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Lesson 1

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. For example, authors often integrate their expertise into the story. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston infuses the setting, characters, and dialogue of the novel with southern folklore and anthropological research. Also, events in the novel mirror some circumstances and events in her life. Hurston's bold statement, "I love myself when I am laughing and then again when I am looking mean and impressive," captures the defiant confidence we encounter in the maturing main character, Janie Mae Crawford. And while we more fully understand the work as we learn about our author, the artistry of the novel does not succeed or fail based on the author's life. The novel—a work of art—has an internal structure independent of the author's personality.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 1 (16 minutes). Students will take notes as they listen. Students will present the three most important things they learned from the CD. Discuss Carla Kaplan's argument that Hurston "depicted black difference."

Copy Reader's Guide essays, "Zora Neale Hurston" (pp. 4-5), "Hurston and Her Works" (pp. 12-13), and "Hurston's Death and Resurrection" (pp. 10-11). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. Groups will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

Writing Exercise

If you could only tell your life story to one person, to whom would it be? Where would you begin? Begin with a significant event or moment that changed your view of the world. Describe your experience through images or word pictures.

Homework

Read Chapter 1 (pp. 1-7).^{*} Why would Hurston use Southern black idiom to tell her story? Ask students to think about Kaplan's comment as they read.

^{*} Page numbers refer to the Harper Collins 1990 edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.