

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preserving African American Funeral Traditions and Cultural Heritage in *Cold Keener*

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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston's *Cold Keener* is a pleasant folk drama about the importance of African American funeral rites in preserving cultural traditions. But Hurston does not merely depict death as a time of sorrow. She describes the funeral as a community event that brings people together in sorrow, music, story, faith, and shared memories. The play depicts the close social ties of the African American community. It demonstrates that traditional funeral rites enable people to cope with loss and to give them a cultural identity. As a folklorist, Hurston meticulously documents the traditions, dialects, songs, and religious rituals that make up the lived experience of Black people in the American South. In this paper, I discuss how *Cold Keener* celebrates these traditions as a form of resilience, dignity, and collective memory. It also discusses the play's contribution to preserving African American oral culture during the Harlem Renaissance. In examining community, spirituality, grief, and the persistence of culture, Hurston re-imagines death as a powerful celebration of life and cultural identity, according to the study. However, ultimately, *Cold Keener* makes a compelling case for viewing funeral rituals not just as sites of grief but as significant cultural practices that forge social cohesion, preserve historical memory, and reaffirm the living legacy of African American folk traditions.

Keywords: African American Theatre, Funeral Traditions, Cultural Heritage, Folk Culture, Harlem Renaissance, Oral Tradition

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Zora Neale Hurston's *Cold Keener* is a folk play about African American funeral customs and community *life*. The funeral gathering is a tradition in the rural South where family, friends and neighbours come together to mourn the deceased person by sharing memories, spiritual songs and prayers. But death, for Hurston, is not a sad event but one that fosters faith, solidarity, and the strengthening of community cultural values. The play also tries to show the importance of African American oral tradition, music and religious practice in keeping cultural identity. The funeral rites of Hurston are a way of reconciling sentiment, of fortifying social bonds. *Cold Keener* is a testament to the cultural wealth, honour, and resilience of African American communities, as well as to the ability of shared traditions and collective memory to help individuals cope with grief and to transmit their history and identity to future generations. At its most effective, *Cold Keener* is a testament to these qualities.

African American funeral rites are about more than mourning; they are about community, faith and cultural identity, writes Zora Neale Hurston in *Cold Keener*. Furthermore, the play shows that a funeral is not only a time to grieve the loss of a loved one but *also* a time for people to unite, support each other, and celebrate the life of the deceased. Prayers, spiritual songs, storytelling and memories are ways to give comfort and strength to the community in difficult times. These traditions are described in a way that demonstrates Hurston's understanding of folklore. Through oral traditions, religious beliefs, and community involvement, she argues, African American culture is sustained. Every rite in the play is imbued with cultural meaning, reminding the audience of the generations who have passed these rites *down* and how they continue to build community. The play also suggests that grief is more easily shared. Not to be lost alone but to come together as family, friends and neighbours for emotional and spiritual support. This unity makes the funeral a symbol of hope and resilience. In *Cold Keener*, Hurston demonstrates how African American funeral practices preserve cultural memory, create a sense of collective identity, and pass on the community's legacy to new generations. Deborah G. Plant argues that:

Zora Neale Hurston regarded African American folklore as a living cultural tradition that preserved the history, beliefs, and identity of Black communities. Through her plays, Hurston transformed everyday customs into literary expressions of cultural resilience and collective memory (Plant 12).

Zora Neale Hurston, African American folklore was more than a collection of old tales and customs. It was a living tradition with the history, beliefs, values, and identity of black communities. Her plays take banal cultural practices, songs, rituals, storytelling, and communal gatherings and give them literary and historical significance. In Hurston's work, we see how traditions connect generations, build communities, and preserve cultural memory. She celebrated the lives of ordinary black folk and showed that folklore was a rich source of resilience, pride, and cultural continuity. The following dialogues are most apt regarding African American mourning tradition:

Mourner: "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away."

Another Mourner: "May the Lord give the family strength." (Hurston 75)

African American funeral traditions are based on community, faith, and cultural memory. These customs often commemorate the passage of the dead into eternal life, rather than viewing death as a time of mourning. Family members, friends, neighbours, and church members gather to pray, sing spirituals, share memories and comfort one another. The call-and-response, the emotional mourning, the gospel music all suggest a belief that grief is to be shared. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, these traditions are expressed through communal mourning and expressive lamentation, showing that funerals are not just acts of remembrance but also powerful affirmations of resilience, unity, and hope.

Black culture does not come alone in grief. When someone dies, we share the burden of loss with family, neighbours, friends and the community of the church. They are comforting, a reminder to mourners that they are not alone, that there are people who care. Spiritual songs, prayers, memories and words of encouragement provide a safe place to grieve without shame or fear. This mutual support allows mourners to turn pain into strength and hope during one of the most difficult times in life. Zora Neale Hurston's "Cold Keener" is a good example of the community ways of mourning. A funeral is not a death rite. A community remembers a life and offers support to the bereaved. In the keening, in the heartfelt talk, in the shared participation, Hurston imagines mourning as communal and personal. But in the midst of sadness, the community shows its strength through humour, compassion, and fellowship. These conversations show that healing begins when people grieve together, not apart. Hurston's presentation of mourning as a cultural phenomenon experienced by the people emphasises the continued importance of community solidarity, faith, and caring. Above all, *Cold Keener* is a story of the power of community, and of what it takes to survive loss and continue living with dignity and hope. Holloway, Karla F. C.

states: "No culture bases so much of its identity on the persistent rehearsal of commemorative conduct as does African America." (Holloway 7) Holloway's words suggest a need to remember the past in African American cultural identity. Funeral rituals are not only ceremonies of loss; they are a way of keeping history alive, honouring ancestors and strengthening community ties. African Americans gather to mourn, to remember, and to comfort one another, so that loss becomes a collective experience that engenders strength, community, and cultural continuity.

One particularly good example of the preservation of African American folk culture is Zora Neale Hurston's *Cold Keener*. Instead of a traditional dramatic narrative, Hurston collects folk songs, dances, work songs, spirituals, storytelling, humour, and everyday talk to depict the lived experience of black communities in the American South. The play reflects the rhythm of daily life. The tradition, passed *down* from one generation to the next by word of mouth, is celebrated in the play. She believed the culture of ordinary African Americans deserved the same respect as that afforded to written literature. She brought real dialect, music, and community traditions to the stage, challenging the idea that Black folk traditions were trivial or primitive.

As *Cold Keener* demonstrates, these traditions are valuable historical documents that preserve the voices, beliefs, and emotions of a people whose stories were often ignored by mainstream history. The play also investigates the power of collective memory. Singing, dancing and storytelling are all forms of cultural survival that communities engage in to keep their identity alive despite the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination. In "*Cold Keener*," Hurston entertains her audience while preserving African American cultural heritage. "Her work is a reminder that folk culture is a living tradition that continues to inspire, teach and empower future generations. Hemenway, Robert E states:

Zora Neale Hurston's *Cold Were Watching God* preserves African American folk culture by presenting authentic folk songs, dances, spirituals, storytelling, dialect, and community traditions. Rather than a conventional play, it celebrates the oral heritage and collective memory of Black communities, demonstrating that folklore is a vital expression of cultural identity and historical resilience. (Hemenway 164)

Zora Neale Hurston's "*Color Keener*" is a tribute to the vitality and resilience of African American folk culture. Hurston celebrates the cultural practices that shaped Black identity through traditional songs, dances, spirituals, storytelling, local dialect, and the community's daily life. She does not offer folklore as mere entertainment but

as a living tradition that carries history, values, and collective memory, helping future generations remain connected to their cultural roots and indomitable spirit.

In *Cold Keener*, Zora Neale Hurston beautifully shows that music and spirituality are at the centre of African American folk life. Rather than using songs and religious practices as mere background, she presents them as essential parts of everyday experience. Spirituals, work songs, and rhythmic chants give voice to emotions that are often difficult to express through ordinary speech. They communicate hope, sorrow, faith, endurance, and the determination to survive despite the hardships of slavery and racial oppression. Hurston also presents music as a living tradition that connects generations. Songs are passed down orally, carrying the memories, wisdom, and experiences of ancestors. When people sing together, they not only share music but also strengthen their sense of belonging and cultural identity. Similarly, spirituality in *Cold Keener* extends beyond church services. It is reflected in storytelling, communal singing, celebrations, and everyday acts of faith that bring people together and offer comfort during difficult times.

By placing these authentic cultural expressions on the stage, Hurston challenges the belief that Black folk traditions are unimportant or merely entertaining. Instead, she shows that music and spirituality preserve history, strengthen community ties, and keep cultural memories alive. Through *Cold Keener*, Hurston celebrates the resilience of African American communities and demonstrates that their musical and spiritual heritage continues to inspire, unite, and empower future generations. Hemenway Robert E states:

Hurston also presents music as a living tradition that connects generations. Songs are passed down orally, carrying the memories, wisdom, and experiences of ancestors. When people sing together, they not only share music but also strengthen their sense of belonging and cultural identity. Likewise, spirituality in *Cold Keener* extends beyond church services. It is reflected in storytelling, communal singing, celebrations, and everyday acts of faith that bring people together and offer comfort during difficult times. (Hemenway 170)

For Hurston, music and spirituality are not merely cultural pursuits, but the foundation of African American community life. Folk songs are the memories, wisdom and values of our ancestors, which are passed from one generation to another. Through song, story and celebration, we develop common identity and an intense sense of belonging. In *Cold Keener*, spirituality is not just for religious worship. It is

part of people's daily lives, giving hope and emotional strength. According to Hurston, music and spirituality are not just cultural practices; they are the foundation of African American community life. In the mix of singing, storytelling, and celebration, there is a strong sense of belonging, a common identity. In *Cold Keener*, religion is not just a matter of worship but a way of life, a source of hope, emotional strength, and resilience to fight oppression, hardship, and social injustice, and the capacity to defy them.

Oral tradition has always been a mainstay of African American culture. While many African Americans during slavery were not permitted to read or write, they found some powerful ways to keep alive their history and identity. Their experiences were preserved in oral form, in stories, songs, spirituals, folktales, proverbs, and even in idle talk. Oral traditions passed wisdom, family histories, cultural values and lessons of survival from generation to generation, keeping each generation aware of its roots. In *Cold Keener*, Zora Neale Hurston replicates the richness of this oral tradition by translating the everyday life of Black people to the stage. Her characters speak through storytelling, music, humour, rhythmic speech, and real, natural conversations. The voices are not just telling individual stories; they are telling the collective memory of a whole community.

Each song is about the struggles of days gone by. Each story is about celebrating survival, hope and the will to live. Hurston also suggests that communal memory is determined by shared moments. Singing together, telling stories, celebrating happy events and supporting each other in times of loss all serve to strengthen the bonds of community. "Even after years of oppression and discrimination, these traditions provide a sense of belonging and a reminder of shared history." Hurston. *Cold Keener* shows that folklore is more than entertainment. It is a living expression of cultural identity, a vehicle for keeping African American history, memory and traditions alive for future generations, and for preserving the voices of everyday people. According to a statement, "The oral tradition is central to the African American literary tradition "from Henry Louis Gates Jr., storytelling, songs, folklore, and spoken language are a part of the preservation of African American culture. Centuries before most of the Black population had access to any form of education or written records, their history, values and life experiences were passed on through oral traditions. The stories were also told to keep the culture alive under the pressure of oppression. These living traditions informed the writing of authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, who gave a permanent literary voice to the voices, memories and collective experiences of African American communities.

In Zora Neale Hurston's "Cold Keener", the African American communities get their power from their culture. Slavery, racism and social injustice caused a lot of suffering, but the traditions which gave people a sense of identity and hope could not be destroyed. She sings the praises of folk songs, spirituals, storytelling, humour, dance, and everyday speech as vehicles for transmitting the community's history, values, and spirit. Such traditions connect people to their forefathers and remind them that they're part of something greater than themselves. What makes the play powerful is the way resilience is created from shared experience. The characters endure many hardships, but they will not let their pain define them. They come together to sing, to tell stories, to laugh, to pray, to rejoice. They are small acts, but a powerful statement of courage and survival. Through music and story, they remember where they have come from, they find comfort in one another, and they find the strength to face an uncertain future. Hurston also makes it clear that culture is not only preserved in books or museums. It is grounded in language, customs and the everyday life of the people. She's putting these real traditions on stage to challenge the notion that Black folk culture doesn't matter. *Cold Keener*, however, venerates this living legacy, which memorialises collective memory, fortifies community, and motivates future generations to face adversity with dignity, hope, and unbreakable resilience. "*Hurston saw folklore as the living expression of a people's culture.*" (Hemenway 167)

Zora Neale Hurston's *Cold Keener* is a beautiful tribute to the endurance and longevity of African American cultural traditions. Rather than losing rituals, Hurston presents the funeral traditions as important cultural rituals that bring people together in times of grief, memory, and anticipation. Through spirituals, funeral songs, storytelling, prayers and collective mourning, she exposes how communities honour the lives of the departed and draw on the emotional strength to continue their own journey. Thus, death is not just a moment for mourning but a site for the reassertion of cultural identity and of collective sentiments. The importance of *Cold Keener* lies in its ability to give voice and recognition to the lives of everyday African Americans. What Hurston means is that the true history of a community is not in the documents but in the memories, songs, customs and experiences of its people. She displays these real traditions, disputing the long-standing assumption that black folk culture has no meaning or artistic value. In the end, *Cold Keener* contends that culture is alive because communities still practice it, value it, and pass it on to future generations. Funeral rites are important symbols of continuity, connecting the past to the present and offering hope for the future. Hurston's work celebrates the resilience of the African American community and implies that collective memory, communal faith, and cultural practices

preserve African Americans' identity. Thus, *Cold Keener* is a tribute to African American heritage and dignity, and the indomitable spirit of its people.

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