Spunk Study Guide

Spunk by Zora Neale Hurston

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Spunk" was only the third short story Zora Neale Hurston published, and it was immediately successful. She had been encouraged to come to New York City by Charles S. Johnson, the editor of the National Urban League's influential magazine, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, because Johnson had published her second story, "Drenched in Light," and recognized her talent. At Johnson's urging, Hurston entered "Spunk" in *Opportunity*'s 1925 literary contest and took second prize for fiction. (A play she submitted, *Color Struck*, took second prize for drama.) The story was published in the June 1925 issue of the magazine, and Hurston's career was launched. Later that year, the story was included in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, an anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays edited by Alain Locke, a former philosophy professor of Hurston's at Howard University. The anthology became one of a handful of important and widely read collections of the Harlem Renaissance, demonstrating the best of the new writing coming out of black America.

The story takes place in a rural, all-black Southern town, much like Eatonville, Florida, where Hurston grew up. It is the story of a confident man who steals a weaker man's wife, and how the husband gets his revenge after death. Like many of Hurston's stories, it deals with the nature of marriage and with a struggle between a strong man and a weak one. Much of the story is told in dialogue, and the characters speak in a Southern African American dialect with rich, figurative language. Early critics of Hurston's work were divided on her use of this kind of language: some were delighted that she was celebrating the language she had heard first-hand, and others felt she was advancing her career by presenting demeaning black stereotypes to a white audience.

Author Biography

Zora Neale Hurston's short but dazzling career took her from poverty in rural Florida to the life of the literary elite in New York City and back again. She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first officially incorporated all-black township in the United States, and a town much like the one in which "Spunk" takes place. She was born on January 7, in a year that has never been verified but was probably 1901. Her father, John, was a Baptist minister and carpenter; her mother, Lucy Ann, was a former schoolteacher with a small sewing business. Lucy Ann died in 1904, and in 1915 Zora left home to work as a maid for a traveling theatre company.

She found her way to Maryland, where she worked as a waitress and completed high school, and then studied literature and philosophy at Howard University. She published her first short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in the university literary magazine. In 1925, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, she moved to New York City with "$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope."

Hurston sought out and charmed the Harlem elite with her flamboyant personality, and soon achieved success as a writer. Her short story "Spunk" won second prize in *Opportunity Magazine*'s first literary contest, and was published in the June 1925 issue. The attention led to a scholarship to Barnard College, where she studied anthropology with the famous Franz Boas. She learned to appreciate and collect African-American folklore and, supported by a grant, traveled around the South gathering stories, work she would return to throughout her life.

Hurston was an eccentric, witty, and carefree woman, who lived for many years on gifts from wealthy white friends who found her entertaining and exasperating. With their support she carried on her folklore-collecting and her writing. During the 1930s she produced dozens of short stories, three novels, including the much-admired *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and two important collections of folklore, all of which have attracted critical and popular praise. She was a sought-after lecturer at universities, and her short stories were published in the most important magazines of the day. However, as she explains in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she was never paid enough for her writing to support herself, as was the case for almost all black writers at the time.

Throughout her life, Hurston made a strong impression wherever she went—no one who knew her was neutral about her. She had two brief marriages, won and lost several close friends, and feuded publicly with other prominent African-Americans. Her writing tapered off during the 1940s, and she withdrew from society. By 1950 she had to take on domestic work to make ends meet. She died in a county welfare home in Florida on January 28, 1960, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Plot Summary

Although there is a third person narrator who tells the story, the actions of the main characters in "Spunk" are interpreted mostly by the men who stand around commenting on what they see as they lounge about their village's one store. The narrator is detached, uninvolved in the action, but the men who speak have opinions about everything. As the story opens, a man and a woman walk arm-in-arm down the street of the village and into the brush. As the men watch the couple walk away, their gossiping makes it clear that the man is Spunk Banks, a "giant of a brown-skinned man" who is known in town and at the saw-mill for his bravery. The identity of the woman is not revealed until a small nervous man enters the store, and Elijah, one of the other men, begins to tease him. He is Joe Kanty, and the woman on Spunk's arm is Joe's wife, Lena. Shamed by Elijah's mockery, Joe takes out a razor and announces that he is going to confront Spunk and get his wife back. He leaves the store in pursuit of the couple, and the men continue to gossip. Elijah tells the story of Joe coming face to face with Spunk and Lena the week before and being too cowardly to act. Although Elijah's friend Walter thinks Spunk is too arrogant, the men all understand why Lena would prefer Spunk to the timid Joe. They are sure that Joe will not have the courage to attack, and that Spunk would never harm him anyway, because Spunk is the greater man.

But the men are wrong. Joe does come up behind Spunk and Lena with his razor, and Spunk shoots him dead. Calmly he tells everyone about the shooting, knowing that no one will challenge him— and no one does, even though he exaggerates the danger he was in, reporting that Joe "come out there wid a meat axe an' made me kill him." Joe was a coward, he says, attacking from behind, and Spunk had no choice. After a swift trial he is set free and takes up again with Lena, who has been waiting for him with love in her eyes.

Soon after, word gets around that Spunk and Lena are about to marry. They have been living together in Lena's house, but Spunk has bought a new house and wants to marry Lena to restore her respectability. One night, as they are getting ready for bed, a black bobcat circles the house howling. Spunk gets his gun—the gun he used to kill Joe&mdash but the animal looks right into his eyes, frightening him so he cannot shoot. Spunk, the man who is known for his fearlessness, is convinced that the bobcat is Joe, come back from Hell to keep him from marrying Lena. Walter, who has always been less admiring of Spunk than the others, believes that the animal probably is Joe, and comments that "Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk." To the surprised Elijah, he explains that for Spunk to fight when he is naturally fearless takes little courage; but for Joe to confront Spunk in spite of his fear is a brave act. Whether the black bobcat (an animal never before seen in the area) really is Joe or not, from that night Spunk lives with fear. Even at the saw-mill, where he has always been able to do the most dangerous work, standing with perfect balance on logs as they move down the conveyor toward the saw, he trembles.

Finally, the inevitable happens. Spunk falls from a log into the saw and is fatally injured. Before he dies, he accuses Joe of having pushed him into the blade—pushed him from the back, like a coward. When Spunk is laid out for burial, the whole village comes to see him and to comfort Lena. As Lena wails loudly for the man she loved, the men drink and make coarse remarks while the women speculate about who will be Lena's next conquest.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Spunk Banks is a giant of a man and a bully, and he has taken Joe Kanty's wife, Lena, for his own without regard to Joe's feelings. All the loungers at the village store watch as Spunk and Lena come walking down the street. Elijah Mosley and Walter Thomas gossip about Spunk's behavior and the fact that Joe, a much smaller man, has not been able to do anything about the situation.

Spunk, who works at the sawmill, is something of a hero to the men because he isn't afraid of anything. Poor Joe comes into the store and the men ridicule him for the way Spunk and Lena have become a pair.

Walter doesn't approve of Spunk's taking Lena just because Joe is timid, but Elijah protests. He says that doesn't have anything to do with it. It's just that Spunk wants Lena, a small and very pretty woman. That's just the way he is, says Elijah. It doesn't matter what obstacle gets in his way, he goes after whatever he wants. He says that Spunk has told Joe that Lena is his. He tells Lena he is going to look after her and will build her a house. She replies that the house she lives in is hers - her father gave it to her. Even so, he assures her that he is the person who is going to look after her from now on.

Now Joe is in the store and is saying he's going after Spunk with his razor. The men encourage him; although, after he leaves, they express doubts that there's anything he can do. After all, they say, Joe knows that Spunk totes an Army 45. In fact, they believe Joe will hide the razor and will not do anything.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The setting for this story is a small African-American community in the 1920s, based on Eatonville, Florida, a completely black town where the author grew up. While this was long before the era of Magic Johnson and Shaquille O'Neal, it is impossible not to think of the very large African American men who have dominated the sports world since the middle of the 20th Century. Spunk is heroic in size, he has all the confidence he needs to accomplish whatever he sets his mind to, and he is both feared and respected in his community. Unfortunately, this particular hero is also a bully.

The point of view is unusual in this story in that it keeps shifting. There is a narrator who is describing what is going on, then the focus shifts to the men in the store, and it is through their eyes that one sees what is happening, and it is their perceptions that shape our own. The reader admires Spunk's cool self-assurance in brashly taking what he wants because they do. At the same time, the men feel sorry for poor Joe, who is helpless to do anything about what is going on, and the reader also feels sympathy for him.

But it is impossible to determine which of the two men Walter and Elijah identify with. This ambiguity is purposeful. It keeps the reader guessing, also. Is Spunk to be admired or despised? Should one feel sympathy for Joe or disgust?

This may seem a simple story, but the dynamics among this small group of characters is anything but simple. The author, Zora Neale Hurston, had a passion for the people whose dreams and desires, traumas and foibles make up the fabric of her stories. In the generations immediately following her, many black writers were caught up in sociological and political issues, but not Hurston. She was an artist first and last. The medium she worked in was not paint and a brush or stone and a chisel, but the people she had grown up with and lived among and knew so intimately. She puzzled about and recorded human motivations and peculiarities - what sets one apart from others, what makes him or her unique?

In this story, she has written an inherently unique character, Spunk: a fascinating creation shaped from the raw material of observations and interactions.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The men hear a shot in the woods, and Spunk comes swaggering out, Lena clinging to him and weeping. He claims that Joe attacked him from behind and he had to shoot him. "Joe come out there wid a meatax an' made me kill him," he announces.

He sends Lena home and leads the men to the woods where Joe lies dead, still clutching his razor. Spunk shows them the cut on his back, and even though the men are angry at Spunk, there is nothing they can do. They discuss locking him up and bringing the sheriff from Orlando, but they know it will be futile.

The court declares that it was self-defense after a very short trial. So Joe is dead, Spunk is back at work riding the dangerous log carriage that feeds the circle saw. He roams the woods again and is back with Lena, and he is as free as he was before the killing.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The conflicts in this story at the most basic level are between Joe and Spunk, and Joe is clearly outranked. There is very little competition and no question about the outcome. Spunk is going to win this battle because he has everything going for him, and Joe has very little. The story could end here, and the bad guy would come out the winner. But the story is not over yet.

In this chapter, the story is back to a third-person narrator telling the story. He simply comes out of the woods, tells his side of the story, and tells the men to take Joe and bury him.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Spunk has moved Lena out of her home and into the Bradley house, which he is buying for her. He does not want people to continue talking about her.

The first night they are together in the house, a black bobcat comes and walks all around the house, howling. Spunk takes his gun to go and kill it, but it looks him right in the eye and howls right at him. Spunk says it isn't a bobcat; it is Joe come back from Hell.

Walter says, "He oughter be nervous after what he done. . . . Ah bet he'll be back time and agin, too."

?Taint nothin' for Spunk to fight when he ain't skeered of nothin.'" He also reminds Elijah that Lena was the only thing Joe ever wanted and the only thing he ever had. He believes Joe is back to wreak vengeance. Besides, he says, "It musta been a h'ant cause ain' nobody never seen no black bob-cat."

The next thing they hear is that Spunk believes the saw is wobbling even though the machinist insists there is nothing wrong with it. Then Spunk claims someone has pushed him toward the saw even though there was no one near him.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter is told entirely by Elijah and Walter - two characters that Hurston uses over and over in many of her other stories. The plot begins to thicken here, however. While Chapter 2 ended with Spunk the victor and Joe dead, in this chapter the reader finds that Joe may not be entirely gone and that Spunk may not be so victorious. While Joe could not defend his rights while he was alive, now that he is dead he has powers that Spunk is unable to fight against. Spunk cannot use his gun to eliminate this adversary. This is an interesting twist on standard plotting where the action builds to a climax and at that point it is clear who comes out the winner.

The supernatural is very much a part of black literature. A good example lies in Toni Morrison's work. She is a best-selling black writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1993, and who draws heavily on the supernatural in her depiction of modern African-American communities. This is evident most notably her best seller, *Beloved*, published in 1987, which was made into a movie. Hurston delights in the black vernacular and uses it effectively and extensively in her stories. Without that feature, this story would not work. The supernatural twist to the story becomes believable because one hears about the "h'ant" from the mouths of true believers.

So did Joe bring about Spunk's death? Can one accept the reality of a spirit who comes back from the dead and wreaks vengeance? Hurston writes her plots so effectively that the reader is swept along. Doubts are swept away.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The inevitable happens: Spunk falls into the saw and is killed. His last words are, "It was Joe, 'Lige - the dirty sneak shoved me . . . he didn't dare come to mah face . . . but Ah'll git the son-of-a-wood louse soon's Ah get there an' make hell too hot for him . . . . Ah felt him shove me . . .!"

The entire village goes to the wake, including Elijah and Walter, and Joe's father, Jeff Kanty. Lena wails, everyone eats the food brought by the community, and they all conjecture about who will be Lena's next.

Chapter 4 Analysis

So now the climax has been presented. Joe, from the grave, seems to have come out the winner, and Spunk knows it. The story of his demise comes from Walter and Elijah, but again, the point of view shifts. The denouyment, the unraveling of the story, is told by the third-person impersonal narrator. The wake ties up all the loose ends, including the satisfaction Joe's father, Jeff, has in looking triumphantly at the body of the man who killed his son. Having the impersonal narrator step in and finish off the story is effective and functional. The ambiguous observations of the men no longer to get in the way of the reader's own perception of the satisfying conclusion.

This story is about justice, both divine and human, a favorite theme for Hurston. In most of Hurston's stories, the good guys win and the bad guys lose, a theme that is once again demonstrated in *Spunk*.

Characters

Spunk Banks

The opening words of the story, "A giant of a brown-skinned man," refer to the title character, Spunk Banks, a saw-mill worker with flashy clothes, a guitar, and a way with women. His size is matched by his self-confidence. Not only is he unafraid of the most dangerous jobs at the saw-mill—jobs that have killed other men—he has no hesitation about carrying on with another man's wife right in front of the man and all his friends. The other men treat Spunk with a mixture of respect and fear, and talk admiringly and grudgingly of his courage and quick temper, and of the .45 pistol he carries. Even when he calmly kills Joe, they do not dare challenge him. When Spunk decides to marry Lena, whom he has made a widow, Spunk gets his first taste of fear when confronted with a black bobcat, which he believes is Joe's spirit.

Joe Kanty

Joe Kanty is the opposite of Spunk Banks in every way. He is a small, round-shouldered man with ill-fitting clothes and a nervous disposition. When his wife, Lena, takes up with Spunk, Joe is unable to stand up for himself against Spunk's size and confidence. Even when he meets Spunk and Lena together, he will not or can not fight. Spunk humiliates Joe, and Lena is disgusted with her husband. Finally, Joe gathers his courage and goes after Spunk with a razor. Spunk shoots him dead. Most critics argue that the appearance of a black bobcat near the end of the story represents Joe's return from beyond the grave as he seeks revenge on Spunk.

Lena Kanty

Lena is a small, pretty woman who is married to Joe but in love with Spunk. She has been publicly carrying on with Spunk, seeming not to care about her husband's feelings. When Joe refuses to fight for her, she rejects him totally and walks away with Spunk, but not before asserting her power in a small way by refusing to accept a new house from her lover. She shows some fear when Spunk kills Joe, but she welcomes Spunk when his trial is over. Although she weeps loudly when Spunk is killed, the other women in the village know that she will get over him as quickly as she forgot about Joe.

'Lige

See Elijah Mosley

Elijah Mosley

Among the men lounging in the store when Spunk and Lena walk by is Elijah Mosley, whom his friends call 'Lige. He and the other men function as a kind of narrator, gossiping about what has happened at the mill, or on the street, or in someone's bed. When Joe enters the store, it is 'Lige who goads him with the truth about Lena's infidelity, and after Joe leaves 'Lige tells everyone else about the earlier encounter between Joe and Spunk. He is the first to know that Spunk and Lena plan to marry, and the first to know about the bobcat. Though his role in the action is small, Elijah reports and comments on the action, and he is the most admiring of all the witnesses. His being first with every detail is a way of vicariously living the exciting life Spunk lives.

Walter Thomas

Elijah Mosley's constant companion in gossip sessions at the store is Walter Thomas, and the dialogue between the two of them makes up most of the story. Walter is always interested in Elijah's news, and is always willing to give opinions about Joe and Spunk and Lena, but he has more reservations about Spunk, and more admiration for Joe, than Elijah has.

Themes

Courage and Cowardice

The most important theme in "Spunk" is suggested by its title: since the nineteenth century, the word spunk has been slang for feistiness or liveliness. To say of someone, "She's got spunk," is to say that she is spirited, unafraid. Spunk is not only the name of the central character of this story, it is his defining quality, the reason for his name (presumably a nickname). Elijah Mosley praises Spunk's bravery in the opening scene: "But that's one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks—he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool—*nothin*'! He rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts 'round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty. When Tes Miller got cut to giblets on that circlesaw, Spunk steps right up and starts ridin'. The rest of us was skeered to go near it." With every step Spunk takes, every gesture he makes, he shows his confidence and bravery. He saunters, walks leisurely, and speaks in a carefree voice. To the men of the village, he is courage personified.

Immediately after Elijah finishes praising Spunk's actions at the sawmill, Joe Kanty walks into the store where the men are gathered. The contrast is dramatic: "A round-shouldered figure in overalls much too large came nervously in the door, and the talking ceased." Joe has none of Spunk's confidence, even when the subject is his own wife, Lena, whom Spunk has stolen. He stands at the counter "with his Adam's apple twitching nervously up and down his throat. One could actually see the pain he was suffering, his eyes, his face, his hands, and even the dejected slump of his shoulders." Where Spunk "saunters" and "strolls," Joe "stumbles" and "shambles" and "sneaks." Behind his back, Elijah tells about an encounter between Spunk and Joe the week before. Even when Spunk claimed Lena as his own, Joe could only mumble in reply, refusing to fight. The men agree that Joe is "timid 'bout fightin'," but disagree about whether that gives Spunk the right to carry on as he does.

Later, when Spunk has killed Joe, the men reassess their notions of bravery. Spunk, the man who "ain't skeered of nothin ," is now the nervous one, "so nervoused up he couldn't shoot" at the bobcat howling outside his window. Walter, who has had his reservations about Spunk all along, claims "he oughter be nervous after what he done," and startles the other men by announcing, "Know what Ah think? Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk." For Spunk to fight, he explains, did not take courage because Spunk has no natural fear, but for Joe to overcome his fear and fight the bigger man was an act of courage.

In the remaining few paragraphs of the story, Hurston presents several more images of fear. One of the men says of Spunk, "I'm skeered of dat man when he gits hot." Elijah hesitates to sit with Spunk's dead body because "Ah'm a li'l bit skittish." One of the men who comes to view the body is Joe's father, "who a few hours before would have been afraid to come within ten feet" of Spunk. None of these men has the courage Joe has finally found. As Walter puts it, "Joe's ready for Spunk an' ain't skeered any more."

Love and Passion

At the center of the conflict between Spunk and Joe is the "small pretty woman" Lena, whom they both love. The exaggerated notion of an "overwhelming passion" is often talked about in movies and stories, but in Joe's and Spunk's case, the description is accurate. Lena's love, and the threat of losing it, makes both men act out of character. Lena is the most important thing in Joe's life, and he sees in Spunk "the man that's got all he ever had. Y'all know Joe ain't never had nothin' nor wanted nothin' besides Lena." The prospect of losing her makes him, a small man with a razor, confront Spunk, a much larger man with a gun. One word for this kind of behavior is *brave*, but another is *crazy*, and Elijah uses this word for Spunk: "Spunk's crazy 'bout Lena." With Joe dead, Spunk is planning to marry Lena, although everyone knows he is the not "the marryin' kind." Thinking that Joe might be coming back as a bobcat to prevent the marriage, Spunk becomes a different, nervous, person—a person like Joe used to be. Love makes these very different men crazy, and ultimately drives them to kill each other.

Lena also feels love strongly, but it does not overwhelm her. She does love Spunk, and even as her lover is publicly humiliating her husband, Lena looks at Spunk "with her eyes so full of love that they wuz runnin' over." But, like many of Hurston's female characters who seem to be consumed by love, she always holds something back, and when Spunk proposes to build her a new house she asserts her own power and refuses to leave the house that she owns herself. She will give up her love and her body, but she is clear-headed enough to look out for her security. She is not unfeeling: she weeps "in a frightened manner" when Joe is killed, and "deep and loud" when Spunk dies. But losing love does not destroy her. The viewing of Spunk's body takes place in Lena's house, and already the other women are wondering who will be "Lena's next."

Style

Point of View and Narration

"Spunk" is structured as a series of stories within a story, and it has different levels of narration. At the heart of the story are Spunk, Joe, and Lena—the two men and the woman they both love. Of the three, Lena never speaks on-stage, although well over half of the story is told as direct speech. Joe speaks only once, and the words he says are his last on earth: "Well, Ah'm goin' after her to-day. Ah'm goin' an' fetch her back. Spunk's done gone too fur."

Spunk, the central character, speaks three lines, when he takes the other men to see Joe's body and announces calmly, "Joe come out there wid a meat axe an' made me kill him."

Most of the action of the story is related by Elijah, gossiping with Walter and the other men at the village store. For Elijah, Spunk's life is admirable, literally the stuff of legends. Elijah tells several stories: the story of Spunk's bravery when Tes Miller is killed at the saw-mill, the story of Joe's earlier confrontation with Spunk and Lena, the story of Spunk and the bobcat. Elijah is also the one who is nearby when Spunk falls into the saw blade and who hears his last words, and he tells that story as well.

Elijah clearly enjoys telling the stories, and tells them well. In fact, once he gets warmed up to a story and is certain of his audience's attention, he is fully capable of embellishing the truth to make the story more interesting. For the story of Joe's confrontation with Spunk, for example, Elijah first poses the idea as a question: "Didn't he meet Spunk an' Lena face to face one day las' week an' mumble sumthin' to Spunk 'bout lettin' his wife alone?" Once Walter shows an interest in the story, however, Elijah is able to come up with much more information, including a detailed dialogue with long quotations from Spunk and Lena—a big step from "mumbling something." Elijah never reveals any affection or consideration for Spunk, Joe, or Lena; they are simply material for his stories.

Tying Elijah's stories together is a third-person narrator who speaks the story's first and last lines but very few in between. The narrator describes actions briefly and gives insightful but unobtrusive analyses based on what can be seen, but does not reveal the inner lives of the characters and does not explain or interpret the story for the reader. Instead, the narrator sets the characters in motion and moves them to places where they can watch each other and talk to each other. The direct speech is memorable and vivid, while the narrator's sections are merely functional, like stage directions in a play.

Colloquialism

When Elijah and the other characters speak, it is in a rich Southern dialect full of folklore and figurative language. A central question in Hurston criticism has been her use of

dialectic speech. Many critics have praised her for having a good ear for the way people speak, while others have faulted her for presenting caricatures of real speech that support the negative stereotypes her original white patrons had of African Americans. Whether the way Elijah speaks represents a stereotypical ignorant African American or simply an intelligent and witty rural Southerner may be in the eye of the beholder. In either case, when Hurston quotes Elijah and the others, she attempts to capture not only their characteristic turns of phrase, but their pronunciation as well, as in this line from Elijah: "He rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts 'round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty."

The narrator, however, speaks in an educated, detached voice that could come from anywhere in the country. Instead of colorful phrases like "don't give a kitty" or "passle of wile cats," the narrator refers to "an air of nonchalance" and "coarse conjectures." The contrast is made startlingly clear in the first two sentences of the story: "A giant of a brown-skinned man sauntered up the one street of the village and out into the palmetto thickets with a small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm. 'Looka theah, folkses!' cried Elijah Mosley, slapping his leg gleefully." Hurston's ability to draw as needed on her own two voices, as a rural Southerner and as a college-educated woman in New York City, is put to good use here, to make the different levels of narration clear and distinct.

Historical Context

The Harlem Renaissance

When Hurston arrived in New York City in 1925, it was to become a part an intellectual, literary, and artistic movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Since the end of World War I, African Americans had been migrating to Harlem, a section of New York City, seeking jobs in the new industrial economy. Soon Harlem was one of the largest black communities in the United States, and it became a center for black intellectuals and artists. The movement was inspired by older, established black intellectuals, including W. E. B. DuBois, who had founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910, and who called for a new racial consciousness and cultural identity. Other mentors included Charles Johnson, editor of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, and Alain Locke, who compiled the 1925 anthology of poetry, fiction, and essays called *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which some have called the Bible of the Harlem Renaissance. Throughout the 1920s, these men encouraged the next generation of African-American writers and artists to create new works that presented a realistic view of black life.

Answering the call were many talented and educated young people who were lured to exciting and sophisticated Harlem. During this decade, African- American culture was celebrated everywhere in New York City. Plays about African-American characters, with African-American casts, were produced in Harlem and on Broadway. The famous Cotton Club offered white audiences nightclub entertainment by the best black performers. African- American painters and musicians thrived. Writers, including Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen, and Hurston, produced stories and poems that presented African Americans with respect and pride. The movement faded away with the coming of the Great Depression in the 1930s, but the work it produced greatly influenced later generations of artists, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.

Black Aesthetics, White Patronage

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance were inspired by their own aesthetics and their own wish for self-expression. However, most of their books were published by white publishers for white readers intrigued by stories about African Americans, who seemed foreign and exotic. Some members of this white audience were genuinely interested in the new artists, while others were interested only because the African-American writers were the latest fad. But despite the obvious quality of their work, even the best black writers did not sell many copies of their books and could not command high advances from publishers. Hurston was not unique in being supported for most of her career by wealthy white patrons who gave her money outright or hired her for jobs that required little work; she simply could not earn enough from her writing to support herself. This necessity to appeal to white audiences caused some tension among the Harlem

Renaissance writers. They were determined not to echo earlier writers like Charles Chesnutt, who flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and whose work seemed now to be trying too hard to appeal to white stereotypes about African Americans. While some of them hoped that their best writing would demonstrate to white Americans that African Americans were their intellectual equals, they were determined not to consider white approval or disapproval too much, but to write chiefly for themselves.

Hurston's fiction, as well as her folklore collections, differed from many of the works written during the movement. She did not write about urban or ghetto life, but returned again and again in her writing to the rural life she had known in Eatonville, Florida. With a good ear for speech and dialect, she wrote lines for her characters that sounded the way she heard rural people speaking. Other Harlem Renaissance figures, including Langston Hughes, accused her of using the dialectic speech and the elements of folklore to denigrate her own people and to please whites, who expected unsophisticated language and behavior from African Americans. This controversy, and Hurston's flamboyant disrespect for the more serious and political intellectuals in the movement, contributed to Hurston's gradual withdrawal. By the early 1930s, as the movement itself was waning, she had returned to Florida.

Critical Overview

"Spunk" was received favorably from the very beginning, taking second place in the *Opportunity* literary contest, being published in the magazine, and then being selected for Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, all within a few months. That first success led to others, and Hurston's work was wellregarded for the next fifteen years. Her novels were widely reviewed. Reviewers focused their attention on the local color aspects of the novels and debated whether her characters' dialectical speech was a strength or a weakness. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), won the Ainsfield Award in Racial Relations. However, she had no great commercial success, and although her works were widely reviewed, there was no serious scholarly criticism of her work during her lifetime. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, writings like "Spunk," depicting rural African Americans speaking in dialect and believing in folk superstitions, fell out of favor with African-American readers. They found the characters too unsophisticated, and associated folklore with the slavery and oppression they hoped to overcome. Hurston's reputation and sales dropped off, and when she died in obscurity in 1960 her works had gone out of print.

A decade later, Hurston and her work were rediscovered, largely through the efforts of poet and novelist Alice Walker and biographer Robert Hemenway. Walker learned about Hurston through her interest in folklore, and then found in Hurston's fiction the literary foremother she had been seeking. She published an article in 1975 in Ms. magazine describing her search for Hurston's unmarked grave. Two years later, Hemenway's biography was published; the book's foreword, written by Walker, ends with this explanation for her efforts to revive Hurston's prominence: "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone." Hurston's work did become important again, at first primarily to other African-American women and then to a wider readership. Publishers reissued Hurston's books and serious literary criticism began to appear. Hurston is now considered not only an important woman writer or African-American writer, but a major American writer. The Library of America has published two volumes of her work, one of fiction and one of folklore. The Zora Neale Hurston Literary Festival, held annually in Eatonville, Florida, draws large crowds. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston's most critically acclaimed book, has become a staple in college literature courses and is often cited as the first black feminist novel.

"Spunk" is widely anthologized in high school and college texts, and in collections of African- American stories, women's stories, and ghost stories. Yet it has attracted little critical attention of its own. Hurston's short stories were never collected and published in book form during her lifetime, so "Spunk" did not appear in print between 1925, when it was included in *The New Negro*, and 1985, when it became the title story in*Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston*. The story is mentioned in critical surveys written earlier than 1985, including Margaret Perry's *Silence to the Drums: A Survey of the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (1976) and Chidi Ikonn's *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature*, 1903-1926 (1981). Both of these critics focus

on what Perry calls the "folkloric strains" and Ikonn calls "verifiable folk beliefs." Referring back to the 1925 publications, both assume that their readers have not read the story and give little more than plot summary.

More recent critics have dealt with the story in more telling ways, trying to locate the source of its strength. In their introduction to *The Complete Stories*, (1995), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Sieglinde Lemke point to the complexity of the story's structure, with its "three levels of narration: action (the two protagonists over Lena); judgment (the men watching them and reflecting); and the narrator's comments." Robert Bone's *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story* (1988) praises Hurston's "imagination bound to a specific landscape: its people, its folkways, and its pungent idiom." Although Bone finds Hurston's short fiction to be "apprentice work," he finds in "Spunk" "something of the power that is generated by her best fiction."

While critics agree that "Spunk" explores in brief the themes developed more fully in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, they do not agree about what the themes are. Gates and Lemke find in both stories the themes of "love, jealousy, guilt, superstition, and death," while Lillie P. Howard, author of the Twayne United States Authors volume on Hurston, finds the theme of "hubris punished." Interestingly, for Howard the hubris punished is not Spunk's alone. Lena is to blame for her failed marriage, and "she is made to suffer, though her punishment is mild when compared to that of the men. Lena Kanty loses both of the men in her life within a few days." Sam Cornish, reviewing the short stories in the 1985 volume for the *Christian Science Monitor*, is more sympathetic to Lena, seeing in her one of Hurston's young black women "caught between the beginning of the modern world and the oppressive, Victorian atmosphere of the nineteenth-century black and white America."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bily is an instructor of English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, she examines "Spunk" as a story about story-telling.

When Zora Neale Hurston was growing up in Eatonville, Florida, she was surrounded by people who did not value books as much as she did, but who carried within their heads great story collections from the African-American oral tradition. Skillful story-tellers could hold their listeners spellbound for hours, with tales that combined elements of African tradition, the history of slavery, and current events. In Eatonville, as she explains in the introduction to *Mules and Men* (1935), she compiled her first collection of folklore, as everyone knew the same stories. "From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that."

Although she had not yet acquired "the spyglass of Anthropology" when she wrote "Spunk," Hurston already recognized what those stories could provide for a fiction writer. She had always loved hearing the men tell tall tales, and she expected her readers would, too. In *Mules and Men* she remembers a scene of Eatonville that closely resembles scenes of Elijah, Walter and the others in "Spunk": "As early as I could remember it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories." In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she recalls the scene in greater detail: "Men sat around the store on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next one through their mouths. The right and the wrong, the who, when and why was passed on, and nobody doubted the conclusions. There were no discreet nuances of life on Joe Clarke's porch."

For the men of Eatonville, as for Elijah and Walter, story-telling was an important source of entertainment and a way of processing information about their community. In writing "Spunk," Hurston dealt with issues of courage and love, but on another level she created a story that is itself about the art of story-telling.

"Spunk" is told by a third-person narrator who has no special information about the characters' motivations and feelings, but who is a sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued witness to the events. The narrator, who has the vocabulary and sentence structure of the college-educated Hurston, speaks the first line of the story: "A giant of a brown-skinned man sauntered up the one street of the village and out into the palmetto thickets with a small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm." Observations like the fact that Spunk "sauntered" or that Lena clings "lovingly" are typical of this insightful narrator, who also notes that the men in the store try to watch the couple "with an air of nonchalance, but with small success." Nearly everything the narrator says is based on observation of actions and speech, but this narrator does not miss the clues in behavior that reveal human character, particularly human frailty.

When Joe Kanty comes into the store, the narrator gives the reader a brief lesson in how much can be learned about people just by watching them. The reader is walked through the interpretation, and the clues that lead up to it: "One could actually see the pain he was suffering, his eyes, his face, his hands and even the dejected slump of his shoulders. He set the bottle down upon the counter. He didn't bang it, just eased it out of his hand silently and fiddled with his suspender buckle."

Look carefully at gestures and mannerisms, the narrator seems to say, and you can see into the human heart. A few lines later, the narrator gives another small detail about Joe, and challenges the reader to interpret it correctly. Joe "reached deep down into his trouser pocket and drew out a hollow ground razor, large and shiny, and passed his moistened thumb back and forth over the edge."

This time, it is Elijah who attempts to interpret the action, and he gets it wrong. The narrator's skill at interpreting human behavior contrasts with the lesser skills of the men of the village, particularly Elijah's. He spends his time watching and eavesdropping and gossiping, and more than half of the story is made up of direct speech by the men, who analyze the story of Spunk, Joe and Lena as it unfolds. Very little of the action of the story happens on-stage, in front of the reader. Joe's first confrontation with Spunk is described by Elijah, and his second is described by Spunk and summarized by the narrator. Spunk's bravery at the sawmill, his desire to marry Lena, his fear of the bobcat, and his horrible death are all stories that Elijah brings to Walter and the others.

But unlike the third-person narrator, Elijah-asnarrator is unreliable. Elijah tells a good story, but he is not interested in being a good judge of character or, to put it another way, of his characters. He watches Joe rub his thumb over the razor, but reads the gesture incorrectly. His prediction is that "He makes that break outa heah to bluff us. He's gonna hide that razor behind the first palmetto root an' sneak back home to bed. Don't tell me nothin' bout that rabbit-foot colored man."

Of course, he is wrong about what Joe means to do, just as he is wrong about how Spunk will react: "He might turn him up an' spank him fur gettin' in the way, but Spunk wouldn't shoot no unarmed man." Elijah carries on the tradition of the men on the porch in Eatonville and throughout the South. In that tradition, it is not as important to be accurate as it is to be interesting, as Hurston recalls in *Mules and Men*: "The very next afternoon, as usual, the gregarious part of the town's population gathered on the store porch. . . . 'Zora,' George Thomas informed me, 'you come to de right place if lies is what you want. Ah'm gointer lie up a nation. . . . "Now you gointer hear lies above suspicion,' Gene added."

Elijah does not try hard to conceal the fact that he makes things up as he goes along. He begins a typical story with a question, to see whether anyone else has information about the subject: "Didn't he meet Spunk an' Lena face to face one day las' week an' mumble sumthin' to Spunk about lettin' his wife alone?" The other men have not heard this one before. Walter asks, "What did Spunk say?" and Elijah the story-teller is off again. His story of the encounter is told in rich detail, with long quotations from a conversation that he cannot have actually heard, much less remembered word-for-word.

It is easy to see what makes Elijah a good story-teller. He sprinkles his narration with colorful phrases describing "a passle of wile cats" and an Adam's apple "galloping up and down his neck like a race horse." His characters speak lines like "Lena, ain't I yo' husband?" and "Lena, youse mine"—lines out of a story. Elijah ends his tale sure that he is right about Joe: "I'm jus' waiting to see whut he's goin' to say when he gits back." Although he is frequently wrong about his interpretations, the men hang on his every word. They would not care to have facts get in the way of a good story.

The narrator steps back to the foreground to open the second of the four parts of "Spunk," to inform the reader that Elijah's stories were inaccurate, that "Joe Kanty never came back, never." This is immediately followed by Spunk's short and inaccurate account of what happened in the thicket: "Joe come out there wid a meat axe an' made me kill him." The men know he is lying, but say nothing. Spunk's account is just another story. At the store later on, "they all talked of locking him up until the sheriff should come from Orlando, but no one did anything but talk."

In the third section, Elijah tells tales again, this time about Spunk "gittin' ready to marry Lena," and about the bobcat that has made Spunk fearful. Significantly, Spunk seems to desire marriage, although he is not "the marryin' kind," because he wants to keep Lena from becoming the material for more stories. Elijah explains, "He don't want folks to keep on talkin' about her&mdashthass the reason he's rushin' so." In this section, Walter and the other men do most of the talking, and they seem to be better interpreters than Elijah is. Walter understands the ways in which Joe was brave, and another "one of the men" picks up on the important detail of Spunk wobbling on the saw. Unlike Elijah, who thought Joe has nothing to fear from Spunk, this man reports, "I'm skeered of dat man when he gits hot. He'd beat you full of button holes as quick as he's look atcher."

When Spunk is killed, the stories stop for a while. The narrator speaks first in section four, reporting, "The men gathered the next evening in a different mood, no laughter. No badinage this time." Using the word *badinage* instead of the simpler *banter* or *repartee*, the narrator draws a clear line separating the narrator's voice from the men's, and a clear distinction between the narrator's reliable reporting and the men's unreliable stories. Elijah tells one last story—the tale of Spunk's last moments of life. He sets this story apart from all the others by telling it simply, with no apparent embellishment, and by telling it away from his usual stage: "Elijah did not answer until they had left the lighted store and were strolling down the dark street." Perhaps he realizes that this story is too important for "lying," or perhaps this is the first story in which he has truly cared about the characters. During the wake, the stories stop. But by the time of the funeral, the men are back to their traditional way of communicating, whispering "coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey."

In "Spunk" Hurston examines the stories men tell and finds them unreliable and amusing. She uses the narrator to point out the unreliability of the men's version of life in the village, and casually mentions that the women, who "wondered who would be Lena's next," are better interpreters. Do the unreliable stories kill Joe and Spunk? Some of the men in the crowd seem to think so, and they glare at Elijah "accusingly" when Joe is shot. Years after she wrote "Spunk," when Hurston had equipped herself with "the

spy-glass of Anthropology," she learned to value the folk tales and "lying sessions" of Eatonville in a new way. It would be interesting to ask her how Elijah, Walter, and the narrator of "Spunk" would look under that spy-glass.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Overview of "Spunk," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Traub asserts that "Spunk" offers a new perspective on Shakespeare's Hamlet. *Traub argues that, similar to Lena, Gertrude exercises personal prerogative when finding herself defined as "an object of property*."

. . . African-American women writers' return to Shakespearian drama is hardly surprising, for what more obviously status-studded example of Anglo- European patriarchal culture exists to "signify" or "trope" upon? I will first briefly discuss the way in which Hurston's short story "Spunk" rewrites, by means of a few words, Gertrude's marriage to Hamlet's uncle, transforming an action that in Hamlet's mind is equated with adultery and incest into the personal prerogative of any woman who finds herself defined as an object of property. I will then turn in considerably more detail to Gloria Naylor's complex, ambivalent relationship to Shakespeare, and her attempt in *Mama Day* to voice African-American subjectives within the problematic described and enacted by Caliban.

"Thass mah house," Lena speaks up. "Papa gimme that." "Well," says Spunk, "doan give up whut's yours, but when youse inside don't forgit youse mine, an' let no other man git outa his place wid you!"
"Spunk" depicts a struggle among men over "women-as-property" that continues even after the men's deaths. "Cuckolded" and eventually killed by his wife's lover, Joe returns from the grave for revenge: he pushes his usurper, Spunk, into the blades of a massive saw at the community lumber mill. Yet, inserted within this narrative, working *within* the logic of patriarchal discourse to subvert it, is an unnamed force, conjured up in the final sentences of the story: "The women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered who would be Lena's next. The men whispered coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey." Women heartily consuming funeral baked meats—meats prepared in remembrance of the dismembered Spunk—extends Lena's individual erotic power to a community of women: they too are metaphorically figured as powerfully devouring erotic agents.

In this light, Lena's earlier assertion of property rights, "thass mah house"—although immediately assimilated by Spunk into his own logic of patriarchal possession ("when youse inside don't forgit youse mine")—*prefigures* the subversion of the meaning of property and possession by precisely the female erotic power that such symbolic enclosures are meant to contain. Having moved in to Spunk's house after Joe's death, Lena is, at Spunk's death, possessed of house and of herself as sexual object. The trajectory of erotic power within the narrative transforms Lena from male-possessed object to self-possessed subject. By the end of the story, the meaning of the title "Spunk" has been transferred and transfigured from male patronymic to Lena's "spunky" assertion of erotic power.

The sly reference in "Spunk" to funeral baked meats echoes Hamlet's cynical retort to Horatio's admission that the queen's marriage "followed hard upon" the king's funeral:

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (*Hamlet* 1.2.80- 81). Why does "Spunk" invoke, through this reference, Shakespeare's play? To call attention, I would argue, to its implicit revision of *Hamlet*'s vilification of female desire. Gertrude's "adulterous" marriage becomes newly figured as an exchange fatal to any man who treats woman as his object of property. As in *Hamlet* the men in *Spunk* violently destroy each other, with women's bodies serving as the psychic battleground upon which masculine subjectivity asserts itself or founders; but unlike Gertrude or Ophelia (the woman upon whom Hamlet's anxieties about his mother are projected), Lena is not positioned as the sacrificial victim to male heroism— instead, possessed of self and property, a heroic figure in her own right, she moves on. Even as the men seek to contain Lena's "predatory" sexuality between their "guzzles of whiskey," it has, by means of their "coarse conjectures" and the women's silent musings, already slipped off the page. Already presumed to be elsewhere, Lena's erotic agency is in excess of what can be said or contained within a patriarchal frame.

Source: Valerie Traub, "Rainbows of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the Work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, edited by Marianne Novy, University of Illinois Press, 1993, pp. 150-64.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Howard discusses the manner in which Hurston explores the issue of marriage in "Spunk."

Now that the literary buffs are enthusiastically discovering or rediscovering Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960), a black woman novelist and folklorist who, like many of her black contemporaries, failed to realize the bright promise of the Harlem Renaissance, a critical look at certain aspects of her fiction may be in order. During her lifetime, much of Hurston's erratic and short-lived fame rested on the publication of her two books of folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), though she also published short stories, plays, essays, four novels—*Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)— and an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). Part of her relative obscurity can be attributed to ill-founded criticism like that of Richard Wright who, in his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, charged Hurston with being unconcerned with the race or class struggle or with the revolutionary traditions of black people in America. Today's readers, having found that Hurston's works deal not only with black problems, but with problems common to all human beings, are puzzled by Wright's charges. Though her fictional landscape differs radically from Wright's her works clearly convey the idea that people, regardless of their color or their peculiar burdens, must inevitably struggle with some of the same life problems. Although several of life's problems interested Hurston, she seemed particularly interested in the problems that beset the state of marriage.

Critics have agreed that a writer's system of values can be determined by a close reading of that writer's works. We can normally determine what qualities an author admires or detests in a character, for instance, by how that writer makes us feel about that character. We can also determine how an author values a character by what he/she allows to happen to that character. Hoyt Trowbridge uses this process to determine that Jane Austen values intelligence, morality, feeling, beauty, and worldly condition (rank and fortune) in her characters. We can use the same procedure to determine what qualities Zora Neale Hurston who, like Austen, confined her studies to small, country villages, considered essential to a good marriage—what qualities she valued in the marriage partners and what qualities she detested.

The marriage relationship and the problems that emanate therefrom are themes in four of Hurston's short stories and in three of her novels. Instead of portraying marriage romantically—all cape jasmine bushes and sweet potatoes—however, Hurston presents it frankly, replete with infidelity, jealousy, violence, and hatred. Of the eleven marriages in the seven works, only three succeed. By looking closely at these three, we can reasonably conclude that Hurston considered courage, honesty, love, trust, respect, understanding, and a willingness to work together essential to a successful marriage. By looking closely at the unsuccessful marriages, we can see that for those who did not subscribe wholeheartedly to Hurston's formula, the consequences could be disastrous.

"Spunk," published in *Opportunity* in June, 1925, is one of the unsuccessful ones. Told in Poelike fashion, the story examines infidelity, jealousy, violence, and hatred. It is set in an all-black community in Florida where Spunk Banks, Joe and Lena Kanty form a love triangle. Banks, an audacious character who "ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool," woos Lena from her husband and parades around town with her on his arm. Kanty, the weak, cuckolded husband, is shamed and spurred by town gossip to confront Banks and demand his wife back. When he foolishly does so with a mere pocket knife he is killed by Banks. When Banks prepares to marry Lena a few days after Joe's death, he is mysteriously troubled by his conscience. He sees a black bobcat that "walked round and round that house and howled like forty," which he cannot shoot, and he imagines that someone is pushing him into an electric saw at work. Before very long, he is mysteriously caught in the saw—pushed by Joe, he swears—and killed.

Because Joe and Lena Kanty are relatively flat characters and because the narrator is rather closedlipped, the reader is not privy to information that would explain how the Kanty marriage came to its present state. He does know, however, that Lena is taken with Banks because of his spunk—his determination to conquer and reign over the world—a blatant contrast to Joe's lack of prowess. Too, the reader gets some indication of how he is to feel about the characters by the way each character is portrayed. Spunk Banks, for instance, is described as "A giant of a brown skinned man . . ." who "ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool— nothin'! He rides that log down at the sawmill jus' like he struts 'round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty." He is that kind of man who would "go after *anything* he wanted" and he tells Lena that "Youse mine. From now on Ah works for you an' fights for you an' Ah never wants you to look to nobody for a crumb of bread, a stitch of close or a shingle to go over yo' head, but *me* as long as Ah live." Spunk is clearly a man's man, an absolute necessity in the Hurston world. After he kills Joe, however, he loses some of his spunk, too much to remain one of the chosen. Not only is he so "nervoused up" that he can't shoot the black bobcat but he believes that the cat is Joe "done sneaked back from Hell!" At work, where he had always reigned supreme, he is now "cussin a blue streak 'cause he 'lowed dat saw wuz wobblin'—almos' got 'im once . . . claimed somebody pushed 'im but 'twant nobody close to 'im." Later, when he is indeed caught in the saw, he claims that "he pushed me —the dirty hound pushed me in the back! . . . It was Joe—the dirty sneak shoved me . . . he didn't dare come to mah face . . . but Ah'll git the son-of-awood louse soon's Ah get there an' make hell too hot for him . . . Ah felt him shove me. . . ."

Curiously, as Spunk declines in manliness, Joe Kanty increases in it. While Banks had been a "giant of a brown skinned man," Kanty had simply been a "round shouldered figure in overalls much too large." And while Banks "sauntered up the one street of the Village," Kanty "came nervously in the door" of the local store. After seeing his wife clinging to Banks's arm, Joe "swallowed several times painfully and his lips trembled. . . . He stood there silent with his Adam's apple twitching nervously up and down in his throat. One could actually see the pain he was suffering, his eyes, his face, his hands even the dejected slump in his shoulders." One of the townsmen refers to him as that "rabbitfooted colored man" and another says that he's "timid 'bout fightin'." While Banks loudly proclaims Lena as his, Kanty "sorter whines out 'Lena ain't I yo'

husband?"' When Joe does challenge Spunk, he sneaks up and tries to stab him in the back. Clearly there is no comparison between the two.

After Joe is dead, however, one of the townsmen wonders if Joe wasn't a braver man than Spunk:

Lookit whut he done; took a razor an' went out to fight a man he knowed toted a gun an' wuz a crack shot, too. 'Nother thing Joe wuz skeered of Spunk, scared plumb stiff! But he went jes' the same. It took him a long time to get his nerve up. 'Tain't nothin' for Spunk to fight when he ain't skeered of nothin'.

And when Banks is killed, the same man says: "If spirits kin fight, there's a powerful tussle goin' on somewhere ovah Jordan 'cause Ah b'leeve Joe's ready for Spunk an' ain't skeered anymore—yas, Ah, b'leeve Joe pushed 'im mahself." Obviously, it is easier to attribute qualities of strength and bravery to Joe Kanty when he is not around, swallowing, slumping, and trembling, to refute the claims. Ironically, both men are quickly forgotten. At Spunk's wake, "The women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered who would be Lena's next. The men whispered hoarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey."

By Hurston standards, Joe Kanty is not a MAN; he's one of those puny characters who are more of a nuisance than anything else. Although Banks is a MAN, on the other hand, he is a wrongheaded one, the tragic hero with too much hubris who, by imposing his will upon others (the whole town is frightened of him) without proper regard for their feelings, brings about his own downfall. Too, after Banks kills Kanty, he loses his spunk and thus becomes less than a man. At this point, he would not make an ideal spouse. Lena Kanty does not go unpunished for where she once had two men, she now has none. She at least remains to try again, however. A good marriage for her still remains a distinct possibility.

Source: Lillie P. Howard, "Marriage: Zora Neale Hurston's System of Values," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, December, 1977, pp. 256-68.

Adaptations

In 1990, playwright George C. Wolfe produced *Spunk*, a musical stage adaptation of three of Hurston's short stories. Although the title "Spunk" has come to be associated with the liveliness of Hurston's fiction, the story "Spunk" is not included in the program.

Topics for Further Study

Find out what you can about how an old-fashioned saw-mill worked. What was the job Spunk was doing when he rode logs near the blade? What amount of steadiness and courage would be required to do this work?

Investigate the role of the supernatural in African- American folk beliefs, perhaps in Hurston's own collections *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). What stories might the townspeople in "Spunk" have heard that would bring them to the conclusion that the bobcat is truly Joe's spirit come back for revenge?

Do you think "Spunk" is old-fashioned in terms of gender roles? Write a new version of the scene in which Joe confronts Spunk and Lena. Set your scene around the turn of the twenty-first century.

Hurston has often been praised for having a good ear for the way people speak, and for writing it down accurately and respectfully. For a contrast, read aloud a short passage from "The Goophered Grapevine" (1887) by Charles Chesnutt, which many critics today find to be exaggerated rather than authentic. Do you agree with these critics? Try your hand at writing a short speech in the language you and your friends use. Try to capture the vocabulary, the interesting expressions, and the pronunciation of the way you speak.

Compare and Contrast

1887: Eatonville was incorporated as an allblack, self-governing community. It provided residents an opportunity to live normal lives without daily struggles with racism. African-American culture thrived without competition.

1990s: In America's "melting pot," many ethnic groups feel that their distinct cultures are being absorbed and erased because young people are exposed every day to many different cultural influences. Some neighborhoods and communities have established special classes, clubs, and charter schools to preserve and protect their cultural heritage.

1925: Women in the United States had had the right to vote for only five years, and they had few rights in terms of marriage and divorce, employment protection, or property ownership. Most married women, with or without children, were not employed outside the home.

1990s: Women have few legal impediments to full involvement in the political and economic life of the United States. Most childless women have employment outside their homes.

1920s: Approximately one in nine marriages in the United States ended in divorce.

1990s: Approximately one in two marriages in the United States ends in divorce.

1920s: The area near Eatonville, Florida, the probable setting for "Spunk," was largely agricultural, with citrus fruit and timber at the center of the economy.

1990s: Eatonville has been absorbed as a suburb within the Orlando Metropolitan Area, which also includes Walt Disney World. Although there are still farms producing citrus fruit and winter vegetables, the economy is driven by tourism and by the aerospace and electronics industries.

1920s: It was almost impossible for African Americans to earn their living through writing. Publishers did not pay big advances to African- American writers and did not promote their books extensively, and books by African Americans did not tend to sell many copies. Exceptions included *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright, and poetry by Langston Hughes.

1980s and 1990s: Several books by African Americans have become popular and critical successes, making their writers famous and wealthy. Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993; her novel *Beloved* (1988) was awarded the Pulitzer prize. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) also received the Pulitzer Prize. Other African-American women writers, including Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Bebe Moore Campbell and Teri McMillan, have written books that were commercially successful and critically acclaimed

What Do I Read Next?

"The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933), one of Hurston's most popular and well-known stories. Set in Eatonville, it tells of the marriage of Missie May and Joe Banks, and how it is almost destroyed by the lure of wealth.

Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) is Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography. Its early chapters focus on Hurston's early life in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black township that resembles the setting of "Spunk." This telling of her life is as entertaining as it is unreliable—several important facts, including her age and her contributions, are distorted by a writer who was more interested in writing a commercial success than in revealing herself.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), today considered Hurston's masterpiece. The novel begins and ends in Eatonville, Florida, where Janie Crawford struggles to find contentment. After loving and losing three men, she discovers that the key to happiness lies within herself.

"What White Publishers Won't Print," original originally published in *Negro Digest* in 1950 and collected in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979). Near the end of her career, Hurston laments the difficulties she and other members of ethnic minorities have faced in getting major publishers to publish and promote their stories.

A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Recollections, Legends, Tales, Songs, Religious Beliefs, Customs, Sayings, and Humor of Peoples of African Descent in the Americas, (1976), edited by Harold Courlander, the author and editor of dozens of books of folklore. This volume presents the oral traditions of more than two dozen African-American cultures, and includes maps, photographs and musical scores.

Colored People: A Memoir (1994) by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates remembers growing up in an all-black community in Piedmont, West Virginia, in the 1950s and 1960s, and the "sort of segregated peace" his family enjoyed there.

Further Study

Davis, Rose Parkman. *Zora Neale Hurston: An Annotated Bibliography and Reference Guide*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Compiled by a librarian, this is an exhaustive annotated guide to books, dissertations, articles, chapters, book reviews, children's books and web sites dealing with Hurston's life and work.

Giovanni, Nikki, editor. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance Through Poems*, New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

A highly praised anthology of poetry from Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Brooks and others, interspersed with Giovanni's perceptive commentary on the poems, history, and biography.

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

The first full-length biography, based on original manuscripts and letters, as well as interviews with Hurston's friends and colleagues. Hemenway is frank about gaps in his research and questions that still need definitive answers.

Howard, Lillie P. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Twayne, 1980.

A solid overview for the general reader to Hurston's life and work, with chronology, index, and a nolonger- current annotated bibliography.

Walker, Alice. "Looking for Zora." In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984, pp. 93-116. Originally "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." *Ms. Magazine*, March, 1975, pp. 74-79, 85-89.

The story of how Alice Walker, searching for her heritage as a writer, located the approximate location of Hurston's unmarked grave and purchased a headstone for it.

Witcover, Paul. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Chelsea House, 1991.

A richly illustrated biography for young adults, which gives a fascinating look at life during the Harlem Renaissance.

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Cornish, Sam. "Hurston's Tales Illuminate Rural Black Culture." *Christian Science Monitor*, May 31, 1985, p. 23.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and Sieglinde Lemke. Introduction to *The Complete Stories* by Zora Neale Hurston, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, pp. xiv-xv.

Howard, Lillie P. *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Twayne, 1980, pp. 64, 71.

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Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*, New York: Harper & Row, 1990, pp. 2, 19.

Ikonn□, Chidi. "Zora Neale Hurston." In *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature*, 1903- 1926, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981, pp. 184-85.

Perry, Margaret. "The Short Story." In *Silence to the Drums: A Survey of the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976, p. 123.

Walker, Alice. Foreword to *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* by Robert Hemenway, University of Illinois Press, 1977, p. xviii.

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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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