



Classroom Guide for ZORA HURSTON AND THE CHINABERRY TREE

by **William Miller**
illustrated by
Cornelius Van Wright
and **Ying-Hwa Hu**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-4

Reading Level: Grades 3-4

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.3/.5

Lexile Measure®: 640

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 3.5

Themes

Dreams and Aspirations, Gender Roles, Death in Family, African American History

Synopsis

The true story of the famous African American writer, who as a young girl learned about hope and strength from her mother.

Background

Zora Neale Hurston is considered one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. This era is said to have begun with the migration of southern blacks to the north. The resulting increase in African American population also created new opportunities for artists—writers, musicians, painters—who were drawn to the support offered by wealthy white patrons. Among Hurston's literary contemporaries from the Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer.

Hurston was born in 1891. She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black, incorporated town in America. At an early age, she was exposed to the rich oral tradition of her community: stories, songs, and folklore that celebrated African American life.

Hurston attended Howard University and Barnard College, where she studied anthropology. She traveled throughout the South recording the folktales of her people. She published these stories in a collection called *Mules and Men*. Hurston was also the author of many works of fiction. Her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a classic of African American literature.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before students read the story, you might want them to discuss one of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. Do you ever think about the future? Why? What dreams do you have about your own future? What is the difference between a dream you have in your sleep and a dream you have for your future?
2. Do you have a special relative who encourages you to think about what you will do when you are an adult?
3. Zora, the main character of the story, is African American. What is your cultural heritage? Do you know special stories, songs, or poems from the country from which your ancestors came? How did you learn these stories?
4. Have you ever lost something that was very special to you?

Vocabulary

Have students write down any interesting words they find as they are reading. After reading the story, students can write their words on a wall chart. Other students who know the meaning of the words can share their definitions. Set time aside on a regular basis to discuss the meanings of the words.

Setting a Purpose for Reading/Listening

Have students look at the cover of the book. Ask them what the girl is doing. Have students consider what they would like to know about the girl and what might happen to her. Tell students to think about their questions as they read the story.

AFTER READING**Discussion Questions**

You may want to ask the students the following questions to stimulate discussion:

What are the best things about being a girl? What are the best things about being a boy? What things did Zora want to do that she was told only boys could do? Are these things still done only by boys today? Name some things that girls and women can do today that they could not do back in Zora's time (e.g., voting, participating in the military).

Reader's Response Journals

To promote active reading, you might wish students to keep a reader's response journal. The journal will help students personalize what they are reading. Ask students to write their reactions to people and events in the story. Suggest that they consider such questions as the following: Why do you think Zora's mother

encouraged her to climb the tree? Would you like to know someone like Zora? Why or why not? Would you like to be more like Zora? Why or why not?

Other Writing Activities

- I. Ask students to choose to respond to one or more of the following activities:
 1. Pretend you are Zora. Write in your diary about your feelings when your mother died. Tell why you will remember what you promised her.
 2. Write a poem about the chinaberry tree.
 3. Write a story that an older member of your family has told you about something that happened in the past.
 4. Pretend you are Zora's friend. Write her a letter encouraging her to remember her dreams and to find a way to keep her promise to her mother.
 5. Suppose that you were a parent. What would you tell your child to do in order to prepare for his or her future? Would you want your child to be independent like Zora? Write the advice you would give your child.

II. After students have read the story, arrange them into groups of four. Explain to them that the members of each group will take turns adding leaves to a "Tree of Dreams."

Provide each group with a large sheet of butcher paper on which you have drawn the outline of a tree. Tell students that they will take turns drawing leaves on the branches of the tree. Inside each leaf, they will write a dream. The dream may be personal, such as "Becoming a doctor," or universal, such as "Stopping famine in Africa." The students may take turns until they have run out of ideas or class time.

Use the trees as a "Forest of Dreams" to facilitate a discussion of dreams and aspirations. Be sure to display the "Forest of Dreams" in the classroom.

ESL Teaching Strategies

1. You might want to preview the main ideas and concepts in the story with your ESL students. Discuss with students the idea of remembering one's cultural heritage. Have students consider the idea that parents sometimes have different ideas about how their children should act.
2. After ESL students have read the story—or had it read to them—have them retell the story in their own words. You might wish them to retell the story to a partner who can then ask them to clarify points that he or she did not understand.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

In order to integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you might want to have students complete some of these activities.

Social Studies

1. Ask students to volunteer what they consider "boys' activities" and "girls' activities." After listing their ideas on the chalkboard under the appropriate headings, ask students why they classified the activities as they did. Elicit the fact that these are artificial designations. Encourage students to recognize that gender should not determine one's interests or activities.
2. In the story, the older people stop the clock at the moment of the mother's death and cover the mirrors with sheets. Ask students to find out about practices of other cultures when someone dies. Have students report their findings orally to the class.
3. Have students research some of the great African cultures, such as the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai; the forest kingdom of Benin; and the city states of East Africa. You might want to have some students to report their findings to the class orally. Other students might prepare maps to aid in the oral presentations.

Art

1. Tell students to research African masks or other artifacts. Then have students make a model of the cultural symbol they have researched. Tell students they may use clay, tissue paper, papier mache, or any other appropriate medium to recreate the artifact. Display the finished models in the classroom.
2. In the story, Zora lives in a small town in a rural community, but she dreams of going to distant cities. Have students use old magazines and newspapers to make two collages. The first collage will show life in a small town; the second will show life in a big city. Use the collages as the basis of a discussion of the two ways of life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

William Miller is an associate professor of English and creative writing at York College in York, PA, where he also teaches African American literature. He has published three books of poetry, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1991. *Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree* is his first picture book.

Miller was especially moved by Hurston's relationship with her mother, who died when she was still a young girl. One of his wishes in writing *Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree* is to capture the moment at which Hurston decided to become a writer—a moment of tragedy transformed into hope. Rounding out his trilogy about prominent African Americans, are *Frederick Douglass: The Last Day Of Slavery* and *Richard Wright And The Library Card*. He is also the author of *The Bus Ride*, *Night Golf*, *The Piano*, and *Rent Party Jazz*.

Cornelius Van Wright and **Ying-Hwa Hu** have been illustrating books together since 1989. For *Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree*, the husband and wife team did extensive research before beginning their illustrations, from studying pictures of 19th century clothing at the public library to visiting the New York Botanical Garden

to get the exact shape of the chinaberry tree. The latest book that Van Wright and Hu illustrated for LEE & LOW is *The Legend of Freedom Hill*.

Van Wright is a native New Yorker, and has a bachelor's degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Hu was born and raised in Taiwan, and has an associate of arts degree from Shih Chien College in Taipei and a bachelor's degree in education from St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, MN. They live in New York City with their two children. A full list of books jointly illustrated by the duo is listed below.

Awards & Reviews

Reading Rainbow Selection

"Pick of the Lists" *American Booksellers*

"This storybook...asizes the awareness of family, nature and community that is reflected in [Hurston's] writing."—*The New York Times*

"One of the most inspiring and beautiful children's books published this year." —*Rethinking Schools*

"[A] lyrical affirmation of life's unlimited potential."—*The Horn Book Magazine*

"This book may inspire girls to reach for their dreams." —*Creative Classroom*

Resources on the Web

Learn more about **Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree** visit:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/136/hc/zora_hurston_and_the_chinaberry_tree

Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree in Spanish:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/163/pb/zora_hurston_y_el_arbol_sonador

Other Books by William Miller

Richard Wright and the Library Card

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/99/hc/richard_wright_and_the_library_card

Richard Wright and the Library Card in Spanish:

www.leeandlow.com/books/158/hc/richard_wright_y_el_carne_de_biblioteca

Frederick Douglass: The Last Day of Slavery

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/51/hc/frederick_douglass_the_last_day_of_slavery

The Bus Ride

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/27/hc/the_bus_ride

Night Golf

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/87/hc/night_golf

The Piano

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/hc/the_piano

Rent Party Jazz

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/hc/rent_party_jazz

Joe Louis, My Champion

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/hc/joe_louis_my_championpal

Other Books by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu**Sam And Lucky Money:**

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/101/hc/sam_and_the_lucky_money

Sam And Lucky Money in Spanish:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/159/hc/sam_y_el_dinero_de_la_suerte

Sam And Lucky Money in Chinese

www.leeandlow.com/books/164/hc/sam_and_the_lucky_money_chinese

The Legend of Freedom Hill:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/78/hc/the_legend_of_freedom_hill

Booktalk with William Miller about Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/miller.mhtml>

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