

Lessons in Diction and Deism



The Literary Paradises of Hurston and Bartram in a High School Curriculum

Early American literature is not commonly taught at the high school level. There are many reasons for this: diction is florid, page counts are high, novels are nonexistent, and a more painless nod to the colonial period is easily managed with a study of *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Crucible*. If the typical goal of high school literature classes is to inculcate a love of reading in students and to expose students to writing worth mimicking, then the most prudent course is to cleave to the latter half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During my years teaching some of the most popular curriculum standards, though, I have found that opportunities abound to incorporate earlier texts. *The Great Gatsby* cries out for excerpts from Ben Franklin's journals, and the references that Anne Petry makes to the Junto in her novel *The Street* do as well. Study of Ralph Ellison requires supplementary readings in the Transcendentalists to help unpack allusions to Emerson and the Golden Ball. Even one Brit Lit high school stand-by, *Jude the Obscure*, requires reference to an early American antecedent: Thomas Hardy's model for the Bible altered and improved by the iconoclastic Sue Brideshead was surely modeled on Thomas Jefferson's *Life of Jesus of Nazareth*.

But none of the pairings I list above complement each other as well as the works of two Florida writers, one of the eighteenth and one of the twentieth century: William Bartram's *Travels* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. To begin with, the biographies of these two writers make for a

fascinating comparison. Both approach their highly poetic and philosophical depictions of Florida with concrete backgrounds in the sciences: Hurston with her anthropology background and Bartram with his familial background in botany and naturalism. Both were single minded and wary of aligning themselves with grander political projects: Hurston was famously rebuffed by contemporary novelists like Richard Wright for refusing to take up the race issue, while Bartram turned down Jefferson's invitation to join the Lewis and Clark expedition. Both were avid travelers, explorers, writers, gardeners, thinkers, and Florida enthusiasts.

Both authors write about nature as a lens to think metaphysically about human life. In other words, both Bartram and Hurston appear to be "watching God" through nature.

As a student of anthropology under Franz Boas and a lover of her home state of Florida, Hurston probably read Bartram's *Travels*. Although no direct reference to these early American travelogues appears in her writing, she was certainly conscious of the tradition. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, Hurston tells an anecdote she frames as the turning point of her education, when a teacher recited for the class the poem "Kubla Khan." Her affection for that teacher, the drama of the reading, and the stunning imagery of the poem cemented her love of learning. This is the only specific reference that Hurston makes to the curriculum of her formal schooling, and one can only wonder if she recognized her native state of Florida in the imagery of the poem. The fact that Coleridge, in writing "Kubla Khan" (among other poems) took inspiration from Bartram's travels down the St. John's River is well documented in the poet's notebooks.

Since Hurston was an innovator in bringing Southern black dialect into her fictional dialogue, diction is a natural focal point for literary study of her works. The same holds true for the study of William Bartram, not because of regional idiom so much as the pure foreignness of elevated eighteenth-century writing to the ears of contemporary adolescents. Look at how these two descriptive passages, because of their similar attitudes toward a storm, throw one another's language nicely into relief. Hurston writes:

Ten feet higher and as far as they could see the muttering wall advanced before the braced-up waters like a roadcrusher on a cosmic scale. The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed its chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed to be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel.



"Mico Chlucco the Long Warrior or King of the Siminoles," frontispiece from *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida ...* William Bartram (Philadelphia, 1791). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



"Portrait of William Bartram," engraved by T.B. Welch from an original painting by C.W. Peale, date unknown. Courtesy of the Portrait and Print Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Bartram uses many of the same devices in his description:

But yet, how awfully great and sublime the majestic scene eastward! the solemn sound of the beating surf strikes our ears; the dashing liquid of yon liquid mountains, like mighty giants, in vain assail the skies; they are beaten back, and fall prostrate upon the shores of the trembling island.

Although the styles of these two writers are drastically different, the techniques they use—personification, sensory imagery, hyperbole—and their goals are surprisingly similar. The two texts are replete with passages that might be juxtaposed for close study of language.

Excerpts from Bartram are also useful in contextualizing many of Hurston's themes. One of the central symbols in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a bee pollinating a pear tree, echoes Bartram's philosophical musings about mosquitoes, or swamp ephemera, "inimitably bedecked in their new nuptial robes." When Bartram steps back to compare the very short period for which these insects leave their muddy homes of their lowly grub stage and live as flying insects to the ephemeral nature of human happiness, we also see an opportune comparison to Hurston's philosophy of happiness. When her character Janie speaks to her lover, Teacake, about the hard times they are suffering, she says "If you kin see the light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah was fumblin' around and God opened de door." Both authors write about nature as a lens to think metaphysically about human life. In other words, both Bartram and Hurston appear to be "watching God" through nature.

Animal motifs are another important element of study in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and students generally are interested in examining and discussing the novel's menagerie. In one passage depicting an incipient hurricane, animals have lost their fear of people and of each other under the threat of the natural disaster's "common danger." Hurston depicts this temporarily peaceable kingdom when she writes that "A baby rabbit, terror ridden, squirmed through a hole in the floor and squatted there in the shadows against the wall, seeming to know that nobody wanted its flesh at such a time." She concludes that "Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other." Bartram likewise devotes some of his most beautiful passages to the transcendence of the fleeting peace of the wilderness. Coming upon a "chrystal fountain" or a spring, he observes that the clear waters and resulting unobstructed vision causes loss of predatory instinct among the animals:

Yet when those different tribes of fish are in the transparent channel, their nature seems absolutely changed; for here is neither desire to destroy nor persecute, but all seems peace and friendship. Do they agree on a truce, a suspension of hostilities? or by some secret divine influence, is desire taken away? or are they otherwise rendered incapable of pursuing each other to destruction?

Both authors seek from nature these moments of extreme unity that link them both to the deist tradition of belief. While Bartram frequently detects his "supreme protector" in the natural dangers that bypass him peacefully, Hurston seeks God in the inscrutability of the elements that surround her. In her autobiography she writes, "The ever-sleepless sea in its bed, crying out 'how long?' to Time; million-formed and never motionless flame; the contemplation of these two aspects alone, affords ... sufficient food for ten spans of ... expected

lifetime.”

To juxtapose the work of these two authors pedagogically is to enrich both of their legacies. Hurston was a writer who railed against the politicization of her work and the demands on her to be a “race writer.” This universality of themes that she insisted upon and her pure enthusiasm for the land shine especially when studied in the context of early America, its deists and naturalists. Bartram, too, is burnished: from the obscure place of a long-winded botanist he becomes more easily recognizable as the sensitive observer, recorder, and thinker he truly was. It is an interesting exercise to look with students across generations to see their fruit trees, their magnolias, wild beasts and beasts of burden, their Seminoles, their insects and their hurricanes both startlingly lucid.



“A Map of the Coast of East Florida from the River St. John Southward near to Cape Canaveral,” between page xxxiv and page one of Chapter One from *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida ...* William Bartram (Philadelphia, 1791). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Further Reading

Hurston’s biography *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942) contains reflection about the author’s education, early life in Florida, spirituality, and many other interesting strands that justify a reading together with Bartram.

Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston’s masterpiece, is the most appropriate choice for the high school literature classroom, Hurston also writes about Florida in some of her other works. In *Mules and Men* (1935), she records the folktales of the region. She also worked on the *WPA Guide to Florida* (1939), and her contributions are not those of a typical guidebook: rather than tourist sites, she describes sites of old folklore, places of sacred significance to the African American and Native American communities.

For more on Bartram’s wide ranging influence see N. Bryllion Fagin’s *William Bartram: Interpreter of the American Landscape* (1933). This text includes some biographical background on Bartram, as well as close textual study of his style. Among the most interesting observations about Bartram’s writing is the shifting diction that Fagin attributes to his lack of formal education. Although Bartram was certainly tutored in botany and the Linnaean system by his famous father, the remainder of young Bartram’s education resulted from self-directed reading.

Sadly, no searchable e-book of Bartram’s *Travels*, or *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the*

Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws. Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions; Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians (1792), exists, only facsimile editions, so the hunt for passages that complement those found in Hurston must be done the old-fashioned way.

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