

# Oral Histories & Zora Neale Hurston

## Lesson Guide

Author: Tatiana McInnis  
Vanderbilt University

---

### Overview and Objectives

**Grade levels:** 6-12<sup>th</sup> grade (can be adapted)

**Subject areas:** Language Arts/Social Studies/ Technology

**Duration:** 3 sessions

**Topic:** Oral Histories and Zora Neale Hurston's Audio Recordings

**Prior Knowledge:**

Students will ideally have studied other work by Hurston and have a working understanding of her tendency to write stories about story-telling, and her use of vernacular to facilitate connections between vernacular and oral histories and cultures. Having prior knowledge of use of vernacular and working definitions of oral histories, students should be able to articulate the stakes of understanding and engaging with these cultures as they link to issues of race, gender, and representation (as in, diversifying who we are studying and how we are studying them).

**Summary:**

This lesson could be used as an extension plan on a unit on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or on rhetoric, vernacular, folklore, and/or social studies methods in a Human Geography, US History, Sociology, or Geography course. Oral histories as a focus could be adapted to many questions across the social sciences/language arts and literature classroom.

**In this lesson, students will:**

- Develop a definition of oral histories/oral culture/orality and be able to articulate the important distinction between oral and written histories
- Create their own written/oral histories
- Close-read story and analyze how Hurston merges the form of the parable/folk tale to produce a story about story-telling in "Magnolia Flower."
- Engage a focused analysis of the story's content and style to consider how Hurston addresses issues of Black and Native American interactions, the memory of nature, colorism, gender roles, etc. (could be tailored to educator goals)

**Content of Lesson Guide**

1. Objectives and Connections to Prior Knowledge
2. Materials
3. Activity Staging
4. Curriculum Relevance/Common Core Standards
5. Glossary

---

### Materials

- Internet Access/Projector
- Paper/ Pencil and other art supplies
- Recording Device (camera, smart phone, etc.)
- If possible, access to a computer lab

---

### Lesson Plan

#### Day 1

##### Activities:

- A. Think-Pair-Share (15-20 minutes): Have students individually think of a funny story to share with one of their classmates. Encourage students not to write these stories (yet) just to think of them and organize them in their minds to talk about with their peers. Allow 5 minutes for students to share their stories with each other.
- B. Have students work individually and write down the story they have just told to their students. If they feel compelled, they can add art/ draw/ decorate the written pages in ways that help further convey the meaning of these stories (allow 10-15 minutes)
- C. Have students exchange their written stories and each reader should take notes/discussion about things that changed from the written and oral forms of the story.
- D. Have student's write brief self-reflection on what challenges they experienced in translating their stories to the written word.
  - a. Was anything lost or gained in the written form?
  - b. Do they prefer telling or writing the stories?
  - c. If the story was different (i.e., instead of funny, telling a sad, dramatic, angry story) do you think you would prefer to talk or write about it? Why?
  - d. From your own experience, what do you think oral history is?
  - e. What does sharing oral histories allow us to do that writing does not?
- E. Show video of Dr. Nwankwo defining "oral history" to spark closing discussion and reiteration of oral history and how it relates to the stories the students have created.
- F. Homework:

Assign "Magnolia Flower" (please refer to the appendix; also available at: [http://www.pf.jcu.cz/stru/katedry/aj/doc/kocmichova/Z\\_N\\_Hurston\\_Magnolia\\_Flower.pdf](http://www.pf.jcu.cz/stru/katedry/aj/doc/kocmichova/Z_N_Hurston_Magnolia_Flower.pdf)) and "Story in Harlem Slang" (please refer to the appendix; also available at: [http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/Hurston\\_Harlem\\_Slang.pdf](http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/Hurston_Harlem_Slang.pdf))

As students read, ask them to annotate how Hurston captures the sound of speech/vernacular (particularly in "Story in Harlem Slang" and how she shows the importance of telling stories, the way we tell stories, and who (or what) gets to tell stories.

#### Day 2

##### Activities:

- A. Students should have read "Magnolia Flower" and "Story in Harlem Slang"

- before the class session.
- B. In small groups, have students discuss their initial reactions to the stories, with particular attention to vernacular and Hurston’s meta-storytelling. Have students repeat the conclusions drawn in small groups to the broader class.
  - C. General Discussion Questions to be answered using jigsaw technique. Break class into three groups to answer each question.
    - a. How does each of the stories call attention to the difference between writing stories and listening to stories?
    - b. How does the use of “slang” help us think about the challenges of writing how people speak? Can we think of any current scenarios that highlight this challenge (hint at texting)?
    - c. Why do you think Hurston chose to personify nature in “Magnolia Flower”? What commentary is she presenting by allowing things to speak that normally would not speak?
  - D. If possible, in a computer lab, have students listen to at least three of Zora Neale Hurston’s audio-recordings (folk songs accessible on <https://www.floridamemory.com/collections/folklife/people/?id=hurston>) and have students choose one and answer the following questions in an in-class written assignment:
    - a. How does the song you have chosen present a story you might not have otherwise have heard?
    - b. How does Hurston introduce this song? Is there anything in the framing of the song that makes us think about oral cultures in different ways? Pay particular attention to:
      - i. How and where these songs are developed and transmitted? What do they reveal about working conditions and about WHO is using oral history to communicate and document history?
      - ii. What story is being provided within the songs?
  - E. After addressing questions in written form, have entire class discuss their findings as a larger group.
  - F. If for whatever reason access to a computer lab is limited, play “Tampa” (available on the aforementioned website) for the entire class and have them answer the aforementioned questions in writing and then discuss as a group.

### Day 3

#### Activities:

- A. Show oral histories by Darria Hudson (MA Divinity), Carlin Rushing (MA Divinity), and Annie Castro, (English PhD candidate), available on <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/zoraclas/>. Hudson discusses Hurston’s ethical inclusion of working-class voices in her work, Rushing describes her experience of teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Castro discusses the relationship between oral culture/histories and spirituality, focusing on her research on *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. While not analyzing the works the students will have read, the histories will give a sense of Hurston’s importance, as well as model how the students might approach their own histories.

- B. Depending on resources in a given classroom, either:
- Have students partner up and spend ~10 minutes preparing what they would like to record. If working with partners, students might prefer interview format (modeled by Annie Castro's video) or a monologue (modeled by Carlin Rushing's video).
  - If resources allow, each pair could be given a recording device—allow 15-20 minutes to complete recording for both students (histories should be 3-5 minutes long).
  - After students record their oral histories, have them write short-self reflections of the experience of recording their histories: What specific challenges did they experience? What did they enjoy about their histories?
  - If resources allow, upload oral histories on a WordPress blog, or similar website, and require students to comment on at least two of their peers' histories with discussion questions or an analysis of the video itself.

\*\*\* If there is not access to digital publishing and/or recording technology available for multiple students to work simultaneously, have students practice their histories with partners while individual students record their histories with instructor. Have students who have finished either a) help other students practice or b) begin reflection process.

---

## Glossary

### **Vernacular**

A language or dialect spoken by the common people of a region (usually different from official/literary standards).

This lesson plan specifically focuses on the relationship between Black Vernacular English/African American Vernacular English and oppression and self-expression. Oral history research values multiple perspectives across formal educational levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, regional communities, etc., and provides an inclusive model for researching the human experience.

BVE- Black Vernacular English

AAVE- African American Vernacular English

[Pullum, Geoffrey K. "African American Vernacular English is Not Standard English with Mistakes."](#)

Pullum, Geoffrey K. "African American Vernacular English is Not Standard English with Mistakes." Rebecca S. Wheeler (ed.) *The Workings of Language*. Westport CT: Praeger, 1999.

### **Folklore**

the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth].

## Oral History

The collection and study of historical information using sound recordings of interviews with people having personal knowledge of past events.

Oral history is a tool for learning about people, places, and events. Explain to students that we learn about the past (and how we feel about things going on now) by asking people to tell them stories about it. These stories are called oral history.

---

## Curriculum Contents/ Standards

### Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)  
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2](#)  
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10](#)  
Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

### Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1](#)  
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6](#)  
Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](#)  
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)  
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4](#) [Culminating Activity 1]  
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### Tennessee English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 11-12

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3](#)

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

### **Tennessee English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 11-12**

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](#)

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### **Tennessee Anchor Standard for Literacy in All Subjects**

- RH 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- RH 3: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- RH 7 (technology): Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- WHST 10: Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- SL 1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

## Story in Harlem Slang

**W**AIT till I light up my coal-pot and I'll tell you about this Zigaboo called Jelly. Well, all right now. He was a sealskin brown and papa-tree-top-tall. Skinny in the hips and solid built for speed. He was born with this rough-dried hair, but when he laid on the grease and pressed it down overnight with his stocking-cap, it looked just like that righteous moss, and had so many waves you got seasick from looking. Solid, man, solid!

His mama named him Marvel, but after a month on Lenox Avenue, he changed all that to Jelly. How come? Well, he put it in the street that when it came to filling that long-felt need, sugar-curing the ladies' feelings, he was in a class by himself and nobody knew his name, so he had to tell 'em. "It must be Jelly, 'cause jam don't shake." Therefore, his name was Jelly. That was what was on his sign. The stuff was there and it was mellow. Whenever he was challenged by a hard-head or a frail eel on the right of his title he would eye-ball the idol-breaker with a slice of ice and put on his ugly-laugh, made up of scorn and pity, and say: "Youse just dumb to the fact, baby. If you don't know what you talking 'bout, you better ask Granny Grunt. I wouldn't mislead you, baby. I don't need to—not with the help I got." Then he would give the pimp's\* sign, and percolate on down the Avenue. You can't go behind a fact like that.

So this day he was airing out on the Avenue. It had to be late afternoon, or he would not have been out of bed. All you did by rolling out early was to stir your stomach up. That made you hunt for more dishes to dirty. The longer you slept, the less you had to eat. But you can't collar nods all day. No matter how long you stay in bed, and how quiet you keep, sooner or later that big gut is going to reach over and grab that little one and start to gnaw. That's confidential right

\*In Harleinese, *pimp* has a different meaning than its ordinary definition as a procurer for immoral purposes. The Harlem pimp is a man whose amatory talents are for sale to any woman who will support him, either with a free meal or on a common law basis; in this sense, he is actually a male prostitute.

**Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?**

Sign up now at [storyoftheweek.loa.org](http://storyoftheweek.loa.org) to receive our weekly alert so you won't miss a single story!

from the Bible. You got to get out on the beat and collar yourself a hot.

So Jelly got into his zoot suit with the reet pleats and got out to skivver around and do himself some good. At 132nd Street, he spied one of his colleagues on the opposite sidewalk, standing in front of a café. Jelly figured that if he bull-skated just right, he might confidence Sweet Back out of a thousand on a plate. Maybe a shot of scrap-iron or a reefer. Therefore, Jelly took a quick backward look at his shoe soles to see how his leather was holding out. The way he figured it after the peep was that he had plenty to get across and maybe do a little more cruising besides. So he stanced out into the street and made the crossing.

“Hi there, Sweet Back!” he exploded cheerfully. “Gimme some skin!”

“Lay de skin on me, pal!” Sweet Back grabbed Jelly’s outstretched hand and shook hard. “Ain’t seen you since the last time, Jelly. What’s cookin’?”

“Oh, just like de bear—I ain’t nowhere. Like de bear’s brother, I ain’t no further. Like de bear’s daughter—ain’t got a quarter.”

Right away, he wished he had not been so honest. Sweet Back gave him a top-superior, cut-eye look. Looked at Jelly just like a showman looks at an ape. Just as far above Jelly as fried chicken is over branch water.

“Cold in hand, hunh?” He talked down to Jelly. “A red hot pimp like you *say* you is, ain’t got no business in the barrel. Last night when I left you, you was beating up your gums and broadcasting about how hot you was. Just as hot as July-jam, you told me. What you doing cold in hand?”

“Aw, man, can’t you take a joke? I was just beating up my gums when I said I was broke. How can I be broke when I got de best woman in Harlem? If I ask her for a dime, she’ll give me a ten dollar bill; ask her for drink of likker, and she’ll buy me a whiskey still. If I’m lying, I’m flying!”

“Gar, don’t hang out dat dirty washing in my back yard! Didn’t I see you last night with dat beat chick, scoffing a hot dog? Dat chick you had was beat to de heels. Boy, you ain’t no good for what you live.”



"If you ain't lying now, you flying. You ain't got de first thin. You ain't got nickel one."

Jelly threw back the long skirt of his coat and rammed his hand down into his pants pocket. "Put your money where your mouth is!" he challenged, as he mock-struggled to haul out a huge roll. "Back your crap with your money. I bet you five dollars!"

Sweet Back made the same gesture of hauling out non-existent money.

"I been raised in the church. I don't bet, but I'll doubt you. Five rocks!"

"I thought so!" Jelly crowed, and hurriedly pulled his empty hand out of his pocket. "I knowed you'd back up when I drew my roll on you."

"You ain't drewed no roll on me, Jelly. You ain't drewed nothing but your pocket. You better stop dat boogerbooing. Next time I'm liable to make you do it." There was a splinter of regret in his voice. If Jelly really had had some money, he might have staked him, Sweet Back, to a hot. Good Southern cornbread with a piano on a platter. Oh, well! The right broad would, or might, come along.

"Who boogerbooing?" Jelly snorted. "Jig, I don't have to. Talking about *me* with a beat chick scoffing a hot dog! You must of not seen me, 'cause last night I was riding round in a Yellow Cab, with a yellow gal, drinking yellow likker and spending yellow money. Tell 'em 'bout me, tell 'em!"

"Git out of my face, Jelly! Dat broad I seen you with wasn't no pe-ola. She was one of them coal-scuttle blondes with hair just as close to her head as ninety-nine is to a hundred. She look-ted like she had seventy-five pounds of clear bosom, guts in her feet, and she look-ted like six months in front and nine months behind. Buy you a whiskey still! Dat broad couldn't make the down payment on a pair of sox."

"Sweet Back, you fixing to talk out of place." Jelly stiffened.

"If you trying to jump salty, Jelly, that's your mammy."

"Don't play in de family, Sweet Back. I don't play de dozens. I done told you."

"Who playing de dozens? You trying to get your hips up on

your shoulders 'cause I said you was with a beat broad. One of them lam blacks."

"Who? Me? Long as you been knowing me, Sweet Back, you ain't never seen me with nothing but pe-olas. I can get any frail eel I wants to. How come I'm up here in New York? You don't know, do you? Since youse dumb to the fact, I reckon I'll have to make you hep. I had to leave from down south 'cause Miss Anne used to worry me so bad to go with me. Who, me? Man, I don't deal in no coal. Know what I tell 'em? If they's white, they's right! If they's yellow, they's mel-low! If they's brown, they can stick around. But if they come black, they better git way back! Tell 'em bout me!"

"Aw, man, you trying to show your grandma how to milk ducks. Best you can do is to confidence some kitchen-mechanic out of a dime or two. Me, I knocks de pad with them cack-broads up on Sugar Hill, and fills 'em full of melody. Man, I'm quick death and easy judgment. Youse just a home-boy, Jelly. Don't try to follow me."

"Me follow *you*! Man, I come on like the Gang Busters, and go off like The March of Time! If dat ain't so, God is gone to Jersey City and you know He wouldn't be messing 'round a place like that. Know what my woman done? We hauled off and went to church last Sunday, and when they passed 'round the plate for the *penny* collection, I throwed in a dollar. De man looked at me real hard for dat. Dat made my woman mad, so she called him back and throwed in a twenty dollar bill! Told him to take dat and go! Dat's what he got for looking at me 'cause I throwed in a dollar."

"Jelly, de wind may blow and de door may slam; dat what you shooting ain't worth a damn!"

Jelly slammed his hand in his bosom as if to draw a gun. Sweet Back did the same.

"If you wants to fight, Sweet Back, the favor is in me."

"I was deep-thinking then, Jelly. It's a good thing I ain't short-tempered. 'T'aint nothing to you, nohow. You ain't hit me yet."

Both burst into a laugh and changed from fighting to lounging poses.

"Don't get too yaller on me, Jelly. You liable to get hurt some day."

"You over-sports your hand your ownself. Too blamed as-torperious. I just don't pay you no mind. Lay de skin on me!"

They broke their handshake hurriedly, because both of them looked up the Avenue and saw the same thing. It was a girl and they both remembered that it was Wednesday afternoon. All of the domestics off for the afternoon with their pay in their pockets. Some of them bound to be hungry for love. That meant a dinner, a shot of scrap-iron, maybe room rent and a reefer or two. Both went into the pose and put on the look.

"Big stars falling!" Jelly said out loud when she was in hearing distance. "It must be just before day!"

"Yeah, man!" Sweet Back agreed. "Must be a recess in Heaven—pretty angel like that out on the ground."

The girl drew abreast of them, reeling and rocking her hips.

"I'd walk clear to Diddy-Wah-Diddy to get a chance to speak to a pretty lil' ground-angel like that," Jelly went on.

"Aw, man, you ain't willing to go very far. Me, I'd go slap to Ginny-Gall, where they eat cow-rump, skin and all."

The girl smiled, so Jelly set his hat and took the plunge.

"Baby," he crooned, "what's on de rail for de lizard?"

The girl halted and braced her hips with her hands. "A Zigaboo down in Georgy, where I come from, asked a woman that one time and the judge told him 'ninety days.'"

"Georgy!" Sweet Back pretended to be elated. "Where 'bouts in Georgy is you from? Delaware?"

"Delaware?" Jelly snorted. "My people! My people! Free schools and dumb jigs! Man, how you going to put Delaware in Georgy? You ought to know dat's in Maryland."

"Oh, don't try to make out youse no northerner, you! Youse from right down in 'Bam your ownself!" The girl turned on Jelly.

"Yeah, I'm *from* there and I aims to stay from there."

"One of them Russians, eh?" the girl retorted. "Rushed up here to get away from a job of work."

That kind of talk was not leading towards the dinner table.

"But baby!" Jelly gasped. "Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent!"

The girl smiled with pleasure at this, so Sweet Back jumped in.

"I know youse somebody swell to know. Youse real people. You grins like a regular fellow." He gave her his most killing look and let it simmer in. "These dickty jigs round here tries to smile. S'pose you and me go inside the café here and grab a hot?"

"You got any money?" the girl asked, and stiffened like a ramrod. "Nobody ain't pimping on me. You dig me?"

"Aw, now, baby!"

"I seen you two mullet-heads before. I was uptown when Joe Brown had you all in the go-long last night. Dat cop sure hates a pimp! All he needs to see is the pimps' salute, and he'll out with his night-stick and whip your head to the red. Beat your head just as flat as a dime!" She went off into a great blow of laughter.

"Oh, let's us don't talk about the law. Let's talk about us," Sweet Back persisted. "You going inside with me to holler 'let one come flopping! One come grunting! Snatch one from de rear!'"

"Naw indeed!" the girl laughed harshly. "You skillet is trying to promote a meal on me. But it'll never happen, brother. You barking up the wrong tree. I wouldn't give you air if you was stopped up in a jug. I'm not putting out a thing. I'm just like the cemetery—I'm not putting out, I'm taking in! Dig?"

"I'll tell you like the farmer told the potato—plant you now and dig you later."

The girl made a movement to switch on off. Sweet Back had not dirtied a plate since the day before. He made a weak but desperate gesture.

"Trying to snatch my pocketbook, eh?" she blazed. Instead of running, she grabbed hold of Sweet Back's draping coat-tail and made a slashing gesture. "How much split you want back here? If your feets don't hurry up and take you 'way from here, you'll *ride* away. I'll spread my lungs all over New York and call the law. Go ahead, Bedbug! Touch me! And I'll holler like a pretty white woman!"

The boys were ready to flee, but she turned suddenly and rocked on off with her ear-rings snapping and her heels popping.

"My people! My people!" Sweet Back sighed.

“I know you feel chewed,” Jelly said, in an effort to make it appear that he had had no part in the fiasco.

“Oh, let her go,” Sweet Back said magnanimously. “When I see people without the periodical principles they’s supposed to have, I just don’t fool with ’em. What I want to steal her old pocketbook with all the money I got? I could buy a beat chick like her and give her away. I got money’s mammy and Grandma change. One of my women, and not the best one I got neither, is buying me ten shag suits at one time.”

He glanced sidewise at Jelly to see if he was convincing. But Jelly’s thoughts were far away. He was remembering those full, hot meals he had left back in Alabama to seek wealth and splendor in Harlem without working. He had even forgotten to look cocky and rich.

## GLOSSARY OF HARLEM SLANG

- Air out—leave, flee, stroll  
 Astorperious—haughty, biggity  
 Aunt Hagar—Negro race (also Aunt Hagar's chillun)  
 Bad hair—Negro type hair  
 Balling—having fun  
 Bam, and down in Bam—down South  
 Battle-hammed—badly formed about the hips  
 Beating up your gums—talking to no purpose  
 Beluthahatchie—next station beyond Hell  
 Big boy—stout fellow. But in the South, it means fool and is a prime insult.  
 Blowing your top—getting very angry; occasionally used to mean, "He's doing fine!"  
 Boogie-woogie—type of dancing and rhythm. For years, in the South, it meant secondary syphilis.  
 Brother-in-black—Negro  
 Bull-skating—Bragging  
 Butt sprung—a suit or a skirt out of shape in the rear  
 Coal scuttle blonde—black woman  
 Cold—exceeding, well, etc., as in "He was cold on that trumpet!"  
 Collar a nod—sleep  
 Collar a hot—eat a meal  
 Color scale—high yaller, yaller, high brown, vaseline brown, seal brown, low brown, dark black  
 Conk buster—cheap liquor; also an intellectual Negro  
 Cruising—parading down the Avenue. Variations: *oozing*, *percolating*, and *free-wheeling*. The latter implies more briskness.  
 Cut—doing something well  
 Dark black—a casually black person. Superlatives: *low black*, a blacker person; *lam black*, still blacker; and *damn black*, blackest man, of whom it is said: "Why, lightning bugs follows him at 12 o'clock in the day, thinking it's midnight."  
 Dat thing—sex of either sex  
 Dat's your mammy—same as, "So is your old man."  
 Diddy-wah-diddy—a far place, a measure of distance. (2) another suburb of Hell, built since way before Hell wasn't no bigger than Baltimore. The folks in Hell go there for a big time.  
 Dig—understand. "Dig me?" means, "Do you get me? Do you collar the jive?"  
 Draped down—dressed in the height of Harlem fashion; also *tagged down*.  
 Dumb to the fact—"You don't know what you're talking about."  
 Dusty butt—cheap prostitute  
 Eight-rock—very black person  
 Every postman on his beat—kinky hair  
 First thing smoking—a train. "I'm through with this town. I mean to grab the first thing smoking."  
 Frail eel—pretty girl  
 Free schools—a shortened expression of deprecation derived from "free schools and dumb Negroes," sometimes embellished with "free schools, pretty yellow teachers and dumb Negroes."  
 Function—a small, unventilated dance, full of people too casually bathed  
 Gator-faced—long, black face with big mouth  
 Getting on some stiff time—really doing well with your racket  
 Get you to go—power, physical or otherwise, to force the opponent to run

- Ginny Gall—a suburb of Hell, a long way off
- Git up off of me—quit talking about me, leave me alone
- Go when the wagon comes—another way of saying, “You may be acting biggity now, but you’ll cool down when enough power gets behind you.”
- Good hair—Caucasian-type hair
- Granny Grunt—a mythical character to whom most questions may be referred
- Ground rations—sex, also *under rations*
- Gum beater—a blowhard, a braggart, idle talker in general
- Gut-bucket—low dive, type of music, or expression from same
- Gut-foot—bad case of fallen arches
- Handkerchief-head—sycophant type of Negro; also an *Uncle Tom*
- Hauling—fleeing on foot. “Man! He cold hauled it!”
- I don’t deal in coal—“I don’t keep company with black women.”
- I’m cracking but I’m facking—“I’m wisecracking, but I’m telling the truth.”
- Inky dink—very black person
- I shot him lightly and he died politely—“I completely outdid him.”
- Jar head—Negro man
- Jelly—sex
- Jig—Negro, a corrupted shortening of zigaboo
- Jook—a pleasure house, in the class of gut-bucket; now common all over the South
- Looking—playing the piano, guitar, or any musical instrument in the manner of the Jooks (pronounced like “took”) (2) Dancing and “scronching” ditto.
- Juice—liquor
- July jam—something very hot
- Jump salty—get angry
- Kitchen mechanic—a domestic
- Knock yourself out—have a good time
- Lightly, slightly and politely—doing things perfectly
- Little sister—measure of hotness: “Hot as little sister!”
- Liver-lip—pendulous, thick, purple lips
- Made hair—hair that has been straightened
- Mammy—a term of insult. Never used in any other way by Negroes.
- Miss Anne—a white woman
- Mister Charlie—a white man
- Monkey chaser—a West Indian
- Mug man—small-time thug or gangster
- My people! My people!—Sad and satiric expression in the Negro language: sad when a Negro comments on the backwardness of some members of his race; at other times, used for satiric or comic effect
- Naps—kinky hair
- Nearer my God to Thee—good hair
- Nothing to the bear but his curly hair—“I call your bluff,” or “Don’t be afraid of him; he won’t fight.”
- Now you cookin’ with gas—now you’re talking, in the groove, etc.
- Ofay—white person
- Old cuffee—Negro (genuine African word for the same thing)
- Palmer House—walking flat-footed, as from fallen arches
- Pancake—a humble type of Negro
- Park ape—an ugly, underprivileged Negro
- Peckerwood—poor and unloved class of Southern whites
- Peeping through my likkers—carrying on even though drunk
- Pe-ola—a very white Negro girl

- Piano—spare ribs (white rib-bones suggest piano keys)
- Pig meat—young girl
- Pilch—house or apartment; residence
- Pink toes—yellow girl
- Playing the dozens—low-rating the ancestors of your opponent
- Red neck—poor Southern white man
- Reefer—marijuana cigaret, also a *drag*
- Righteous mass or *grass*—good hair
- Righteous rags—the components of a Harlem-style suit
- Rug-cutter—originally a person frequenting house-rent parties, cutting up the rugs of the host with his feet; a person too cheap or poor to patronize regular dance halls; now means a good dancer.
- Russian—a Southern Negro up north. “Rushed up here,” hence a Russian.
- Scrap iron—cheap liquor
- Sell out—run in fear
- Sender—he or she who can get you to go, i.e., has what it takes. Used often as a compliment: “He’s a solid sender!”
- Smoking, or *smoking over*—looking someone over
- Solid—perfect
- Sooner—anything cheap and mongrel, now applied to cheap clothes, or a shabby person.
- Stanch, or *stanch out*—to begin, commence, step out
- Stomp—low dance, but hot man!
- Stormbuzzard—shiftless, homeless character
- Stroll—doing something well
- Sugar Hill—northwest corner of Harlem, near Washington Heights, site of newest apartment houses, mostly occupied by professional people. (The expression has been distorted in the South to mean a Negro red light district.)
- The bear—confession of poverty
- The big apple, also *the big red apple*—New York City
- The man—the law, or powerful boss
- Thousand on a plate—beans
- Tight head—one with kinky hair
- Trucking—strolling. (2) dance step from the strolling motif
- V and X—five-and-ten-cent store
- West Hell—another suburb of Hell, worse than the original
- What’s on the rail for the lizard?—suggestion for moral turpitude
- Whip it to the red—beat your head until it is bloody
- Woofing—aimless talk, as a dog barks on a moonlight night
- Young suit—ill-fitting, too small. Observers pretend to believe you’re breaking in your little brother’s suit for him.
- Your likker told you—misguided behavior
- Zigaboo—a Negro
- Zoot suit with the rect pleat—Harlem style suit, padded shoulders, 43-inch trousers at the knee with cuff so small it needs a zipper, to get into, high waistline, fancy lapels, bushels of buttons, etc.



## Zora Neale Hurston: "Magnolia Flower" (1925)

*Daughter of a Baptist minister, Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida, the sixth of eleven children. She attended Howard University before transferring to Columbia University. Hurston majored in anthropology, graduating with a B.A. in 1927. She studied folklore and voodoo practices in New Orleans and Florida from 1927 to 1931. Hurston's masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), was written while she conducted fieldwork in Haiti and was completed in just seven weeks. During the depression in the 1930s, Hurston worked for the WPA, recording interviews with rural, "bookless blacks," i.e., illiterate African Americans, one of whom was an African-born former slave, Cudjo Lewis. In the late forties and fifties she worked as a librarian, teacher and finally as a cleaning woman, dying impoverished in 1960. In the 1970s her novels and short stories experienced a revival, although none of her works have received much Czech scholarly attention or have been translated into Czech. This story typifies her inimitable style and voice. It includes, as in so many of Hurston's stories, a strong, proud woman, conflict between the hardened, formerly enslaved generation and their offspring seeking love and freedom, as well as an expression of non-Christian spirituality, a spirituality which may indicate resistance to white Christian culture.*

### Magnolia Flower

The brook laughed and sang. When it encountered hard places in its bed, it hurled its water in sparkling dance figures up into the moonlight.

It sang loud, louder; danced faster, faster, with a coquettish splash! at the vegetation at its banks.

At last it danced boisterously into the bosom of the St. John's, upsetting the whispering hyacinths who shivered and blushed, drunk with the delight of moon kisses.

The Mighty One turned peevishly in his bed and washed the feet of the Palmetto palms so violently that they awoke and began again the gossip they had left off when the Wind went to bed. A palm cannot speak without wind. The river had startled it also, for the winds sleep at the bosoms of the waters.

The palms murmured noisily of seasons and centuries, mating at birth and the transplanting of life. Nature knows nothing of death.

The river spoke to the brook:

"Why, O Young Water, do you hurry and hurl yourself so riotously about with your chatter and song? You disturb my sleep."

"Because, O Venerable One," replied the brook, "I am young. The flowers bloom, the trees and wind say beautiful things to me: there are lovers beneath the orange trees on my banks, – but most of all because the moon shines upon me with a full face."

"That is not sufficient reason for you to disturb my sleep," the river retorted. "I have cut down mountains and moved whole valleys into the sea, and I am not so noisy as *you* are."

The river slapped its banks angrily.

"But," added the brook diffidently, "I passed numbers of lovers as I came on. There was also a sweet-voiced night-bird."

"No matter, no matter," scolded the river. "I have seen millions of lovers, child. I have borne them up and down, listened to those things that are uttered more with the breath than with the lips, gathered infinite tears, and some lovers have even flung themselves upon the soft couch I keep in my bosom, and slept."

"Tell me about some of them," eagerly begged the brook.

"Oh, well," the river muttered, "I am wide awake now, and I suppose brooks must be humored."

### The River's Story

"Long ago, as men count years, men who were pale of skin held a dark race of men in bondage. The dark ones cried out in sorrow and travail, – not here in my country, but farther north. Many rivers carried their tears to the sea and the tide would bring some of them to me. The Wind brought cries without end.

"But there were some among the slaves who did not weep, but fled in the night to safety, – some to the far north, some to the far south, for here the red man, the panther, and the bear were alone to be feared. One of them from the banks of the Savannah came here. He was large and black and strong. His heart was strong and thudded with an iron sound in his breast. The forest made way for him, and beasts were afraid of him, and he built a house. He gathered stones

and bits of metal, yellow and white – such as men love and for which they die – and grew wealthy. How? I do not know. Rivers take no notice of such things. We sweep men, stones, metal – all, ALL, to the sea. All are as grass; all must to the sea in the end.

“He married Swift Deer, a Cherokee maiden, and five years – as men love to clip time into bits – passed.

“They had now a daughter, Magnolia Flower they called her, for she came at the time of their opening.

“When they had been married five years, she was four years old.

“Then the tide brought trouble rumors to me of hate, strife and destruction, – war, war, war.

“The blood of those born in the North flowed to the sea, mingled with that of the southern-born. Bitter Waters, Troubled Winds. Rains that washed the dust from Heaven but could not beat back the wails of anguish, the thirst for blood and glory; the prayers for that which God gives not into the hands of man – Vengeance, – fires of hate to sear and scorch the ground; wells of acid tears to blight the leaf.

“Then all men walked free in the land, and Wind and Water again grew sweet.

“The man-made time notches flew by, and Magnolia Flower was in full-bloom. Her large eyes burned so brightly in her dark-brown face that the Negroes trembled when she looked angrily upon them. ‘She curses with her eyes,’ they said. ‘Some evil surely will follow.’

“Black men came and went now as they pleased and the father had many to serve him, for now he had built a house such as white men owned when he was in bondage.

“His heart, of the ex-slave Bentley, was iron to all but Magnolia Flower. Swift Deer was no longer swift. Too many kicks and blows, too many grim chokings had slowed her feet and heart.

“He had done violence to workmen. There was little law in this jungle, and that was his, – ‘Do as I bid you or suffer my punishment.’

“He was hated, but feared more.

“He hated anything that bore the slightest resemblance to his former oppressors. His servants must be black, very black, or Cherokee.

“The flower was seventeen and beautiful. Bentley thought often of a mate for her now, but one that would not offend him either in spirit or flesh. He must be full of humility, and black.

“One day, as the sun gave me a good-night kiss and the stars began their revels, I bore a young Negro yet not a Negro, for his skin was the color of freshly barked cypress, golden with the curly black hair of the white man.

“There were many Negroes in Bentley’s Village and he wished to build a school that would teach them useful things.

“Bentley hated him at once; but ordered a school-house to be built, for he wished Magnolia to read and write.

“But before two weeks had passed, the teacher had taught the Flower to read strange marvels with her dark eyes, and she had taught the teacher to sing with his eyes, his hands, his whole body in her presence or whenever he thought of her, – not in her father’s house, but beneath that clump of palms, those three that bathe their toes eternally and talk.

“They busied themselves with dreams of creation, while Bentley swore the foundation of the school-room into place.

“‘Nothing remains for me to do, now that I have your consent, but to ask your father for your sweet self. I know I am poor, but I have a great Vision, a high purpose, and he shall not be ashamed of me!’

“She clung fearfully to him.

“‘No, don’t, John, don’t. He’ll say ‘Naw!’ and cuss. He – he don’t like you at all. Youse too white.’

“‘I’ll get him out of that, just trust me, precious. Then I can just own you – just let me talk to him.’

“She wept and pleaded with him – told him of Bentley’s terrible anger and his violence, begged him to take her away and send her father word; but he refused to hear her, and walked up to her house and seated himself upon the broad verandah to wait for the father of Magnolia Flower.

“She flew to Swift Deer and begged her to persuade her lover not to brave Bentley’s anger. The older woman crept out and tearfully implored him to go. He stayed.

“At dusk Bentley came swearing in. It had been a hot day; the men had cut several poor pieces of timber and seemed all bent on driving him to the crazy-house, he complained.

“Swift Deer slunk into the house at his approach, dragging her daughter after her.



"What followed was too violent for words to tell, – strength against strength, steel against steel. Threats bellowed from Bentley's bull throat seemed no more than little puffs of air to the lover. Of course, he would leave Bentley's house; but he would stay in the vicinity until he was told to leave by the Flower, – his Flower of sweetness and purity – and he would marry her unless hell froze over.

"Better eat up dem words an' git out whilst ah letcher," the old man growled.

Bentley drew up his lips in a great roll glare.

"No!" John shouted, giving him glare for his rage boiling and tumbling out from behind these ramparts, as it were. His eye reddened, a vessel in the center of his forehead stood out, gorged with blood, and his great hands twitched. For good or evil, Bentley was a strong man, mind and body.

"Swift Deer could no longer restrain her daughter. Magnolia Flower burst triumphantly upon the verandah.

"Well, papa, you don't say that I haven't picked a man. No one else in forty miles round would stand up to you like John!"

"Ham! Jim! Israel!" Bentley howled, on the verge of apoplexy. The men appeared. "Take tis here yaller skunk an' lock him in dat back-room. I'm a gonna hang im high as Hamon come sun up, law uh no law."

A short struggle, and John was tied hand and foot.

"Stop!" cried Magnolia Flower, fighting, clawing, biting, kicking like a brown fiend for her lover. One brawny worker held her until John was helplessly bound.

"But when she looked at all three of the men with her eye of fire, they shook in superstitious fear.

"Oh, Moh Gawd!" breathed Ham, terrified. She's cussing us, she's cussing us all wid her eyes. Sump'm sho gwine happen?"

"Her eye indeed something to affright the timid and even give the strong heart pulse. A woman robbed of her love is more terrible than an army with banners.

"Oh, I wish I could!" she uttered in a voice flat with intensity, "You'd all drop dead on the spot."

"Swift Deer had crept out and stood beside the child. She screamed and clasped her hands over her daughter's lips.

"Say not such words, Magnolia," she pleaded. "Take them back into your bosom unsaid."

"Leave her be," Bentley laughed acidly. "Ah got a dose uh mah medicine ready for her too. Befo' ah hangs dis yaller pole-cat ahm gwinter marry her to crazy Joe, an' John can look on; den ah'll hang *him*, and she kin look on. Magnolia and Joe oughter have fine black chillen. Ha! Ha!"

"The girl never uttered a sound. She smiled with her lips but her eyes burned every bit of courage to cinders in those who saw her.

John was locked in the stout back-room. The windows were guarded and Ham sat with a loaded gun at the door.

Magnolia was locked in the parlor where she ran up and down, tearing her heavy black hair. She beat helplessly upon the doors, she hammered the windows, making little mewling noises in her throat like a cat deprived of her litter.

The house grew grimly still. Bentley had forced his wife to accompany him to their bedroom. She lay fearfully awake but he slept peacefully, if noisily.

"Magnolia Flower!" Ham called softly as he turned the key stealthily in the lock of her prison. "Come on out. Ah caint stan' dis here weekedness uh yo pappy!"

"No thank you, Ham. I'll stay right here and make him kill me long with John, if you don't let him out too."

"Lord a mussy knows ah wisht ah could, but de ole man's got de key in his britches."

"I'm going and get it, Ham," she announced as she stepped over the threshold to freedom.

"Lawd! He'll kill me sho's you born."

"Her feet were already on the stairs."

"I'll have that key or die. Ham, you put some victuals in that rowboat."

"Half for love, half for fear, Ham obeyed."

"No one but Magnolia Flower would have entered Bentley's bed-room as she did, under the circumstances but to her the circumstances were her reasons for going. The big horse pistol under her pillow, the rack of guns in the hall, and her father's giant hands – none of these stopped her. She knew three lives, – her own, he

lover's, and Hams' – hung on her success; but she went and returned with that key.

"One minute more and they flew down the path to the three leaning palms into the boat away northward.

"The morning came. Bentley ate hugely. The new rope hung ominously from the arm of the giant oak in the yard. Preacher Ike had eaten his breakfast with Bentley and the idiot, Crazy Joe, had forced himself into a pair of clean hickory pants.

"Bentley turned the key and flung open the door, stood still a moment in a grey rage and stalked to the back-room door, feeling for the key meanwhile.

"When he fully convinced himself that the key was gone, he did not bother to open the door.

"'Ham, it 'pears dat Magnolia an' dat yaller dog aint heah dis mawnin', so you an' Swift Deer will hafta do, being ez y'all let 'em git away.' He said this calmly and stalked toward the gun rack; but his anger was too large to be contained in one human heart. His arteries corded his face, his eyes popped, and he fell senseless as he stretched his hand for the gun. Rage had burst his heart at being outwitted by a girl.

"This all happened more that forty years ago, as men reckon time. Soon Swift Deer died, and the house built by strong Bentley fell to decay. White men came and built a town and Magnolia Flower and her eyes passed from the hearts of the people who had known her."

The brook had listened, tensely thrilled to its very bottom at times. The river flowed calmly on, shimmering under the moon as it moved ceaselessly to the sea.

An odd couple picked their way down to the water's edge. He had once been tall – he still bore himself well. The little old woman clung lovingly to his arm.

"It's been forty-seven years, John," she said sweetly, her voice full of fear. "Do you think we can find the place?"

"Why yes, Magnolia, my flower, unless they have cut down our trees; but if they are standing, we'll know 'em – couldn't help it."

"Yes, sweetheart, there they are. Hurry and let's sit on the roots like we used to and trail our fingers in the water. Love is wonderful, isn't it, dear?"

They hugged the trunks of the three clustering palms lovingly; then they hugged each other and sat down shyly upon the heaped up roots.

"You never regretted, Magnolia?"

"Of course not! But, John, did you ever hear a river make such a sound? Why it seems almost as if it were talking – that murmuring noise, you know."

"Maybe, it's welcoming us back. I always felt that it loved you and me, somehow."

MLO  
to Flower's