

Paternal Confidence in Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits"

Zora Neal Hurston's 1933 short story, "The Gilded Six-Bits," highlights male mating behavior. The plot addresses a husband's reactions to his wife's infidelity, emphasizing the importance of paternal confidence in long-term commitment. The possibility that an unfaithful wife will give birth to a child sired by her extramarital partner represents an evolutionarily grave risk for her husband: if he provides care and resources for a child to whom he is not biologically related, he helps to perpetuate another's genes rather than his own.¹ Existing commentary on the story has not focused on the evolutionary implications of female adultery, however. Readers instead have emphasized tensions the story explores between variously defined oppositions: between "real" and "false" values,² for example, between appearance and reality,³ between country and city,⁴ between material and non-material wealth,⁵ between Caucasian and

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- 1 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 10, 67; Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 148; Trivers, "Parental Investment and Reproductive Success," 76.
 - 2 Pearlie Mae Fisher Peters, "Missie May in 'The Gilded Six-Bits,'" in *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 89-95.
 - 3 Norman German, "Counterfeiting and a Two-Bit Error in Zora Neale Hurston's 'The Gilded Six-Bits,'" *Xavier Review* 19, no. 2 (1999).
 - 4 Nancy Chinn and Elizabeth E. Dunn, "'The Ring of Singing Metal on Wood': Zora Neale Hurston's Artistry in 'The Gilded Six-Bits,'" *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 49, no. 4 (1996). <http://web.ebscohost.com/online.library.marist.edu.htm>, accessed February 2, 2008; Evora W. Jones, "The Pastoral and Picaresque in Zora Neale Hurston's 'The Gilded Six-Bits,'" *College Language Association Journal* 35, no. 3 (1992).
 - 5 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lenke, "Zora Neale Hurston: Establishing the Canon," in *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008); Cheryl A. Wall, introduction to *"Sweat": Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

African-American systems of valuation.⁶ Though presentation of such themes likely forms part of Hurston's auctorial intention, she clearly signals paternity as the central concern in her narrative. Insights from evolutionary biological theory enable readers to explore that concern, together with its implications.

As David M. Buss points out, human males are confronted "with a unique paternity problem not faced by other primate males"; concealed ovulation in the human female means there is no overtly recognizable cause-and-effect connection between copulation and pregnancy.⁷ Lacking observable proof that his mating efforts, rather than another man's, have caused impregnation, the individual male possesses no definitive evidence that he is the biological father of a partner's offspring. (Since gestation occurs within their own bodies, women, obviously, harbor no equivalent doubts about their genetic relationship to offspring.) To reduce the degree of paternal uncertainty inherent in their situation, and to maximize the evolutionary appropriateness of their parental investment, human males demand female sexual fidelity, since it offers the best possible guarantee that a woman's acknowledged mate has in fact sired her children.⁸ Consequently, evidence that a woman has allowed sexual access to other men tends to dilute or end her partner's mating commitment.⁹ Exploring the psychology of the betrayed husband, Hurston's narrative offers insight into the workings of adaptive mechanisms designed to counteract the threat to male fitness posed by female adultery.

The featured couple is working-class: Joe Banks brings home weekly wages from the G and G Fertilizer company, where he works the night shift. Small details sufficiently indicate that the job involves hard manual labor in filthy conditions, for Joe is tired when he returns home and in need of a bath; periodically he complains of pains in his back. Resources are not plentiful, clearly, and this is an important factor in the development of character and plot. The interaction Hurston selects to demonstrate the vitality of this young marriage (Joe and Missie May have been married just over a year) is a ritual in which Joe hands over all his pay to his wife. He first flings silver dollars through

6 Hildegard Hoeller, "Racial Currency: Zora Neale Hurston's 'The Gilded Six-Bits' and the Gold-Standard Debate," *American Literature* 77, no. 4 (2005); Wall, introduction.

7 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 66.

8 Ibid., 67; Trivers, "Parental Investment and Reproductive Success," 170.

9 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 67; Daly and Wilson, "Evolutionary Psychology," 16.

the doorway, “for her to pick up and pile beside her plate.”¹⁰ She responds with mock reproach, which ends in a joyful, erotically charged scuffle as she searches his pockets for small gifts he pretends to withhold from her, “things he had hidden there for her to find” (88). “A furious mass of male and female energy,” they engage in “tussling” and “tickling,” a “friendly battle” that bears witness to the couple’s energetic sexual relationship (87, 88).

Introducing readers to Joe and Missie May, this lovingly described encounter illustrates with great clarity the evolutionary psychology of long-term mating, from the point of view of both sexes. The man invests his resources in his mate, indicating the intensity and enthusiasm of his commitment by the manner in which he transfers wealth to her. This is no cut-and-dried, ‘here’s your housekeeping money for the week’ exchange. Joe’s behavior emphasizes that there are no limits to his willingness to invest in Missie May. Playfully prodigal, he in effect announces to her, ‘here is all my money; I throw it at your feet; I reserve nothing; I put it entirely at your disposal.’ By supplying her with some resources in the shape of gifts with particular appeal to her femininity (small luxuries such as chewing gum or scented soap), he further underlines his desire to please her. The most important luxury item he purchases for her is a bag of “candy kisses,” which metaphorically links the proffered resources with the sexual satisfactions the relationship so obviously provides (88). Joe supplements material generosity with verbal expressions of his devotion. “So long as Ah be yo’ husband, Ah don’t keer ‘bout nothin’ else,” he assures her, for example (91). His strategy for preserving his marriage combines the “provision of resources” with the expression of “love and kindness,” features that Buss identifies as key ingredients in the enterprise of long-term mating.¹¹

The plot proper begins with a new outlay of expense intended to please Missie May, when Joe proposes an outing to a “real swell” new ice cream parlor (89). Its proprietor, Mr. Otis D. Slemmons, has impressed Joe and other local men with his fine clothes, gold teeth, and prosperous, cosmopolitan air. A combination of conspicuous wealth and success with women makes him the object of general male envy. He wears gold coins (five- and ten-dollar pieces) as personal adornment, on his stick-pin and watch chain, at the same time letting it be known that “all de womens is crazy ‘bout him” and that this is the source of his wealth: “womens give it all to ‘im” (90). Slemmon’s self-presentation appeals

10 Zora Neale Hurston, “The Gilded Six-Bits,” in *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories*, with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lenke (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 87. All citations refer to this edition.

11 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 132.

very obviously to male fantasies, for it blatantly reverses the usual relationship between male wealth and female willingness. Instead of having to invest resources in order to enjoy sexual intimacy with women, Slemmons avers that women supply the resources in compensation for sexual access to *him*. The picture he paints compels his listeners' belief, if only temporarily, because it represents male wish-fulfillment. *Midnight Cowboy* offers another variation on this fantasy, as readers may recall, and that film's plot hinges on the unrealistic nature of the protagonist's expectations. Not participating in the collective desire of Slemmons's male audience to give credence to his boasts, Missie May responds with telling skepticism to the tales her husband has accepted so uncritically. "How you know dat, Joe?" she demands, arguing that Slemmons's mere word "don't make it so He kin lie jes' lak anybody else" (90).

It is difficult—if not, indeed, impossible—to think of any human culture in which fertile young women offer material inducements in order to enjoy erotic encounters with men. (Dowry systems pose an exception, not relevant here, of course, and Slemmons seems in any case to be referring to short-term mating opportunities rather than to the long-term, contractual relationships regulated by female dowries; see Daly and Wilson.¹²) Because of their biological role in reproduction, including critical facts about egg size, gestation period, and lifetime reproductive potential, females command uniquely "valuable resources."¹³ Except in unusual instances, therefore, they do not need to offer men any inducement beyond sexual opportunity itself, which is in and of itself precious.¹⁴ Joe and his fellows nonetheless are hoodwinked by Slemmons's improbable claims. Overwhelmed by his show of wealth to a degree that prevents them from criticizing its manifest boastfulness, they are disposed to take the impressive stranger at his own value. They are further dazzled by the irresistible appeal of the fantasy he represents, a scenario in which women eagerly offer themselves—and their resources—to a uniquely attractive man. Each one of them would like to be that man and enjoy such advantages—to be freed, in short, from the usual rules of the Darwinian game and find himself holding all the cards.

Hildegard Hoeller argues that since Slemmons has been receiving money from white women in exchange for sex, he has in effect sold himself in a

12 Daly and Wilson, *Sex, Evolution*, 289-290, 322.

13 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 20.

14 *Ibid.*, 20, 86.

humiliating, perhaps parodistic, re-enactment of slavery.¹⁵ The fraudulence of Slemmons's claims constitutes an important obstacle to Hoeller's interpretation, however, on two different counts. First, if he had been successful in selling his sexual services to wealthy women, he would not be so quick to alter his tactics with Missie May—to whom he promises “gold” in return for *her* favors. Second, if large numbers of women had been giving him money, his boast that he has “money ‘cumulated” would be true (90); his prosperity would be genuine rather than pretended. Once his wealth is revealed as sham, his claims that women—of any race or ethnicity—have given him money are exposed as false.

Joe escorts Missie May to the new ice cream parlor with more than one motive. In addition to wishing to give her pleasure, he desires to show her off to the shop's apparently high-status proprietor. Presenting his attractive wife to Slemmons is an act of competitive male display on Joe's part, proof that he has been able to attract an enviable mate of his own.¹⁶ “He talkin’ ‘bout his pretty women—Ah wants ‘im to see *mine*” (90-91). He appears to achieve that goal, for Slemmons expresses admiration for Missie May and, implicitly, for the man who can clam long-term access to her: “Ah have to hand it to you, Joe” (91). Joe's triumph is tinged with irony, however, for he has drawn the interest of a womanizer to his wife's attractions. Slemmons begins an intensive pursuit of Missie May, a pursuit he conducts along more ordinary lines than those he has boasted of to the men in town. Indeed, the tactics Slemmons employs in his pursuit of Missie May effectively give the lie to his earlier bragging. It is evident that he does not expect her to supplement her personal charms with anything of material value; rather, he frankly offers her his money in return for sexual favors. “He said he wuz gointer give me dat gold money,” she later explains, “and he jes’ kep on after me—” (94). In this brief affair, readers observe evolved adaptations at work: courted by a man who appears to offer vastly more resources than her current mate, a woman decides it is in her interest to accept his attentions. As Buss points out, “immediate extraction of resources is a key adaptive benefit that women secure through affairs”.¹⁷

15 Hoeller, “Racial Currency,” 772, 775.

16 Ibid., 771.

17 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 87.

Newcomers to evolutionary biological theory may be disconcerted by the idea of women exchanging sexual favors for resources. Initially, certainly, the notion can seem retrograde and anti-feminist, presenting an unpleasantly acquisitive picture of women. A number of readers have expressed discomfort with Missie May's apparent "prostitution" of herself, either within her marriage (as witnessed by the silver coins Joe tosses in her direction every week) or in the context of her affair, undertaken for the sake of "gold money" (94).¹⁸ Even a cursory consideration of women's situation in the ancestral environment, however, suggests why women had to consider a potential mate's resources before engaging in sexual activity. A single sexual encounter might lead to conception, and a woman left to survive pregnancy, lactation, and child-rearing on her own, without resources in the shape of assistance, provisions, shelter, and the like, would be unlikely to succeed in the reproductive enterprise. Throughout most of human history, the connection between available resources and offspring survival has been incontrovertible. If the politically and economically pernicious effects of evolved sexual strategies are to be effectively counteracted in a contemporary, post-industrial environment, moreover, they must be recognized and acknowledged. As Buss explains, "an evolutionary perspective on sexual strategies provides valuable insights into the origins and maintenance of men's control of resources and men's attempts to control women's sexuality."¹⁹ Elsewhere Buss describes "possible points of congruence between feminist and evolutionary perspectives," and Anne Campbell has undertaken a careful, point-by-point comparative analysis of feminist and evolutionary theory.²⁰ Barbara Smuts explores intellectual and political tensions between the two theoretical systems, as do Kenrick, Trost, and Sheets.²¹ Griet Vandermassen's detailed consideration of feminism in the context of evolutionary biology also is illuminating in this context.²²

18 See, for instance, Chinn and Dunn, "The Ring of Singing Metal," 3; Hoeller, "Racial Currency," 772-73; German, "Counterfeiting," 5, 11-12.

19 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 212.

20 Buss, "Sexual Conflict," 296; Campbell, *A Mind of Her Own*, 12-33.

21 Smuts, "Male Aggression"; Douglas T. Kenrick, Melanie R. Trost, and Virgil L. Sheets. "Power, Harassment, and Trophy Mates: The Feminist Advantages of an Evolutionary Perspective," in *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. David M. Buss and Neil M. Malamuth, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

22 Griet Vandermassen, *Who's Afraid of Charles Darwin? Debating Feminism and Evolutionary Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005).

Because readers do not watch the progress of the courtship but are presented, like Joe, with a sudden *fait accompli* when Slemmons and Missie May are discovered in bed, it is difficult to assess her motives step-by-step. From the outset she expresses doubts about the newcomer's self-proclaimed prowess with women ("Whyn't he stay up dere where dey so crazy 'bout 'im?") and hints at vague plans for procuring some of his wealth: "Us might find some [gold] goin' long de road some time" (90, 91). Such remarks leave readers with the impression that her affair may be motivated by the desire to transfer Slemmons's wealth to her husband. This explanation of her behavior is supported by her grief-stricken tears when Joe catches her in the act of adultery and by her subsequent remorseful conduct. Insisting that she loves Joe "so hard," she appears genuinely devastated by the loss of his trust and affection (94). There is evidence, in sum, that she has not been infatuated by Slemmons's apparent wealth and status, that she feels no love for him and never aspired to become his long-term partner. Instead, she may be exchanging her sexual favors quite deliberately for "dat gold money," intending to present it to her husband; at one point she avers that the gold coins would "look a whole heap better" on Joe (91). Thus she perhaps justifies her adulterous behavior, in her own mind, as an act intended to enrich her marriage rather than imperil it, "a sin committed out of her love for Joe."²³ Trivers's analysis of self-deception is relevant here, as readers attempt to sort out the tangled layers of Missie May's conscious and unconscious intentions.²⁴

There is no getting around the fact that if she grants secret sexual access to a short-term partner in order to bring new resources to her marriage, Missie May risks lowering her husband's lifetime reproductive success. If Slemmons fathers her first child, the total number of children Joe might conceive with her will have been reduced by one. No matter how generously her motives are interpreted, the consequences of Missie May's infidelity—in terms of fitness—are not nearly so damaging for her as for her husband. The logic of her intentions, very likely not consciously articulated, seems clear when examined from a Darwinian perspective. If she becomes pregnant by Slemmons, she risks giving birth to a lower-quality child than she could have conceived with Joe, perhaps, but the child will still be hers. Self-interest therefore might suggest to her that the risk of impregnation by Slemmons is outweighed by the advantage of access to his money. If her affair is not discovered, Joe is likely to

23 Peters, "Missie May," 93.

24 Trivers, "Self-Deception," 271-86.

acknowledge and support the child without suspecting that he might not be its father—a course of action obviously “contrary to [his] own interest” but highly “adaptive” from Missie May’s point of view.²⁵ Meanwhile that child, along with any others later sired by Joe, will enjoy the benefits of the unexpected resources Missie May has extracted from a short-term affair. If Slemmons’s wealth had been real, rather than feigned, her decision to seize this opportunity to ensure a more financially secure future for her offspring might have made a positive difference in her fitness and that of her progeny.

As long as the affair remains undetected, and so long as her short-term partner gives a woman otherwise unavailable resources, she stands to reap benefits in fitness. The poorer the woman, the more true this is: a larger percentage of her children is likely to survive and thrive if more food, better shelter, enhanced medical care, or improved vocational opportunities flow to her family through a wealthy extramarital partner. Missie May and Joe belong to the class of the working poor, after all; a woman compelled to dry herself after bathing with a “meal sack” might with reason prove susceptible to the blandishments of a prosperous suitor (87). Disclosure of the affair threatens the stability of the marriage (and this is the principal risk Missie May assumes in accepting Slemmons’s attentions) precisely because a wife’s adultery stands to decrease her husband’s fitness. Missie May’s cost-benefit analysis, as she weighs the pros and cons of an affair with a supposedly rich suitor, scarcely will coincide with Joe’s. Even a small risk that his wife might conceive a child with another man would be unacceptable from a husband’s point of view.²⁶ He is unlikely to regard resource-extraction from her partner in adultery as adequate compensation for the loss he will suffer in numbers of copies of genes passed on to the next generation.

In terms of plot development, Missie May’s strong desire to preserve her marriage is crucial. Once detected in an adulterous liaison, she assumes a posture of dignified remorse, cooking and cleaning with energetic dedication while hoping her husband will accept her contrition and renew his trust in her. After the discovery scene, in which Joe strikes Slemmons and wrests the gold piece from his watch chain, the omniscient narrator shifts the focus of attention to Missie May. In consequence, readers observe the operation of male jealousy, defined by Buss as the psychological mechanism “our ancestors evolved ... for solving the paternity problem” through the eyes of the woman at whom it is

25 Trivers, “Parental Investment and Reproductive Success,” 76.

26 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 66-67.

directed.²⁷ Joe's initial reaction to the sight of another man in bed with his wife is a stunned incredulity ("the great belt in the wheel of Time slipped"), followed closely by "fury" (93): "he had both chance and time to kill ... but he was too weak to take action" (93). He lands a couple of punches and sends the man on his way, caught in a kind of emotional paralysis, "feeling so much and not knowing what to do with all his feelings" (94). The powerful emotions Joe experiences in this moment illustrate the essential elements of male sexual jealousy, including rage and aggression.²⁸

In the weeks and months following this confrontation with Slemmons, Joe says nothing to his wife about his feelings or plans. Consistently "polite," but "aloof," he refrains from questioning her about the affair, just as he reveals nothing about his future intentions (95). He maintains the "outside show" of their marriage, going through the motions of ordinary chores and activities with two significant exceptions (96): he ceases their sexual relations and he stops handing over resources. "There were no more Saturday romps. No ringing silver dollars to stack beside her plate" (95). With the passage of time, he finds himself unable to maintain his sexual reserve: a backrub after "three months" of abstinence leads to further intimacy, and "youth triumphed" (95). Missie May anticipates that sexual contact will facilitate reconciliation but finds herself mistaken: Joe maintains emotional distance. He makes his position painfully clear by leaving the gold coin he has yanked off his rival's watch chain underneath her pillow, as if in payment for the sexual encounter.

Only at this point does Missie May learn what Joe has known ever since he acquired the trophy: it is not a real ten-dollar gold coin at all but merely a gilded fifty-cent piece. Given the story's composition date in 1933, some readers are inclined to interpret the gilded coin in the context of the Great Depression and the gold-standard debate.²⁹ "Making money and the desire for money became national concerns," Chinn and Dunn argue. "Popular songs, fiction, and movies throughout the 1930's celebrated the lives of the rich and the famous," they point out, suggesting that Hurst uses "gilded money and Otis T. Slemmons to explore the misguided belief that material goods would bring happiness."³⁰ Hoeller explores the possibility that Hurston forges the emphatic silver-gold contrast in the story in order to voice her critique of the "the gold standard and

27 Ibid., 126.

28 Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 294-95.

29 Chinn and Dunn, "The Ring of Singing Metal"; Hoeller, "Racial Currency."

30 Chinn and Dunn, "The Ring of Singing Metal," 3.

its insistence on the supremacy and universality of white values (and white civilization)."³¹ These readers make a well-wrought case that Hurston is taking on broad-based sociopolitical and economic issues in her story. The presence of such concerns does not, of course, alter the biosocial implications of the gilded coins as a male resource. Any political or economic statement is secondary to the biologically fundamental issues that so clearly dominate the story's content and shape its plot.

Since Missie May's affair with Slemmons was motivated, on her own admission, by the resources he promised her ("he was gointer give me dat gold money"), it is humiliating for her to find that those resources were all sham. There never was any benefit to be gained by an involvement with Slemmons, and she has jeopardized her marriage to Joe for nothing. Slemmons's success in impressing her with his supposedly magnificent resources illustrates the "evolutionary arms race between deception perpetrated by one sex and detection accomplished by the other."³² In this instance, a woman has been insufficiently alert to deceptive male tactics. Readers infer that Joe takes some satisfaction in passing on this ironic information to Missie May; he assuages his anger with his wife by demonstrating how she has been duped. Presenting her with the counterfeit coin also enables him to express his resentment of her disloyalty via insult, since by offering payment for sex he implies that he regards her as a promiscuous woman whose favors are for sale. "He had come home to buy from her as if she were any woman in the long house. Fifty cents for her love. As if to say that he could pay as well as Slemmons" (96). Joe's unflattering message is that Missie May has ceased to belong to the Madonna-like category of women, characterized by premarital chastity and post-marital sexual fidelity, to whom men make long-term commitments. Her adulterous behavior positions her, instead, in the ranks of promiscuous women with whom men seek only short-term liaisons.³³

Missie May returns the counterfeit gold coin as wordlessly as it is given, by placing it in Joe's clothing. Her message to him is as clear as his to her: she indicates that she is providing him with sexual intimacy out of marital love rather than for pay. The coin looms large in her imagination, an object inspiring fear and loathing; it is "a monster hiding in the cave of his pockets to destroy her" (95). She interprets Joe's use of it to torment her as "her punishment" (96). An important effect of Joe's punitive action, clearly, is to

31 Hoeller, "Racial Currency," 780.

32 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 155.

33 Smuts, "Male Aggression," 252; Trivers, "Parental Investment and Reproductive Success," 74.

convince his wife that he will not tolerate sexual transgressions. If he were to offer her quick or easy forgiveness, he would risk licensing future extramarital escapades on her part. In any cooperative alliance, as Dawkins points out in his analysis of tit-for-tat strategies, it is necessary that individuals be “punished for defection” or cheating will become rampant.³⁴ Another effect of Joe’s behavior is to test the degree of Missie May’s commitment to him. Without resorting to either rudeness or violence, he nevertheless succeeds in making his wife extremely uncomfortable. She has no idea when, if ever, his withholding behavior and silent rebukes will end. By putting up with an extended period of coldness and by suffering the insults represented by the coin, she acknowledges fault, communicates remorse, and affirms loyalty. The longer Joe tests her, the more convincingly she proves that the marriage is valuable to her and that she is willing to endure discomfort to win back his trust. Both partners in the marriage are engaged in a waiting game. Joe is waiting to see whether Missie May will offer adequate proof of ongoing commitment, while she in turn is waiting to see when and if his resentment of her fault will be healed. Psychologically, this waiting makes sense on both sides: the rift caused by Joe’s mistrust can be repaired only gradually, as Missie May’s “displays of fidelity” over time provide persuasive evidence of her renewed commitment to sexual exclusiveness.³⁵

The plot takes another turn at this point, as Hurston introduces an evolutionarily critical complication: Joe observes that his wife is showing signs of pregnancy. Before the incident with Slemmons, he had been wishing for exactly this state of affairs: “He thought about children. ... A little boy child would be about right” (92). Now, of course, his wife’s pregnancy is a source of great ambivalence for him. Whose child is she carrying? Neither Joe nor the reader knows for certain whether Missie May’s affair with Slemmons involved more than the single sexual encounter that Joe interrupts. There is no evidence, certainly, that they were together often or long. It is possible, of course, that conception occurred on the one occasion when Joe found her in bed with Slemmons. His wife’s pregnancy therefore poses a fitness-related dilemma for Joe. If the baby is his, he longs to nurture it and its mother; if it is Slemmons’s baby, he has no such wishes. Joe takes over the heavy chores (“you ain’t got no business choppin’ wood, and you know it,” he avers), a precautionary move to safeguard the health of a fetus that may well be his (96). At the same time,

34 Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 227.

35 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 114.

however, he lets his wife know that he remains wary of investing in this pregnancy. Questioning her assertion that the baby will be sure to resemble him ("You reckon?"), he fingers the gilded coin he still keeps in his pocket. This serves as a deliberate reminder of her infidelity, making his reservations, and their cause, unmistakably plain.

From readers' point of view, it should be noted, there is a frustrating element of imprecision in the timeline of Missie May's pregnancy. Joe notices the pregnancy at about the three-and-a-half-month mark, since she gives birth "almost six months later" (96). A vague reference to passage of time between the resumption of their conjugal relations and his observation of her condition introduces a slight question as to whether more than nine months elapse between her affair and the birth of the child: "the sun swept around the horizon, trailing its robes of weeks and days" (95-96). Joe's openly expressed doubts about the child's paternity offer evidence that readers are expected to interpret those "trailing ... robes" of time as a relatively brief period—that is, less than a month. Joe can do the arithmetic for himself, obviously, and his continued worries indicate that numerical calculations alone will not suffice to eliminate Slemmons from the running as father. Quite apart from any nine-month count-down, moreover, the suspicions awakened by his wife's infidelity work to create a generalized distrust on Joe's part: a wife guilty on one occasion of sexual disloyalty may prove so again. For the best of reasons Joe's anxieties about paternity loom large.

German reads the "trailing ... robes of weeks and days" as a fairly extensive period of time, and he concludes that Joe is sure Slemmons *cannot* be the baby's father (10).³⁶ Such a reading is undermined by Joe's openly articulated concerns about the child's paternity; it introduces a further temporal complication, moreover. If the vaguely denoted "weeks and days" represent any amount of time between four and ten weeks, then Joe absolutely cannot be the father, since conception would have occurred during the three-month period of conjugal abstinence. It seems likely, on balance, that the confusion generated by the narrator's reference to "weeks and days" is accidental and that the more definitely noted time periods (e.g., three months, six months) are those to which readers are expected to attend.

Hurston assigns to Joe's mother the central role in relieving his doubts. Because a man's relatives also stand to lose if he invests in offspring not his own, it is adaptive for them to maintain a watchful, even suspicious attitude

36 German, "Counterfeiting," 10.

in response to the problem of paternal uncertainty. After all, Joe's relatives will suffer decreased inclusive fitness if he spends years supporting a child conceived by Otis T. Slemmons. Because they share genes with Joe, if he sires fewer children as a result of being cuckolded they, too, suffer a loss. Any assistance to that child given by grandparents, aunts or uncles on Joe's side of the family (and such assistance from extended family is, of course, common in human societies) similarly would be misplaced, if Joe accepts as his own another man's child.³⁷ One commonplace response to the adaptive problem faced by paternal relatives is the tendency of maternal relatives to suggest that an infant resembles its father, or some member of the father's family, presumably with the unconscious hope of allaying fears that might short-circuit paternal investment.³⁸

Just as it is in the interest of relatives on the maternal side to insist that there can be no possible question about the identity of the father, however, it is in the interest of relatives on the paternal side to remain vigilant to the possibility of cuckoldry. Because Joe's mother belongs to the naturally suspicious set of paternal relatives, her announcement to him that the newborn baby is "de spittin' image of yuh, son" carries weight (97). She underlines her conviction with notable insistence, telling him "if you never git another one, dat un is yourn" (97). Similar statements from Missie May's mother would lack the persuasive force of this testimony from Joe's. There is no reason for Joe's mother to imagine a resemblance that is not there; indeed, she has a genetic stake in remaining objective in her assessment of the baby's appearance. Hurston also has provided evidence in her text that Missie May's mother-in-law was displeased from the start by her son's choice of a wife, judging her to be potentially promiscuous—for example, to "fan her foot around" and "get misput on her road" (97). Very evidently, her statements about the child are not motivated by any personal affection for her daughter-in-law, or by more generalized loyalty to her sex. Rather, the doubts she harbors about Missie May's character make her particularly apt to question the paternity of a putative grandchild. Her pre-existing bias against her daughter-in-law renders her assurances to Joe all the more convincing.

Gayl Jones's comment that "the story is perhaps resolved too simply at this point, the '*baby chile*' being a kind of *deus ex machina*," misses the point.³⁹

37 Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 236, 249; Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 186.

38 D. Kelly McLain et al., "Ascription of Resemblance of Newborns by Parents and Nonrelatives," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 21 (2000): 21-22.

39 Gayl Jones, "Breaking out of the Conventions of Dialect: Dunbar and Hurston," *Présence Africaine: Revue Culturelle du Monde Noir* 144 (1987): 41.

The birth of a baby resembling Joe resolves the plot for good reason: it resolves as, indeed, nothing else can, the paternal uncertainty which constitutes the major source of conflict in the story. Joe is in conflict with Slemmons, who has diverted his wife's sexual attentions and reproductive potential away from her marriage. Joe also is in conflict with Missie May, who has been sexually disloyal and who now may be trying to trick him into supporting another man's child. Finally, Joe is in conflict with himself: desperately ambivalent, he yearns to forgive but seethes with mistrust. The child is no narrative contrivance but an essential means of relieving Joe's doubts and enabling him to continue his long-term commitment to Missie May. If there is a hint of artifice in the story's conclusion, it is Joe's mother, rather than the baby, who plays the role of *deus ex machina*. Her assurances of Joe's paternity make it possible for him to accept his wife's child as his own and renew his marital commitment. His mother's unsought testimony, offered at just the right moment to allay Joe's painful suspicions, may strike some readers as a little too convenient.

Confirmation of paternity thus serves as the resolution of the story's plot. In the starkest biological terms, what is at stake, more than individual happiness or the sanctity of marriage, is the passing on of genes. Readers can only speculate about what might have happened to Joe's and Missie May's relationship if his mother had not volunteered such a strong conviction that Joe is the father of his wife's baby. In the absence of certainty on that point, his commitment to the marriage might be expected to waver. The happy ending Hurston depicts is possible only because the husband is confident that he will be investing in a child carrying his genes. Hildegard Hoeller argues that Joe has no "essential proof [of paternity] that goes beyond the surface appearance," dismissing the testimony of Joe's mother. Hoeller goes on to voice admiration for Joe's willingness to accept the baby "as his own"; he "makes the baby his own currency."⁴⁰ While it is true that his mother's pronouncement does not constitute absolute proof of Joe's paternity, he accepts it as such. The movement of the plot strongly supports her assurances, moreover, reaching its climax in the moment when she avers that the baby is "de spittin' image" of Joe. Only then, encouraged by a close kinswoman who also has a vested interest in unmasking false candidates for his investment, does he effect a reconciliation with his wife. Hurston provides ample evidence of Joe's conviction that he is the biological father—behavioral indicators as well as verbal testimony. His certainty on this point is necessarily subjective, but it is unmistakable. Storyline and plot

40 Hoeller, "Racial Currency," 777.

development lose their meaning if readers interpret Joe's parental pride at the story's conclusion as altruism rather than as fitness-enhancing behavior.

The importance of this issue is clear: readers must notice, for instance, that Missie May is guilty of adultery no matter who fathered her child. The fact that Joe, rather than Slemmons, impregnated her is irrelevant, ethically speaking. Joe can forgive her, evidently, if her sexual disloyalty will have no negative impact on his genetic legacy. Readers must suspect that if the baby had looked like a tiny Otis, Joe's forgiveness would not have been forthcoming. If Joe is biding his time, as noted earlier, for adequate proof of Missie May's remorse and commitment, he is also awaiting the outcome of the pregnancy. If Missie May were to miscarry, or if the child were to be stillborn, for example, then its paternity would be irrelevant. In such a case, if he were sufficiently convinced of his wife's future loyalty Joe might continue in his marriage without worrying about Slemmons's threat to his lineage. In the case of a live birth, there is hope, but no guarantee, that the child's appearance will settle the issue of paternity. In an era before genetic testing was available, the most convincing proofs of kinship were provided by signs of physical resemblance.

Once his mother has come forward to settle the question of paternity, Joe resumes investing resources in his wife. In addition to bringing home a large supply of groceries ("all the staples"), he once again flings his pay, fifteen silver dollars, through the doorway (97). He cashes in Slemmon's counterfeit coin, furthermore, spending the fifty cents on "candy kisses" for Missie May (98). This act signals his wish for a full reconciliation. Disposing of the evidence of Missie May's adultery, he indicates that he will no longer use the coin as an instrument of reproach. Purchasing "gifts of eroticized food" with that same coin, he expresses his desire to renew their sexual intimacy, in all its joyful vitality.⁴¹ When the store clerk suggests that fifty cents worth of molasses kisses is an absurdly large quantity, advising Joe to "take some chocolate bars too," Joe refuses; only an extravagant gesture will do (98). All of Slemmons's money must be spent on "kisses" that illustrate the connection between female reproductive energies and the expenditure of male resources. Like Ado Annie's suitor in *Oklahoma*, Joe indicates that he is an all-or-nothing man: the prodigality of his outlay communicates the message that he will put *all* available resources at his wife's disposal, with the expectation that she, for her part, will channel *all* her reproductive energy toward him.

41 Ibid., 774.

Joe's conversation with the store clerk from whom he purchases the candy and other provisions also shows him making efforts to deflect the social humiliation associated with cuckoldry. He describes Slemmons as "a stray nigger" who offended Joe with his boastful manners and pretensions to wealth (97). He even adds that Slemmons was "tryin' to tole off folkses wives from home," a detail he might have suppressed unless he fears that word of Slemmons's womanizing has spread (98). The clerk responds by asking, "did he fool you, too?" raising the possibility that Joe has been deceived by Slemmons's mate-poaching activities as well as by his phony gold (98). Joe offers an emphatic denial, claiming that he "knocked 'im down" and seized the gilded coin simply because he was irritated by the stranger's braggadocio, or "smart talk" (98). He makes a point, as well, of affirming paternity of the new baby: "Ah got a li'l boy chile home now" (98).

Readers perceive that Joe is misrepresenting his interactions with Slemmons calculatingly, in order to avoid the reputational damage typically suffered by a man who fails to keep his mate's sexual loyalty.⁴² Insisting that he distrusted Slemmons from the outset, Joe hopes to squelch any gossip linking the stranger with Missie May. At the same time he attempts to present himself as a forceful and aggressive male, well able to fend off challenges from other men. Such masculine "displays of bravado ... are directed toward other men in an attempt to elevate status and prestige."⁴³ As part of this effort, Joe even adopts some of Slemmons's posturing, telling the store clerk that he has been away in "spots and places" (97). Echoing Slemmons's phrasing to suggest that he is well traveled and sophisticated, Joe imitates the strategy the newcomer used so successfully to impress new acquaintances. The knowledge that Slemmons achieved status and respect (however temporary) by means of fraudulent claims does not deter Joe from making use of similarly deceptive tactics in the hope of bolstering his own image in the community.⁴⁴

The impact of race on the characters' situation emerges most clearly in the white store clerk's comment after Joe's departure: "these darkies ... laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em" (98). Interpreting Joe's laughing deprecation of Slemmons as the sign of a carefree nature, the clerk reads Joe as "a type," revealing his conviction that individual psychology is racially determined.⁴⁵ To say

42 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 126.

43 Ibid., 10.

44 Chinn and Dunn, "The Ring of Singing Metal," 8; German, "Counterfeiting," 11.

45 John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Classic Comedy*, excerpted in "Sweat": Zora Neale Hurston, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 191.

that Joe never “worries” is to deny his full humanity and, by extension, that of all African Americans. Readers are acquainted firsthand with the suffering Joe has experienced in previous months, moreover, and they also understand the attitude of easy confidence he projects while mocking Slemmons as a function of intrasexual competition (here the attempt to assert dominance over a rival). Hurston has arranged for readers to realize how utterly mistaken the white man’s racially based assumptions are and thus to reject their underlying bigotry. The irony evoked by the clerk’s remark is directed, very obviously, toward him. Adaptationist analysis of the story supports Hurston’s point fully, as the characters’ behavior is shown to be consistent with “universal psychological mechanisms.”⁴⁶

As Lillie P. Howard states, one of Hurston’s recurring messages is “that people, regardless of their color or their peculiar burdens, must inevitably struggle with some of the same life problems.” In confronting problematic and conflict-ridden situations, fraught with “infidelity, jealousy, violence, and hatred,” her characters express their humanness in all its complexity.⁴⁷ Further evidence that Hurston regards her characters’ feelings and behavior as normative can be found in her chosen narrative strategies. The omniscient narrator keeps readers at some distance from the characters’ inner reflections at several critical points in the story. Readers obtain no direct access to Missie May’s motives in yielding to Slemmons’s courtship, for instance, or to Joe’s plans in the months following his wife’s adultery. As Gayl Jones points out, “Hurston handles all the emotional reversals and complications in narrative summary rather than in active dramatic scenes.”⁴⁸ Assuming that readers will understand the two protagonists’ motives, reactions, and calculations on the basis of general human experience, she implies that her story is an old one, with universal application. In this way, her narrative method appears to reflect her background as folklorist and ethnographer. She utilizes dialect, rituals, and folkways to locate her characters in an identifiable environment, simultaneously pointing toward psychological mechanisms transcending the local.⁴⁹

Certainly men’s apprehensions of misplacing parental effort is universal, as countless examples from popular culture and literature bear witness. The final song in Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor Lost*, for instance, declares that the

46 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 185.

47 Lillie P. Howard, “Marriage: Zora Neale Hurston’s System of Values,” *College Language Association Journal* 21 (1977): 256, 257.

48 Jones, “Breaking out of the Conventions,” 41.

49 Chinn and Dunn, “The Ring of Singing Metal,” 4; Hoeller, “Racial Currency,” 778.

spring call of the cuckoo "mocks married men."⁵⁰ Not only does the bird's call mimic the word "cuckold," warning men of their wives' possible infidelity, the brood parasitism for which this species is notorious exemplifies reproductive deceit and exploitation at its most extreme. The cuckoo's victims take care of another bird's offspring because they are unable to distinguish the cuckoo's eggs or chicks from their own. In contrast to the bird world, in which both parents are equally prone to deception, the prospect of being so tricked threatens only males in the human realm:

The cuckoo then, on every tree
Mocks married men; for thus sings he—
Cuckoo,
Cuckoo, cuckoo! O, word of fear
Unpleasing to a married ear!⁵¹

It is highly fitting that such words conclude a play titled *Love's Labor's Lost*. Shakespeare's lyrics remind us that the emotion of "love" is a proximate mechanism driving humans toward reproductive efforts that constitute the central "labor" of most individual lives. To lose the genetic payoff from that labor by lavishing energy on genetic impostors represents an irretrievable loss, indeed.

Like Hurston's story, Shakespeare's song assumes familiarity with the problem female infidelity poses for men: cuckoldry is presented as a widely understood human concern, not restricted to any one historical moment or social context. Hurston states in her autobiography that her attention as a writer is drawn to commonalities in human nature that underlie surface distinctions:

My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different ideas, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no.⁵²

Clearly, her perspective is very like that of an evolutionary psychologist. The store clerk's racist assumptions, like Joe's and Missie May's ritualized games

50 William Shakespeare, *Love's Labor's Lost*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1948), 5.2.909.

51 *Ibid.*, 5.2.908-12.

52 Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1942), Reprint. (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 214.

and richly metaphoric verbal exchanges, form part of the particularized cultural context in which the protagonists' evolutionary heritage expresses itself.⁵³

With the restoration of resource-provisioning and sexual vitality to Joe's and Missie May's relationship, their story comes full circle. The breach in their marriage is healed, and its future prospects are strengthened by a joint parental commitment to a child in which both partners claim genetic interest. Hurston's plot illustrates with striking clarity the centrality of paternal confidence in male mating decisions: indeed, it may be read as a case study of this particular adaptive problem. It offers an illuminating portrait of male jealousy, identifying fear of misplaced parental investment as a principal source of this powerful emotion. Readers observe that Joe's ability to forgive an adulterous act is tied inextricably to the genetic consequences of the deed. Above all else, the adaptationist perspective cuts through any tendency to wrest sentimental or didactic meaning from the story. Often it is read as a record of maturation and forgiveness: marital discord is overcome; false values are rejected; reconciliation is achieved.⁵⁴ Neither ethical principles nor romantic ideals dictate Joe's decision to remain in his marriage, however; his chief concern is the safeguarding of his own fitness. If confronted with another instance of infidelity on his wife's part, he can be expected to demonstrate at least as much coldness and anger as he did the first time, very probably more. He has not become more altruistic, or more forgiving of human frailty; rather, he has reaped the adaptive benefits of jealousy.

To locate the story's meaning in vague ideas about the power of love or the ethics of reconciliation does great disservice to the tough-mindedness of its statement. "The Gilded Six-Bits" is not a vapid tale of error and forgiveness but an unsparing delineation of Darwinian realities: men practice deceit to gain social status and access to women; happily married women can be tempted to sexual disloyalty if sufficiently impressive resources are on offer; a man can forgive his wife's infidelity if—and only if—he is sure she has not foisted alien genes upon him. The author who crafted a fictional situation to test and illustrate these realities is not surprised by the outcomes she depicts, nor does she encourage readers to condemn the portrait of human psychology that emerges.

53 Jones, "Breaking out of the Conventions," 44-45; Wall, Introduction, 14.

54 See Rosalie Murphy Baum, "The Shape of Hurston's Fiction," in *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991); Gates and Lenke, Introduction; Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Howard, "Marriage"; Jones, "Pastoral and Picaresque"; Jones, "Breaking out of the Conventions"; Lowe, *Jump at the Sun*; Peters, "Missie May."

Zora Neale Hurston's narrative quietly accepts genetic self-interest as an inevitable component of our common human nature, a *sine qua non* that, with luck and a modicum of good will, need not be incompatible with tender and lasting relationships. "Tremendous benefits flow to couples who remain committed," after all.⁵⁵ Missie May and Joe have much to gain if they continue their marriage, so long as they can do so without jeopardizing the reproductive success of either partner.

55 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 123.