

**Hackensack High School**  
**AP English Literature and Composition**  
**Zora Neale Hurston Biography**



Born January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama.

Family moved to **Eatonville, Florida**, one of the first predominantly African-American towns to be formed from the ashes of the Civil War and emancipation and first such town to officially incorporate.

Hurston matriculates at Howard University; however, due to financial hardship, she is unable to complete her degree. She is awarded a scholarship to **Barnard College**, the woman's college associated with Columbia University, and graduates in 1927 with a bachelor's in **anthropology** and a focus on ethnography, which would inform much of her literary work.

Before and while at Barnard, she becomes an influential figure within the **Harlem Renaissance**, working on literary magazines and journals with the likes of Langston Hughes.

Hurston primarily spends her life documenting the folklore and customs of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. In addition to travels within the American South of the time, she ends up receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship that provides the funds to research Afro-Caribbean culture in Haiti. Her work in Haiti was considered groundbreaking, as she gained access to previously undocumented societies of Vodun (Voodoo) practitioners.

Dies January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1960, in Fort Pierce, Florida, and is buried in an unmarked pauper's grave, having been unable to support herself with fiction and forced to work odd jobs such as a substitute teacher and as a journalist in Pittsburgh to make ends meet.

Her oeuvre remained neglected for decades, until a 1970's revival centered on Alice Walker's "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." Early on, her work attracted mainly feminist critics, but she eventually gained wider acceptance for her documentation of the African-American experience in the South.

While initially dismissed as too literary to be truly academic, anthropological texts, her work was eventually embraced as an anthropological study of the cultures she viewed.

### Controversy within African-American Literary Circles

Hurston's politics caused her relationship with other prominent Harlem Renaissance figures to be strained, and her work was widely lambasted within that literary circle.

"... The sensory sweep of 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."

-Richard Wright

Criticized for both the anthropological and political thrust of her oeuvre, Hurston was attacked by prominent African-American authors of the time, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

Her work, which examines both the culture and conflicts of and within the African-American communities she viewed, particularly with regards to dialect and skin tone, addressed topics considered taboo.

Her conservative politics (Hurston was a Republican and subscribed to Booker T. Washington's bootstrap philosophy for the African-American community) put her at odds with many of the figureheads of the Harlem Renaissance, whose politics tended towards socialist and communist. Hurston's criticism of Brown vs. Board of Education in her essay "Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix" was also widely criticized; Hurston's personal politics leaned towards segregationist, as she believed that integration would decimate black cultural traditions and cause the death of African-American society.

