Mules and Men Study Guide

Mules and Men by Zora Neale Hurston

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Plot Summary

Zora Neal Hurston says that she is relieved when someone tells her that she should go collect folk stories of the blacks of the Deep South. With a financial backer and an idea of where she wants to travel, she sets out to do just that. Upon arriving in Eatonville, Florida, she tells friends that she's come to record their biggest lies. The stories almost immediately begin to flow and Hurston begins making record of the stories and the storytellers.

Many of the stories focus on the days of slavery when a particular black slave - often named John - manages to outsmart a white master. Other stories explain aspects of everyday life, from the reason the dolphin's fin is "crosswise" to the reason dogs chase rabbits. Still other stories focus on legends. There is the slave with incredible strength who kills the Devil and is then refused admission to either Heaven or Hell, and the man who outwits the Devil and manages to marry his daughter. Still others are tall tales. As one story goes, there was a man who uses a single shot from his muzzle loader to kill turkey, partridges, a deer and ducks.

Hurston doesn't merely relate the stories but tells them as they were told to her. Typically there is a group of people gathered to hear the stories along with Hurston. The stories are sometimes prompted by other stories and the conversations are sometimes reduced to one-liners aimed at each other or at telling the biggest lies. These range from the stories of the ugliest men and the meanest bosses - including the man who didn't die but simply "uglied away."

Hurston spends time in different communities in order to reach a cross section of the culture and to learn new stories. She finds herself involved in a brawl in one town and participates in a fishing trip in another. She admits that she could spend a great deal more time on the topic of folklore but that she has other work to do.

Hurston then turns her attention to the stories of hoodoo. She travels to New Orleans, and there spends time with some of the hoodoo masters, including relatives of the famous hoodoo practitioner, Marie Leveau. She learns about spells and conjures and goes through a series of initiations in order to continue her studies. She relates stories of the power of hoodoo, including the man who sought revenge against the wealthy planter who had killed his daughter. Hurston also relates some details about ghosts, such as the fact that ghosts never cross water.

Folk Tales, Chapters 1 through 3

Folk Tales, Chapters 1 through 3 Summary

The story opens with Hurston crossing the line into Eatonville township, Florida. There are a number of people who meet her as she comes into town. They ask how long she's going to be in town and she says that she's staying for several months in order to hear all the tall tales and folk stories they can tell. She says she plans to stay with "Mett," Hurston's friend Armetta Jones and her husband Ellis who live on Front Street.

Hurston is quickly told that she's come to the right place for hearing the stories. One man says that some in the area are good for nothing other than telling lies and "murdering groceries." Two men arrive at Mett's house that evening and begin telling stories. James Mosely relates the story of the angels who were rolling barrels of water around in heaven so quickly that they broke several and caused the Johnstown flood. A black man who'd drown in the flood goes to heaven and is made welcome, but spends a great deal of time telling everyone about the flood. He later tells Saint Peter that one man in heaven had been very rude, refusing to listen to the story. Upon further questioning, Saint Peter says that man was Noah, and that there's probably nothing he doesn't already know about floods.

Hurston is invited to a "toe party," and she asks what that is. She learns that the young women at the party stand behind a curtain with only their toes sticking out. The young men "buy" the toes and have the opportunity to spend time with the young lady and to spend money on her over the course of the evening. Hurston says that some of the young men are disappointed with their "purchases" and that some ungallantly run from the room rather than spend the time with the young lady. Hurston says that there are several people at the party when she arrives with her car piled down with guests, but that the party doesn't become a fun event until the arrival of the Eatonville folks. The party continues for several hours and Hurston has her toes "sold" five times over the course of the evening. She eats a great deal and dances as well. She tries a local liquor called "coon dick" but says it is too strong for her tastes. They all pile back into Hurston's car for the trip home.

In chapter two, Hurston gathers the following day with several people, including a man named Charlie Jones who says that "Big Moose done come down from de mountain," meaning that important things are soon to happen. Hurston says that Charlie and George Thomas are soon telling so many stories that she could have written a book without talking to anyone else. They are joined by Ellis Jones and B. Mosley, and the talk turns to preachers. One of the men relates the story of a man who wanted to be a preacher. The man laid down beside a log and said, "Now Lawd, if you don't pick me up and chunk me on de other side of dis log, Ah know you done called me to preach." Because he wasn't picked up and hurled to the other side of the log, he told everyone that he'd been "called to preach." Ellis counters with a story about two brothers. The older preaches in a large church and the younger becomes a preacher as well, but is

barely making ends meet with his tiny congregation. He finally gives up and returns to plowing, saying that's what he'd been called to do anyway.

The crowd has grown by this point and Charlie Jones explains why the congregations of so many churches argue and then split into separate churches. He says that Christ takes the disciples for a walk one day, instructing each to pick up a rock. Peter picks up the smallest rock he can find and when it is time to eat, Christ turns the rocks into bread for their noon meal. Peter has little to eat and the next time Christ tells them to pick up a rock, Peter takes an entire mountain. After walking for awhile, Christ says that he'll use Peter's rock as the foundation of the church. Peter objects and demands that Christ turn his mountain into bread. Christ obeys and uses the other rocks - all very small - to piece together the foundation for the church.

There erupts a minor dispute about the color of skin with two men talking about the darkness of the other's skin. A woman who is called Gold then tells the story of why some people have black skin. She says that God has created a great number of people at the same time he's creating the oceans and the mountains, but that God hadn't created an entire person at a time. Instead, he creates the people, then hands out eyes on a particular day and teeth on another, and so on until the day comes when God is going to hand out color for skin tones. Gold says that everyone arrives at the appointed time "except de niggers." God, wanting to finish his day's work, sends the angels searching for the missing people and the angels find them all asleep. The people are rousted and rush to God's side. In their hurry, they bump into each other and the angels, turning over footstools and shoving God's throne aside. God loudly yells at them to "git back." Gold says that the people misunderstand and believe that God has ordered them to "git black." She finishes the story by saying, "and they been black ever since."

Mathilda Mosley then tells the story explaining how women came to have the advantage over men. According to her story, men and women are originally created equal in strength by God. Then the man asks God to increase his strength to give him an advantage. God does and the man is then physically superior to the woman. The woman, on the advice of the Devil, asks God for a set of three keys - one to the kitchen, one to the bedroom and one to the man's future generations. The woman simply locks the doors to these three things whenever the man uses his strength against the woman.

In chapter three, a youngster named Julius Henry tells the complicated story of a slave named John who gets the better of his master by making the master kill his own horse, then his own grandmother before allowing John to drown him. There is a woman named Shug, short for Sugar, who says that Julius's story is "a over average lie." She compares it to a wind she'd witnessed that blew so hard that the days of the week were scattered so that "Sunday didn't come till late Tuesday evening." A man named John French is next with a story of brothers named Jack and Jim who'd gotten their inheritance before their father's death. One settles down to farm and the other makes a bet with the Devil, eventually outsmarting the Devil and running away with his daughter. The lengthy story is finished when Jack Jones says that if the story had been something worthwhile, John probably couldn't remember it. Hurston is soon planning to head out of town for another area where she hopes to gather a new perspective and more stories.

Folk Tales, Chapters 1 through 3 Analysis

The story begins with an introduction in which Hurston describes her excitement when she was given permission to return to the South to gather the stories of tall tales and folklore of her people. She says that she had grown up with these stories but that she had been too close to them to fully appreciate them until she was away at college. She describes the way she comes to decide to go to Florida, the home of her childhood. She concludes her introduction with a thanks to Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, a woman who had backed Hurston's trip, both financially and emotionally.

There's an interesting point that appears in Gold's story of how her race of people came to have black skin tones. Gold tells the story of God handing out color for skin tones and says that there were "niggers" who didn't show up on time. The fact that these people were, in Gold's story, already set apart from the other races is significant. This separation is present and important even without the black skin tone.

It's important that the reader understand that many of the people cited by Hurston are her friends and extended family, but there are others who are unfamiliar to her prior to the story-telling times. These events draw crowds of people, most with an eye toward hearing the stories as a means of entertainment, though some want to participate in the stories. The appearance of the young man named Julius Henry is interesting in that he's younger than most of the men participating, but he tells his story anyway. There seems to be a level of measured tolerance for the younger generation butting into these conversations, almost as if the older generations are judging the youngsters based on their story-telling. This is seen again in later chapters. An interesting aspect of this blending is the level of sophistication and length of the story. While the stories told by the older people are generally straightforward - even though they are also unbelievable - the stories of these youngsters tend to be more convoluted with twists and turns in the plot apparently aimed at keeping the listeners' attention for a longer span of time. This isn't the rule as other experienced story tellers also provide lengthy stories, but seems to be a general tendency.

Folk Tales, Chapters 4 through 6

Folk Tales, Chapters 4 through 6 Summary

In chapter four, Hurston travels to Polk County, then sees a sign announcing the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Loughma, Florida, and decides to stop there. She finds the people distrustful initially because many of them are on the run from the law. Hurston says that there is one woman, Babe Hill, who had been on the run from the law for killing her husband. She'd been caught and taken to jail before the case was dropped. Hurston says she doesn't want to mislead the reader, and says that women who kill are punished, though she believes there to be a "quota" before justice is exacted. She says that she probably once knew what that number was, but has since forgotten. She does say that there's a woman there who had killed five men and that "the sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely."

After Hurston spreads the story that she had been a bootlegger, explaining how she'd come by both the car and the money for her expensive clothes, she is more accepted by the people. On payday, she travels with a group to Pine Mill for a dance but finds that she's not invited to dance and that conversations around her become quieter and stilted. Finally, a man named Mr. Pitts introduces himself to Hurston. He tells her that people are afraid of her because of her wealthy appearance. He goes on to say that most of them wouldn't know how to treat a woman of her caliber anyway. He says that he would personally make certain that he didn't wake her in the morning, that he cooked his own breakfast and then left enough for her on the back of the stove for when she woke, and that he knows how to talk. As a demonstration, he talks in a falsetto voice, saying "Yes, Ma'am," to her question. Hurston laughs with the others and her acceptance into the community is sealed. She sings "John Henry" later and her reputation precedes her into other communities during her project.

Later, Hurston plans to go with some of the men on their day's work out in the swamps, where she's promised she'll hear a great many tall tales. The workday is cancelled when the foreman is ill and the men are told to check in at the mill. On the way to the mill, the men tell stories about the ugliest people and the meanest bosses they've known. One says that there was a man so ugly that he had to pull a sheet over his head at night so that sleep could slip up on him. Another counters that he'd known a man so ugly that they dipped him in the Mississippi River and had "skimmed ugly for six months." When someone says that has to be the biggest lie, another counters that he'd known that same man and that he hadn't died, but had just "uglied away." On the subject of mean bosses, one says that there was a boiler explosion and that one boss had docked the men for the time they were in the air because they were off the job.

There follows some longer stories. One involves John, who's sent to the field by his master to find the person stealing corn. John finds that it's a bear and grabs the animal's tail but then discovers that he can't turn it loose because the bear will then eat him. He holds the bear all night, and when the master arrives the next morning he grabs the tail

and sends John for help. John promptly lays down and fans himself, telling the master to go ahead and let go whenever he wants, that John had tried to do that very thing all night. Jim Presley then tells the story of how there were two large packages and the white man and black man raced to get them. The black man won and claimed the larger, which turned out to be tools. The white man accepted the smaller, which turned out to be a pen and paper. Jim says that the black man has been working hard and the white man has been figuring ever since.

In chapter five, Joe Wiley tells about two slaves. The first told the second that he'd cussed the master and the master hadn't done anything. The second, not to be outdone, cussed the master and was beaten for it. The first then says that he hadn't done it to the master's face, but while he was some distance from the man. The second later tells the first that he'd looked up the "drawers" of the missus. The first, not to be outdone, does the same and is beaten for it. The second says that he had looked up the drawers while they were hanging on the line, not while the missus was wearing them.

They arrive at the mill and sit around telling more stories for a time. Joe Wiley tells the story of a slave named John who'd been on the verge of being hanged by the master. Another slave is in the tree above John, striking matches as he prays. This convinces the master that there's lightening and that John's prayers are being heard, prompting him to set John free. Joe says this is the reason some slaves were set free while others remained in slavery. There are several more stories told before the men check in and discover that they aren't needed.

In chapter eight, those who had been fishing together leave the lake to return home. They plan to go to the "jook joint" later that night, but while they are still at home they hear voices and learn that a traveling preacher has arrived. Some wander outside to listen and to join in the singing while others go on about their business.

Folk Tales, Chapters 4 through 6 Analysis

Hurston's stop at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company isn't planned but is a spur-of-the-moment decision. She isn't deterred by the fact that the property is supposedly off limits to those not employed by the lumber company and finds a room to rent for her stay. However, Hurston doesn't fit in with this poor, rural community. She is extremely out of place, mainly because of her car and her clothes. She explains away her outward show of wealth - including her dress from Macy's that had cost more than twelve dollars - by saying that she and her man had been bootleggers. She explains her appearance in the camp by saying that she's on the run from the law - a common occurrence in this region. Interestingly, it still takes some time for her to gain the trust of the people who fear that she's associated with the law and that her purpose in being in the camp is to spy on them and to report back to someone.

Hurston's telling of the attitude about women killing men is interesting in that she is obviously telling a tall tale herself. It should be noted that the justice system of the day would hardly have gone out of the way to bring blacks who'd murdered blacks to justice.

However, Hurston's exaggeration that one woman had killed five men and that the sheriff was "considering" calling the woman in for a severe "scolding" is an example of the fact that she can tell tall tales as well as the other storytellers she interviews during this project.

Folk Tales, Chapters 7 through 10

Folk Tales, Chapters 7 through 10 Summary

Hurston is with a group of people telling stories, and over the course of the time, several stories spark other stories. The events also spark other stories. For example, someone is chided for their unwillingness to fire off a gun in what he sees as unfavorable circumstances. This sparks the story of a slave sent out to shoot a deer with the master's gun but the slave refuses to fire, saying he wasn't going to risk harming the master's gun by shooting uphill. That sparks stories about guns and another man tells about firing out the doorway into the dark one night. He says that there is a strange noise outside all night and the next morning he discovers that it's the bullet, waiting for daylight to figure out which way it's supposed to go.

Larkins White tells the story of a man who has one load of ammunition left for his muzzle-loader and goes hunting. He sees nothing for several miles then sees turkey, deer, ducks and partridges. He shoots the limb with the turkeys and they fall to the ground, dying on impact. The ball continues its travel and kills all the ducks on the pond. The gun explodes and kills the deer. The explosion knocks the man back and he smothers the partridges. He knows he has to have the wagon to carry it all home and goes to get it. It's such a heavy load that he walks home beside the mule. He then sees that the traces connecting the mule to the wagon have stretched in the rain, stretching back out of sight. The man stables the mule and waits. The traces, drying and shrinking in the sunlight the following day, draws the wagon home.

Floyd Thomas says that even God reserves the right to change his mind. He says that God had made the entire world when the flowers said that they were lonely. God then took tiny shears and snipped scraps from lots of places. The scraps fluttered by and were called "flutter-bys" but the people soon became confused and called them "butterflies." Another of the men tells the story of a snail who is ill and sends her husband to fetch the doctor. After seven years, she hears a shuffling at the door and says that she's relieved that the husband has returned. He says that he's just now made it to the door to go get the doctor.

In chapter nine, the group arrives at the juke joint, where a raucous card game is underway. There is dancing as well. Alcohol is prohibited, but someone makes an alcoholic drink out of Sterno and sugar so that at least one man is soon feeling its effects. Possession of drink is cause for being taken to jail but in the illegal version, it remains possible to get. Hurston notes that it's also dangerous to the health of the drinker and the maker, but that doesn't stop the production either. There is an ongoing argument between some of the women and it has spilled over to include Hurston. On this night, she fears that she might get caught up in a fight, but a woman named Big Sweet promises to watch out for her. An argument erupts between them, with Hurston in the middle. Hurston believes that there's going to be a killing over the fight. She says that there's only one thing that could possibly have ended the fight, and that it happens

when the Quarter Boss walks in and breaks up the fight. He sends the women away, warning those who don't work on this job that they'll be jailed if they try to return. During the next payday gathering, Hurston is again attacked and decides that it's time for her to leave.

In chapter ten, Hurston heads onward to Mulberry, Pierce and Lakeland and says that she picks up an extraordinary amount of information about children's games and stories. In Pierce, the company that provides housing similar to the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company is much more conscientious about the living conditions than the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company had been. This company provides good housing and a community center. Hurston points out the differences as noteworthy. She says that in Pierce she finds a man named Mark C. Ford who turns out to be a "mighty story teller." Mark asks Hurston if she's ever noticed that the dolphin's tail is "crosswise." He says that the dolphin had originally been able to traverse the earth as quickly as the sun and that God hadn't been happy to discover this, so grabs the dolphin by the tail and turns the fins. The dolphin is still fast, Mark says, but not as fast as the sun.

When someone says "unh-hunh" without properly saying "yes," Mark says there's a reason that sound is used for "yes." He says that the Devil went to heaven once to kidnap a bunch of angels to help him with his work. The Devil has angels in his hands, wrapped in his tail, under his arms and in his mouth. When someone asks him a question and he opens his mouth to say "yes," he loses the angels. When someone asks another question, he says "unh-hunh." He then asks Hurston if she knows why God made "li'l women." When she says she doesn't, he says that their purpose is to "beautify" the world. He says that the purpose of big women is to show "slim girls how far they kin stretch without bustin.'" One heavyset woman takes offense at the story and leaves angry, though not before making it known that she's angry.

Mark then tells the story of "Big Sixteen," a slave who takes his name from his shoe size. Big Sixteen does anything his master asks and is very strong. His master sends him to catch the Devil and he does, killing him in the process. When Big Sixteen dies, he goes to heaven, but the angels fear he can't be controlled and refuse to let him enter. Mark says that the man "has to go somewhere" so he goes to hell, but the Devil's children recognize him as the man who killed their father. The Devil's wife gives him a chunk of hot coal and tells him to go start his own hell somewhere else. Big Sixteen leaves and Mark says that he's wandering still, and that he's sometimes seen as a jack-o-lantern.

Mark goes on to tell some other stories, some of them meant to be spooky. Hurston then receives a letter from Big Sweet with the news that a couple there were to be married and that Hurston is invited. She arrives but is afraid to be out on her own for fear that she'll be attacked again. When a scuffle erupts, Jim Presley urges her to run, saying that some of those in the joint will die and others will be taken to jail. She runs away and says that she sees the sun rising as she approaches Crescent City.

Folk Tales, Chapters 7 through 10 Analysis

While Hurston could easily have presented the tales as a series of stories, she takes time to put them into context. For example, as chapter seven opens, Hurston is talking with several people and one tells a story of a dog and a rabbit, both courting the same girl, and that the rabbit grows jealous of the dog's singing and so slits his mouth, ending his ability to sing. That, according to the story tell, also ends any chance of friendship between the dog and the rabbit. That story sparks another about the enmity between the dog and the rabbit and that story sparks another, and so on. This is an interesting way of presenting the stories that would otherwise be extremely disjointed.

There is near constant chiding among the men and women telling the stories, as some profess the stories to be truth and others saying they must be lies. These arguments occasionally become heated, though are mainly in fun. At one point there is an argument over whether this kind of lying will cause a person to go to hell. When one man says that they should all shut up and fish, Joe Wiley counters that the man must be getting old if he doesn't want to hear some good lies. Joe then says that good lies are like sound doctrine in that some people just can't stand to hear it.

There are many aspects of the stories that seem to have hidden meanings. Larkins says that this is the case. He compares it to stories of the Bible, saying that not everyone can understand the meanings of every story. Larkins then tells another story. Naturally, he follows that announcement with a story.

Mark tells several stories that are meant to be spooky and, as is typical of this kind of story, the setting is typically a graveyard. The stories lose a great deal in print translation because the storyteller would engage his listeners in ways an author can't engage her readers. This loss makes the stories seem dry and unimportant, but they do lead into the section of the book Hurston refers to as "hoodoo."

Hoodoo, Chapters 1 through 7

Hoodoo, Chapters 1 through 7 Summary

In chapter one, Hurston notes that she could spend much more time gathering the stories and folklore of the black culture, but that she's aware that there's a limit to her resources and she still has to gather information about the "hoodoo." Hurston notes that in the first six days, God created world. She says those were six days of "magic spells and mighty words." On the seventh, according to Hurston, God rested and man was created "around half-past five on the sixth day," meaning that man doesn't know how any of the previous creations occurred. Hurston says that hoodoo is founded and based on secrecy, meaning that nobody really talks about where it "begins and ends" except to other believers. In an effort to prepare to write about hoodoo, Hurston searches for a teacher. She finds a woman named Eulalia who practices hoodoo, specifically focusing on matters of the heart.

In chapter two, Hurston finds additional information but admits that much of it is not worth relating. She says that one common link between those known for their hoodoo is their link to Marie Leveau. While she's studying Marie Leveau, Hurston encounters a man named Luke Turner, who is reportedly the nephew of the famed hoodoo woman. Hurston says that by the time she meets Turner she's gone through five initiations, and she begins to plead with him to take her as a pupil. He is initially uninterested and tries to make her go away, a fact that Hurston puts down to his natural confidence in his own abilities. He is sometimes rude, but she persists and finally names an exorbitant price in order to take her as a student. She says that she "dickers" with him and gets him talking about his aunt, Marie Leveau.

According to Turner's story, Leveau was born February 2, 1827, that her parents weren't married and that she was a Creole Quadroon. Both her grandmother and mother were hoodoo doctors. She isn't really interested until a hoodoo doctor named Alexander senses her power and takes her as a pupil. However, Leveau wasn't ready to commit to the study until a rattlesnake talks to her. Turner says that after many people begin asking Leveau for potions and spells, the police decide to arrest her. She sends them away with spells, first one, then two, then four, then an entire police force. Turner says that Leveau plans a feast on the Eve of St. John's, "partly because she is Catholic and partly because of hoodoo." She disappears for the nine days prior to the feast then walks into the lake and disappears for the nine days following the feast. Turner says that Leveau had realized that he was afraid during a particular event and tells him that he's right to be afraid. She then tells him to build an altar of his own and to wait there for the power, which he does. Turner's story about Leveau goes on to include some of the spells she casts and he says that a person who has "the last curse" would be better off dead.

Hurston takes the initiation under Turner, nothing that she'd gone through it before with other hoodoo doctors. This time she is given a crown made of a snakeskin. She notes

that her other crowns had been made of various materials, including bark, egg shells and material. She says that the significance has nothing to do with what it's made of but only the purpose for it. The initiation goes on with Hurston lying naked, face down, on a snakeskin. She later steps through a tub of water. Other items included in her initiation are iced cakes, serpent-shaped beads, spinach and egg cakes, breaded Chinese okra, two yellow bouquets, two red bouquets and two white bouquets, thirty-six yellow tapered candles and holy water. Turner directs her on each step of the ceremony until, at ten that night, they go to a place in the swamp. Hurston calls it "dismal" and says that they kill a sheep there.

Over the next five months, Turner continues to study with Turner and recites several spells Turner casts with Hurston's help. In one case, he casts a spell to get a man out of town then drops dead chickens along the highway. The spirits of these chickens are to keep the man from ever returning. The woman who asks for the spell says she'd rather have the man dead, but Turner says he won't kill the man and the woman agrees to the exile instead. Hurston says that Turner foresees his own death "one year and seventy-nine days" in the future. He asks Hurston to remain as his partner and to take over his work when he dies. She says that it's with "great sorrow" that she says she can't fulfill that request.

In chapter three, Hurston moves on to study with Anatol Pierre. He also lives in New Orleans and claims kinship to Marie Leveau. He is an octoroon and Hurston describes him as "very emotional." He takes her on as a pupil, and her initiation is held on a Saturday. The items for this initiation are lavender "toilet water," orange blossom water, parsley, sugar, salt, two long pink candles and "Jap honeysuckle perfume." Hurston says Pierre comes to her house at Belville Court. The ingredients are mixed into a bath and Hurston is "bathed by the teacher." She then resumes her studies, though she is now recognized as an advanced student.

Hurston relates the story of a man named Muttsy Ivins, who says he fears for his life. Pierre immediately contradicts the man, saying that he fears for his life because he's sleeping with the wife of a jealous man. Muttsy pays two hundred fifty dollars and Pierre casts a spell with Hurston's help. Following the spell, which includes burying a dead chicken, a cat and a doll in a coffin, Pierre and Hurston burn candles at midnight for nine nights. Then Pierre sleeps "in a holy place in a black draped coffin" for ninety nights. In Hurston's words, "and the man died."

In chapter four, Hurston becomes a pupil of Reverend Father Joe Watson. He is called the "Frizzly Rooster" because of his ability to unearth and undo hoodoo, regardless of who had cast the spell originally. Hurston notes that he's a dynamic personality and has women throwing themselves at his feet, despite that fact that they all seem to fear him as well. His wife seems to know that she could be replaced at any time and whispers to Hurston that she's going to leave him. She claims that the hold Watson has over her is financial and that if she could obtain a piece of the coral he has as the center of his power, she'd leave him and start a business of her own. Hurston suggests that she take Watson's coral and let him find a replacement, but the wife seems to fear that idea.

Hurston's initiation by Watson and his wife is a complex event utilizing little other than candles. She is to light her candle using each of the candles on an altar, so that she lights her candle, pinches it out and relights it until she's used each of the candles as a source of the flame. She is carried through a maze and kicks over candles as she goes with explicit instructions that she not try again if she misses one. She says that the initiation concludes when she is sprinkled lightly with holy sand and water "and confirmed as a Boss of Candles." Soon after this, she's told to hold "consultations" on her own. When she tells Watson that she's nervous, he says that she should talk to the people who come to her, then talk to him before taking action. Her first consultation is a woman who says that the man who shot her husband is going to get off without punishment. Watson tells Hurston to charge the woman five dollars. Hurston then describes her participation in a spell in which Hurston has to catch a black cat and boil it. She says that each time the cat screams she is to curse it and she does. She says that as the spell is nearing its end, Watson and his wife rush to her side and that there follows "indescribable noises" and feelings, and that she believes death to be near, though at daybreak the following day she is safely at home.

Dr. Duke is Hurston's next teacher. He is known as a "swamper" because he spends a great deal of time in the swamp. Hurston notes that most hoodoo doctors buy herbs and other supplies but that Duke finds and gathers his own. He focuses on "law cases," and Hurston says she knows that he is paid a hundred and eighty-five dollars to perform a spell to get a man out of jail after being accused of attempted murder. Hurston relates some of the recipes, such as how to silence an opposing witness using beef tongue, nine needles and nine pins. Hurston tells the story of a woman who says she wants her husband to be gone. She says that he won't support her but also won't leave so that someone else can. Duke questions her, saying that she has to be certain this is really what she wants. He points out that some women say they want the man gone but take it back the following day. Hurston says that the woman assures Duke that she wants her husband gone and he gives her a complicated spell to enact. She is to take the dirt from his right foot track and "parch" it in a skillet. The spell is detailed to the point that she must have a dark bottle to put the dirt in and that she must add it to a dirt dauber nest. She is to then pour the concoction - which includes cayenne pepper - into a sock and tie the top of the sock while looking away. She is then to follow another complicated set of instructions to dispose of the sock in the river.

Hurston spends some time with Dr. Samuel Jenkins. She says that he does "some work," but focuses on reading the cards. She says that most of his clients are white and upper-class and says that they believe in him. Hurston says that he makes a wish on her behalf that comes true when a white woman pledges never-ending support.

Hurston then relates information regarding the dead. Those include that ghosts do not cross water and that rain on a funeral is a sign that God is displeased with the dead and wants to wash even his footprints from the earth. A murder victim who is buried in a sitting position can be assured that the murderer will be brought swiftly to justice. Hurston also offers some warnings. She says that a ghost that is displeased by the actions of a person may slap that person so that the head snaps sideways and the neck

refuses to straighten up. She says that this is incentive to "speak gently to ghosts" and their children.

In chapter six, Hurston relates a series of tales about hoodoo and its power, including the use of hoodoo to correct injustices. In one of the stories, a wealthy planter kills a young black girl who works for him, then demands that her mother and father - also his employees - clean up the mess. The parents know there will be no justice for the murder and they quietly leave, though not before the father soaks a handkerchief in the girl's blood. One night the planter sees a man run through his yard and he's certain it's his victim's father. The planter's wife immediately becomes hysterical and tries to kill her husband. She's institutionalized and the planter moves with his children to another area. One night he sees a black man and is certain it's again the father of his victim. As he rushes outside to chase the man, his son attacks him with a poker and the man eventually gives in to pressure to have the boy institutionalized as well. The man and his daughter move again but the father of his victim tracks him down and his daughter soon attacks her father. She would have killed him except that she'd failed to put shells in the gun. This, according to Hurston, is the power of hoodoo.

In chapter seven, Hurston studies under Kitty Brown. Hurston describes Kitty as a Catholic who loves to put love affairs and marriages together. She raises an herb garden and is often called on when fresh herbs are necessary. Hurston says that Kitty teaches her ways to bring back a mate. Her best client is a woman named Minnie Foster, who constantly seeks some form of assistance from Kitty in order to assure her situation with her lover. One week she wants to bind him closer to her and the next she wants to make sure he'll return from a business trip. Kitty seems tolerant, though sometimes she becomes impatient with Minnie.

Hurston concludes the section with a brief story about a cat that catches a rat. As the cat is about to eat the rat, the rat says that the cat can't eat without washing her face and hands first. The cat, not wanting the rat to believe that she has no manners, goes to wash and finds the rat gone upon her return. When the cat catches another rat, the rat asks if she's going to wash her face and hands. The cat responds that she has manners but that she's going to use them after dinner.

Hoodoo, Chapters 1 through 7 Analysis

Hurston begins the "hoodoo" section of the book by noting that "belief in magic is older than writing." She says that it's because of this that no one knows how it started. She has a point. Some of the earliest historical writings note a belief in magic as an established part of culture. Hurston also sets the stage for the upcoming hoodoo section of the book by noting the hoodoo version of the creation. Hurston says that some people refer to this magic as "voodoo," and that it's one and the same.

Turner talks about the misconceptions related to Marie Leveau. He says that she'd held dances with plenty of food each month and that everyone was invited to these events. Turner says that the "white people" had come only to watch, and - apparently - to judge.

He says that these whites had expected to find hoodoo rituals and believed the dances they saw to be just that. But Turner says, as Hurston has already pointed out, that hoodoo is a private matter and people don't show off the hoodoo rituals to non-believers. These dances were likely very primitive in their manner and this is probably what made the bystanders believe them to be hoodoo. Turner and Hurston use this as an example of the misconceptions related to hoodoo.

Hurston notes that what "works with one person has no effect on another." For a rational person who wants to explain away these events of hoodoo, it seems more likely that coincidence wins out occasionally and the spell that's put on a person comes true now and then, just as the natural course of events. It seems likely that the complicated instructions may play a role in this. The person who finds that a particular spell doesn't work may discover that they've done some aspect of the spell incorrectly, resulting in a failed spell without the hoodoo practitioner losing face.

Hurston's participation in the hoodoo rituals seems completely out of character. She apparently spends more than a year at this part of the project based on the number of months she says she spends with various hoodoo practitioners. During that time, she participates in a number of hoodoo rituals and initiations, apparently without fear for either her safety or her soul. She doesn't at all address the conflict of hoodoo and religion and apparently has no fear of repercussions for her actions. The reader who had expected the second part of the book to be light-hearted and filled with fun stories as the first part had been is bound to be disappointed. Hurston herself seems to fully believe in the hoodoo. Though she doesn't defend the belief or the hoodoo itself, she does seem to approach the subject fully expecting that all readers will also believe.

Characters

Zora Neal Hurston

Author of the book and the main point of view for the story. Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, and it's here that she begins her quest to record "Negro folklore." Hurston has been away from the Deep South for some time, living in the North where she's earned a college degree. She says that she was "relieved" when someone told her to return to her roots and write the book about the tall tales of her childhood. She doesn't explain this, but it seems that she clings to those roots, even when she's expanding her own life experiences. Hurston feels a need to remain connected to people of her culture and her return to her hometown is significant in her welcome.

However, when she steps into another community, she finds the people distrustful, and it takes some time for her to become accepted among their ranks. Hurston seems to feel the effects of this strongly and quickly alters her story and her appearance in order to fit in. Her attitude regarding her people, her heritage and their stories is that it's important and deserves to be preserved. She meets with some skepticism when she explains her quest to record as many of the tall tales and legends as she can. However, those who are skeptical of her mission are more than willing to give her the stories she needs.

An interesting aspect of Hurston's work is that she probably could have written the book without returning to the South to hear the stories again. She'd heard these kinds of stories all through her childhood but feels the only way to adequately approach this job is to hear them again as an adult and to immediately put them on paper so that she retains the accuracy of the story and the storyteller.

John

The epitome of the slave in the black folklore. This is the name used most often in the storytellers' versions of the legends and fables involving slaves. John is typically smart and often outsmarts his master. In one of the stories, John tricks his master into killing his own horse and grandmother before allowing John to drown him. Meanwhile, John has made a great deal of money from the tragedies of his own life. John is also the source of comic relief in some stories. In one case, John grabs hold of a bear's tale and spends a great deal of time trying to figure out how to let go without letting the bear eat him. When his master grabs onto the tail, John lets go and, rather than running for help, tells the master that he's been trying to turn lose for hours. John's ability to outwit his master is used in one story to explain why some slaves achieved freedom while others remained in slavery. In that case, John calls on a friend to pose in a tree and to everything John prays, the friend strikes a match, making the master think that John has a direct line to God. This so frightens the master that he sets John free.

James Mosley

One of the first to tell Hurston a tall tale upon her arrival in Florida. James tells the story of the black man who dies during the Johnstown flood and who is trying to tell everyone in heaven about his experiences when he encounters Noah who knows all there is to know about floods.

Gold

The woman who tells the story of God handing out color for skin tone. The people who didn't show up on time were rousted out of their naps by angels and they hurried to God's side, shoving and pushing their way to be near him. God yells at them to "git back" and they misunderstand, thinking he's told them to "git black." Gold's last name is not revealed and she seems to be a new acquaintance of Hurston's at the time she tells the story.

Joe Wiley

The man at the Everglades Cypress Camp who tells the story of the two slaves who'd sought to outdo each other with their daring toward the master and missus of the plantation. One had convinced the other to cuss the master and then had been tricked into looking up the missus's "drawers." Joe tells several other stories as well.

Larkins White

The man who tells the story of killing the turkey, ducks, partridges and deer with a single shot of a muzzle loader. Larkins' story doesn't end with this incredible shot, but goes on to include the hunter's troubles as he hauls his game home.

Floyd Thomas

The man who tells the story of the God having changed his mind. The story goes that the flowers were lonely and that God decides to create "flutter-bys" to keep the flowers company. The people, according to Floyd's story, soon got the name wrong and the flying insects became known as "butterflies."

Mark Ford

The man who Hurston describes as a "mighty storyteller" in Pierce. Mark tells the story explaining why the dolphin's tail is crosswise and several others. He's accepted as a storyteller among the people of his community and some seem to resent it when someone else steps in with a story of their own.

Big Sweet

The woman who promises to watch Hurston's back while she is in the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company's camp. Big Sweet is a large woman and isn't at all afraid to stand up for herself.

Luke Turner

The nephew of the famous hoodoo practitioner Marie Leveau, Turner is initially uninterested in taking Hurston on as a pupil. When he finally agrees, he takes her through an initiation and is pleased with her progress during the months that follow. Turner foresees his own death and asks Hurston to remain with him as his partner and to take over his business upon his death. Hurston notes that she's sad that she can't accept.

Objects/Places

Eatonville, Florida

Where Hurston grew up and the first stop on her quest to gather the folklore of the Black communities.

Front Street

Where Hurston stays with her friend, Armetta Jones, while in Eatonville.

Toe-Party

A dance of sorts in which the young ladies hide behind a curtain with only their toes sticking out and the young men "buy" the toes, earning the right to dance and spend time with the young ladies.

Wood Bridge

Where Hurston attends a toe-party soon after her arrival in Florida.

Polk County, Florida

Where Hurston goes to spend time with another group of storytellers.

Pine Mill

Where a dance is held while Hurston is staying in Polk County.

Everglades Cypress Lumber Company

The company that owns the camp where Hurston stays for a time in Polk County.

Loughman, Florida

Where the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company is located.

Pierce, Florida

Where Hurston goes after having the fight in Loughman.

New Orleans

Where Hurston goes to study hoodoo.

Themes

The Importance of Heritage

Hurston admits to being relieved when she's told to go collect folklore from the culture of the blacks in the Deep South. She doesn't say who told her to go or how the project came about, but it seems obvious that this was important to her because it provides intensive ties to the roots of her heritage. This culture will likely seem familiar to anyone growing up in the South during this time, but the importance of gathering this information could be lost on anyone who doesn't share Hurston's heritage. The stories are sometimes silly, often unbelievable, and almost completely falsehoods. With few exceptions, the stories could not be true. However, this is exactly what makes them important to the culture. These stories represent a basis of the culture. For example, there are the stories explaining how the animals came to be enemies and others explaining how particular animals came into existence. These are typical of a culture in which science has not yet offered explanations. In addition, the stories about slaves ties the people of Hurston's time to their ancestors who were held in bondage. Very often, the slave is a brilliant tactician who holds power none of them had in the times of slavery. In fact, the blacks of the 1960s when Hurston is collecting her data are still subservient to most of their white peers. While the folklore and hoodoo stories are in no way the sum total of the culture of the blacks of the Deep South, they are important reminders of the ancestry and heritage of those people.

The Lasting Impact of Slavery

The impact of slavery on the lives of the blacks is seen mainly through their stories. A great many of their legends focus on the slave named "John," who seems to be the epitome of every slave, and the "Massa," or master. It should be noted that in Hurston's stories, "Massa" is always capitalized, indicating the importance of this man's role in the lives of the blacks at the time. In the stories, John is sometimes able to get the better of the master, an indication that this is desirable, though it seldom happens. John is often beaten, again making the point that this is often the case. The importance of the relationship between the blacks and their white owners continues to be an important aspect of life for these descendants of slaves. Many of the stories relate the reason the black man works so hard. For example, there are two packages in the road and the white man and black man race to them. The black man wins and takes the largest package for himself. The white man doesn't argue and takes the smaller. The black man finds tools - shovels, picks and hoes - while the white man finds a pen and paper. Since this time, the black man has worked hard and the white man has spent his time figuring ways to make the black man work harder. These stories indicate the typical attitudes of the 1960s, the time when Hurston was gathering her stories.

Belief in Hoodoo

While some may not believe in the power of hoodoo, Hurston obviously does. She goes to great lengths to conduct this research and believes that the men and women who take her as their pupil are able to cast spells, conjure and control people and events. Hurston goes so far as to cite one hoodoo doctor who uses a spell to cause death. This power is such that Hurston claims to have had some sort of near-death experience after boiling a black cat as part of a spell. She says that she heard "indescribable" noises and cannot explain what she felt, but that she knew death was nearby. She doesn't go into any additional detail on this topic, but it seems another example of her belief. Hurston also cites a case in which a man makes a wish on her behalf. The man wishes that a woman would grant Hurston never-ending help. Hurston says that a telegram arrives the next day with the woman's pledge of support. She doesn't elaborate on this point either, and it's not clear whether this is someone who had already pledged support or even what form the support would take. It seems that Hurston's belief in hoodoo is somewhat over the top in that she is willing to go through elaborate initiations. These sometimes involve her being naked with her teachers and require extensive preparations. She sometimes fasts for days and once has a sheep killed as part of the ritual.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the viewpoint of Zora Neale Hurston. This perspective is not nearly so limited as is typical of first person stories because of the nature of the book. The book is presented as a series of scenes, with Hurston relating details about the people she is with and the stories they tell. While the perspective is limited to whatever Hurston can see and hear at the time, her purpose is to relate all the stories that are told to her by the various people around her. The limitation is not an issue for this story.

Hurston's own connection to the people she interviews could skew the story to some degree. She cares for these people and grew up with many of them. While the goal of the story is to relate the tall tales of the people, she also reveals stories about the people who tell the tales. For example, she explains her lack of acceptance at one small town along the way and says the people there are distrustful of the law. Her explanations about these aspects could be skewed because of her obvious caring and concern for these people. That doesn't seem to be the case, but it is a possibility the reader should keep in mind.

Setting

The story is set in the deep south in the 1960s. There are several distinct settings, all of them real. Hurston's trip begins in Florida, where she encounters friends from her childhood and visits in the home of another friend. She soon travels to a lumber camp. This is an entire town that is based on the lumber camp. The lumber company sets the rules, and Hurston notes that she enters the town though it's clearly against the company policy for visitors to remain without the company's permission. Hurston seems to find this place somewhat squalid, and both the company and the workers seems to have a lack of interest in the appearance of the place. She compares that to another camp she visits later and notes that the second camp town is well maintained and has a community center.

The second part of the book, "Hoodoo," is set in New Orleans. This is a fitting setting because of the presence of famous hoodoo practitioners such as Marie Leveau. This setting is not described in much detail but the reputation of the city is so famous that extensive description probably isn't necessary.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straightforward manner. The first part, related to folklore, has an overall upbeat, positive tone though the second part, related to hoodoo, has a darker tone. The stories are all legends, tall tales or stories of magic among the blacks.

However, just beneath the surface of the stories and the happiness of the people Hurston encounters is a darker side of life for the blacks of the South. These people work hard, are often treated cruelly and are living lives in near-abject poverty. They have little to look forward to other than more days of hard work and poverty, but they somehow manage to find opportunities for fun, including dancing. The stories told by these people are an important part of their culture and of their entertainment. This seems to be why Hurston initially takes off with the idea to record the stories. It should be noted that there are many negative references to the blacks of the time. The people are only a century away from the time of slavery, meaning the stories of their grandparents and great-grandparents have been handed down directly from slaves.

There is a frequent use of the words "Negro" and "nigger" throughout the story. The uses of these words, though considered slang, is important in that it maintains the integrity of the stories. These are the words used by the storytellers, and Hurston seems to have set out to present accurate representations of the stories. For the purpose of continuity, the word "blacks" is used throughout this study guide. It should also be noted that the author spells words as the storytellers say them. That means there is a constant dropping of the letter "g," so that "talking" becomes "talkin.'" The word "Noah" is changed to "Nora" to imitate the speaker's word, as is the word "dem" for "them" and "dese" for "these." The majority of these words are easily understood by sounding them out. There are also other words and phrases with which the reader might not be familiar. For example, Hurston says at one point that she's been invited to "spread my jenk." Phrases such as this are explained with footnotes. This particular phrase means to "have a good time," according to Hurston's note.

Structure

The story is divided into two parts. The first is titled "Folklore" and contains a series of stories, lies and legends. The second is titled "Hoodoo" and contains stories of the hoodoo of New Orleans and of Hurston's role in practicing the craft. The first part is divided into ten chapters. Though the chapters vary in length, most are about fifteen to eighteen pages. The chapters contain stories and the number of stories varies from one chapter to the next. Chapter one has only two stories, "John and the Frog" and "Witness of the Johnstown Flood in Heaven." The second chapter has seven, with several stories related to church. For example, this chapter contains the story of why churches sometimes split and how two brothers were called to preach. Several of the chapters contain more than six stories. While many of the chapters contain related stories, not all stories of any one chapter are on a single subject. This is because the subject of one story sometimes prompts the telling of another story.

In the second part, there are seven chapters. These chapters are somewhat shorter in length, with several of them covering only four or five pages. These chapters are arranged somewhat differently. The first is Hurston's explanations of hoodoo and her time working under Eulalia. The second is Hurston's time working with Luke Turner, the third is her time with Anatol Pierre, the fourth is her time with Father Watson, the fifth is

her time with Dr. Duke and the seventh is her time with Kitty Brown. In chapter six, Hurston relates "conjure stories."

Quotes

"The raw likker known locally as coon dick was too much. The minute it touched my lips, the top of my head flew off." Folklore, Chap. 1, p. 16

"De trouble is you women ain't good for nothing' exceptin' reading' Sears and Roebuck's bible and hollerin' 'bout, 'gimme dis nd gimme dat' as soon as we draw our pay." Folklore, Chap. 2, p. 24

"One woman had killed five when I left that turpentine still where she lived. The sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely." Folklore, Chap. 4, p. 60

"Ah always lak to open up a big box 'cause there's nearly always something good in great big boxes. So she run and grabbed a'hold of de box and opened it up and it was full of hard work." Folklore, Chap. 4, p. 74

"They all got a hidden meaning', just like de Bible. Everybody can't understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained." Folklore, Chap. 7, p. 125

"You eats dat wid some bread. Not a whole heap of bread - just enough to keep you from swallerin' de fish befo' you enjoy de consequences." Folklore, Chap. 8, p. 135

"You know, all de time youse outside in de weather, li'l breezes and winds is jumpin' on yo' back and crawlin' down you' neck to hid. They'll stay right there if you don't do something' to git shet of 'em." Folklore, Chap. 8, p. 137

"'Big Sweet, what you mean tuh do wid that knife?' 'Ahm jus' 'bout to send God two niggers.'" Folklore, Chap. 9, p. 152

"You got mo' poison in yuh than dat snake dat wuz so poison tell he bit de railroad track and killed de train, hunh?" Folklore, Chap. 10, p. 161

"Some uh dese folks goin' tuh judgment and some goin' tuh jail. Come on, less run!" Folklore, Chap. 10, p. 179

"Finding and catching a black cat is hard work, unless one had been released for you to find." Hoodoo, Chap. 4, p. 220

"When the water boiled I was to toss in the terrified, trembling cat." Hoodoo, Chap. 4, p. 221

Topics for Discussion

Describe how Hurston goes about her project of collecting the stories of folklore and hoodoo. To what lengths does she go in order to collect these stories? Could the stories have been presented some other way? Would they have been as effective?

The first part of the book is devoted to folklore and the second part to hoodoo. Compare the two parts. What are the similarities? The differences? How does the tone of the two parts differ? Is this appropriate? Support your answers.

Describe three of the folklore stories told to Hurston. Describe the setting in which she hears them. Compare the three stories. Who are the main characters of each? Are the stories at all believable?

Folklore and legends are present in every culture. Are folklore stories and legends important to a culture? Why or why not? Compare the folklore and legends related in this story to those commonly associated with some other culture. What are the similarities? The differences?

Describe three of the hoodoo practitioners who take on Hurston as a student. What things do all have in common? What are the differences? It seems that these hoodoo doctors tend to "specialize" in some particular aspect of hoodoo. Is this reasonable? What does Hurston learn from each?

Hurston presents a series of conversations in which the participants relate lies about the ugliest person or the meanest boss. Does this kind of conversation have a place in the folklore of the blacks of the Deep South of this time period? Why or why not? Are there similar conversations that have become popular at other times in history/ Compare these conversations to the more traditional folk tales.

Give one example of a tall tale, one example of a legend and one example of a folk story. Which is the more interesting in your opinion? Why? Compare the three. What role does each play in the culture of the blacks of this time period?