker well versed in an oral communication style can translate and transfer into the literate style of a different audience. In fact, the connection between orality and literacy is especially served by studying *Mules and Men* and comparing it with other texts that Hurston collected. In the process of shifting from the collected oral texts and preparing for publication, Hurston initiated several linguistic techniques that are applicable to the teaching of writing at any level.

One of the informants whom Hurston collected from, Joe Wiley, was a young school boy she met on her expedition to Alabama. Attached to a letter dated July 25, 1928, to her “godmother” Mrs. Osgood Mason, were several stories with a note from Hurston saying, “All of these stories except the first were written out by Joe Wiley himself, hence the lack of dialect.” This is a revealing comment that sheds light on Hurston’s conceptualization of dialect and her own usage of the Eye-dialect apparatus for publishing. This term Eye-dialect, chosen by some sociolinguists to describe literary conventions that often take liberties with the spoken reality of language variation through orthographics, includes such divergent spellings as wus/was, keerful/careful, and ketch/catch. The discussion of dialect, however, would carry us in a very different direction. For now, let us say that dialect was not the only change Hurston made.

Having to contend with all the conventions of writing for an unseen audience that did not share background information, Hurston needed to find ways of translating from what was for all intents and purposes an oral style to literate style. She had to use lexical and syntactic complexities as well as rhetorical structures that would give the work a shape for publishing. Oral communication depends for its effect on interpersonal involvement or the sense of identification between the speaker and the listener. Writers who employ features of involvement can create an interpersonal relationship between themselves or the characters and the reader. The audience in a written piece must get the point, so sequence and other

factors must be manipulated. Events might be reordered to highlight the point of the story (evaluation). Internal evaluation may be shifted to external evaluation. Certain concepts may need to be made explicit.

Moving from an oral version of a story to a written one may lead to adding a title, formulaic sentences, literary diction, and features of detachment such as changing a direct quote to an indirect one (He said). There may be increased lexical density and a general change in lexical choice. The rhetorical devices used in the oral version (figures of speech, repetition, parallelism in the grammatical system) will be retained, but the paralinguistics must show up in paragraphing, punctuation, etc. The speaker may invoke certain maxims in the oral text that are assumed rather than articulated. But in the written version the narrator must either delete such references or make them explicit.

A comparison between two versions of "John and the Coon" collected from Joe Wiley by Hurston and "The Fortuneteller" found in *Mules and Men* demonstrates many of the operations discussed, highlighting the types of changes she made to move from the "oral text" to the published one. Because Joe Wiley had written the story for Hurston, he assumed that his audience was operating on the same cultural wavelength, therefore he didn't use the dramatic devices Hurston incorporates in her text. He did not, for example, describe characters or physical settings in much detail. When Hurston retells the story in *Mules and Men*, however, she incorporates greater details, sometimes adding whole paragraphs.

In the comparison we find that Hurston uses more repetition, inverts facts for clarity and emphasis, resorts to specification of such items as "the man" for "he," "many person" for "a many one," uses words emphatically as in "way behind," includes transitional devices, changes pronominal reference, lexicalizes by changing "box" to "big old iron wash pot," changes narrative voice and function in dialogue, adds a specific threat rather than letting it be implied, and generally includes more specification and less inference. In fact, at one point she inserts an entire paragraph for emphasis. While the narrative units were the same in both versions, Hurston's was elaborated, lexicalized, rhetoricized, dialectized, and otherwise expanded, making her version nearly double in length from 29 lines in Wiley's to 45 lines in her own.

When we ask what kinds of things in African American discourse style might survive in transfer to written style, we can look to Hurston's work. The tendency to repetition of key words and sounds (alliteration), vivid imagery, concrete catchy phrasing, figurative and metaphoric language, symbolism, and experiential oral style may be transferred to written style. Narrative sequencing to elaborate abstract concepts that may include details, characterizations, plot, and related digressions are certainly there. Deliberate manipulation of grammatical structure and meter can be transferred. Exaggerated language and proverbial statements may transfer, along with formulaic structure. Indirection, suggestion, and innuendo can be retained.

From these observations we can conclude that an analysis of writing that had as its origins a speech event of a verbally skillful performance has pedagogical implications and that oral discourse style is transferable. Even the conversations amongst storytellers between the stories in *Mules and Men* can function in some ways like the call-and-response tradition of African American discourse style for audience participation. If Hurston's goal was indeed to preserve the oral tradition of African Americans through the literature she collected and created, she was successful. But not only did she preserve it, she left for us a model that can be used as a teaching tool.

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Bibliography

Zora Neale Hurston was a prolific writer of folklore research, fiction, essays, even plays. A recent picture book for elementary grades and works useful for secondary students are listed below. Many scholars have written about Hurston since Alice Walker re-introduced her to the general public in the 1970s, and an annual celebration in Eatonville, FL, commemorates her life and work.

Mules and Men, by Zora Neale Hurston, HarperCollins, 207 pp., reprinted 1990.

Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston, by Mary E. Lyons, Great Achievers Series, Aladdin Paperbacks, 144 pp., 1993.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston, HarperCollins, 207 pp., reprinted 1990.

Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, by Robert E. Hemenway, U of IL Press, 1980.

Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree, by William Miller, illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, Lee & Low Books, 32 pp., \$6, 1996.