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Hurston herself, Drenched in Light

Zora Neale Hurston shared the qualities and personality traits of her fictional character, Isis Watts, and continued throughout her life with the same inner light as she had in her youth. Hurston fills "Drenched in light" with descriptive and detailed information about the young Isis Watts that define similar places, objects, and ideas that relate to Hurston's childhood. It is these extra details and descriptions of things that are often overlooked in most fabricated tales but are constructed well in "Drenched in Light." Hurston uses experiences from her childhood to develop the story and the spirit of Isis Watts. There are many obvious details from the story that can be analyzed and interpreted for their reason that Hurston has included them in the story. Some details are less obvious and a further comprehension of Zora Neale Hurston's life can help illustrate their true nature for existing in the story. Comparing the names, costumes, details, behaviors, and even the awareness of the characters in "Drenched in Light" to what we know about Zora Neale Hurston can further enhance our knowledge of the life and spirit of the author.

Hurston carefully chooses the names of her characters in the story. Isis Watts' Grandmother's name was Grandma Potts in "Drenched in Light." According to Hemenway, author of "Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography," Grandma Potts was "Hurston's own grandmother's name" (11). Isis's father's name was John and so was Hurston's. Zora describes Isis's father in "Drenched in Light" as the "widowed father" (93). In real life Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Potts, "...died when Hurston was nine, in a scene that was traumatic for the child"

(Hemenway 16). According to Valerie Boyd, author of "Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neal Hurston", Isis' last name "Watts" was chosen "...from the primary word for measuring light and power, an ambiguous indicator of the value Hurston placed on Isis's incandescent spirit and, consequently, on her own" (92). Also, "Isis" is the name of a woman in Egyptian mythology that "...tricks Ra, the creator, into revealing his secret name and was then elevated to become the most revered goddess of Egypt. Associated with the color red, Isis was considered the most powerful magician in the universe" (92).

Like Isis, Hurston day-dreams about fairy tales throughout her youth and shares her fantasies with others. By sharing her dreams and fantasies, Hurston receives the attention of others and gains their support like Isis Watts does from the woman, Helen in "Drenched in Light," who stops to ask Isis the way to "Maitland" and wants to go to the "Park Hotel" (96). According to Boyd, in Hurston's youth, women are fascinated by her and "...invited Zora to visit them at the Park House Hotel in Maitland" (36). These events in Hurston's youth helped to promote her interest in fairy tales and myths as she received gifts from the women. Among the gifts sent to Hurston was a box, and in it "...was Gulliver's Travels, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Dick Wittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales" (37). In "Drenched in Light," Isis tells Helen that "...she was really a princess" and "...the time when she was Hercules and had slain numerous dragons and sundry giants" (96). Hurston also admired Hercules in her youth, "Of the Greeks, Hercules moved me the most...Hurston recalled" (Boyd 37). Hurston's fantasies were not restricted to mythology. In "Drenched in Light," Isis Watts imitates "...the Spanish Dancer she had seen in a medicine show some time before" and wears "...Grandma's new red tablecloth ...in lieu of a Spanish shawl" (95).

Hurston dresses for multiple occasions in similar fashion to Isis Watts throughout her life. According to Boyd, Hurston experienced a similar occasion where she “...sported a red ribbon...” and “...red and white checked gingham dress...” on her way to the Park House Hotel in Maitland (36). On several occasions, Hurston is known for her spectacular and extravagant dress. For instance, Steven Watson, author of “The Harlem Renaissance,” highlights an occasion at the *Opportunity* awards where Hurston grabs the attention of everyone after winning several awards when she “...strode through the room filled with her fellow writers, unfurled her bright scarf, and reiterated the title of her play at the top of her lungs, “Coloo...rrr ...STRUCKK...KK!” (67). Hurston is able to make connections in Harlem quickly and often attracts attention at rent parties. Steven Watson, author of “The Harlem Renaissance” describes Hurston after “Debuting at the *Opportunity* prizes dinner, Hurston became within a month not only Fannie Hurst’s secretary but a staple at the parties of Carl Van Vechten...” (71). Hurston continually grabs the attention of others throughout her life; a character trait that resembles the behavior of the young Isis Watts in “Drenched in Light.”

From her childhood and throughout her adulthood, Hurston’s behavior in life often resembles and seldom strays from the high-spirited and resilient Isis Watts. In “Drenched in Light,” Isis would “...sit atop of the gate post and hail the passing vehicles...everybody in the country...knew little Isis Watts, the joyful” (91). This is an activity that Hurston also enjoyed as a child. Hemenway’s biography records Hurston saying, “My favorite place was atop the gate-post...Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it...”(11). Hurston demonstrated a similar behavior in her adulthood when she took “...a pair of calipers and stand on a Harlem street corner measuring people’s skulls...” (63). Hurston’s behavior is

comparable to young Isis's behavior in "Drenched in Light" when Isis is dancing before a "crowd clapping their hands for her" (95). According to Watson, we can imagine Hurston "turning up at rent parties, attending gatherings at Wallace Thurman's or A'lelia Walker's, launching into perfectly mimetic Eatonville-ese, and leaving stories in her wake" (71). Hurston is often the center of attention and loves to entertain but also shows a similar pattern to Isis Watts when it involves being conscious of her entertainment.

In "Drenched in Light", Isis Watts is always aware of all of the consequences and persistently keeps on dancing to the music because "...she couldn't help it" (95). Hurston demonstrates this persistence when trying to maintain her career as a writer. Kristal Brent Zook, author of "Jump At De Sun" explains that even when "...most of her peers had given up trying to make a living as writers", Hurston was still "...the only notable black woman of her time attempting against all odds to make a living at her craft" (36). Hurston published her autobiography "Dust Tracks On A Road" in 1942 at the age of fifty-two. Hurston's persistence is accompanied by the similar trait of Isis Watts' in being aware of the consequences. In "Drenched in Light," Isis hides "...under the house to brood over the whipping she *knew* [my emphasis] would come" (94). Isis's awareness illustrates that she cannot resist her natural instincts to let her inner spirit shine. In Valerie Boyd's "Wrapped in Rainbows," a similar awareness is demonstrated in a letter written by Hurston to Annie Nathan Meyer:

...But, Oh, if you knew my dreams! My vaulting ambition! How I constantly live in fancy in seven league boots, taking mighty strides across the world, but conscious all the time of being a mouse on a treadmill. Madness ensues. I am beside myself with chagrin half

of the time; the way to the blue hills is not on tortoise back, it seems to me, but on wings. I haven't the wings, and must ride the tortoise (111).

Hurston is well aware that she is living out her fantasies and even says that she is “conscious all the time” of the realities of life. This awareness illustrates that Hurston’s spirit has a true nature to it and is not constructed of a self-indulged or egocentric falsity that has arrived over time or from success.

Some folks believe that a person’s personality would change with the introduction to success or fame. Hurston is able to maintain a spirit developed in childhood through her entire life. When Zora Neale Hurston was writing “Drenched in Light,” she built her character Isis Watts from experiences in her childhood. For Hurston, not only were the experiences, names, objects, and places that she developed for the characters in “Drenched in Light” similar to her childhood but also the personality and spirit that she developed in the character of Isis Watts was similar to her own. Where “Drenched in Light” ends, Isis Watt’s spirit continues to fantasize and dream, dress extravagantly, and let her spirit shine while being aware who she really is in the life of Zora Neale Hurston.

Annotated Bibliography

Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: the Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2002. Print.

Wrapped in Rainbows is a biography that outlines the work and achievements of Zora Neale Hurston. Historical facts and noted comparisons in the work are used to explain the events in "Drenched in Light."

Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. With a Foreword by Alice Walker*. Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois, 1980. Print.

As a biography of Zora Neale Hurston's life, many facts are compiled about the author's writing and life. Events in Hurston's life are used in comparison to the character traits of Isis Watts in "Drenched in Light."

Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*. New York: Pantheon, 1995. Print.

This book covers multiple fore-runners of the Harlem Renaissance including Zora Neale Hurston and provides a variety of information about their relationships between one another.

Wilson, Sondra Kathryn. *The Opportunity Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the Urban League's Opportunity Magazine*. New York: Random House, 1999. 91-98. Print.

This book contains the short story "Drenched in Light" by Zora Neale Hurston. The story is used to analyze and compare similar aspects with the author.

Zook, Kristal Brent. "Jump At De Sun." *Nation* 276.6 (2003): 33-38. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

"Jump At De Sun" describes the ambition of Zora Neale Hurston and makes usable comparisons to other authors with less ambition. Article makes the point that several fore-runners of the Harlem Renaissance traded in their writing careers to pursue other opportunities. The essay is relevant as it points out one of Hurston's definitive character tributes of persistence.