The Gilded Six-Bits Study Guide

The Gilded Six-Bits by Zora Neale Hurston

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Contents

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits" was published in *Story* magazine in 1933, when Hurston was a relative newcomer on the literary scene. The well-known publisher Bertram Lippincott read the story and liked it so much that he wrote to Hurston and asked if she was working on a novel. She wasn't, but, eager for a book deal, she told him that she was, and, three months later, presented him with the manuscript of her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Hurston, a noted talent and personality of the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, went on to greater success with the publication of her second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937, but later fell into obscurity and eventually died in poverty. Though it was pivotal to her career, "The Gilded Six-Bits" was not re printed until renewed scholarly interest in Hurston led to the publication of a compilation of her short stories, entitled *Spunk*, in 1985. It is now considered one of Hurston's best stories.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is a story of love, betrayal, and forgiveness. It playfully portrays the happy domestic life of two young newlyweds and shows the havoc that is wreaked when a slick and sophisticated outsider comes into their community and into their home. The story is typical of Hurston's fiction in that it offers a positive and affectionate vision of African-American life, that it is set in her native town of Eatonville, and that it reflects the rich oral traditions of that community. "The Gilded Six Bits," rich in metaphor and melodious dialect, is a meditation on the meaning of value and a celebration of emotional resilience and integrity.

Author Biography

Zora Neale Hurston was born January 7, 1903, in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. She was the daughter of John and Lucy Hurston. Her father worked as a preacher and a carpenter and also served as Eatonville's mayor. Her mother, a seam stress, was a powerful and positive influence in Hurston's life, encouraging her daughter to "jump at de sun." She died when Hurston was nine, her father quickly remarried, and Hurston was sent to boarding school. While still a child, Hurston worked at many odd jobs. A white employer eventually arranged for her to attend high school at Morgan Preparatory School in Baltimore, Maryland, where she graduated in 1918. Biographer Robert E. Hemenway writes that "the sources of the Hurston self-confidence were her home town, her family, and the self-sufficiency demanded of her after she left home for the world."

Hurston went on to Howard University, publishing her first stories while a student there. After receiving an Associate's degree, she struck out for Harlem, which had become a thriving center for black culture. The witty and outgoing Hurston took the town by storm, charming the black intelligentsia and white patrons of the blossoming artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. She soon won a scholarship to attend the prestigious Barnard College, becoming its first black student. Here began her lifelong interest in anthropology. She received a B.A. from Barnard in 1928.

While studying, Hurston continued to publish short stories. In 1933, she published "The Gilded Six-Bits," and her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, came out the following year. In 1935, she published Mules and Men, a collection of folklore gathered from her native Eatonville. Dividing her time be tween fiction and anthropology, Hurston began graduate studies in anthropology at Columbia University in 1935 and wrote what is widely considered her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (1937) while doing field work in the West Indies.

Ambitious and frank to a fault, Hurston made enemies as well as friends in Harlem. But, despite the fact that she had become a celebrated writer, she never lost her sense of humor or forgot her roots. The flamboyant and exuberant Hurston could talk to anyone, from rich benefactors to illiterate farmers. Her memories of the self-segregated Eatonville community stayed close to her heart, leading her to oppose school desegregation in the 1950s, against the rising tide of the Civil Rights Movement.

In her middle age, Hurston fell on hard times. She supported herself as a screenwriter and college drama instructor but was later reduced to working as a maid, a job she had never been good at in her youth. Hurston was married twice briefly and had no children. She suffered a stroke in 1959, and died in a public home the following year. She was buried in an unmarked grave at a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Plot Summary

The story opens with the description of a modest but cheerful house in an all-black community. Inside, Missie May, a young newlywed, rushes to bathe in anticipation of her husband Joe's return from work. She hears the sound of Joe throwing nine silver dollars in the door, signaling their playful weekly ritual. She pretends to be mad that he is throwing the money and chases him, then goes through his pockets to find little presents he has bought her.

As they eat dinner that night, Joe tells her that he is going to take her out to a new ice-cream parlor opened by a man from Chicago. They discuss this new man in town, whose name is Otis D. Slemmons. Slemmons appears to be rich and worldly. Joe admires his fine clothes, while Missie May comments on his big gut and suggests that he might be lying about his wealth and success. Joe cites a five dollar gold piece that Slemmons wears as a stickpin and a ten-dollar piece he wears on his watch chain as evidence of his wealth. Joe has heard that women gave him all of his money, but Missie May continues to compliment her husband and deny Slemmons's attractiveness. Joe tells Missie May that he wants to show off his pretty wife to Slemmons.

When they return from the ice-cream parlor, they continue to talk of Slemmons and his gold. Joe tells his wife that he is happy without riches as long as he has her. A weekly trip to the ice-cream parlor becomes part of the happy couple's routine.

One night Joe is sent home from work early. As he walks home he fantasizes about having a son with Missie May. When he arrives home, he calls out to his wife to reassure her in case, hearing him, she fears an intruder. There is a loud noise in the bedroom. Joe imagines a robber or murderer is attacking Missie May. He enters the room and finds Slemmons in their bedroom half dressed. Slemmons pleads with Joe for his life, offering him money not to hurt him. Joe punches him and tells him to get out. As Slemmons flees, Joe hits him again and finds that his gold charm has broken off in his hand.

Joe's response is to laugh, while Missie May cries, telling Joe that she knows he doesn't love her anymore and explaining that Slemmons had offered her gold. Joe tells her he has gotten the gold piece for her. They spend the night awake in bed, not speaking. Missie May imagines that Joe will leave her, but Joe asks her to fix him breakfast, signifying some degree of normalcy between them. At break fast she sees the gold piece that Joe has set down on the table. She cries, and he tells her not to think about the past.

Joe does not leave Missie May, but gone is the couple's loving playfulness. She often wonders where the gold coin is. One night Joe comes home from work complaining of a sore back. She rubs him—the first physical contact they have had since her betrayal. This leads to sex, which thrills Missie May until she finds the gold coin under Joe's pillow the next morning. She examines it and realizes that it is not a gold piece but a fifty-cent coin gilded with a thin layer of gold. She wonders if Joe thinks he has bought

her. She puts the coin back in his pants pocket and leaves the house. But she soon runs into Joe's mother and resolves that no one should find out about the damage to her marriage.

One day Joe comes home from work and sees Missie May chopping wood. He tells her to stop, recognizing that she is pregnant. Missie May tells him that the baby will be a boy that looks just like him. Joe fingers something in his pocket—presumably the gold coin.

Six months later Missie May gives birth to a baby boy. Joe asks his mother, who has attended the birth, how his wife is, at first not asking about the child. His mother tells him that the baby looks just like him. For a week afterward, Joe goes to work and then comes home and stands at the foot of his wife's bed.

The next weekend Joe goes to the nearby city to do some shopping. He buys all of the regular staples, then asks how many molasses kisses he can get for fifty cents, throwing the gilded coin onto the counter. The clerk, who is a white man, asks him where he got it, and Joe tells him about a man who came through town pretending he was rich and trying to steal people's wives. The clerk asks if the man had tricked him, and Joe denies it. Joe asks for a full fifty cents worth of candy for his wife and new son. After he leaves the store, the clerk comments to the next customer that he wishes he could be like "these darkies," referring to Joe. The clerk says that they laugh all of the time and never worry about anything.

Joe goes back home and rolls fifteen silver dollars in the front door. Missie May, still recovering from childbirth, creeps to the door. She play fully tells Joe that when she gets her strength back, she'll get him back for doing such a thing.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens with a description of the house of Joe and Missy May Banks. It is a simple, yet happy home. Missy May just finished her weekly cleaning and is bathing. She knows she must hurry to finish up before her husband gets home from his job at the G. and G. Fertilizer works.

Just as she finishes dressing, she hears "the ring of singing metal on the wood" floor nine times. She grins, knowing that her husband is throwing silver dollars in the door – the same thing he does every Saturday afternoon. After he throws them in, he quickly hides in the bushes outside.

Missy May rushes out the door, playfully demanding to know who is there, and begins searching for Joe. She finally catches him inside the kitchen door and they "rough and tumble" as she searches his pockets for the treats he brought for her: candy kisses, chewing gum, sweet soap and a pocket-handkerchief.

Afterwards, Missy May fixes a bath for Joe and gets dinner ready. They continue their friendly, playful banter throughout the meal. Then, Joe announces that Missy May needs to change into her Sunday clothes because they are going out for the evening – to the brand-new ice cream parlor. He wants Missy May to "be one [of the] first ladies the walk in [there]" and have ice cream. They begin discussing the parlor's owner, Mr. Otis D. Slemmons – a heavy-set man with a mouthful of gold teeth. Joe explains that he is in style and very fashionable. He expresses jealousy for Slemmons' build. Missy May tells Joe that she thinks he is "pritty" just the way he is.

Joe also tells Missy May that all the women like Slemmons wherever he goes; Missy May points out that he could be lying just like anyone else. Joe contradicts her and says that Slemmons has a five-dollar gold stickpin and a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain. He wishes it were his money and marvels that women in Chicago supposedly gave Slemmons the money. Slemmons likes to show off the money, but he will not let anyone touch it.

That night on the way home from the ice cream parlor, Joe talks about how "swell" Slemmons is. They like the way he talks and the words he uses. Joe is also proud that Slemmons admires his wife. Missy May talks about his gold money and how nice it would look on Joe. She wishfully talks about neat it would be to "find" some gold along the road.

They go to the parlor on Saturday nights because Joe works the night shift every other night. He leaves around six and gets home around dawn. One night he gets off at eleven because the factory runs out of acid. Joe walks home and thinks about when he and Missy May will have children. He decides to quietly sneak in the front door to

surprise Missy May. As he walks in the door, he bumps a pile of dishes and hears a shriek from his wife. He quickly reassures her and then hears a large movement coming from the bedroom. Fearing robbers or murderers, he strikes a match and enters the bedroom. To his surprise, he sees Slemmons, half-dressed and trying frantically to get dressed. All Joe can do is laugh. As he lights a lamp, he hears his wife crying and Slemmons pleading for his life. Joe chases Slemmons out of the house after grabbing his chest and punching him. After he has gone, Joe realizes he is holding Slemmons' broken watch chain and the gold coin charm.

Not knowing what else to do, he puts the coin in his pocket and goes to bed. Missy May is still crying, and Joe asks her why. She says she loves him and is sure he does not love her back. He tells her not to judge his feelings for her. She said she did it because Slemmons promised to give her the gold money. Joe told her not to cry because now she has the money.

Missy May figures for sure that Joe will leave her, and she will not be able to do nice things for him anymore such as fix him meals and clean his house. Joe surprises her, however, when he asks her for breakfast. She fixes it for him, but he refuses to eat. He tells her not to cry so much and not to look back at the past. Missy May does not leave Joe because she still loves him, but she does not know why he stays; he is polite and kind to her, but very distant.

They no longer romp and play with one another and Missy May often wonders what became of the gold coin. One night, three months later, Joe returns home at midnight needing a backrub. Missy May complies, happy to touch her husband again. They are intimate that night. The next morning, as Missy May makes up the bed, she finds the gold coin under her pillow. She realizes it is not even gold, but a gilded half dollar – this explains why Slemmons never let anyone touch his gold. She wonders why Joe had left it there: as a sign that her punishment is over, or as a "payment" for her actions the night before. She puts the coin in his Sunday pants pocket and leaves the house.

As she is walking away, she sees Joe's mother and decides her leaving is admitting defeat. She returns home determined to make *Joe* leave *her*. Every ten days or so, Joe comes home in need of a back rub. One morning when he returns from work, Missy May is chopping wood. He takes the ax and chops the wood for her. He tells her it is not appropriate for her to be chopping wood. She protests saying she has been doing it for some time now, anyway. He then says he knows she expecting a baby and that she should not be chopping wood in her condition. She tells him that it will be a boy and it will look just like Joe. He then reaches into his pocket to finger something that is in there (presumably the gold coin).

Almost six months later, Joe returns home from work to find that Missy May has had the baby – a boy. His mother tells him that the baby looks just like him and that Missy May is doing well. Everyday that week, he fools around the house during the day. Right before leaving for work, he goes into the bedroom and asks Missy May how she feels. On Saturday, he goes to the market and buys all the staples they need plus some

apples and bananas. He then goes to the candy store. He tosses the coin on the counter and asks for fifty-cents worth of molasses kisses for his wife.

When he gets home, he stands at the kitchen door and tosses fifteen silver dollars through the door. Missy May is not able to walk yet, so she crawls to the door and tells him she is going to find him for that.

Analysis

The theme of this story, "money isn't everything," permeates the lives of Joe and Missy May. They are perfectly happy, live in a simple, yet happy home and love one another deeply. They both enjoy doing things to make the other feel special, such as Missy May always cleaning the house and fixing meals for Joe and Joe always buying treats for Missy May when he goes to the market. Their "perfect" life changes, however, with a seemingly harmless conversation about how nice it would be to have money.

Throughout the plot of the story, there are two recurring symbols: happiness and money. At the beginning of the story, Hurston describes the house as simple, yet "happy". Missy May and Joe spend a lot of time laughing and playing with one another. After the mistake with Slemmons, there is no mention of happiness. Their marriage is simply the actions of a married couple without the emotions that go with it. Money, at the beginning is also a simple happiness for them. They "play" their game every Saturday when Joe tosses the money in the door for Missy May to find. They do not have a lot of money, but enough to live and be happy. Great foreshadowing occurs during their discussion on the way home from the ice cream parlor the first night. They both talk about how much they like Slemmons' style. Joe is proud that Slemmons admires his wife and Missy May wishes to have gold money some day just like Slemmons. This makes the reader see that something will probably happen with either Slemmons or his money or both. In the end, everything is tied together when Joe finally gets rid of the "gold" money to buy the candy kisses for Missy May (a symbol that they can finally *really* put the past behind them). The candy is also a symbol of their past happiness and playful Saturday afternoons.

The setting of the story is important in the sense that the readers must know Joe's and Missy May's lifestyle throughout the story. Their life at first is simple and happy. This is one of the reasons why they think so much of Slemmons. He is well traveled and "exotic" in the sense that he has had so many different experiences that Joe and Missy May will likely never experience.

The story is written in third person point of view, which means that the narrator is someone other than a character in the story. We can "hear" some of Missy May's and some of Joe's thoughts, but they are limited. This gives the reader an opportunity to get an objective view of the events of the story.

Both Missy May and Joe are dynamic characters, meaning that they change throughout the story. Missy May begins the story deeply in love with her husband and quite happy.

She also has a love of money or at least a love of the thought of what it may be like to have money like Slemmons. That is what leads her to trouble. She decides that she can do whatever it takes to get her hands on the gold money even if it means betraying her husband. In the end, even though she never stops loving her husband, the "gold" coin represents more hurt and disappointment than she ever thought money would.
Likewise, Joe goes through a major change. Because of Missy May's betrayal, he must learn to trust again. He keeps hold of the gold coin as a reminder of what she did and, finally, when he is ready to fully forgive her, he gives up the coin and takes home a treat to his wife to symbolize his desire to finally move on with their lives.

Characters

Joe Banks

Joe Banks is Missie May's husband. Joe and Missie May are newlyweds who are demonstrably in love. Joe works the night shift at the local fertilizer plant, but he does not make very much money. When his week is over, he and Missie May enjoy a flirtatious game that begins with him rolling his pay in coins over their threshold. Their life is filled with "joyful mischief" and also genuine sweetness. "That was the best part of life—going home to Missie May." They represent domestic harmony, each happy in his or her role and routine, until the flashy stranger Slemmons enters their life. Joe is impressed with the man's apparent wealth and his stories of success with women. He wants to show off his wife to Slemmons. When Missie May betrays Joe by having an affair with Slemmons, Joe is shocked and uncommunicative. He leaves Slemmons's gilded trinket around the house as if to remind Missie May of her failing, but when she gives birth to a son who looks just like Joe, he is able to fully forgive her. He buys her molasses kisses with the gilded coin, which represents affection and sweetness winning out over blame.

Missie May Bank

Missie May Banks is Joe's newlywed wife. She is enraptured with her new role as his spouse and with their domestic routine. Missie May is content to take care of their modest house and looks forward each day to Joe's return. Part of the couple's rapport involves playful banter and "mock battles" that end with her searching his pockets for candy and trinkets. However, real conflict enters the relation ship when Missie May agrees to have sexual relations with Slemmons, a pretentious outsider who promises her gold that she knows Joe admires but cannot earn. It is implied that Missie May wants the gold not for herself but for Joe. Missie May is bereaved when Joe discovers her with Slemmons, assuming he will never love her again. Joe tells Missie May not to dwell on the past, but he reminds her of her betrayal by leaving Slemmons's gilded trinket around the house. She resolves that she will stay in the marriage until Joe leaves her, which he does not do. Their domestic routine continues, but devoid of the joyful banter and affection in which they had both reveled. Joe finally forgives Missie May completely when she gives birth to a baby boy that looks just like him.

Clerk

A white clerk waits on Joe when he goes to Orlando to buy supplies after Missie May gives birth. He asks Joe about the gilded fifty-cent piece, and Joe tells him about Slemmons, not admitting that Slemmons tricked and cuckolded him. After Joe leaves, the clerk comments to the next customer, "Wisht I could be like those darkies." The clerk interprets Joe's story in terms of stereotypes about blacks being simple and happy.

Joe's Mother

Missie May runs into Joe's mother after she has left the house, having discovered the gilded gold piece under Joe's pillow. She knows that Joe's mother doesn't like her, and the encounter reminds her of her pride and makes her resolve to keep up the "outside show" of her marriage. Joe's mother also attends to Missie May when she is in labor. She had not approved of the marriage, but after Missie May gives birth to Joe's son, she tells her son that he made a good choice after all.

Otis D. Slemmons

Otis D. Slemmons is a sophisticated newcomer in the small, rural, all-black community of Eatonville. He has just opened an ice-cream parlor there. Joe meets him and is impressed with his tales of seducing women and making money, while Missie May tries to boost her husband's ego by pointing out Slemmons's big gut. However, Missie May is also impressed by his ostentatious gold jewelry, wishing that she could get some for her husband. Lured by promises of gold, she agrees to have a sexual relationship with Slemmons. Only after her husband discovers them together and takes Slemmons's watch chain does Missie May realize that Slemmons is a fake, and that the gold piece he wears is nothing but a gilded fifty-cent piece. Slemmons stands for the emptiness of material wealth and the in authenticity of big-city sophistication.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

Hurston introduces the theme of appearances and reality in the first lines of the story. On the surface of things, the couple's yard is nothing but a "Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G and G Fertilizer works for its support." But Hurston goes on to welcome readers inside the couple's home, describing their playful battle and teasing affection. What appears on the outside to be modest and meager is, in fact, rich with love and joy in life.

Hurston makes the converse point through the character of Slemmons. He has seen the world and experienced life more broadly than Missie May and Joe have. He has the appearance of sophistication and riches, represented by the ostentatious gold pieces he wears as jewelry. Despite the fact that they enjoy the simplicity of their life together, Joe and Missie May are taken in by the image that Slemmons projects. The gold money he wears on his jewelry makes a particular impact on the young man and woman who have never seen luxury. It impresses them that he has enough extra money to wear some of it for show. They are naïve in believing that Slemmons is what he appears to be and that he has something that they might want. They eventually discover that the ten-dollar gold piece Slemmons wears on his watch chain is nothing but a fifty-cent piece covered with gold. While Slemmons is richer and more sophisticated than Joe and Missie May, his life lacks the authenticity of theirs. The fake gold piece represents the fake appearances Slemmons presents to the world. In reality, Slemmons has nothing that compares to the happiness that Joe and Missie May share.

Betrayal and Forgiveness

The plot of "The Gilded Six-Bits" pivots on Missie May's betrayal of her husband. The reason for her betrayal is complicated. She is deeply in love with Joe, but takes to heart his awe for Slemmons's apparent riches and his comment that "Ah know Ah can't hold no light to Otis D. Slemmons." When she suspects Slemmons of lying about his status, Joe holds up the gold stickpin and watch chain as evidence that he is as rich as he says he is. And when she says that the gold would look better on Joe, he replies that she's crazy and a poor man like him will never have gold money. Joe claims that he's satisfied with his life as long as he has her, but Missie May has picked up on his longing for Slemmons's wealth and social standing. She enters into a sexual relationship with Slemmons because he offers her gold—the very thing that Joe thinks he will never have. By trying to give Joe gold, she takes away something more precious—his trust in her.

When Joe discovers her with Slemmons, Missie May fears that his love for her died then and there. But Joe's response to her betrayal is ambivalent. He doesn't reject her, but he doesn't communicate with her about his feelings either. She takes some comfort

in resuming their normal domestic routine, but is troubled by the absence of affection and openness between them. Joe tells Missie May not to dwell on the past, but he reminds her of her betrayal by leaving the gold trinket from Slemmons's watch chain out for her to see. This is the only way Joe communicates with her about her betrayal. When she gives birth to his son—one that clearly resembles him rather than Slemmons—Joe is finally able to put the past behind him. He trades the trinket for molasses kisses. The kisses are a symbol of forgive ness in that they represent the affection that has been lacking. Because they melt in the mouth, they also represent the dissolving away of Joe's grudge.

Love and Passion

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is, above all, a love story. Missie May and Joe's love may not seem dramatic from the outside, but they create drama by enacting mock battles that give them an excuse to tease and wrestle with each other. The opening scene, where Missie May receives Joe at the door, has strong erotic elements. The couple's sexuality is represented as positive, open, and playful. The character of Missie May is introduced sitting naked in the bath. When her husband arrives, she chases him, and they fall to the floor together, "a furious mass of male and female energy." Joe pretends to resist as she searches through his pockets for the little gifts she knows he has brought her, leading her to threaten to tear his clothes off. This healthy, joyful love is thwarted by the appearance of Slemmons who seduces Missie May by promising her the gold she covets out of love of Joe. Missie May's interaction with Slemmons appears to completely lack the eroticism of her relationship with her husband. She sees the affair as a transaction and, perhaps, a sacrifice. By the end of the story, the couple finds a way to heal through the domestic routine they both love, through the sexual passion that they can't repress ("youth triumphed and Missie exulted") and, most importantly, through the fruit of that passion, a baby boy.

Style

Setting

Hurston begins the story with description of its setting that uses the same adjective repetitively: "It was a *Negro* yard around a *Negro* house in a *Negro* settlement." Such deliberate emphasis underscores the 'blackness' of the community (which is later named as Eatonville, Hurston's real-life hometown), defining how it is seen from the outside. Once the story gets underway, the characters' race is not mentioned, though it remains implicitly significant. "The Gilded Six-Bits" takes place in a community that is all black, thus racial *difference* is not much of an issue—quite an exceptional situation in the United States, especially during the race-conscious 1930s when Hurston wrote. Instead, Hurston addresses the issue of race through celebrating the integrity and cultural richness of the all-black community. Because she often chose such happily segregated settings, Hurston's black literary peers sometimes criticized her for failing to address racism. The issue of the community's insularity is explored in "The Gilded Six-Bits" through the device of a disruptive worldly outsider, Slemmons, who is impressive to Missie May and Joe largely because he is from "spots and places—Memphis, Chicago, Jacksonville, Philadelphia and so on." Hurston also offers the nearby city of Orlando as a contrast to Eatonville. Joe goes there to shop and chats with a white clerk in a friendly way, only to be called a "darky" as soon as he leaves. Hurston portrays the small all-black town as a harmonious haven that shields its inhabitants from the deceptions and prejudices of the larger society.

Narration

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is narrated in the third person, from the perspective of someone who is not a participant in the events. The narrator is omniscient, with access to some of Missie May and Joe's inner thoughts, though, for the most part, the story is narrated in a straightforward and objective way. Perhaps the most striking feature of the story's narration is Hurston's use of dialect in the quoted speech of her characters. This sets up a contrast between the standard English of the exposition and the imaginative, vivid language of the characters. While, in the history of American literature until that point, dialect had been used in a way that reduced its speakers to stereotypes of ignorance, Hurston gloried in the expressiveness of African American oral traditions. As a folklorist, she appreciated her people's dialect as a unique and often beautiful aspect of their culture. Missie May's good clothes are "Sunday-go-to-meetin' things" and Slemmons is capable of lying because "his mouf is cut cross-ways, ain't it?" Hurston also shows African-American dialect as particularly rich with metaphorical expressions of love. "God took a pattern after a pine tree and built you noble," says Missie May. "Ah'd ruther all de other womens in de world to be dead than for you to have de toothache," Joe tells her. Dialect is central to the story's literary power.

Symbolism

The set of symbols Hurston employs in the story are connected through the concept of *value*. The story opens with Joe returning home with his weekly pay and a few small gifts for his wife. When he rolls the coins in the door, they stand not for Joe's economic earning power, but instead a playful and erotic ritual through which the couple celebrates the beginning of their free time together. The dollars Joe rolls in the door are a sign of the homecoming that he regards as the happiest aspect of his life and a symbol of how much he values Missie May. The candy kisses hidden in his pockets represent both affection and eroticism. In contrast, the coins that Slemmons wears as jewelry represent the display of wealth for wealth's sake. "Whut make it so cool," Joe says, duly impressed with Slemmons's gold, "he got money 'cumulated." But when Slemmons's coins enter the Banks's house (their surname itself being a pun on money), their happiness is disrupted. His coins, which he wields as a form of power, especially over women, end up being worthless. They do not win Missie May from Joe but remain as a sign of the mistake she made over what to value. When Joe trades Slemmons's gilded trinket for a huge quantity of candy kisses at the end of the story, this refers back to the celebratory opening scene and suggests that, with the baby, Joe's faith has been restored, and his joy has been redoubled. The candy kisses symbolize what is truly valuable to the happy couple.

Historical Context

Eatonville, Florida

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is set in Eatonville, Florida, which was the first incorporated all-black town in the United States and also Hurston's real life hometown. Such voluntarily segregated towns, growing out of a post-Civil War phenomenon known as "race colonies," offered blacks the opportunity for political independence and some measure of freedom from the oppression of the wider racist culture. The area—now part of Orange County, Florida—was developed largely by white Northern veterans of the Civil War, with blacks coming there initially for work opportunities. A few progressive whites sold small parcels of land to African Americans with the purpose of allowing them to build their own, new community. Twenty-seven founders incorporated Eatonville as a town in 1887. It was designed with civic and community principles in mind, with a school and church at the town's symbolic center. Though racial segregation was the norm across the United States, Eatonville was exceptional because it was segregated by the choice of its own citizens, with the intention to empower them. In the words of Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway, Eatonville "existed not as the 'black backside' of a white city, but as a self-governing, all-black town, proud and independent, living refutation of white claims that black inability for self government necessitated the racist institutions of a Jim Crow South."

Hurston lived in Eatonville only sporadically after age nine, but it remained central to her sense of self and to her vision as an artist. "This community affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of itself," writes Alice Walker in her foreword to *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Walker asks, "For how many other black Americans is this true?" Oral traditions thrived in Eatonville, where storytelling "lying sessions" on the porch of the general store were part of the texture of everyday life. Hurston made the oral culture of Eatonville the subject of her first anthropological study of folklore, *Mules and Men*. The tales, sensibilities, and language of Eatonville "lying sessions" are also essential to her fiction. "Hurston came to know that her parents and their neighbors perpetuated a rich oral literature without self-consciousness," Hemenway writes, "a literature illustrating a creativity seldom recognized and almost universally misunderstood." Through both anthropology and fiction, Hurston preserved the unique oral creativity of the Eatonville community in print form and tried to make its value understandable to the wider world. "The Gilded Six-Bits" celebrates the integrity of the Eatonville community and the power of its indigenous form of expression.

The Harlem Renaissance

After college, Hurston headed for Harlem, a historically black neighborhood in New York City. She was part of a large demographic shift of African Americans moving from the rural South to the urban North, and of a more specific cultural phenomenon that centered in Manhattan, known as the Harlem Renaissance. While "The Gilded Six-Bits"

is set far from the sophisticated world of 1930s Harlem, the influences of the cultural movement afoot there contributed to the circumstances of its writing.

Harlem was referred to as "the Negro capital of America." Two-thirds of all black New Yorkers lived there, and it was a popular entertainment spot for blacks and whites alike. In the early stages of the Harlem Renaissance, starting about 1917, white artists and intellectuals began to collect, write about, and imitate African-American folk art forms. Later, in the 1920s, a small group of talented and well educated blacks living in Harlem —often supported and promoted by white benefactors—became visible as they started to create art based on African American folk culture for themselves.

Hurston was one such promising black talent when she came to New York in 1925. An extraordinary storyteller and wit, Hurston fit the image of the colorful and folksy Negro that had become so popular. She was embraced by members of the black and white intelligentsia alike as a representative of the 'New Negro.' But in the 1930s tensions between white patrons and black artists grew. Many black artists began to criticize the condescending and controlling attitudes of their white benefactors. Their writing became more overtly political, and they began to portray the psychological damage caused by racism in their works. Hurston was an exception to this trend, content to work the system for whatever benefits she could gain and continuing to write about the black experience in ways that, for the most part, did not focus on white stereotypes or oppression. Criticized by her peers during her life time, she was embraced by a later generation of black writers for representing a vision of African American self-love and psychic health. A heart warming story set in an all-black town where racism exists only at a distance, "The Gilded Six-Bits" is a clear example of these qualities.

Critical Overview

In 1933, when Hurston was a rising star of the Harlem Renaissance and an impoverished drama instructor at Bethune-Cookman College in Day tona, Florida, she showed her story, "The Gilded Six-Bits," to an English professor there. He liked it so much that he not only read it to his writing class, but took it upon himself to submit it to *Story*, a well known literary magazine. Bertram Lippincott, a New York publisher wise to the black folk-art trend, then took it upon himself to write to Hurston, expressing interest in publishing any novel she might be working on. This led Hurston to begin and quickly finish her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Thus "The Gilded Six-Bits" was pivotal to her professional development as a fiction writer. (She was already on her way to establishing herself in the field of anthropology under the mentorship of notable anthropologist Franz Boas).

Hurston seemed to effortlessly charm and impress white mentors, and these mentors were some of the same people who wrote or influenced early reviews. Her reception in the mainstream American press was by and large very positive, while her black peers tended to be more critical. For example, a 1934 review of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* written by Martha Greuning for the mainstream *New Republic* cites Hurston's "zest and naturalness," calling her an "insider" who "shares with her hero the touch of 'pagan poesy' that made him thrill his hearers when he preached," and the *New York Times's* Margaret Wallace calls the novel "the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet to be written by a member of the Negro race." In contrast, Estelle Felton of the black periodical *Opportunity* says that "Hurston has not painted people but caricatures," and Andrew Burris of *The Crisis* deems the book a failure, claiming that "she has used her characters and the various situations created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and their folkways." Black writers of an earlier generation found her fiction too crude and risque, while her peers wondered whether she capitulated too easily to white fantasies of happily humble black life. Throughout her career, fellow blacks accused Hurston of ignoring the realities of racism. Hurston disagreed, maintaining that a focus on how racism cripples American blacks was too limiting, and drawing on her idyllic all-black Eatonville as a model of a rich and un-degraded African-American culture.

From 1925 to 1945 Hurston was one of the most high-profile and acclaimed black writers in the country. In 1943 she appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature* for being the first black author to win the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. But she, like virtually all other black Harlem Renaissance writers, made very little money on her publications, and she had to work at a wide variety of jobs to support herself when white patronage dried up. By 1950 she was working as a maid, her books out of print. Ten years later she died in poverty and was buried in an unmarked grave.

In 1973 African-American novelist Alice Walker visited Eatonville and went on a pilgrimage to Hurston's grave. This period was the beginning of another 'renaissance' in African-American letters, this time centering on women writers. Walker wrote about the importance of Hurston's influence, one factor leading to a sudden rush of renewed

interest in Hurston's writing. In his introduction to *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, noted African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recollects first encountering Hurston's out-of-print work while teaching in 1976. "An undergraduate student in a seminar at Yale demanded that I add her to our syllabus, and gave me her one dog-eared photocopy so that I could share it with our class." He goes on to say that in 1993, at the time of writing, "at Yale alone, seven teen courses taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God!"* Hurston fit onto American literature and women's studies syllabi self-conscious about the need to include more diverse authors, as well as in the courses of new African-American studies departments.

The publication of *Spunk*, in which "The Gilded Six-Bits" appears, can be attributed to the Hurston revival. This volume, collecting some of Hurston's best stories, was published in 1985. Brent Staples of the *New York Times* describes the book as "splendid" and "energetic," as well as "decidedly feminist." He credits "The Gilded Six-Bits" for "hold[ing] up nicely after fifty-two years."

Their Eyes Were Watching God remains Hurston's best-known work and is widely considered her strongest. Most of the considerable scholarly criticism of Hurston centers on this novel, though there is also notable academic interest in her anthropological writings. Many interpretations of Hurston's fiction combine attention to dialect with feminist concerns related to power and voice. Other recent critics refute Hurston's image as an artless folklorist, treating her work in terms of its historical context and political import. In "Breaking Out of the Conventions of Dialect," Gayl Jones takes this approach in an analysis of "The Gilded Six-Bits," defending Hurston against accusations of frivolity and discussing Hurston's dilemma—"How does one write of ordinary people without making the story seem trivial?"—in terms of her unconventional use of dialect.

In her lifetime, Hurston's reputation rose suddenly and dropped precipitously, only to rise to even greater heights after her death, thanks in large part to a new generation of black artists and writers who claimed her as a foremother. "We are a people," writes Alive Walker in her foreword to *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. "A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the significance of gender roles and economic power in "The Gilded Six-Bits."

Hurston begins her 1933 short story "The Gilded Six-Bits" with a scene celebrating the domestic bliss of a newlywed couple. She virtually leads readers by the hand up the path to the modest but cozy house, offering them an intimate glimpse into the couple's marital harmony. As the story opens, Missie May Banks, the young wife, readies the house and herself for her husband's return. Each Saturday the husband, Joe, announces his home coming by rolling nine silver dollars across the just scrubbed threshold. It is the end of his week at the fertilizer plant, and the nine dollars are presumably what is left of his paycheck after he has bought some basic supplies, as well as a few small treats for his wife. With the house in perfect order, Missie May relishes the teasing chase and flirtatious tussle she knows is to come, when she will tackle him and rifle through his pockets for the little gifts he has hidden.

The inclusion of this opening scene is crucial to the story, which goes on to show how the harmonious routine of the Banks household is disrupted by Otis Slemmons and the illusive temptation of his gold. First, the play fight offers a *contrast* with the real marital trouble to come. Second, it contains subtext about gender roles and economic power that *foreshadows* this same trouble. For, although Hurston portrays the homecoming ritual as a natural and exuberant expression of young love, it can be understood to be, like Slemmons's seduction scheme, the enactment of an economic exchange. In each ex change it is the man's role to provide money and the woman's role to compensate him for his offerings. The man's status derives from his earning power, while the woman's derives from her feminine charms. The first version of this exchange, taking place within the context of marriage, is depicted as balanced and healthy. The second, taking place outside of marriage, is depicted as exploitative and deceptive. However, close analysis of the opening scene suggests a correspondence between the two scenarios of exchange.

In the course of their affectionate banter that Saturday afternoon, Missie May and Joe have a dialogue about their roles as man and woman. Joe delivers the silver dollars to Missie May in a way she pretends to take offense to. '"Who dat chunkin' money in mah do'way?' she asks, spotting him hiding in the yard and then chasing him into the house. 'Nobody ain't gointer be chunkin money at me and Ah not do'em nothin,' she shouted in mock anger." While Joe is really handing over his hard earned salary to his wife for the maintenance of their household, the assumption behind Missie May's mock anger may be the fact that to throw money at a woman is to call in question her sexual reputation, implying that she can be bought. This foreshadows her acceptance of Slemmons's offer of gold for sex. Later, after Joe catches them together, she must sincerely wonder if her husband thinks he can buy her like a prostitute when he leaves Slemmons's gold trinket under her pillow after they have sex. But, at the story's happy opening, such an

unseemly implication is cause for jest between husband and wife, and also may add a kind of illicit excitement to their domestic routine.

After Missie May pretends to take offense at the coins, she goes on the offensive, rifling through Joe's pockets for gifts. She insists that he "gimme whateve' it is good you got in yo' pocket. Turn it go Joe, do Ah'll tear yo' clothes." Though Joe has hidden the presents to elicit just such a response, he pretends to resist, and telling her, "Move yo' hand. Woman ain't got no business in man's clothes nohow." Joe really wants her to search his pockets, not only so she will find the gifts he has bought for her, but also because it gives her an excuse to grope him and possibly tear his clothes. The scene combines a dynamic of economic exchange with a strongly sexual connotation. This is another in stance of foreshadowing—Slemmons also lures her into having sexual contact with the promise of gifts. As the couple scuffles, Joe tells Missie May that, should she tear his clothes, "you de one dat pushes de needles round heah," reminding her that it is her job as his wife to mend his clothes. In the context of marriage, sexual innuendo easily turns into teasing about household chores.

Thus, the mock battle and flirtatious banter of the opening scene not only provide evidence of Missie May and Joe's domestic happiness, they also subtly demonstrate the asymmetry of their economic power vis-á-vis their gender roles. In some sense, the gender roles in a traditional marriage of the 1930s—a marriage where the man has a job and the woman keeps house—echo the unseemly implications of throwing money at a woman. Marriage is a kind of exchange. A woman, with no economic power of her own, takes a man's money and gives him something in return—not only sex, as with prostitution, but also household labor, including childbearing and rearing. Sex and domestic work are what a man gets in exchange for passing his wages along to his wife. The couple's ritual plays on and revels in the rules of this arrangement.

From a contemporary perspective, Joe's com mands to mend his clothes and cook for him may seem limiting or even demeaning, but Hurston portrays Missie May's self-respect as dependent on this very role. After the play fight, she has Joe's bath water ready, and when Joe tells her to have dinner on the table when he gets out of the tub, she reprimands him. "Don't you mess wid mah business, man . . . Ah'm a real wife, not no dress and breath. Ah might not look lak one," she adds, referring perhaps to her part in their playful romp, "but if you burn me, you won't git a thing but wife ashes." Though it comes in the form of waiting on her husband, Missie May asserts that the housework is her realm of control. Historians have noted that during the Depression, when the story takes place, most married couples tried to maintain their traditional gender roles, meaning that the husband worked and the wife kept house, even though men's status as family providers was threatened by the weak economy and high unemployment. Because work was scarce, women were less likely to work outside of the home. However, their role in maintaining the household became more important when money was scarce. The family budget depended on them to make up the difference for what their men might not be able to earn by cutting corners and making do, even though they had very little economic power of their own. This historical perspective may make it easier to understand why Missie May takes so much pride in her identity as a "real wife," as defined through her mastery of housework.

Missie May doubtlessly loves Joe for his personal qualities, but, invested as the couple is in traditional gender roles, his value to her is tied to his earning power, as revealed by their playful ritual. Similarly, for Joe, part of Missie May's value to him can be attributed to her cooking and cleaning, and, as well, to her sexual attractiveness. He takes pleasure in showing her off to Slemmons, since in addition to flaunting his gold, Slemmons has cited his many women as evidence of his status. When Joe tells Missie May about having met Slemmons, he concludes that his wealth makes Slemmons attractive. He's got a "mouth full of gold teethes" and a fat belly that "make 'm look lak a rich white man." Missie May retorts that he is ugly, "got a puzzlegut on 'im and he so chuckle-headed, he got a pone behind his neck," going on to compliment Joe's physical appearance. But after she meets Slemmons herself, she begins to see things Joe's way, admitting, "He'll do in case of a rush. But he sho' is got a heap uh gold on 'im . . . It lookted good on him sho' nuff." While women are attractive because of their physical beauty and caring attributes, men are attractive because of their economic power. Ironically, only when a man is already rich can he adorn himself with jewelry and accept gifts from the opposite sex without compromising his masculinity.

Missie May goes on to reassure Joe that the gold would "look a whole heap better on you," and begins to fantasize about somehow getting hold of such gold jewelry for him. Joe readily acknowledges that a "po man lak me" will never have access to such riches. This is because, lacking Slemmons's economic power and charisma, he will never convince rich white women to shower him with gifts, and because, rather than accumulating money, he gives it to his wife to run the household. Missie May doesn't admit to Joe that she wants to take matters into her own hands, speculating only that maybe someday they will find some gold along the road. In her wifely role, this is the only sufficiently passive way she can imagine to get hold of some gold with which to adorn her husband.

When Slemmons offers Missie May gold in exchange for sex, she steps outside of her cherished role as a "real wife," not only in that she is unfaithful to her husband but in that she attempts to take over Joe's own cherished role as the family breadwinner. Slemmons is disruptive to the Banks's marriage not so much because he represents a competitive love interest or a real sexual threat, but because he encourages Missie May to attempt to provide economically for Joe by "earning" gold from him. When this is revealed, Missie May and Joe's traditional gender roles are upset, and the domestic ritual with which they reinforced them can no longer be celebrated.

Though the story promotes openness and for giveness, it envisions this only by means of a return to the asymmetrical economic arrangement that is arguably what led to the problem in the first place: that Missie May is economically powerless without a man. The morning after her betrayal, she is somewhat comforted when Joe asks her to make him breakfast and, later, when he succumbs to sleeping with her. But harmony is fully restored in the house only when she gives Joe a son—the ultimate symbol of her wifely value. At this point, Joe, once again secure in his status as husband, takes the trinket he wrested from Slemmons wrist and buys a little gift, offering it, with his wages, as a sign of his true love.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Jones examines history as told through folk tales, in this case by opposing the simplicity of country life with the sophisticated and superficial life of the city.

The history of a people, recorded through folklore, reveals unique, significant, complex, and even virtuous behavior patterns of a culture. This kind of history is one of the contributions of Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist and folklorist, and includes literature reflecting the pastoral and the picaresque. It also includes literature which maintains readability, relevance, and its rightful position among belles lettres. Characteristic of such history is Zora Neale Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits."

The term *pastoral* embodies many characteristics, the first of which is a "contrast between two worlds—one identified with rural peace and simplicity—the other with power and sophistication." This contrast pervades the story. While details of the story will be used later to indicate other pastoral qualities, an initial discussion of this characteristic is appropriate here for its overshadowing effect.

According to Robert E. Hemenway, "The Gilded Six-Bits" is an "ironic account of infidelity and its human effects." A young Southern, unsuspecting wife, anxious to earn a "gold coin," is seduced by an aggressive, pretentious, smooth-talking, city entrepreneur from Chicago who flaunts his superficial possessions and his dalliance with women. Missie May, the wife and central figure in the work, represents the simple and peaceful.

Hurston's three principal characters, Missie May, Otis D. Slemmons, and Joe, approach life variously. Joe, the husband of Missie May, represents the simple and the peaceful. Otis D. Slemmons, the city entrepreneur, symbolizes the powerful and sophisticated. While Joe is seemingly momentarily concerned with the interest that Missie May seems to have in Slemmons, and while Missie May is hopeful that she and Joe "will find" some gold, Missie May engages in an affair with Slemmons and is discovered by her husband in the process. The fleeting appeal of the city life is in contrast to the already pleasant security of rural life. Missie May hopefully tells Joe, "Us might find some gold long de road some time. Us could."

The simple life is exalted by Hurston when she gives significance not to the gilded coins but to the simple, natural entities of the earth. As Missie May weeps in Joe's arms over her act of infidelity and her regrets about the act, Hurston writes:

The sun, the hero of everyday, the impersonal old man that beams as brightly on death as on birth, came up every morning and raced across the blue dome and dipped into the sea of fire every evening. Water ran down the hills and birds nested. Nature's way of soothing the soul is symbolized and exalted in the sun. Nature tempers disappointments and pain.

The sophisticated city life is depicted with a kind of deceptiveness and shallowness in the conversation between Joe and the store clerk in the candy store in Orlando. When Joe throws the gilded half dollar on the counter, the clerk asks him where he got it, and Joe replies:

Offen a stray nigger dat come through Eatonville. He had it on his watch chain for a charm—goin' round making out iss gold money. Ha ha! He had a quarter on his tie pin and it wuz all golded up too. Tryin' to fool people. Makin' out he so rich and everything. Ha! Ha! Trying to tole off folkses wives from home.

The gilded power and sophistication are elusive; the serenity and security of the simple life are desirable and attainable. The simple life is meaning ful to the inhabitant, not to the observer, for as the clerk erroneously sums up Joe's life by saying that "[n]othin worries 'em," he fails to locate the true pulse of simplicity, serenity, and peace of mind inherent in the rural life of Joe and Missie May. The real pulse of simplicity is feeling— experience— sublimity.

A second characteristic of the pastoral is the presentation of situations of choice. From the time that Missie May meets the city businessman until she succumbs to his advances, she torments herself with thoughts of what life would be like with the glitter and prestige of owning gold coins. Because the reader is allowed to see immediately the temporary shallowness of the gold coins and the boastful talk, "the simple world is more intrinsically desirable." Missie May's need and desire to return to the simple life afforded by her husband, Joe, is found in the narrator's explanation of Missie May's behavior after her husband told her, "Missie May, you cry too much. Don't look back lak Lot's wife and turn to salt." The narrator continues, "Missie knew why she didn't leave Joe. She couldn't. She loved him too much, but she could not understand why Joe didn't leave her."

A third characteristic of the pastoral is the implication that the city (world) has "illusory, shallow rewards." Slemmons, symbolizing the city with its illusory rewards, is realistically depicted when the narrator describes the response of Missie May when she finds the piece of money under her pillow. The narrator explains:

Alone to herself, she looked at the thing with loathing, but look she must: She took it into her hands with trembling and saw first thing that it was no gold piece. It was a gilded half dollar. Then she knew why Slemmons had forbidden anyone to touch his gold. He trusted village eyes at a distance not to recognize his stick-pin as a gilded quarter, and his watch charm as a four-bit piece.

Next, a manifestation of the pastoral in a literary work is in a peasant's need to be protected from corruption and temptation. Although Missie May is quickly aware of the likelihood of much exaggeration in the statements made by Slemmons, she is naïve and believing when alone with him. At one point, she tells Joe that "Dat stray nigger jes tell y'all anything and y'all b'lieve it;" yet, at another point, after she tells Joe, "Oh Joe, honey, he said he wuz gointer give me dat gold money and he jus' kept on after me." Missie May is aware, but she needs the protection of her husband.

The last pastoral quality in Hurston's short story is the revelation of "fundamental values." This story, while embodying many ideas, embodies best perhaps the idea that infidelity can be a cheap affair which tarnishes a marriage with the same deceptive shallowness found in the tarnish of Otis D. Slemmons's coin.

One of the pedagogical functions of folklore is to remind members of society of wise codes of conduct; Hurston's story serves this function. The deterioration of Missie May, caused primarily by worry and respect, evidences the need for society to adopt wise, accountable codes of behavior.

While extended definitions of the picaresque as a literary form abound, four characteristics of the picaresque lend themselves to Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits."

Initially, "picaresque," according to Robert Bone, "consists of a journey, which is not so much a spatial geographical excursion as a pilgrimage to wards possibility, toward experience, toward spiritual freedom." Careful analysis of "The Gilded Six-Bits" reveals two of the characters, Missie May and Slemmons, on a "pilgrimage toward experience." For Missie May, the journey begins with the onset of supposing what life would be like for her and her husband if they owned the kind of "gold" that the city man flaunted; the journey ends with the realization that fleeting, gilded tokens are cheap, useless, and even damaging when one's life is traded for illusion. Darwin Turner surely had "The Gilded Six-Bits" in mind when he said that "most of Zora Neale Hurston's stories . . . seem to be quiet quests for self-realization." For Missie May learns to differentiate between the valued and the value less. This, for Missie May, is a maturation process, a journey. For Slemmons, the journey begins with his stop in Eatonville, Florida, for the purpose of get ting as much from the residents of this city as they will allow and by any means; the journey ends as "Slemmons was knocked a somersault into the kitchen and fled through the open door." This, for Slemmons, is a dying process, for the type of man symbolized by Slemmons is one who is ultimately defeated. The manipulative schemes, the flamboyant attire and accessories, bespeak an experience leading to defeat.

The second picaresque quality is the movement of the "picaresque hero from a static, hierarchical traditional society to a series of adventures on an open road." While Slemmons should not be labeled a hero, he can be seen as one who moves from traditional society to adventure. After all, when he settles in Eatonville, he is already being called "Mr. Otis D. Slemmons of spots and places—Memphis, Chicago, Jacksonville, Philadelphia and so on." The mobility of Slemmons indicates a series of adventures. Slemmons's haste in opening the ice cream parlor speaks of the ease with which he quickly settles in one place after the other. The adventuresome spirit is in direct contrast with Joe's life, since for Joe "[t]hat was the best part of life— going home to Missie May."

Another characteristic of the picaresque in literature is given by Robert Bone when he says:

This bastard is cut off from the past and from tradition; there is no ancestral fortune to sustain him; he is entirely on his own, and must survive as best he can.

Hurston brings Otis D. Slemmons into the story by showing him as a stranger to this quiet, rural town. The introduction of Slemmons is at once a contrast to the tone and quality of life into which Joe and Missie May have securely and so happily nestled.

Hurston does not give the readers any indication that this city-slicker is from the background of the Harlem Renaissance; she does, however, in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, say that people are products of their cultures. Since Eatonville, Florida, is clearly depicted as a specific cultural location by carefully recorded dialect, behavior, and descriptions, Otis D. Slemmons is cutoff from this tradition by the author's description of his previous residences and his behavior. Missie May even calls Slemmons "[d]at stray nigger" when she is warning Joe that this newcomer is bragging about many of his so-called dalliances with women and that this bragging may not contain all truth. The only words Hurston gives to Slemmons are those which are uttered through Joe as he tells what Slemmons asked and the pleas that Slemmons made for his life when he pleaded, "Please, suh, don't kill me. Sixty two dollars at de sto'. Gold money." Joe says, "He asted me, 'Who is dat broad wid de forty shake?'"

Finally, the "picaresque journey is at the bot tom a quest for experience." The experience is for all of Hurston's characters, but perhaps most meaningful for Missie May. The story is, at its core, one of a woman saved from destruction and tarnish with the birth of a son who looks like her husband, Joe, and by the forgiving heart of this husband.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" holds its rightful place among belle lettres in its realistic portrayal of life in the South. In his biography of Hurston, Hemenway says,

Zora Hurston had known firsthand a culturally different esthetic tradition. While she and her class mates revered Beethoven, she also remembered the box playing of Eatonville's Bubber Mimms. She enjoyed Keats, but recognized the poetry in her fa ther's sermons; she read Plato, but told stories of Joe Clark's wisdom. . . . Her racially different folk culture was tolerated . . . as a primitive mode of apprehending experience; yet she knew that . . . folk traditions enabled black people to survive with strength and dignity.

"Folklore," Hemenway adds, consists of un written traditions which cause people to perform in familiar ways," thereby creating reality.

Codes for conduct are evident in the consequences experienced by Missie May and Joe. Hurston's genius in presenting this is obvious. Her style unveils the short story within an even broader context than the literary qualities, pastoral and picaresque.

William Dean Howells praises the short story writer's use of "native sources" and "local color flavor of diction." On these two elements of the short story, he writes,

I should, upon the whole, be disposed to rank American short stories only below those of such Russian writers as I have read, and I should praise rather than blame their free use of our different parlances, or "dialects," as people call them. I like this because I hope that our inherited English may be constantly freshened and revived from that

native source which our literary decentralization will help to keep open, and I will own that as I turn over novels coming from Philadelphia, from New Mexico, from Boston, from Tennessee, from rural New England, from New York, every local color flavor or diction gives me courage and pleasure.

Hurston's mastery of the short story is evident. Her attention to the preservation of a culture is a universal technique which has been incorporated in numerous works.

Zora Neal Hurston's fiction provides a history of a people. It inculcates major elements in American fiction, and it does what one literary critic, William Dean Howells, suggests an American short story should do—revive a local dialect. Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits" is not only folklore; it is also great literature—the story of any people who would be momentarily disoriented by the glare and fleeting appeal of a false Utopia.

Zora Neale Hurston is unabashedly a writer of fine literature. A critical analysis of "The Gilded Six-Bits" affirms the genius of this writer in her skillful treatment of not only the pastoral and the picaresque but also fiction, narration, and folklore. Fiction is the shaping of a civilization through a certain construction of language. Hurston makes the rural South live through Missie May's enjoyment of it until new ideas and modes of behavior are introduced, altering the value system of the town and the people. The South represents that time and place in the lives of people, bound by cultural conditions. This time and this place are perfect complements for Joe and Missie May. People are their culture. A digression from the culture of a people is a digression from the reality of the people. Hurston's symbolic reference to illusion versus reality through the feigned significance of the gold coin is a direct reference to illusion versus reality in the altered behavior of people who have digressed from the moral tenor of their culture as a result of the temptations of the turpitude of other cultures.

The use of narration by Hurston is unsurpassed. Hurston's fiction is punctuated with philosophical truths throughout. Choices for analysis, treatment, and application are numerous. Through Missie May's character the need for attention to the spirit of the person and to the culture is evident. Through Joe's character the need for attention to the frailties of human nature, encouraged by strong forces of the modern world, is made clear. Through Otis's character the ever-present appeal of illusory qualities of a strange culture draws attention to the need to understand a given culture, not to embellish it. Through the use of her hometown, Eatonville, Florida, Hurston's narration projects unparalleled significance and strength, for she captures the nuances, scenery, language, tone, and a Southern code of behavior in what has been called her finest short story, "The Gilded Six-Bits."

Finally, Hurston's place in literature as a folklorist remains among the masters of creativity. Any variation on the theme of rural Southern life may be traced to Zora Neale Hurston's perception of it. Her story intensifies the history and the truth of Eatonville, Florida, a truth so complex that it could be of any time and any place. The author's mastery of myth, tale, and legend transcends Eatonville; it goes around the world without leaving the story's setting, for out of that setting is born an understanding of human nature and its culture.

Source: Evora Evora Jones, "The Pastoral and the Pica resque in Zora Neale Hurston's 'The Gilded Six-Bits'" in *The CLA Journal* , Vol. XXXV, No. 3, March, 1992, pp. 316-24.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Jones argues that through the use of dialect in the story the reader is brought inside the African-American community depicted in the story, which opens the possibility for a more complex examination of the characters.

Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933) takes us out of the conventional restrictions observed in Dunbar. This transformation is partly due to the shift in perspective: we are inside rather than out side the black community and there is not the same double-conscious concern with an exclusive white audience. Because there are not the same motives of the anti-lynching story or of the tradition of protest literature in general, Hurston can be concerned with the relationship between a man and woman in "a Negro settlement." She can expand the range beyond "humor and pathos" to a crisis-of-love story; there can be development and recognition, dilemma and resolution, delineated personality.

Critic George Kent has called this a "simple story." In an interview with Bell he says "that one [the story] suggests that really simple people could suddenly resolve all problems by suddenly forgiving each other very easily (. . .) I (. . .) recall that incident being very tediously resolved. I don't recall a really imposing short story by her (. . .)."

Though the story is about "simple people" whose relationship seems to be apparently simply resolved, in view of the problems manifest in Dunbar, it might be reviewed in a more complex light. Its shift in perspective (what Ellison would term "re storing of perspective"), its lack of preoccupation with audience, its sense that Southern rural black speech as dialect may contain any emotion in literature adds degrees of complexity not easily acknowledged or perceived in a cursory reading. Although there certainly is humor in places (as in all her work), it is the spontaneous good humor of fully realized characters in interaction and not that of dimensional minstrel humor. We laugh along with the characters in their happy moments; we go down into the depths with them during the "crisis of love"; we come out with them. We are brought beyond humor and pathos.

The focus is on relationships, interpersonal conflict and conflict of values. There are some elements of sophistication in the story (particularly in its many reversals) but the problem with Hurston (and this perhaps also accounts for Kent's reaction) is how does one write of ordinary people without making the story seem trivial, without making the writer's concerns seem likewise? The subject of Dunbar's story is perhaps a more "significant event" in socio-historical reality but, nevertheless, his Afro American characters remain in the background in both their physical presence and psychological reality. On the other hand, Hurston's characters are pulled to the foreground in both these respects. Like most literary transitions, this does not appear to be of great note these days with contemporary Afro American writers who automatically do the same, notwithstanding certain persistent (or recalcitrant) white critics who may still be asking the former whether they write about "black people or human beings?" and consider the Afro-American character's perspective "the broader perspective" and the significant one.

However, it was an important transition and should be seen as an initial link between a literary technique (viewpoint) and its broader humanistic implications in the depiction of black humanity in literature.

We first meet Missie May and Joe in a ritual scene that occurs every Saturday morning when he throws nine silver dollars in the door "for her to pick up and pile beside her plate at dinner." He also brings her candy kisses. The beginning is full of happiness, "joyful mischief," "mock anger " and the "play fight."

Otis Slemmons, introduced shortly after this playful scene, becomes the center of a conflict of values and the latter, as the subject of much of Hurston's fiction, should be considered a worthy subject or what E. M. Forster would call a "noble" one. Nevertheless, Otis is from Chicago and "spots and places." In the initial dialogue between husband and wife we see the things that interest the couple about him: he has been places, he has gold teeth, he wears "up to date" clothes, his "puzzlegutted " build makes him "look like a rich white man," he has the attention of many women (including white ones up North) and he has gold pieces. These are the things that Joe notices and talks about. Initially, May's concerns seem not to be material but her love for Joe is uppermost; she loves him *as he is*. Joe, however, feels he "can't hold no light to Otis D. Slemmons" because he "ain't never been nowhere" and "ain't got nothing but you."

At first, May is not taken in by Otis or what he represents. Then there is a reversal. The next time we hear the couple talking together (after they have returned from seeing Otis at the local ice-cream parlor), Joe is expressing her earlier values and she is expressing his. We see then all the *things* she wants for him "because she loves him." Nevertheless, she wants them:

Joe laughed and hugged her, 'Don't be so wishful 'bout me. Ah'm satified de way Ah is. So long Ah be yo' husband, Ah don't keer 'bout nothin' else'.

However, to get the gilded six-bits which the gold coins turn out to be, May betrays Joe with Otis. Joe comes home early from work and finds them together. There is a fine handling of emotional reactions here. He sees them and "open his mouth and laughs." Because this is not the expected response—the reaction and emotion seem contradictory—it deepens our sense of the emotion as "a howling wind [which] raced through his heart" and he "kept on feeling so much." He fights Slemmons, drives him away and the crisis of love begins. There is no more laughter or banter.

Kent calls the resolution easy. I think that it appears easy because Hurston handles all the emotional reversals and complications in narrative summary rather than in active dramatic scenes. One reads them quickly and so it seems that they are done quickly but these are real, subtle and difficult changes. Joe makes love to May then leaves a piece of Slemmons's "gold" with the bit of chain attached under her pillow. She then discovers that "it was a gilded half dollar." After the love making she thinks that "they were man and wife again. Then another thought came clawing at her. He had come home to buy from her as if she were any woman in the long house. Fifty cents for her love." She dresses and leaves the house, but she encounters her husband's mother and, so as not

to "admit defeat to that woman," she returns home. Joe discovers she is pregnant, and when she has the child, he knows it is his (his mother even confirms that it looks like him so it must be his!) and they reconcile.

The story is perhaps resolved too simply at this point, the "baby chile" being a kind of *deus ex machina*. Nevertheless, Hurston's handling of their complications and reversals of emotion up to now has been superb and certainly adds more shadings of emotion than revealed in earlier dialect stories. Dialect itself is more complex and shows more literary sophistication. The links with the interior of the characters, the processes of emotional transformation, as well as the foreground presentation make it no "simple story" though it deals with "ordinary folks," yet it poses a challenge because it contains everything that was considered not the stuff of important fiction: it is regional, it focuses on the relationship between a black man and a black woman and it does not make interracial conflict its reason for being.

The problem of the "stuff of important fiction" of course transcends racial lines. A contemporary American white writer, Mary Gordon, has written an article entitled "The Parable of the Cave or In Praise of Water Colors" in which she speaks of Theodore Roethke saying that woman poets were "stamping a tiny foot against God" and that she has been told by male (but not female) critics that her work is "exquisite," "like a water color": "Water colors are cheap and plentiful; oils are costly; their base must be bought. And the idea is that oil paintings will endure."

Because Gordon's remarks are important in cross-sexual and cross-cultural criticism, I will quote her in full:

There are people in the world who derive no small pleasure from the game of "major" and "minor." They think that no major work can be painted in water colors. They think, too, that Hemingway writing about boys in the woods is major; Mansfield writing about girls in the house is minor. Exquisite, they will hasten to insist, but minor. These people join up with other bad specters and I have to work to banish them. Let us pretend these specters are two men, two famous poets, saying, "your experience is an embarrassment; your experience is insignificant.I wanted to be a good girl, so I tried to find out whose experience was not embarrassing. The prototype for a writer who was not embarrassing was Henry James. "And you see," the two specters said, proffering hope, "he wrote about social relationships but his distance gave them grandeur.Distance, then, was what I was to strive for. Distance from the body, from the heart, but most of all, distance from the self as writer (. . .)If Henry James had the refined experience, Conrad had the significant one. The important moral issues were his: men pitted against nature in moments of extremity. There are no important women in Conrad's novels, except for Victory, which, the critics tell us, is a romance and an exception. Despite the example of Conrad, it was all right for the young men I knew, according to my specters, to write about the hymens they had broken, the diner waitresses they had seduced. Those experiences were significant. But we were not to write about our broken hearts, about the married men we loved disastrously, about our mothers or our children. Men could write about their fears of dying by exposure in the forest; we could not write about our fears of being suffocated in the kitchen. Our desire

to write about these experiences only revealed our shallowness; it was suggested we would, in time, get over it. And write about what? Perhaps we would stop writing."And so," the specters whispered to me, "if you want to write well, if you want us to take you seriously, you must be distant, you must be extreme.I suppose the specters were not entirely wrong. Some of the literature that has been written since the inception of the women's movement is lacking in style and moral proportion. But so is the work of Mailer, Miller, Burroughs, Ginsberg. Their lack of style and proportion may be called offensive, but not embarrassing. They may be referred to as off the mark, but they will not be called trivial.And above all I did not wish to be trivial; I did not wish to be embarrassing.

Most female writers (black and white) have experienced this from male critics. Black writers (male and female) have experienced it from (white) male critics and, ironically, given Gordon's re marks, from white female critics. The problem of writers dominated by literary standards of "significant events" (national, sexual, racial) is not only finding one's voice but of trusting it when one does find it; then finding the voice or voices that one most values and avoiding destruction of the creative spirit and discovering how one can most (as Kent would term it) "assert one's existence" and the existences of all the characters.

Kent himself feels that black women writers fail to explore real depth: "Often, the problem is that you don't get a deep enough definition of the things that the woman encounters which are her responses to power (. . .) I would say that black women writers that I've read don't seem to get much into subtle possibilities (. . .) I don't see much possibility and I'm not sure that there is always depth (. . .)." Yet, unlike most critics, he acknowledges that "it might be that male thing you were talking about."

This could be the "elliptical details" in the work for which a male critic would need more "analytical commentary."

But regardless of the "subtle possibilities" (of society, history, gender ?) that critics confuse with aesthetics, in the case of Hurston, dialect, as regional vernacular, can and does contain subject, experience, emotion and revelation. Two reasons for this new attitude and sense of possibility in character and dialect might be that she was born in the first incorporated all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, and that she was a folklorist possessing an exact as well as a creative ear. In her Foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Williams speaks of her "command":

She had at her command a large store of stories, songs, incidents, idiomatic phrases, and metaphors; her ear for speech rhythms must have been remarkable. Most importantly, she had the literary intelligence and developed the literary skill to convey the power and beauty of this heard speech and lived experience on the printed page.Hurston's evocations of the lifestyles of rural Blacks have not been equaled but to stress the ruralness of Hurston's settings or to characterize her diction solely in terms of exotic "dialect" spellings is to miss her deftness with language. In the speech of her characters, black voices—whether rural or urban, northern or southern—come alive. Her fidelity to diction, metaphor and syntax—whether in direct quotations or in

paraphrases of characters' thoughts—rings, even across forty years, with an arching familiarity that is a testament to Hurston's skill and to the durability of black speech.

In "The Gilded Six-Bits" one sees the folklorist in the metaphors, images and descriptions in the dialogue: "He ain't puzzlegutted, honey"; "God took pattern after a pine tree and built you noble"; "You can make 'miration at it, but don't tetch it"; "Ah reckon dey done made him vast-rich." Certainly there is a difference between the metaphors used here and those in Melville's descriptive evaluation of Jube or Creelman's of Washington because we have individuality, range and elegance.

Oral tradition enters, complements and complicates character in the use "storytelling" or reported scenes to reinforce the dramatic ones. When May and Joe go to the ice-cream parlor and see Otis, they return and Joe retells the encounter:

On the way home that night Joe was exultant. "Didn't Ah say ole Otis was swell? Cain't he talk Chicago talk? Wuzn't dat funny whut he said when great big fat ole da Armstrong come in? He asted me, "Who is dat broad wid de forte shake?" Dat's a new word. Us always thought forty was a set of figgers but he showed us where it means a whole heap of things. Sometimes he don't say forty, he jes' say thirty-eight and two, and dat mean de same thing. Know whut be told me when Ah wuz payin' for our ice cream? He say, "Ah have to hand it to you, Joe. Dat wife, of yours is jes' thirty-eight and two. Yessuh, she's forty!" Ain't he killin'?

This description of the scene is important. Hurston does not take us to the ice-cream parlor directly and dramatically; she skips the scene and lets Joe's storytelling serve as a flashback and the story advances through the character's reactions to the moment. Therefore, the psychology of relation ships is explored: there are complicating reversals and confusions of value, then the renewed and stronger affection.

Besides the use of storytelling dialogue, Hurston also moves "folk expressions" into the narrative while in most early fiction, and certainly the turn of-the-century fiction of both Dunbar and Charles Waddell Chesnutt, it was confined to dialogue: "way after while," "make his market," "mess of honey flowers."

Here, the syntax, lexicon and expressive techniques of oral tradition break though to the narrative and alter it; this enlarges the scope of dialect to the modes of exposition. It is also possible for this extensible language to tell a story and Hurston offers a beginning here as well. Wideman speaks of this important "evolution":

From the point of view of American literature then, the fact of black speech (and the oral roots of a distinct literary tradition—ultimately the tradition itself) existed only when it was properly "framed" within works which had status in the dominant literary system. For black speech, the frame was the means of entering the literate culture and the frame also defined the purposes or ends for which black speech could be employed. The frame confers reality on black speech; the literary frame was a mediator, a legitimizer. What was outside the frame—chaotic, marginal, not worthy of the reader's attention—becomes, once inside, conventionalized into respectability.The frame implies

a linguistic hierarchy, the dominance of one language variety over all others. This linguistic subordination extends naturally to the dominance of one version of reality over others.

Hurston, in her use of dialect, was one of the first to initiate this breaking out of the frame—an important initiation for those writers committed to such linguistic explorations in fiction.

In "The Gilded Six-Bits," not only does the dialect have more functions but it is used in a story of greater complexity of character, greater thematic range and literary sophistication. Though the people themselves are "simple" in the sense of being "ordinary folks," their range is more than sentimental or comic emotion. Because the dialect here is given a fuller value and use, we move a step further toward a fuller exploration of black personalities in fiction but it will not be until *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that language, thought, experience, emotion and imagination will break through and add to the text like an apical bud, increasing the length of the stem or, to use Hurston's own image, "a peartree bud coming to flower." She fulfills the possibility of what dialect might do when moved beyond the literary conventions and allowed more of the magic and flexibility of authentic folk creation.

Source: Gayl Jones, "Breaking Out of the Conventions of Dialect: Dunbar and Hurston" in *Presence Africaine*, No. 144, Fall, 1987, pp. 39-46.

Adaptations

"The Gilded Six-Bits," read by Renee JoshuaPorter, is included on an audiocassette entitled *Stories by Zora Neale Hurston*, recorded in 1996 by Audio Bookshelf.

Topics for Further Study

What are Missie May's motivations for betraying Joe by sleeping with Otis Slemmons? Do you think Joe bears some of the responsibility for her mistake?

"The Gilded Six-Bits" can be understood as an exploration of different ideas of value. What are some of the different kinds of value that an object or person can have other than monetary value? What, in Hurston's view, is most valuable?

Hurston is famous for capturing the richness of African-American oral traditions in her writing. Hurston's characters speak in language that is full of metaphors. Identify as many metaphors as you can find in the quoted speech of the characters in "The Gilded Six-Bits." How do these metaphors relate to the story's larger themes?

Do some research about all-black towns in the United States. Do you think that they are a good idea? How does Hurston's portrayal of one such community in "The Gilded Six-Bits" influence your opinion?

The Harlem Renaissance writers who were Hurston's peers often represented Northern cities as places of freedom and the rural South as tied to the oppressive past of slavery. Find some other short stories written by blacks during the Harlem Renaissance and describe their representations of the customs and values of the city versus the country. How do they compare to Hurston's in "The Gilded Six-Bits"?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The U.S. economy suffers from a crippling economic depression. Older industries, such as the automotive, railroad, steel, textiles, and agriculture, are stagnant. New, service-based industries hold promise for economic development, but low wages and extremely high unemployment delay their growth. The national income is cut in half between the stock market crash (1929) and 1932.

1990s: The country enjoys the longest period of economic growth in history. The Dow Jones Industrial Average breaks the ten-thousand mark for the first time. Unemployment is at a record low. A booming high-tech industry fuels the economy, leading to higher wages and more disposable income. This, in turn, supports a service-based consumer economy. Despite prosperity, consumer debt is at a record high. The average family spends more than it earns in a given year.

1930s: The average family income in the United States is in the range of $500 to $1,500 per year. Most families have $20 to $25 per week to meet food, clothing, and housing expenses.

1990s: At the end of the decade, the median family income is approximately $47,000 per year in the United States, leaving just under $4,000 per month for expenses.

1930s: Men's roles are more disrupted by the Depression than women's, since men's status as breadwinners is undermined, while women's roles in maintaining the household remain largely intact. Relatively few women work outside of the home, even in working-class families. In the face of economic insecurity, most couples try to preserve traditional gender roles.

1990s: A two-income family, with both husband and wife working, has become the norm in both middle-class and working-class families, for both social and economic reasons. The women's movement has led to greater opportunities for women in the workplace, and economic pressure makes two incomes necessary for most families.

1930s: Discrimination against African Americans is generally accepted in the highly segregated mainstream American culture. Public spaces are segregated, many African Americans are deprived of the right to vote, and a dozen or more lynchings still occur each year. Politicians begin to identify the issue of civil rights as a national problem, but take little legislative action.

1990s: In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, racism is much less overt in many sectors of American society. However, more subtle forms of racism still plague the nation. President Clinton names racism as a pressing national problem. Public spaces are integrated and the program of Affirmative Action has led to greater integration in the workplace as well, but blacks and whites often have separate cultural and social lives, and significant economic disparities still exist.

What Do I Read Next?

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), widely considered Hurston's finest work, is a novel concerning the life and loves of woman growing up in an all-black community. It offers an exuberant and affirmative picture of love and selfrealization.

Mules and Men (1935), is a collection of folktales that Hurston recorded from her native town of Eatonville, Florida. She shares them with an insider's appreciation of their social and philosophical messages and a storyteller's flare for language.

The Blacker the Berry (1929), Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance classic, tells the story of how intra-race color prejudice affects one family.

The Color Purple (1983), by Alice Walker (an African-American novelist who contributed to Hurston's rediscovery and who was greatly influenced by her writing), portrays a woman overcoming oppression by men and discovering herself in the rural South.

Paradise (1998), by Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, weaves a rich tapestry of history as she tells the story of an all-black town and the strange and powerful women who reside at a nearby nunnery.

Mama Day (1989), a novel by Gloria Naylor, describes several generations of love, jealousy, and magic in a black community on a fictional island off of Georgia.

Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo (1982), Ntozake Shange's novel about the experiences of three artistic African-American sisters, mixes traditional storytelling with innovation.

Further Study

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, and K. A. Appiah, eds., *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, Amistad, 1993.

This volume collects reviews and criticism on Hurston's work from 1934 to 1992, offering a useful historical perspective on Hurston's literary reputation. Some of the more recent scholarly essays may be too specialized for the general reader.

Hemenway, Robert E., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Hemenway offers an authoritative account of Hurston's life based on sensitive insights on her various writings. This scholarly book is long and detailed, but accessible to the general reader.

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, with an introduction by Maya Angelou, HarperCollins, 1992.

Hurston's breezy and possibly inaccurate memoir, originally published in 1942, describes the author's rise from poverty and her experiences as a darling of the Harlem Renaissance.

Lewis, David Levering, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

This thorough and readable analysis of the cultural phenomenon that was the Harlem Renaissance offers a useful context for Hurston's work.

Nathiri, N. Y., ed., *Zora! A Woman and Her Community*, Sentinel Books, 1991.

Editor Nathiri, a fellow native of Eatonville, takes a personal approach to Hurston's life and work, creating an adoring "family album" for her. Includes biographical information, interviews with her relatives, and background on Eatonville.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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