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Chapter One

Standards Focus: Dialect

One of the ways an author develops his or her style is through the use of dialect. Dialect is the distinctive

speech pattern of a particular region, class, or race. Unlike slang, dialect has a distinct and well-developed

system of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Through the use of dialect, authors are able to create

a realistic story, believable characters, and an authentic-feeling setting.

In her research as an anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston collected African-American folk tales and

developed a system to convert many of these spoken tales to a written form of the black dialect. To

Hurston, the dialect was not a negative stereotype, but a musical and poetic language which is a natural

part of the African-American culture. By writing in the realistic manner in which blacks in the South

actually spoke, Hurston creates powerful, authentic characters and a realistic setting.

Directions: Replace the following sentences from Chapter One with a more familiar or modern

“translation.”

1. “Wat dat ole forty year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal?”

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2. “If she ain’t got manners enough to stop and let folks know how she been makin’ out, let her g’wan!”

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3. “The worst thing Ah ever knowed her to do was taking a few years offa her age and dat ain’t never harmed

nobody”

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4. “De way you talkin’ you’d think de folks in dis town didn’t do nothin’ in de bed ‘cept praise de Lawd.”

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5. “Mah mullato rice ain’t so good dis time. Not enough bacon grease, but Ah reckon it’ll kill hongry.”

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6. “Ah see Mouth-Almighty is still sittin’ in de same place. And Ah reckon they got me up in they mouth now.”

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7. “You know if you pass some people and don’t speak tuh suit ‘em dey got tuh go way back in yo’ life and see

whut you ever done. They know mo’ ‘bout yuh than you do yo’ self.”

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8. “Most of these zigaboos is so het up over yo’ business till they liable to hurry theyself to Judgment to find out

about you if they don’t soon know.”

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9. “You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah

friend’s mouf.”

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10. “So long as they get a name to gnaw on they don’t care whose it is, and what about, ‘specially if they can

make it sound like evil.”

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11. “If they wants to see and know, why don’t they come kiss and be kissed?”

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12. “Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain’t no different from a coon hide.”

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13. “It’s hard for me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it. And then again Ah’m hard of

understandin’ at times.”

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14. What can we infer about these characters from their speech patterns?

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15. Is your inference stereotypical or realistic? Or both? On what evidence did you base your opinion?

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Chapters Ten-Twelve

Standards Focus: African-American Folklore in Their Eyes Were Watching God

Hurston spent a lot of time researching African-American folklore and traditions in the Caribbean and Florida.

References to this folklore abound throughout her novel. The following activity will help you to gain a more

comprehensive understanding and appreciation for the inclusion of folklore—one of the richest aspects of the novel.

Directions: Look back on Chapters 1-12 to complete the following charts. Use the text to find examples that fulfill

each section. For the first section, find examples that indicate how folklore is passed by the characters in Their Eyes

Were Watching God. For the second chart, find examples for each attribute of folklore—or, where is this aspect of

folklore found in the story? An example has been done for you.

Common Ways Folklore is Passed from Generation to Generation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Means Example from Text: |  |
| Dramatics | The men try to charm Daisy: “The boys had to act out their rivalry too. Only this timeeverybody knew they meant some of it. But all the same the porch enjoyed the play andhelped out whenever extras were needed.” (Chapter 6) |
| Telling of Stories |  |
| Community Gatherings |  |
| Music and Song |  |
| Practice of Medicine |  |
| Dance |  |
| Talking to Animals |  |
| References to God |  |
| References to Devil |  |
| White People as Oppressors |  |
| Tricksters |  |
| Battle Between the Sexes |  |
| Magic Or Alternative Healing |  |
| Bragging Contests |  |

In your opinion, do you think Their Eyes Were Watching God itself is a good example of African-American folklore?

Why or why not? Explain.

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