



Hitting A Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston

By Susan E Meisenhelder

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Zora Neale Hurston is a controversial figure, equally praised and criticized for her representation of African-Americans; while some critics emphasize her ebullience and celebration of Black culture, others call her fiction stereotypical and essentialist. Observing the workings of the recurrent humor in her works helps explode this critical binary opposition. Specifically, the carnivalesque and the heteroglossia often subvert essentialist notions of (Black) identity.

Jonah's Gourd Vine's protagonist, the preacher-womanizer John Pearson, can be seen as an African rather than an African-American trickster figure, i.e. as a mobile character whose liminality helps him fight essentialist definitions imposed on him by both the white establishment and his own community. Janie's romantic search for self-fulfillment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is undermined by the humor and the carnival, which emphasize her shifting and multiply defined identity. Finally, the African-Americanized story of Moses and the Hebrews shows the conflicts involved in their search for a unified national and cultural identity. In these three novels, Hurston appears as a subversive presence whose manipulation of humor underscores a complex political vision.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Meisenhelder reads Hurston front to back—letters, reviews, canonical and lesser known novels alike. Ferreting out double and crooked meanings, the author plots Hurston's complex relationship to readers, publishers, patrons, gender, and race."

—Susan Willis, Duke University

"An important contribution to African American studies."

—*CHOICE*

About the Author

Susan Meisenhelder is Professor of English at California State University-San Bernardino.

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