

Zora Neale Hurston short stories

“Sweat”

1926

This story was influenced by Eatonville and by her patron, Fannie Hurst. She had met Hurst at the award dinner for Opportunity one year earlier. Hurst first hired Hurston to be her secretary, but she was awful at the job. Instead they became companions, and Hurst funded Hurston’s writing. Hurston felt dependent on Hurst’s patronage, much like Delia did in “Sweat.”

Characters:

Delia Jones – washerwoman
Sykes Jones – Delia’s husband

He resents that she does laundry for white townspeople, but he doesn’t work at all. She supports him with the money she earns. They have been married for 15 years. He sees other women (Bertha). He also beats her and gambles away her money. Even the other men in town acknowledge that she is abused. He even buys treats for his lover with Delia’s money right in front of her. He pays for Bertha’s room in town with Delia’s money as well.

One day he brings home a rattle snake. He wants to scare Delia out of the house so he can have his lover move in. She finally begins to stand up to him, and tells him she hates him. She then comes home to find the snake in the hamper. Did he put it there to try to kill her? She gets on the bed, grabs the lamp and runs. She hides in the hay barn. Sykes comes home. It’s dark in the house. There are no matches left because he took them. He gets bitten, and calls for Delia. He realizes he knew the snake was in there and didn’t try to warn him or save him.

This story is an interesting spin on the Adam and Eve biblical story.

“The Gilded Six Bits”

1933

Influenced by her anthropological studies and her rocky marriages.

Characters:

Missie May
Joe (her husband)
Otis Slemmons

Missie May and Joe live a quiet, simple life in a black community. They are truly in love, and are playful with one another.

Otis Slemmons then comes to town. He is a black man from the north who lives like a rich white man. He is fat, and flaunts his wealth. At first, Joe is the one impressed with him. Missie May doesn't have any interest. However, we see some foreshadowing in the story, as we learn that Slemmons has already been checking out Missie May by walking by the house. After they go to his ice cream shop, it is Missie May who is interested. His gold catches her attention. Meanwhile, Joe tells her he is happy just the way they are. They don't need gold. However, she is already plotting.

Joe gets off work early one night and catches Missie May and Slemmons in bed. As Slemmons tries to get away, Joe tears off his watch charm. He finds out it is a gilded half dollar (not real). For three months Joe and Missie May don't touch. Then one night he says he wants his back rubbed. They make love, and he leaves the coin under her pillow. She decides to leave him, but when she leaves the house she runs into his mother, which makes her change her mind. She doesn't want to give her mother-in-law the satisfaction. Soon it becomes obvious that she is pregnant. Joe doesn't know if the baby is his. After the birth, his mother tells him the baby looks just like him, and explains that she never liked Missie May because Missie May's mother had cheated on her husband, and she was sure her daughter would do the same thing.

He takes the fake gold piece to the store and buys Missie May molasses kisses. The clerk comments that he wishes he could be more like these darkies—nothin worries em. Ignorant remark, and ironic. Joe goes home and throws money in the door.

They will get past this, although their relationship will never be quite the same. They are the ones who are rich, not Slemmons.

Hurston is not so concerned about racism or about women's issues (after all, Missie May is the one who cheats in the second story). She is concerned about what makes people tick. Why do we hurt one another? How do we get past it? She was fascinated by the human condition and human relationships. This is what mattered to her. Relationships are complicated. Men can hurt women and women can hurt men. It isn't always about race or gender. It is about being human. Humans are flawed. It is how we handle those flaws that is so interesting. (Some traces of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's beliefs as expressed in *Solitude of Self* can be seen here).