SOFTWARE & TECH

# The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston

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## Introduction: A Glimpse into Hurston's Literary Brilliance

Zora Neale Hurston remains one of the most celebrated voices in African American literature, and her 1933 short story **The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**is a masterclass in narrative economy, cultural authenticity, and emotional depth. Set in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida—a recurring backdrop in Hurston's work—this story explores the complexities of love, betrayal, and forgiveness within a young marriage. Through vibrant dialect, rich symbolism, and a deceptively simple plot, Hurston crafts a tale that resonates with universal human experiences while grounding it firmly in the African American folk tradition. This article will provide a comprehensive analysis of the story, its historical context, characters, themes, and enduring significance, ensuring both new readers and longtime fans gain a deeper appreciation for this literary gem.

## Plot Overview: A Tale of Trust and Temptation

**The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**introduces us to Joe and Missie May, a newlywed couple living a life of joyful simplicity. Their love is expressed through playful rituals—Joe tosses nine silver dollars onto the porch each Saturday, and Missie May responds with laughter and affection. Their home is a haven of warmth and mutual respect. However, this bliss is disrupted by the arrival of Otis D. Slemmons, a flashy, gold-wearing outsider from Chicago. Slemmons represents the allure of materialism and sexual temptation. Missie May, seduced by his promises or perhaps by the gold he flashes, is caught in an act of infidelity by Joe. The story does not dwell on violence or melodrama; instead, Joe silently leaves the encounter, only to later confront Missie May with quiet devastation. The turning point occurs when Missie May becomes pregnant, and Joe, recognizing the child as his own due to the baby's unmistakable resemblance, makes a choice to forgive. The story ends with a renewal of their rituals—Joe once again tosses silver dollars, but now a gilded one among them, symbolizing the scarred yet stronger bond of their marriage.

## Historical and Cultural Context

### Eatonville: A Symbol of Black Autonomy

Eatonville, Florida, where Hurston grew up, was one of the first all-Black towns in the United States to be incorporated. This setting is crucial to understanding **The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**. The story rejects the then-dominant stereotype of Black life as defined by poverty and oppression. Instead, it depicts a self-sufficient, thriving community where relationships and values are central. Hurston's use of dialect—a "thick" Southern Black vernacular—was controversial among some Harlem Renaissance figures who felt it reinforced negative stereotypes. Yet Hurston argued that dialect was poetic, authentic, and a source of cultural pride. In this story, the dialect is not a sign of ignorance but a musical, expressive language that conveys deep emotion and sharp wit.

### The Great Depression and Material Temptation

Published in 1933 during the Great Depression, the story subtly reflects the economic pressures of the era. The gleaming gold and silver of Slemmons's jewelry—and the nine silver dollars that Joe and Missie May treasure—stand in stark contrast to widespread poverty. Hurston does not preach or moralize; instead, she uses these objects to explore how economic insecurity can corrode trust and values. The "gilded" six bits (seventy-five cents) that Joe later places among the coins is a potent metaphor: something that appears valuable on the surface but is actually only thinly coated with gold. It represents the flawed but resilient nature of human relationships.

## Character Analysis: Depth in Simplicity

### Joe: The Quiet Strength of a Husband

Joe Banks is a deceptively simple character. He works hard, loves deeply, and expresses his affection through rituals. When he discovers Missie May's betrayal, his reaction is neither rage nor revenge. Instead, he exhibits a profound sadness and restraint. He goes to the candy store to buy her sweets, as if nothing has changed, but the tension is palpable. Joe's decision to forgive—and to recognize his own child in the baby's features—demonstrates a mature understanding of love that transcends momentary failure. He becomes the moral center of the story, embodying Hurston's belief in the redemptive power of community and family.

### Missie May: Flawed but Lovable

Missie May is not a villain; she is a young woman tempted by the glamour of Slemmons's world. Hurston writes her with empathy. Her infidelity stems not from malice but from a momentary lapse in judgment, seduced by the promise of something shiny. After the betrayal, she is consumed by shame and fear of losing Joe. Her pregnancy becomes a turning point—she is terrified the child might resemble Slemmons. When the baby turns out to look exactly like Joe, she is overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Missie May's arc is about learning the difference between glitter and genuine value.

### Otis D. Slemmons: The Catalyst for Change

Slemmons is a trickster figure, a common archetype in African American folklore. He boasts about women and wealth, but his "gold" is eventually revealed to be gilded—just cleverly painted metal. He is not evil but rather a cautionary figure representing the dangers of surface-level allure. His role is to disrupt the equilibrium of the marriage, forcing the couple to confront the depth of their commitment.

## Themes and Symbolism in The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston

### Love, Betrayal, and Forgiveness

The central theme is the resilience of marital love. Hurston does not romanticize infidelity; nor does she condemn it with harsh judgment. Instead, she presents it as a human failing that can be overcome through empathy and time. Joe's forgiveness is not instant; it requires him to process his pain and see the bigger picture. The story suggests that love is not a flawless ideal but a practice of choosing to stay and rebuild.

### The Gilded vs. The Genuine

The word "gilded" echoes throughout the story. Slemmons's gold is fake, a cheap coating over metal. The nine silver dollars Joe throws are real, precious to the couple. The gilded six bits Joe later tosses represent the scar on their marriage—something once damaged but now revalued. The baby, too, is a "genuine" product of their union, dispelling the fear of the counterfeit. Hurston uses these symbols to argue that authenticity—in love, in community, in identity—is far more valuable than cheap imitation.

### Ritual and Renewal

The ritual of the silver dollars is a powerful narrative device. It marks the rhythm of their life together. When Joe stops throwing the coins after the betrayal, the reader feels the rupture. When he resumes at the end, but now with a gilded coin, it signifies that the old ritual has been transformed—battered but renewed. This circular structure gives the story a sense of closure and hope.

Hurston's Narrative Style and Techniques

### Use of Dialect and Oral Tradition

Hurston was an anthropologist as well as a writer, and she carefully documented the speech patterns of rural Black Southerners. In **The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**, the dialogue is rich with metaphors, double negatives, and rhythmic cadences. For example, Missie May says, "He's all right under de colliflower, but he ain't no ice-cream cone." This kind of earthy, humorous language gives the characters authenticity and charm. It also roots the story in the oral tradition, where stories were passed down through performance.

### Economy of Description

Hurston wastes no words. The entire story unfolds in just a few pages, yet it leaves a lasting impression. She uses small details—the nine silver dollars, the candy kisses, the gilded coin—to carry enormous thematic weight. Her descriptions of the house, the porch, and the town are minimal but evocative. This economy forces the reader to focus on the emotional undercurrents.

### Symbolic Objects

Hurston often uses objects to represent abstract concepts. The gold watch and chain of Slemmons are symbols of false status. The nine silver dollars are symbols of honest labor and love. The gilded six bits are a symbol of a repaired but scarred relationship. Even the candy—kisses—plays a role in the story's emotional geography.

## Critical Reception and Legacy

**The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**is widely anthologized and studied in literature courses. Critics praise its nuanced portrayal of Black marriage, free from the tragic tropes often imposed by white writers. The story was published at a time when Hurston was gaining prominence as a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, though she later fell into obscurity before being rediscovered by Alice Walker in the 1970s. Today, the story is recognized for its feminist undertones—Missie May is allowed to be flawed yet retain her dignity—and its unflinching look at forgiveness.

## Relevance to Modern Readers

In an era of social media, where relationship scandals are public spectacle, **The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**offers a counter-narrative of private reconciliation. It reminds readers that real relationships are messy and require work. The story also speaks to the enduring tension between materialism and genuine connection. Slemmons's gilded gold is a precursor to today's influencer culture—all surface, no substance. Joe and Missie May's choice to rebuild on the foundation of trust, honesty, and shared history is as relevant now as it was in 1933.

## Conclusion: A Timeless Gem of American Literature

**The Gilded Six Bits Zora Neale Hurston**may be brief, but its emotional range and thematic richness are immense. Hurston's ability to capture the poetry of everyday Black life, her subtle handling of betrayal and forgiveness, and her symbolic use of coins and gilding make this story a masterpiece. It invites readers to look beyond appearances, to value what is real over what is shiny, and to understand that love—like a gilded coin—can be both flawed and precious. For anyone seeking to explore the depth of Hurston's talent, this story is an essential starting point. Its warmth, humor, and humanity continue to resonate, proving that the best literature transcends time and place.

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