The Gilded Six Bits

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Although she was born in Alabama, Hurston's family moved to Eatonville, Florida—the first all-black town to incorporate in the United States—when she was a small child. She considered Eatonville her hometown and used it as a setting for many of her stories. She had a relatively happy childhood until the death of her mother in 1904, after which she held a variety of odd jobs and eventually joined a Gilbert and Sullivan traveling company as a maid. Hurston earned an associate degree from Howard University in 1924 and moved to New York City, where she met a number of major authors from the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes. She began to publish short stories in various periodicals and to study anthropology at Barnard College. Hurston studied under renowned anthropologist Franz Boaz and became the first black woman to graduate from Barnard in 1928. She would go on to use her anthropological training in collecting African American folklore in the South. Hurston was married three times, with her first two marriages ending in divorce. She published a variety of fiction and nonfiction writings over the course of her life, most famously her 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. Hurston continued to write, teach, and collect folklore, winning prestigious awards such as the Guggenheim for her research. In her later years, however, she suffered a number of personal and financial difficulties, ultimately dying in poverty in 1960.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1887, Hurston's hometown of Eatonville, Florida, had become one of the first all-black towns to be incorporated in the United States. Growing up in Eatonville strongly influenced Hurston's outlook and writing career. Hurston lived during the era of Jim Crow segregation in the Southern United States, when African-Americans' civil and political rights were extremely limited. Hurston did not identify herself with the emerging Civil Rights struggle or associate her writing with that movement. She was opposed to segregation, but also opposed some policies intended to mitigate it, such as the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. She argued that the closure of black schools would hinder the passing down of African-American cultural traditions and would not result in better education for black students.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hurston wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, an African-American cultural revival which flowered during the 1920s. Other writers associated with this movement include Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Alain Locke. Hurston's literary approaches and themes were less political than those of many other Harlem Renaissance writers. Joy in everyday life, pride in one's culture, and anti-materialism are recurrent themes in her writing—themes that she viewed as more effective in resisting oppression than focusing directly on discrimination or poverty. She also championed the use of African-American vernacular in her writings. Love, betrayal, morality, and justice are frequent themes in Hurston's fiction, such as the short story "Spunk" (1925), about the violent conflict between Spunk Banks and his lover's husband, and "Sweat" (1926), which focuses on a woman's escape from her adulterous and abusive husband. Another Depression-era short story about marriage is Sinclair Ross' 1939 "The Painted Door," about a rural Canadian couple touched by infidelity. Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (written 1898) features a Southern woman who has a brief affair in the midst of an otherwise happy marriage.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Gilded Six-Bits"
- **When Written:** 1933
- **When Published:** 1933
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short fiction
- **Setting:** Eatonville, Florida, United States
- **Climax:** Joe's discovery of Missie May's infidelity
- **Antagonist:** Otis D. Slemmons
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Belatedly Honored. In her 1975 *Ms.* magazine article, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," novelist Alice Walker helped revive interest in Hurston's life and career. She located an unmarked grave she believed was Hurston's and provided a marker honoring Hurston as "A Genius of the South."

Posthumous Publication. Hurston's nonfiction book, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* was published in 2018. It records Hurston's 1927 interviews with Cudjo Lewis, the last known survivor of the Atlantic slave trade. Hurston could not find a publisher for the book at the time, in part because she insisted on preserving Lewis' vernacular speech within the narrative.

PLOT SUMMARY

At a meticulously tidy, cheerful-looking home, Missie May is bathing after spending Saturday cleaning the house. As she dresses, she hears her husband Joe tossing silver dollars in the open doorway, heralding his arrival home from work. Missie May runs to the door and searches the yard in mock anger, then chases Joe and wrestles playfully with him until she claims candy and other gifts from his pockets. This affectionate game symbolizes the happiness of their marriage.

Over dinner, Joe tells Missie May he is taking her to the town's new ice cream parlor, owned by Otis D. Slemmons, a newcomer from Chicago. Slemmons is a heavy-set, well-dressed man bedecked with **gold**, who brags of his popularity with rich women. After their visit to the ice cream parlor, the couple discusses Slemmons. Joe is impressed by Slemmons and wishes he could emulate his swaggering style. Missie May is more skeptical of Slemmons' claims, but finds his wealth appealing and wonders how she and Joe might find gold money for themselves. Parading Missie May at Slemmons' parlor becomes part of the Banks' Saturday routine, along with the coin-toss game.

One night, Joe is walking home from work early, reflecting on the happiness of his marriage and his hopes for children. He sneaks into the house to surprise Missie May, then hears noises and is stunned to discover Slemmons half-dressed in their bedroom. Begging for his life, Slemmons offers gold money. Joe strikes Slemmons twice, and, after Slemmons flees, Joe finds that he is clutching the man's golden watch charm. Missie May is disconsolate, telling Joe that she still loves him but that Slemmons had promised her his gold.

The couple continues to live together, though their routine has been disrupted by Missie May's infidelity. Their mealtime banter is silenced, and their Saturday afternoon romps cease. One night Joe comes home complaining of back pain and asks Missie May to rub him with lineament oil. They end up sleeping together again, and Missie May is overjoyed, until she discovers that Joe has slipped Slemmons' gold piece under her pillow. She realizes the gold piece is merely a gilded half dollar. She returns the coin to Joe's pocket.

Some time later, it is apparent that Missie May is pregnant. She tells Joe that it will be a little boy, the spitting image of him, but Joe expresses doubt. After the baby is born, Joe's mother, who had disapproved of their marriage, praises the baby's likeness to Joe. Joe keeps his distance for a few days, then goes to Orlando to buy the family's groceries, something he has not done for a long time. He uses the gilded half dollar to buy candy for Missie May, telling the store clerk how he had bested Slemmons and that he now has a little boy at home. The coin, the symbol of the breach in their relationship, has been exchanged for candy kisses, Joe's customary gift for Missie May. When he gets back to Eatonville, Joe tosses silver dollars in the doorway once again, marking the healing of their marriage.

CHARACTERS

Missie May Banks – Missie May is the attractive, spirited young wife of Joe Banks. Together the couple lives in Eatonville, Florida, where Missie May takes pride in maintaining their modest but beautiful home, giving attention to small details. She also delights in cooking abundant meals for them to share. She relishes her role, calling herself "a real wife, not no dress and breath." She loves Joe deeply, cherishes their playful routines, and is proud of his noble appearance. When Joe takes her to the ice cream parlor, Missie May shows her skeptical side by questioning Otis D. Slemmons' charms, but she does find his self-proclaimed wealth appealing, even musing how she and Joe might discover gold of their own. At the story's climax, Missie May sleeps with Slemmons, and when Joe discovers them, she is genuinely remorseful. She tearfully admits that Slemmons had offered her his **gold** piece, but that she still loves Joe. After Joe tauntingly leaves Slemmons' gold piece under her pillow, Missie May is insulted by Joe's insinuation that her love can be bought, and she plans to leave him. However, she again displays her stubborn pride when she decides to stay with Joe after seeing her mother-in-law, who has prayed for their marriage to fail. Not long after, Missie May is revealed to be pregnant. As she had predicted to Joe, she gives birth to a son who is the spitting image of him. With newfound respect, her mother-in-law calls her "strong as an ox" and expresses approval of the marriage. Not long after, Missie May joyfully reconciles with Joe.

Joe Banks – Joe is the husband of Missie May Banks. Together the couple lives in Eatonville, Florida, where Joe is employed by the G. and G. Fertilizer works. Joe takes delight in providing for Missie May and even buying her treats. Every Saturday afternoon, Joe comes home from work and throws silver dollars in the door for his wife to pick up and pile beside her plate at dinner. He also buys small gifts like candy kisses and hides them in his pockets for his wife to find. Joe introduces Missie May to Otis D. Slemmons' new ice cream parlor. He initially admires Slemmons' wealthy persona, but he says he is satisfied with his life because he is married to Missie May. Joe is an emotional man, sensitive to natural beauty such as the reflection of the **moon** on the lake, and eager to become a father. When he discovers Missie May's betrayal, he ultimately hits Slemmons and grabs his **gilded** watch charm, which he later leaves under his wife's pillow after they sleep together. Even while the couple is estranged, however, Joe still welcomes Missie May's care and cares for her in turn, refusing to let her chop wood when he sees that she is pregnant. After the baby is born, Joe acknowledges the child as his son and brings home

candy and silver dollars for Missie May as he used to do.

Otis D. Slemmons – Slemmons is a newcomer to Eatonville and the owner of an ice cream parlor. His origin is uncertain; Joe says that Slemmons is "of spots and places—Memphis, Chicago, Jacksonville, Philadelphia and so on." He is primarily described through the eyes of other characters. He is said to be heavy-set with a mouth full of **gold** teeth, and he wears fine clothing—traits which set him apart from the other residents of Eatonville. Slemmons claims that women are attracted to him wherever he goes. He wears what appear to be a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin and a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain, which no one is allowed to touch. He walks with a "rolling swagger" and speaks in a Chicago dialect. Slemmons finds Missie May attractive and successfully pursues her with offers of gold. At the story's climax, when Joe discovers their adultery, Slemmons pleads for his life and offers more money. Joe strikes him twice and seizes the golden watch charm. Slemmons is last seen fleeing the Banks' house, though the Bankses discover that his watch charm was nothing but a gilded half dollar. He had been deceiving everyone all along.

Joe's Mother – Joe's mother lives nearby in Eatonville. She "prayed…nightly" for the failure of Joe and Missie May's marriage. After she helps Missie May deliver a son, she tells Joe that she had never thought well of the marriage because Missie May's mother had been promiscuous, and she feared the same would prove true of Missie May. However, she is proud of the baby, whom she says is the spitting image of Joe, and seems to revise her opinion of Missie May and the marriage.

Candy Store Clerk – At the end of the story, Joe chats with the unnamed candy store clerk during his shopping trip to Orlando. Although Joe hasn't visited the store for months, the clerk knows Joe by name and remembers his customary candy order. He is the first person in the story to whom Joe announces his son's birth and recounts the story of Otis Slemmons.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DOMESTICITY AND ROUTINE

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is fundamentally a story about home—specifically, the ways in which domesticity can create and sustain love. Hurston's narrative centers on the interactions between newlyweds Joe and Missie May, whose partnership is initially characterized and bolstered by various loving routines. When an outsider disrupts these routines, however, the couple's relationship is tested. By exploring how Joe and Missie May navigate and ultimately overcome such disruption, Hurston suggests that domestic customs create a feeling of kinship and comfort more powerful than the fleeting excitement of unfamiliarity.

Hurston begins by describing the setting as "a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement." The author's words immediately make clear that her story is rooted in the cultural particularities of Eatonville, a "Negro settlement" in Florida. The comfortable familiarity of this settled world provides the backdrop for the characters' relationships. Hurston evokes a strong sense of delight in the regularity and normalcy of the Banks' own home, which is initially described as a tranquil, orderly place that is lovingly cared for, with "a mess of homey **flowers**" that bloom "cheerily." There is "something happy about" the house, which is filled with sunshine after its weekly scouring, has its yard raked in a pattern, and even features shelf-paper trimmed with care.

Against this ordinary yet lovely backdrop, the Bankses play a game wherein Joe throws silver dollars in the open door for Missie May to pick up and pile beside her plate. This game is at the heart of their domestic routine—"it was this way every Saturday afternoon," the narrator remarks—and further adds to the story's overarching sense of place and rootedness. This sense is further reinforced through the details Hurston gives about the couple's meals together—perhaps the most familiar and recurrent element of domestic life. The pleasure Joe and Missie Mae take in sharing food echoes and deepens their marital bond; Hurston writes that though there was "very little talk during" meals, that which was said "flaunted" affection. Domestic life as a whole, for the pair, "was the best part of life . . . everything was right." Hurston presents the happiness, simple beauty, and order of the Banks home and routine as a reflection of the health of its inhabitants' relationships—a reflection that, it follows, suffers when the characters' relationships suffer.

The goodness of the Banks' cherished routine is eventually disrupted by an outsider. When Joe excitedly tells his wife about Eatonville's newly-opened ice cream parlor, there is immediately a certain sense of foreignness and mystery surrounding its proprietor, Otis D. Slemmons. He is "of spots and places," Joe tells Missie May, but not any place in particular. Both refer to him as a "stray," emphasizing his comparative lack of rootedness as well as the suspicion that engenders. Likewise, Slemmons' clothing, language, and manner clearly differentiate him from the other residents and hint at the ways in which their familiar world is about to be disrupted.

Nevertheless, Joe is intrigued by the strange, apparently wealthy Slemmons and the different lifestyle he represents. Joe is the one to arrange the couple's first trip to the ice cream parlor, and afterward he speaks effusively of Slemmons' "Chicago talk" and the new words they learned that evening. Later, of course, Missie May will prove to have been seduced by Slemmons as well. When Joe gets off early from work and

sneaks home to surprise her, the first clue that something is wrong comes when he bumps a pile of dishes and knocks something down in the dark kitchen. Things are already out of place even before Joe discovers Slemmons in their bedroom. By associating Slemmons with a sense of foreignness and disorder, Hurston suggests the intrigue and danger of succumbing to the allure of the unfamiliar.

Domestic routine ultimately saves Joe and Missie May from the estrangement they feel in the wake of Missie May's infidelity. Even though Joe is "strange" to her after he discovers her betrayal, and their usual play and banter are missing, Missie May finds relief in continuing to tend to Joe's needs as she always has—cooking for him and rubbing him with lineament oil when he isn't well. As time passes and the two continue living together, Joe eventually softens towards his wife. Following the birth of their son, Joe's shopping for "all the staples" (that is, their traditional foods), buying Missie May's favorite sweets, and finally resuming the silver dollar game signal that routine is getting back to normal, and thus that healing has occurred. Things are not exactly the same—Missie May, recovering from childbirth, can't run to the door yet to collect the coins—but the familiar shape of their life together is back in place.

The appearance of Slemmons certainly unsettles and disorients Joe and Missie May—near the story's end, Joe remarks to the candy store clerk that he has "been round in spots and places," a description previously applied to Slemmons. But domestic routines ultimately guide the couple back to each other by reminding them of the beauty of the life they built together. In this way, rootedness in the domestic triumphs over the strange and unfamiliar. For Hurston, cheerful homes, playful affection, and delicious meals point to the value of grounding oneself in particular places, cultures, and customs. Such grounding creates a foundational sense of loyalty that is able to withstand the damaging shakeups from outsiders who would attempt to tear down the home a couple has built together.

APPEARANCES, REALITY, AND TRUST

Hurston contrasts deception with authenticity throughout "The Gilded Six-Bits." The title itself—which refers to coins of low value covered with a thin layer of **gold** leaf—invokes the notion of fakery and portends the betrayal that will test Joe and Missie May's marriage. Yet even as Hurston's story highlights the many ways in which appearances frequently contrast with reality, it ultimately suggests that genuine trust can withstand even the basest deception.

Deception frames the story from its very beginning. Joe and Missie May's weekly game is a mere show of hiding, giving chase, and fighting, an elaborate play-acting they have developed together. Even so, this happy charade is used to reaffirm their love for one another. Hurston again evokes this sense of playful deception during Joe and Missie May's meals together, during which their conversations "consisted of banter that pretended to deny affection but in reality flaunted it." Through this relationship, Hurston immediately establishes the frequent difference that exists between appearances and reality. The love and tenderness behind Joe and Missie May's "joyful mischief" further contrasts it with the destructive form of mischief soon to be introduced by Otis Slemmons.

Slemmons literally embodies fakery. The first detail given about him is his "mouth full of gold teethes," and he constantly flaunts his supposed wealth: "a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin and…a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch." While Joe asserts that this makes Slemmons seem like a rich white man and wishes he could emulate this look, Missie May, far more skeptical of the ice cream proprietor, tells Joe, "Ford and Rockefeller and dis Slemmons…kin be as many-gutted as dey please, Ah'm satisfied wid you jes lak you is, baby." When Joe insists that what he is saying about Slemmons is true because "he tole us so hisself," Missie May responds, "Dat don't make it so. His mouf is cut cross-ways, ain't it? Well, he kin lie jes' lak anybody else."

Having already established a world in which appearances frequently contrast with reality, Hurston's initial introduction of Slemmons forebodes his trickery. He pretends to be worldly and wealthy, but—much like Joe and Missie May's games—his looks are deceiving. Slemmons' deception seduces Missie May, and, in turn, ultimately strips her marriage of pretense. Following Missie May's infidelity—itself yet another form of deceit—she and Joe stop playing their coin-toss game. As it had been an early symbol of their playfulness and devotion, the disappearance of this game is one of the most devastating effects of Slemmons' interference in their lives. When Missie May gives birth to a child, however, Joe ultimately takes Missie May at her word and accepts the newborn baby as his own, even though Hurston leaves the question of paternity somewhat ambiguous. Joe's acceptance of the baby is an affirmation of his love for and forgiveness of Missie May. Deceit and betrayal have laid bare the truth of their marriage and revealed genuine love at its heart, whereas Slemmons, like his fake gold piece, promises much while ultimately proving to be worthless.

Throughout the story, Hurston plays with the differences between appearances and reality, finally using this device—symbolized by the gilded coin—to reveal the truth of Joe and Missie May's marriage. The ultimate resumption of the coin-toss game upon Joe's forgiving his wife is the surest signal that the effects of Slemmons' deceit have been overcome; ironically, only when mutual trust has been re-established can the couple playfully deceive each other once again. The charade that opens the story, however—marked by the "furious…energy" of the tussling pair—contrasts with the more muted version at the end of the story, where a weakened Missie May "crept…as quickly as she could" to claim Joe's coins.

This shows that their newlywed innocence, while strained by deceit, has given way to a more weathered yet wiser love founded on trust and forgiveness. Their love is not simply a cheap commodity with a pretty veneer, but an enduring force that can withstand the ugliness of betrayal.

MONEY, CLASS, AND POWER

Hurston initially introduces her characters as happy despite limited resources. When Slemmons appears, however, Joe and Missie May begin to imagine possessing traits, status, and means they do not have. Subsequent discontent leads Missie May to be unfaithful to Joe, threatening their relationship and disrupting its simple pleasures. Hurston argues that while having enough money for basic comforts is important, the desire for *excess* wealth or status is a corrosive force ultimately at odds with genuine happiness.

Although the Bankses are content, Hurston makes clear from the opening of the story that money is nevertheless an ever-present concern in their lives. They, along with the rest of Eatonville, rely on "the payroll of the G. and G. Fertilizer works" for their continued sustenance. This reveals Eatonville to be a solidly working-class town, and immediately establishes the Banks family's financial status as somewhat precarious, in that it is entirely reliant on an outside company. Nevertheless, the Bankses have enough money for simple material pleasures that provide some of the core delights of their marriage. On payday, for example, Joe fills his pockets with treasures for his wife to find—small indulgences like gum, sweet soap, and candy kisses, all of which are prizes in his weekly game of tossing silver dollars to Missie May.

This game further speaks to Joe's status as provider, as Missie May stacks the silver dollars next to her plate while the couple shares a simple yet bountiful meal together. Hurston takes care to describe the meal in concrete detail, mentioning the "big pitcher of buttermilk…ham hock atop a mound of string beans and new potatoes, and…a pone of spicy potato pudding," over which the couple playfully fights for seconds. These images suggest abundance and signal shared pride in what Joe can provide amidst humble circumstances. Though they are not wealthy, there is no initial suggestion of lack in the Banks' day-to-day lives. Moreover, Joe and Missie May have enough "money put away" that they can afford to have children soon. Hurston thus establishes that money is not in itself a corrosive influence; on the contrary, it makes possible some of the central joys of married life.

When Missie May and Joe begin to covet things they don't have, however, their relationship is imperiled. When Joe initially describes Slemmons, he is fixated on aspects of the ice cream proprietor's appearance, which he associates with wealth and status. Responding to Missie May's skeptical reaction, Joe says, "He ain't puzzle-gutted, honey. He jes' got a corperation…All rich mens is got some belly on 'em." These physical markers of affluence have clear racial overtones: "Dat make 'm look lak a rich white man," Joe notes, adding, "he tole us how de white womens in Chicago give 'im all dat **gold** money"—a sign that they are also associated with sexual desirability. Joe envies these traits, trying to imitate Slemmons' paunch and swagger while Missie May is out of the room. Even as Joe covets the external markers of Slemmons' supposed wealth, however, he appears to remain content with what he has, telling his wife, "Don't be so wishful 'bout me. Ah'm satisfied de way Ah is. So long as Ah be yo' husband, Ah don't keer 'bout nothin' else." Missie May, in contrast, ponders how they might stumble upon lost money, musing, "if we wuz to find it, you could wear some 'thout havin' no gang of womens." Eventually, Missie May proves so enticed by wealth that she chooses to sleep with Slemmons for his gold, tearfully defending herself with the argument that Slemmons "said he wuz gointer give me dat gold money…"

After Joe discovers his wife's adultery, the pattern of their life changes: "There were no more Saturday romps. No ringing silver dollars to stack beside her plate. No pockets to rifle." Missie May's act has struck at Joe's status as provider, as well as at the affirming household customs that celebrated and were sustained by that status. In keeping with that shift, Joe's pocket now contains a relatively worthless coin taken from Slemmons, symbolizing the potential loss of the genuine goodness within their marriage. "In fact," the narrator notes, "the yellow coin in his trousers was like a monster hiding in the cave of his pockets to destroy [Missie May]." After the couple finally sleeps together again, Joe taunts Missie May about her superficial desire by leaving the gilded coin under her pillow. Only then does Missie May realize she has been tricked by the allure of fake gold. She is also humiliated by Joe's rebuke, thinking he has offered fifty cents "as if she were any woman in the long house." Hurston shows that because Missie May coveted wealth—or, rather, its trappings—she lost sight of money's healthy function within the Banks' life. Where having enough money once facilitated happiness and thriving, now the desire for excess money has produced betrayal and estrangement.

Joe ultimately "redeems" the gilded coin by using it to purchase a large amount of Missie May's favorite candy. His presentation of fifteen half-dollars at the end of the story likewise signals the restoration of their relationship—their Saturday romps have regained their place at the heart of the marriage—while also reasserting his role as the one who can truly provide for his wife. When Missie May turns away from covetous desires and recognizes anew the goodness of what they already have, money is restored to its proper role within the household, and the couple is likewise restored to one another.

Money in "The Gilded Six-Bits" helps secure wellbeing and makes ordinary family joys possible. But when characters

confuse wealth with wellbeing, the effects are disastrous. Only when Missie May recognizes the emptiness of excess riches can her relationship with Joe be restored. In this way, Hurston argues that while money is important, coveting wealth tends to threaten the very bonds that money is meant to serve.

SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

Sexuality within Joe and Missie May's relationship is a lively, creative force, reflected in the beauty of their home, the playfulness of their interactions, and in Joe's desire for parenthood. At the same time, Hurston portrays sexuality as corrupting when expressed outside of appropriate channels—namely, marriage. Marriage, Hurston suggests, provides an environment within which sexuality is healthy rather than a source of temptation. Above all, Hurston argues that sexuality is at once a creative and destructive act, one that is natural and beautiful when expressed within the bond of a meaningful relationship yet deeply destructive when treated as a transactional exchange.

Hurston paints a vivid picture of marital love and desire expressed through everyday life. She opens the story by describing a light-filled, orderly, and appealing home environment. Immediately thereafter, she introduces Missie May as a sexually attractive, fertile young woman, whose "breasts thrust forward aggressively" as she bathes. Hurston ties Missie May's youthful beauty to the loveliness of the home she and Joe have built together, setting the tone for the positive role of sexuality within the Banks' marriage. Hurston further characterizes the dynamic between husband and wife as "a furious mass of male and female energy." The mood of their marriage is one of joyful, mischievous teasing, laden with sexual tension. Their affection continues to be expressed within the context of happy domestic routines and a cheerful give-and-take. A delicious dinner is marked by "banter that…flaunted" mutual affection, and their shared physical attraction is repeatedly affirmed as Joe "[toys] with Missie May's ear" and the couple exchanges kisses at the table. At the midpoint of the story, as Joe walks home from work, the sight of the **moon** "made him yearn painfully for Missie May," and he dreams of children; in fact, "creation obsessed him." Joe's attentiveness to natural beauty and desire to have a baby underscores the healthy potential of sexuality. Hurston thus initially portrays sexuality as a vibrant force that both nourishes the marital bond and is nourished by it. It can also lead to new life, both literally and within struggling relationships.

At the same time, Hurston suggests that, wrongly acted upon, sexuality has the potential to cause great harm. Slemmons embodies a sexual mystique of his own. The stranger first notices Missie May's beauty, passing and tipping his hat to her while she scours steps. Relating this to Joe, Missie May comments, "Ah thought Ah never seen *him* befo'." Already, Slemmons is characterized by a sense of intrigue. Joe seems to recognize this. When he describes Slemmons to his wife, he can't let go of the subject of Slemmons' prowess with women, even when Missie May interjects with kisses and spirited arguments.

Parading Missie May at Slemmons' parlor becomes a fixed part of the couple's weekly routine. This public display of his wife's beauty brings Joe great satisfaction—it helps make up "the best part of life." Yet Hurston follows Joe's reflections with the revelation of Missie May's adultery, suggesting that the weekly "parading" has helped undermine the very possessiveness Joe prizes. Joe's longings for his wife and for procreation are then abruptly thrown off course when he arrives home and discovers Missie May's adultery. The threat posed by extramarital sexuality becomes explicit, as Joe strikes Slemmons in fury and Slemmons flees in disgrace.

When Joe and Missie May later sleep together for the first time since the latter's infidelity, the marital act is impersonally described (the narrator states simply that "youth triumphed") and is punctuated by the coldness of Joe's gesture when he leaves the gilded coin, the symbol of Missie May's transgression, in "payment"—thereby likening his wife to a prostitute. After months of little to no sexual contact, however, procreation opens a path to the restoration of the Banks' troubled marriage. Missie May becomes pregnant, and despite Joe's unspoken doubts about the child's paternity, he ultimately acknowledges the baby as his son. Furthermore, his mother's approving comments—that Missie May is "gointer have plenty mo' [children]"—signal not only her newfound respect for Missie May, but of hope for their marriage going forward.

Hurston paints a complex picture of sexual desire in "The Gilded Six-Bits." It nourishes the most beautiful aspects of the Banks' relationship and bears the potential for children, yet proves dangerous when flaunted outside of marriage. Joe's insecurity leads him to show off his wife's beauty in public, which in turn leads to Missie May's betrayal of her husband—leaving them with "not the substance of marriage [but] the outside show." Even when the couple reunites sexually, sex alone is not sufficient to heal this breach; it must be wedded to the "substance"—restored trust and enduring affection—in order to fulfill the life-giving potential Hurston celebrates.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

OTIS SLEMMONS' "GOLD"

Throughout "The Gilded Six-Bits," gold (or gildedness) represents the way that covetousness and deceit challenge Joe and Missie May's marriage. In the first

half of the story, both Joe and Missie May are struck by Otis D. Slemmons' gold teeth, the gilded jewelry he wears, and the gold money he claims to have. At this point, gilded objects represent status that is beyond their reach. Indeed, Missie May comments that she has never seen gold money before, and that their only hope of owning any would be to find some accidentally. This desire for wealth and status makes Missie May vulnerable to Slemmons tempting her to sleep with him by promising her his golden watch charm—it's only after committing adultery that she discovers the charm is fake, which reveals the emptiness of the promises of wealth and status for which she has betrayed her marriage. After Missie May realizes it is a gilded half dollar, it is simply referred to as "the coin," and Joe carries the coin in his pocket through the second half of the story. Now that Slemmons' deceit has come between them, the object continues to haunt the Banks' marriage, symbolizing Missie May's choice to pursue something fake rather than being content with the genuine good she already possessed. After she gives birth, Joe spends the coin on a large helping of candy for Missie May—the prize in the couple's abandoned weekly game. Now, the coin represents the exchange of something false for something real. Thus the gold disappears from their lives, and with it the temptation to desire what they do not have. In its place, they resume their old game, a celebration of the goodness of their marriage—one that has been tested and, unlike Slemmons' gold, proven genuine.

SUN AND MOON

Throughout the story, Hurston personifies the sun and moon in various ways, which symbolize the shifting seasons in the Banks' marriage. Her use of these symbols is typically followed by a key moment in Missie May's and Joe's relationship. First, "the challenging sun" marks Joe's ordinary routine—the reflection of the sunrise on the lake urges him home from his night shift each morning, where Missie May, "the best part of life," awaits him. At the story's climax, this routine is disrupted. As Joe walks home early to surprise Missie May, he is aware of "a lean moon [riding] the lake in a silver boat," its beauty making him long for his wife and for children. This extraordinary sight captures Joe's imagination, heralding a new chapter in his marriage, though it takes a different form than he anticipates. After he catches Missie May in infidelity, and the two spend a sleepless night considering what has happened, "the sun's tide crept upon the shore of night and drowned all its hours." With the appearance of the sun, Missie May is swept into the usual routine of tending to Joe's needs. The arrival of dawn and its duties hints that, even at this low point in their marriage, the Banks' love for one another will eventually prevail. In the midst of their ensuing emotional estrangement, "the sun, the hero of every day…raced across the blue dome and dipped into the sea of fire every evening." Here the sun symbolizes the couple's new normalcy, with Missie May remaining steadfast, even as Joe remains aloof and the traditional Saturday romps disappear. After Missie May discovers that Joe has left her Slemmons' fake **coin** and she nearly leaves him, "the sun swept around the horizon, trailing its robes of weeks and days." This image symbolizes the passing weeks of Missie May's pregnancy. At this point, Joe acknowledges his wife's pregnancy, at the same time taking on a strenuous task for her (chopping wood). Even though infidelity still lies between them, this suggests a softening of Joe's attitude toward his wife, which gives way to full reconciliation by the end of the story.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1995.

The Gilded Six-Bits Quotes

It was 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 there was something happy about the place.

Related Characters: Joe Banks, Missie May Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

With the story's opening sentences, the home of newlyweds Joe and Missie May Banks is introduced. These two lines not only set the tone for the story—they also encapsulate important elements of Zora Neale Huston's literary approach. In contrast to some of her contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance movement, Hurston preferred to lift up themes of cultural pride and everyday thriving as a means of countering injustice. By emphasizing "a Negro settlement," Hurston embeds the reader in the cultural particularities of Eatonville, with its deep historical roots as an African American town. In addition, she immediately establishes this home as "happy," as if to head off expectations that this will be primarily a story of deprivation or suffering under external oppression. Thus, domestic contentment in the midst of humble circumstances sets the tone both for the Banks' marriage and for the cultural impression Hurston seeks to create.

She had not seen the big tall man come stealing in the gate and creep up the walk grinning happily at the joyful mischief he was about to commit. But she knew that it was her husband throwing silver dollars in the door for her to pick up and pile beside her plate at dinner. It was this way every Saturday afternoon.

Related Characters: Joe Banks, Missie May Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Missie May has just concluded her Saturday housework and taken a bath when she hears the ring of silver dollars being tossed in her front door. The setting having been established, Joe's character is now introduced through the unusual device of the couple's coin-tossing game. Like his home, Joe is happy and even "joyful," and his throwing of money underscores his role as the financial provider for the family—a status in which Missie May, proudly displaying his earnings on the kitchen table, clearly delights as well. Though Joe sneaks up to the house, the ringing of the coins is no surprise to Missie May, showing that this game is an oft-repeated and cherished part of their life together. Not only does the game introduce the playfully affectionate dynamic of the Banks' marriage, it also introduces the story's theme of deception. Deception, in the world Hurston has established, is not necessarily harmful or ill-intentioned. As Missie May responds to her husband with mock indignation, leading to an elaborate "play-fight," readers see that deception can be a playful toying with appearances, founded on trust and in service to the marital bond. This initial "deception" sets up a distinction between appearance and reality that will resurface throughout the story, not always with benign consequences.

A new man done come heah from Chicago and he done got a place and took and opened it up for a ice cream parlor.... Mister Otis D. Slemmons, of spots and places—Memphis, Chicago, Jacksonville, Philadelphia and so on.

Related Characters: Joe Banks (speaker), Otis D. Slemmons, Missie May Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After Missie and Joe have shared a heaping Saturday dinner, Joe surprises Missie May with news of the ice cream parlor and its enigmatic proprietor. Coming on the heels of a lengthy introduction to the couple and their rooted, contentedly routinized life, the entrance of Otis Slemmons into the story is abrupt and somewhat jarring. According to Joe, Slemmons isn't really from anywhere in particular, immediately setting up a contrast between the itinerant newcomer and the Eatonville household with its unvarying ways. Joe's description also establishes a precedent for the way Slemmons is embodied (or not) throughout the story. Aside from an exception at the story's climax, Slemmons is something of a phantom figure, mainly portrayed through Joe's and Missie May's perceptions of him and not through his own or the narrator's words. This portrayal suggests that the couple's eventual conflict is not solely or primarily with Slemmons himself, but with conflicting desires within their own relationship.

"His mouf is cut cross-ways, ain't it? Well, he kin lie jes' lak anybody else."

"Good Lawd, Missie! You womens sho is hard to sense into things. He's got a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin and he got a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain and his mouf is jes' crammed full of gold teethes...And womens give it all to 'im."

Related Characters: Joe Banks, Missie May Banks (speaker), Otis D. Slemmons

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After dinner and before visiting the ice cream parlor, Missie May and Joe continue to discuss Slemmons, the ostentatious stranger. Missie May has seen Slemmons from a distance, but Joe has also heard Slemmons talk about himself. Among Slemmons' boasts is that women everywhere are crazy about him. In contrast to Joe's enthusiasm, Missie May responds skeptically to Slemmons' self-promoting claims. Quite sensibly, she points out that no matter how impressive the man's appearance, he can lie as well as anyone—a point that Joe, humorously, rejects as stubborn nonsense. These contrasting reactions hint that

Slemmons will continue to be a divisive figure in Joe's and Missie's lives. More than that, the question of appearances becomes more complicated as the couple argues about what Slemmons represents. While Missie May doubts that Slemmons is what he seems (and she in turn seems to be less susceptible to the stranger's mystique), Joe is swayed by Slemmons' glitzy, boastful persona and seems to be more gullible. Yet this expectation will be overturned as Slemmons becomes a regular presence in their lives. Also significant is the prominence of Slemmons' gold jewelry and teeth in their discussion. Already, these signs of apparent wealth make Slemmons an enviable figure—though, for now, Joe seems to be more disposed to covetousness than his wife.

> That was the best part of life—going home to Missie May. Their white-washed house, the mock battle on Saturday, the dinner and ice cream parlor afterwards, church on Sunday nights when Missie May out-dressed any woman in town—all, everything was right.

Related Characters: Missie May Banks, Joe Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Summing up the first half of the story, this quote describes the pattern the Banks' lives have assumed after Slemmons' ice cream parlor becomes part of their Saturday routine. The narrator has just described Joe's usual routine of walking home at dawn following his night shift, and the sentiments regarding "the best part of life" are attributed to Joe, reinforcing his character. Joe is presented as a simple man, content with the rhythms of married life: the home and material goods he provides, his love for his wife, and time enjoyed together in public. Yet Joe's satisfaction in "parading" his wife at Slemmons' ice cream parlor and in church suggests an insecure preoccupation with appearances, as well. In addition, the complacent assertion that "everything was right" creates the expectation that perhaps all is *not* right, and that, contrary to Joe's face-value assessment of his life, "the best part" is about to be threatened.

> As Joe rounded the lake on his way home, a lean moon rode the lake in a silver boat.... It made him yearn painfully for Missie. Creation obsessed him. He thought about children. They had been married more than a year now. They had money put away. They ought to be making little feet for shoes.

Related Characters: Missie May Banks, Joe Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Expanding Joe's reflections on "the best part of life," this quote marks the midpoint of the story. Zora Neale Hurston often used personification of natural phenomena such as the sun and moon in her fiction, and Joe's sighting of the moon is the most striking such image in "The Gilded Six-Bits." Throughout the story, the sun's movements mark shifts in the Banks' marriage, and this sole appearance of the moon foreshadows the story's major turning-point. It is arresting, first, because Joe typically observes sunrise day after day, making the moon an extraordinary sight as he gets off work early and hurries home to surprise Missie May. Drawing on traditional literary associations between the moon and female fertility, the moon's beauty stirs Joe's longing for his wife and for the possibility of children. Joe's reflections that they have money saved up and "ought to be making little feet for shoes" are not out of place—Joe's role as household provider has always been closely tied to sexual attraction and affection in their marriage. The culmination of these themes, as well as Joe's pleasure in the status quo, sets up the reversal of expectation that is about to occur.

> By the match light he could see the man's legs fighting with his breeches in his frantic desire to get them on. He had both chance and time to kill the intruder in his helpless condition...but he was too weak to take action. The shapeless enemies of humanity that live in the hours of Time had waylaid Joe. He was assaulted in his weakness. Like Samson awakening after his haircut. So he just opened his mouth and laughed.

Related Characters: Otis D. Slemmons, Joe Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

At the climax of the story, Joe gets home and hears stealthy movements in the bedroom, then discovers Slemmons in bed with Missie. Frozen, he finds his expectations and dreams for his family abruptly cut down at their source. There is a certain sense of the ridiculous about the scene, as the typically well-dressed, sophisticated Slemmons is found in the most compromising position possible, and as the reality of the situation contrasts, in a darkly comedic way, with Joe's romantic musings just moments earlier. Still, Joe's laughter seems to be a reaction of total shock above all else. The reference to Samson is from the biblical book of Judges. Samson's long hair is discovered to be the source of his immense strength, and when it is cut, Delilah the temptress is able to deliver him over to the enemy Philistines. Joe's enemy is a personified Time that prevents him from responding to the scene as he instinctively desires; his "weakness" is his idealized view of his marriage, which has been the source of his contentment and his self-conception.

There were no more Saturday romps. No ringing silver dollars to stack beside her plate. No pockets to rifle. In fact the yellow coin in his trousers was like a monster hiding in the cave of his pockets to destroy her.

Related Characters: Joe Banks, Missie May Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears some weeks after Missie May's infidelity with Slemmons. It is ambiguous exactly how much time has elapsed, though enough Saturdays have gone by that the couple's new routine is well established. It is the inverse of their old, joyful domestic routine. Instead of playful romps filled with affection, there is polite aloofness and lack of intimacy. Instead of rifling through Joe's pockets for candy, Missie May doesn't dare look in them. Because so much of the first half of the story is devoted to establishing the Banks' household customs and those customs' role in bolstering their identity as a couple, the repetition of "no more" is all the more startling; their marriage is barely recognizable anymore, either to themselves or to the reader. Finally, the "yellow coin" haunts Missie May.

Interestingly, while there is no reason for her to doubt the coin's monetary value at this point, it is no longer called "gold"—as if it has already become worthless to her in view of what she has lost.

Before morning, youth triumphed and Missie exulted. But the next day, as she joyfully made up their bed, beneath her pillow she found the piece of money with the bit of chain attached…She took it into her hands with trembling and saw first thing that it was no gold piece. It was a gilded half dollar.

Related Characters: Otis D. Slemmons, Joe Banks, Missie May Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

About three months after the infidelity, Joe comes home from work with back pain, and after Missie May rubs him with liniment, the couple sleeps together once again. The narrator's use of the phrase "youth triumphed" has an impersonal ring, as if their intimacy was inevitable and will not, by itself, heal the marriage. Nevertheless, Missie May at first takes their reunion as proof that she and Joe are fully reconciled, but she soon she discovers that Joe has left Slemmons' coin—which she had not seen since the morning after she'd slept with Slemmons—tucked under her pillow. In addition, she finally discovers what by now is little surprise: that the coin is not genuine gold. She faces the double insult of having been deceived by Slemmons and of Joe's implication that he, too, can buy her love. The latter seems by far the worse offense, underlining the fact that Missie May's deep love for Joe has never wavered. Ironically, the revelation that the "gold" is fake—a mere coin with external gilding—reaffirms the underlying genuineness of the Banks' outwardly strained marriage.

Dat's yourn all right, if you never git another one, dat un is yourn. And you know Ah'm mighty proud too, son, cause Ah never thought well of you marryin' Missie May cause her ma used tuh fan her foot round right smart and Ah been mighty skeered dat Missie May wuz gointer git misput on her road.

Related Characters: Joe's Mother (speaker), Missie May Banks, Joe Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

With these words Joe's mother, having just tended Missie in childbirth, shares with Joe the news of his newborn son. Joe had asked how his wife had fared, but, seemingly still ambivalent, waited for his mother to volunteer information about the baby. In spite of Joe's unspoken fears, the boy reportedly does look just like him—just as Missie May had predicted earlier. Joe's mother also reveals the source of her longstanding animosity toward Missie May—that Missie's mother had been known for promiscuity, which, Joe's mother thought, did not bode well for Missie's marriage to Joe. The irony is that Missie May had, in fact, gotten "misput on her road," though Joe's mother is none the wiser. It is ambiguous whether Joe's mother, with her questionable judgment, is reading the situation correctly or simply seeing what she wants to see; the baby's appearance is never directly described by the narrator. Regardless, Joe takes both Missie May's and his mother's words to heart, as the reader must, and chooses to trust that the baby is his legitimate son. Thus Hurston seems to argue that love, trust, and forgiveness can be more powerful than the factual truth of a situation.

"Hello, Joe," the clerk greeted him. "Ain't seen you in a long time."

"Nope, Ah ain't been heah. Been round in spots and places."

"Want some of them molasses kisses you always buy?"

"Yessuh." He threw the gilded half dollar on the counter. "Will dat spend?"

Related Characters: Joe Banks, Candy Store Clerk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Within a week of his son's birth, Joe goes grocery shopping in Orlando, as he had not done for a long time, and talks with the candy store clerk. Interestingly, the conversation with the clerk—another outsider, this time both geographically and racially—gives Joe the opportunity to fully speak his mind on what has happened over the past year in Eatonville. He describes himself to the clerk as having "been round in spots and places," which is the same language he had used at the beginning of the story to describe the rootless Slemmons ("of spots and places"). In doing so he characterizes his estrangement from Missie May as a period of rootlessness. Now, as he purchases his wife's favorite candy, he signals that their relationship is returning to its roots, meaning that Joe himself is returning from "spots and places" to where he belongs. By spending Slemmons' gilded coin, Joe transforms a source of deception and disruption into his customary gift for his wife, showing that the couple's deep-rooted love has proven genuine and that betrayal will not have the final word in their lives.

Back in Eatonville, Joe reached his own front door. There was the ring of singing metal on wood. Fifteen times. Missie May couldn't run to the door, but she crept there as quickly as she could.

"Joe Banks, Ah hear you chunkin' money in mah do'way. You wait till Ah got mah strength back and Ah'm gointer fix you for dat."

Related Characters: Missie May Banks (speaker), Joe Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of the story, Joe returns home from shopping in Orlando. The physical homecoming, triumphal in tone, anticipates his long-awaited reunion with Missie May. Their reconciliation is sealed by the reinstatement of the coin-tossing game, which had been absent from their home for months. Yet circumstances are different now. Missie May is still weakened from childbirth and can't run to the door or chase Joe with the carefree abandon of the story's opening scene. Also notable is that Missie doesn't pretend to wonder who is at her door, as she did in the newlywed version of their game; now, she addresses the "culprit" by name from the start, as if to say that there is only one man whose coins belong in her house. These subtle changes suggest the maturation that has taken place in the

Banks' marriage over the past year. Though they have weathered deception and betrayal, their love has proven genuine, not a mere gilded façade. Despite an outwardly weakened, more subdued appearance, their marriage has grown beyond its youthful innocence, and its strong substance will endure.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE GILDED SIX-BITS

Though it is "a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement," which "looked to the payroll of the G. and G. Fertilizer works for its support," there is something happy about the place—"homey flowers" bloom "cheerily" in the tended yard, the house and fence are whitewashed, and the porch is "scrubbed white." It's a Saturday, and the house is drying from its "weekly scouring." Everything is clean, the yard is raked into a pattern, and fresh newspaper cut into a "fancy edge" lines the kitchen shelves.

From its opening lines, the story revolves around a modest Eatonville household. Although its dependence on an outside company makes its financial security precarious, this is a happy home—lovingly tended, tidy, bright, and cheerful. Even before characters are introduced, their pride and delight in their home are evident.

Missie May is taking a bath in the bedroom. Her dark skin glistens, and her "stiff young breasts thrust forward aggressively." Before she finishes, she hears men's voices in the distance and notes that she is running behind time today. She hurriedly gets dressed, but not before hearing "the ring of singing metal on wood" nine times. Although she doesn't see him "grinning happily at the joyful mischief he was about to commit," Missie May knows it is her husband, Joe, throwing silver dollars for her to pick up and pile beside her plate—a Saturday afternoon tradition. In the yard, Joe hides behind a bush and waits.

In the midst of this beautiful home, Missie May is introduced. She, too, is attractive—the home environment she creates is a reflection of her beauty. Her delight at the sound of the coins bespeaks the rootedness in custom and routine already established—she is expecting her husband and looking forward to what the coins portend. Joe's "joyful mischief" further sets the tone of their playful, affectionate marriage. Moreover, money plays a positive role in her life with Joe.

Missie May appears at the door "in mock alarm" and demands to know who has tossed the coins. She begins an elaborate search of the yard, checking the shrubbery, under the porch, and up and down the street. When she spots Joe, she chases him and catches him at the kitchen door, where they engage in a laughing, tussling "rough and tumble." Joe tries to get away, but not too hard; the two are "a furious mass of male and female energy." Missie May rifles through Joe's pockets and produces small gifts, such as her favorite candy kisses, that Joe has hidden for her to find.

Missie May's mock anger and feigned search suggest a long-established charade. This also introduces the theme of deception, though here it is of a joking sort, founded on the couple's familiarity and love of one another. The chase and Joe's pretended resistance are likewise playful, suggesting strong sexual tension. Joe's pocketed gifts show that he enjoys being able to provide small indulgences for Missie.

As they recover from their play-fight, Missie May urges Joe to bathe and dress as well, teasing him, "Ah'm a real wife, not no dress and breath. . .If you burn me, you won't git a thing but wife ashes." While Joe takes his bath, Missie May prepares an abundant dinner, complete with a checked cloth, fresh buttermilk, ham, string beans, and a spicy potato pudding. While the couple shares their meal, they also share "banter that pretended to deny affection but in reality flaunted it" and they jokingly fight for seconds of dessert.

Missie May's teasing insistence on being a "real wife" both underscores her pride in her role and hints that her authenticity might later be in doubt. She relishes preparing an excellent dinner for herself and Joe, a display of plenty amidst their humble circumstances. Their enjoyment of the meal is marked by deep affection, though, like their earlier play, it is characterized by pretended denials of the same. The warmth of the couple's bond, filled with well-worn domestic comforts, sets up what is to come.

As they finish their supper, Joe reveals that he is taking Missie May to the town's newly opened ice cream parlor, and the two discuss its proprietor, a man from Chicago named Otis D. Slemmons. He tells Missie May that he wants her to be one of the first ladies to be served at the parlor. He describes Slemmons as being "of spots and places." Missie May mentions that she had seen Slemmons pass by and tip his hat to her earlier, and that she did not recognize him, though she noticed his **gold** teeth. Joe is impressed by Slemmons' fashionable clothes and heavy-set build, saying that Slemmons looked like a rich white man. Missie May is not impressed with Slemmons' physical appearance, reassuring Joe that "God…built you noble" and that she is satisfied with him just as he is.

In the midst of such familiar routine, an outsider suddenly appears in the couple's conversation. Immediately there is a mystique about Otis Slemmons; unlike them, he is not rooted in a particular place. Everything about his "rich man's" appearance sets him apart from other Eatonville residents and most strikingly from Joe. However, appearances often contrast with reality in Joe and Missie's interactions, creating an expectation that perhaps Slemmons is not what he seems. Joe and Missie May disagree about Slemmons' appearance, hinting that Slemmons will be a source of conflict between them in the future. In a world rooted in the familiar, Slemmons represents both the allure and the danger of the unfamiliar.

While the couple cuddles affectionately, Joe describes Slemmons' **gold** jewelry and gold teeth—a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin and a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain—which Slemmons claims were given to him by women in Chicago. Missie May is skeptical of Slemmons' stories and disappointed in Joe's gullibility ("he kin lie jes' lak anybody else," she retorts), but she agreeably puts on her best clothes so that Joe can show off her beauty at the ice cream parlor. In her absence, Joe affects a paunch and swagger like Slemmons', but finds that his tall, spare build fits ill with Slemmons' characteristics.

Joe continues to be hung up on the outward trappings of Slemmons' wealth and the lifestyle they represent. He insists that Slemmons' claims about himself are true because they came from Slemmons' own mouth, revealing Joe's trusting (gullible?) nature. Moreover, even as Joe and Missie May's attraction to one another is reaffirmed, Joe appears to feel insecure about Slemmons' alleged prowess with women, even trying to imitate Slemmons' build and gait, but failing utterly. Missie May's skepticism makes her appear the more reasonable of the two when it comes to Slemmons—but are appearances deceiving here as well?

On the way home from the parlor, the couple exchange impressions about Slemmons. Joe delights in the amusing "Chicago talk" Slemmons has taught them. ("Dat wife of yours," Slemmons tells Joe, "is jes' thirty-eight and two.") Missie May, meanwhile, is preoccupied by the **gold** Slemmons wore. She has never seen gold money before, and she muses about the possibility that they might stumble across misplaced gold, which Joe could then wear. Joe just laughs and says that he is satisfied with what he has, as long as he is Missie May's husband. The couple then retires for the night.

Joe delights in Slemmons' sophisticated turns of phrase and in the fact that he finds Missie May attractive. Missie May, however, is much more impressed now that she has laid eyes on Slemmons' gold pieces. She seems genuinely interested, not in Slemmons per se, but in figuring out some way of obtaining gold for themselves. Joe, for all his outward preoccupation with Slemmons, seems genuinely content with the circumstances of his life, as long as he is married to Missie May.

The couple's life settles into a happy routine. The best part of Joe's life is returning home to Missie May at **sunrise** after his night shift, enjoying their mock battle on Saturdays, visiting the ice cream parlor after dinner, and going to church on Sundays, where Missie May out-dresses the other women in town.

The importance of domestic routine in the Banks' marriage is reinforced by Joe's happy reflections on the best parts of his life. The usual sequence of weekend events brings him great satisfaction and seems to reflect the overall health of his relationship with Missie May. Yet showing off his wife's beauty in public, whether at the ice cream parlor or at church, is a key part of that satisfaction. This suggests an underlying insecurity in Joe.

One night, Joe gets off work early and walks home in the moonlight. The sight of the **moon** reflected on the lake touches his emotions, making him yearn for Missie May. He reflects that they have been married for more than a year and have money put away, so it is about time to start having children.

Near the climax of the story, the moon's striking beauty, an unusual sight since Joe typically walks home at sunrise, foreshadows the change about to take place in the couple's marriage. Joe's reflections also highlight the healthy role played by both money and sexuality in their relationship—an equilibrium that is about to be disrupted.

Joe slips into the house in hopes of surprising Missie May, but when he knocks something to the floor, he hears a gasp and loud movements in the bedroom. There, he discovers Slemmons frantically getting dressed, and Joe is too stunned to act ("He was assaulted in his weakness. Like Samson awakening after his haircut"). He can only laugh.

Joe's hopeful expectations are cruelly thwarted. The fact that things are out of place in Missie May's tidy kitchen suggests the disarray about to befall their marriage. When Joe discovers Missie's infidelity, he is immobilized by the realization that appearances have proven false. Like the biblical Samson shorn of his source of strength, Joe's disillusionment leaves him frozen and speechless.

As Missie May sobs, Slemmons pleads for his life, offering sixty-two dollars in **gold** money. As Slemmons considers escape, Joe just stands laughing, but before Slemmons can attack him, Joe knocks him down with a crushing blow. Furious, Joe knocks Slemmons down again as he finishes dressing. Once the man has fled, Joe finds that he is clutching Slemmons' golden watch charm in his fist.

Coming from such a mild-mannered man, Joe's sudden violence is striking. Until this point, sexuality had only been a source of celebration between the couple; Joe's rage shows how viscerally he feels Slemmons' intrusion on their bond and on his role as provider. Joe wrenches from him the item that had allured Missie May. The object that had bestowed power and status on Slemmons is now within his grasp.

Missie May continues to weep. Joe is overcome with emotion for a while, then has a good laugh and goes to bed. The couple talks briefly about what has happened, with Missie May lamenting that Joe no longer loves her, and Joe replying that she doesn't know what his feelings are yet. Missie May says that Slemmons had kept after her with the promise of the **gold** piece. Finally Joe tells her that she can stop crying, because he has gotten the gold piece for her.

Although Missie May had not shown much interest in Slemmons, she was receptive to his advances when accompanied by promises of money. While she was initially more skeptical, she proved more susceptible to deception in the long run than her husband. Her actions with Slemmons have stripped her marriage of pretense. She and Joe will not be able to fall back on jokes and games.

The couple spends a sleepless night until "the **sun**'s tide crept upon the shore of night." As dawn breaks, Missie May finds Joe's presence and voice "strange" and despairs for her marriage, but when Joe asks for breakfast, she springs out of bed to serve him once more. Filled with gratitude for the request, she goes to the trouble of fixing fresh chicken, rice, and biscuits for him. However, their meal is devoid of the usual banter, and she weeps again when Joe places the **yellow coin** on the table between them. Joe calmly admonishes her, "Don't look back lak Lot's wife and turn to salt."

A new phase dawns in the Banks' marriage. Though Joe no longer feels familiar to Missie May, his request for breakfast allows her to resume her comfortable role, showing her gratitude by preparing a special meal for him. However, the disappearance of banter shows that not all is normal. Where Joe's silver dollars had once lain on the table between them, Joe now places Slemmons' coin, called merely "yellow" as if to cast doubt on its worth. In another biblical allusion, Joe tells Missie May not to look back with paralyzing regret on actions that cannot be undone.

Time passes, with the **sun** as "the hero of every day, the impersonal old man that beams as brightly on death as on birth." Missie May still loves Joe and cannot leave him. The Banks' marriage remains outwardly intact, but it has changed. Joe is polite but aloof. The Saturday romps, the stack of silver dollars, and the pockets full of gifts are gone. Missie May suspects that Joe carries Slemmons' **gold** piece in his pocket, but she cannot bring herself to ask him or to search for it herself.

The sun's detached steadiness symbolizes the couple's new normalcy. Outwardly, they persist as they always have, but their routine is devoid of its characteristic joy and liveliness. With the disappearance of the Saturday romps, domestic life, trust, and the healthy role of both money and sexuality are all disrupted. The specter of Slemmons' gold piece haunts their marriage.

One night, some three months after Missie May's infidelity with Slemmons, Joe comes home from work with back pain. Missie May rubs him with lineament, and at first it is strange, but by morning, they have slept together again—"youth triumphed." Missie May is triumphant, but then she discovers Slemmons' **gold** piece under her pillow.

At first it appears that the couple's marriage is on the mend, but the impersonal description of the marital act suggests that sex alone cannot heal the breach between them.

Missie May examines the supposed **gold** piece and discovers that it is only a gilded half dollar; Slemmons had counted on villagers' inability to discern the difference. Upon reflection, Missie May interprets Joe's action as an insult—he is treating her like a prostitute and saying that he can pay as well as Slemmons could.

Finally the extent of Slemmons' deceit—and the emptiness of Missie May's desire—is revealed when she discovers the low value of the coin. Where once the Banks had all they truly needed, now Missie May's desire for wealth has reaped betrayal and estrangement. Further, her pride is injured by the cold implications of Joe's "payment."

Returning the hated **coin** to Joe's pocket, Missie May resolves to leave her husband. Shortly after leaving the house, however, she encounters her mother-in-law. Joe's mother has "prayed nightly" that their marriage would end, and Missie May cannot admit defeat to her. She decides that Joe must be the one to leave and returns home.

Though Missie May is unwilling to tolerate Joe's insult, her ultimate loyalty to her marriage is sealed when she refuses to concede defeat to Joe's mother. This turning point signals the genuine love that still exists between the couple, even though it is not outwardly apparent.

Missie May sees the coin no more. Joe's health is still poor, and every ten days or so, he comes home asking her to rub him with lineament. Some time later —"the **sun** swept around the horizon, trailing its robes of weeks and days"—Joe comes home to find Missie May chopping wood. He insists on taking over the task, telling her he isn't blind—she is obviously pregnant. Missie May tells him that the baby will be a boy and the spitting image of him. He asks her, "You reckon?" She asks him who else the child could look like. He doesn't reply, but fingers something inside his pocket **(the gold piece)**.

An unspecified amount of time passes, symbolized by the ever-consistent sun. A thaw occurs in Joe and Missie May's relationship. Joe's concern for his wife's wellbeing overrides his implied doubts about the baby's paternity. Joe makes a point of telling Missie May that he isn't blind, as if to remind her that he is not naïve. In addition, Joe is still hanging onto the gold piece, showing that Missie May's act still lies between them. He has not let go of the power that his resentment affords him.

Almost six months later, Missie May goes into labor and gives birth to a healthy boy. Joe comes home from work and asks his mother, who is tending to the household, how his wife managed. His mother praises Missie May's strength (predicting "she gointer have plenty mo' [children]") and informs Joe that the baby is the spitting image of him. She further admits that she had been unhappy about their marriage because of Missie May's mother's reputation for promiscuity, and she had feared that Missie May would turn out the same way. Joe doesn't respond, but checks on his wife's wellbeing for the next few days.

Though the timing of the child's conception, and thus its paternity, is left ambiguous, the arrival of the new baby signals a healing phase in the family's relationship. Missie May's strength in childbirth, as well as the baby's resemblance to Joe, wins the respect of her mother-in-law, whose prediction of more children speaks to her newfound confidence in the marriage. Joe bides his time in voicing an opinion, but is clearly concerned for his wife's welfare.

That Saturday, Joe goes to Orlando to shop for the household staples—something he has not done for a long time. Finally he goes to the candy store and chats with the clerk. Joe accounts for his long absence by saying that he has "been round in spots and places." He uses Slemmons' fake **gold** piece to pay for a large amount of Missie May's favorite candy kisses. Though the clerk suggests buying a wider selection of candy, Joe insists on spending the gold entirely on candy kisses. He tells the clerk about Slemmons, claiming that unlike others in Eatonville, he had not been fooled by Slemmons' gold or his charms. He also mentions that he has a baby boy at home now, who might enjoy the chocolate as well.

Joe's actions speak louder than his words. His long-delayed shopping trip suggests that he is purposefully resuming his old routine. More than that, he also redeems the deceptive "gold" piece by purchasing an abundance of his wife's favorite treat, simultaneously getting rid of the coin for good. In so doing, he shows his forgiveness of her actions, reaffirms his love, and reasserts his status as the one who can truly provide for her. He describes himself using the same words he had used for Slemmons, suggesting that he had been uprooted and is now back where he belongs. Also, for the first time, he acknowledges the baby boy as his own son. Contrary to his claim, it had seemed as if Joe was taken in by Slemmons' charms at first, but Slemmons' deceit has not triumphed; Joe has emerged wiser and stronger in his devotion to Missie May.

Returning home, Joe tosses fifteen coins at his front door. Missie May, still recovering from childbirth, makes her way slowly to the door. She teases Joe that as soon as she regains her strength, she will get him for this. After many months without it, the couple's game has been restored to its customary place in their routine.

The story ends much as it began, yet the Banks' marriage has weathered a great deal. Missie May cannot run to the door with carefree exuberance, but when Joe initiates their old game, she still responds with heartfelt, teasing delight. Their love may have lost its newlywed innocence, yet it has been tested and emerged stronger, proving it was not merely "gilded," but genuine.

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