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### How It Feels: Hurston's Roaring '20s

The 1920s in the United States remains known as an era of social progression and change. Even though that change may have been both negative and positive, it elicited a new form of society for everyone. Especially, the black and African American communities that were often desperately grappling for a space in the literary community. Zora Neale Hurston's essay on *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* indirectly explored different aspects of the 1920s that made it into the influential period that it is known as today.

First, the brunt of Hurston's essay addresses being African American in a city of the United States that emphasized the color of one's skin instead of their own beliefs and character. This transition from an all-black community served as a cultural shock to Hurston since she was used to living in a city where everyone resembled her, either in appearance or culture. Race did not constantly loom in her mind before moving to Orlando, Florida, because she was never exposed to different races. Hurston dramatically and skillfully uses color imagery to exhibit the true essence of how evident race was in her new city. She states that she "feel[s] most colored when I am [she is] thrown against a sharp white background" (959). Her race did not seem so out of place until she was thrust into a community where the majority was not the same color as her. She refers to moving to the racially segregated town as "the very day I became colored" (958). This is when she noticed how deep-rooted the segregational issues were in the 1920s. Besides being out of her comfort zone, Hurston did not dim out the shining light that resided

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##### An interview with author Darnisha:

*What drew you to Hurston's essay as the one piece you wanted to write about and respond to?*

**D.A:** It caught me off guard. It was a different time and people. A story you never heard about. Segregation was tough, and here you see how she conquered it and twisted the perspective. That different point of view was intriguing.

*Talk about your life as writer so far.*

**D.A:** We used to have to write essays in the first grade. I was always the first one done, and it made me feel like it was something I was good at. I found myself writing on my free time. As I grew older, it became very relaxing.

*What about Prof. Galvin's class affected you most?*

**D.A:** Her interpretation of the many different writings. Every class we had a free-flowing conversation. Seeing how passionate she was really brought out my passion. It pushed me to open up too.

#### Commented [PC2]:

**PROF DIRECTIONS:** 2-3 pages, typed, double spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins.

Choose any one or two reading assignments from the syllabus covered so far in class (that you are **not** presenting on). Discuss how the work(s) reflect social/historical issues from its period and analyze how the writing style or major themes reflects these concerns. Make sure you use specific examples from the text, with some (about 3) direct quotations.

**Do not summarize** the work, and **do not use sources outside of your textbook and class notes**. This is not a research paper. This is to be primarily an analysis/close reading focused on the work itself. Use MLA style for in-text citations. No works cited page is needed, since I know the citations originate from our textbook.

within her soul. She remained outgoing, confident, and extravagant in a community that refused to welcome her confidence and wit. Hurston refused to allow others to control her thoughts and feelings, a characteristic that seemed to serve as a basis for the foundation and impact of the Harlem Renaissance.

Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance represented a revolutionary movement in history for the black community. This birth of intellectual, social, and artistic ideas from within the black community was one of the most prominent progressive movements that brought many black voices to the forefront of the creative sphere. This movement inspired an explosion of cultural pride for African Americans, causing them to create works rooted in their own culture.

Hurston represents this by unapologetically twisting the narrative of racial prejudice in segregated Orlando. She did not “weep at the world” because she was too busy “sharpening my [her] oyster knife” (959). That is what the Harlem Renaissance was about; Zora Neale Hurston depicted that in every way. Black creators were no longer becoming what their white oppressors wanted them to become. They would not be puppets, but individuals that had their own ideas to express no matter if it was popular among their white audiences or not.

In continuation, Hurston refuses to allow color to define her. In a way, she uses that difference to her advantage by highlighting her own culture. In her essay, she innocently mocks a Caucasian man for being unable to truly lose himself in the music that is being played at a jazz club. She explains her “white friend sitting motionless in his seat smoking calmly... He has only heard what I felt” (960). Hurston represents that disparity between cultures but refuses to completely mock and rudely berate the man by referring to him as her “friend”. This shows awareness of the apparent cultural differences among African Americans and Caucasians, but it also supports the idea that those differences should not be the root cause of such massive

**Commented [PC3]:** Here, and throughout, A. connects the time period directly with the style of Whitman. The connections between era and the work are evident.

**Commented [PC4]:** Here, A. adheres to MLA considerations and puts here inserted words properly in brackets to signify that it was not in Hurston's original text.

**Commented [PC5]:** Notice each para contains a citation from the text as required. Nowhere does A. use summary only; she consistently shows how here commentary is reflected in the text itself.

disconnection between the two prominent races. She supports this idea by stating “At certain times I have no race, I am me” (960). Hurston discerns appreciating being African American and having all of this beautiful culture, but she also rejects limiting herself to that race. Once every layer is boiled down, people end up being themselves at the end of the day. Through all the division between races, she wanted to explain that at the end of the day people are who they are, and they should not be limited by how their race is perceived by others.

To conclude, Hurston utilizes this essay format to address personal concerns of racial disparity in society during the 1920s. Making the piece into a brief autobiography emphasizes the authenticity of her feelings. There was evident oppression towards African Americans, especially in the literary community at that time and Hurston chose to break that barrier by personally answering the looming question of *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*.