Counterfeiting and a Two-Bit Error in Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits”

Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “The Gilded Six-Bits” was published in 1933, coincidentally the year the United States went off the gold standard and F.D.R. asked loyal Americans to exchange their gold for silver and paper money.¹ Still, Missie May’s assertion after viewing Otis D. Slemmons’ tiepin and watch fob, “Dat’s de first time Ah ever seed gold money,” seems surprising, though it is perhaps accounted for by her husband Joe’s reply: “We ain’t even seen none dese white folks wearin’ no gold money on dey watch chain”(91). His implication is that rich white people don’t flaunt gold-coin jewelry even if they carry gold money and that poor blacks wouldn’t even have gold money in their possession: “Where would a po’ man lak me git gold money from?”(91). Thus, early in the story Slemmons is suspect as a counterfeit because, in the middle of the Great Depression, the phrase “rich black man” would have been contradictory. Throughout the story, Hurston dramatizes the appearance-versus-reality theme on several levels: objects are covered to make them seem better than they are; people are two-faced; marriage is a thinly-disguised form of prostitution; the slippery nature of language makes accurate communication impossible; and the ambiguity of words functions as the rhetorical counterpart of the fraudulent six-bits.

Hurston makes clear from the story’s opening sentence that black, to some, is implicitly inferior to white (“It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement”), but that a simple veneer could set things right: “The fence and house were whitewashed. The porch and steps scrubbed white”(86). A grassless, hard-dirt yard raked into decorative patterns and a sidewalk bordered by “bottles driven neck down into the ground on a slant” buffer the inhabitants from the harsh barrenness of their lives(86). “Fresh newspaper cut in fancy edge” covering the kitchen shelves and “homey flowers planted without a plan” further disguise the homeliness of the young couple’s domicile (86). However, this superficial, domes-
tic aesthetic is deceptive, for house and yard soon become objective corrollaries of the inhabitants and their own duplicitous facades.

The inherent duplicity of language, especially the trope of oxymoron early in the story, also reinforces Hurston’s theme. The first time we see the husband and wife, Joe has thrown nine silver dollars into the house, and Missie May runs to the door in “mock alarm” and shouts at him in “mock anger”: “Nobody ain’t goin’ to be chunkin’ money at me and Ah not do ‘em nothin’”(87). Then the two pretend to play hide-and-seek, the double-sided nature of their activities echoed in the oxymorons used to describe Joe’s “joyful mischief” and the “friendly battle” or “play-fight” they engage in (87, 88, 88). Then, while eating, they talk in a “banter that pretended to deny affection but in reality flaunted it”(88).

In the midst of these layers of deceit, one would be foolish to take at face value Missie May’s avowal, “Ah’m a real wife, not no dress and breath. Ah might not look lak one, but if you burn me, you won’t git a thing but wife ashes”(88). In other words, she claims to be pure wife, faithful and true, not one made up of finery and perfume. And she is – at least until meeting her counterfeit match in “Mister Otis D. Slemmons, of spots and places”(89).

Slemmons has all the trappings of wealth: gold teeth, a “five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin,” “a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain”(90), and a gut, for as Joe explains to Missie May, who has misgivings about the latter indicator, “Dat make ’m look lak a rich white man. All rich mens is got some belly on ’em”(89). Further, when Joe says he wishes he had a belly, Missie May’s reassuring but conditional reply, “Youse a pritty man, and if Ah knew any way to make you mo’ pritty still Ab’d take and do it”(90), betrays the germinal dissatisfaction that will lead to her infidelity with Slemmons in order to get his gold, ostensibly for Joe.

A little clutch of foreshadowing dialogue that occurs as Missie May is sitting on Joe’s lap epitomizes the story’s theme:

“All de womens is crazy ‘bout ’im everywhere he go.”
“How you know dat, Joe?”
“He tole us so himself.”
“Dat don’t make it so. His mouf is cut cross-ways, ain’t it?”
Well, he kin lie jes’ lak anybody else.”(90)

Precisely. Slemmons can lie like anybody else, including a woman who claims to be “a real [faithful] wife”(88), including a man who says, “Ah’m satisfied de way Ah is. So long as Ah be yo’ husband,” just after he has “spent the time [while waiting for his wife to dress] trying to make his stomach punch out like Slemmons’ middle. He tried the rolling swagger of the stranger, but found that his tall bone-and-muscle stride fitted ill with it”(91). That is, Joe’s miming of Slemmons is an attempted counterfeiting. Indeed, everything up to this point in the story suggests hypocrisy and deceit, so it is foreboding when the narrator, speaking for Joe, says that the husband felt that “all, everything was right”(92), including “Their white-washed house, the mock battle on Saturday, the dinner and ice cream parlor afterwards, church on Sunday nights when Missie out-dressed [i.e., out-counterfeited] any woman in tow”(92), despite her claim to be a real wife, “not no dress and breath”(88).

Strictly speaking, counterfeiting involves replicating something of greater value and passing off the cheaper imitation for personal gain to another’s detriment. In a successful counterfeiting, there is a clear winner and a clear loser. In this sense, Joe’s mimicry of Slemmons and Missie’s out-dressing of other women seem harmless. However, both actions reveal a fundamental dissatisfaction with their authentic selves and a corresponding belief that imitating others of a higher station would be an improvement to make themselves more attractive. The losers in such cases are those deceived into accepting the phony as the genuine. Thus, Joe’s and Missie’s behavior is at worst an intentional counterfeiting and at best a naive posturing or imposturing that projects to others a false identity.

Without saying it outright, Nancy Chin and Elizabeth E. Dunn imply that Slemmons is himself counterfeit: “Living on money given to him by white women [in Chicago], or so he claims, Slemmons walked the walk and talked the talk of Chicago. He sloughed off all that was Southern, rural, and black while he was in the North and replaced it with alien language and habits that fascinate first Joe then Missie May”(780). Thus, Joe is imitating an imitator, surely a dubious enterprise, since he is now twice removed from genuine behavior in this Platonic allegory.

When Joe comes home early from his night shift and discovers Slemmons in bed with his wife, “He was assaulted in his weakness” into passivity (93). Instead of fighting Slemmons, “he just opened his mouth and laughed”(93). His laughter, as paralinguistic communication, masks his pain. Playing off of the etymology of “counterfeit” – to make contrary or opposite – Joe’s laughter is an auditory facade, if you will, that runs counter to his grief; his laughter is therefore a type of counterfeiting.
Slemmons considers an “attack upon the big clown that stood there laughing like a chessey cat,” but he is too late (93). Joe hits and knocks him down, then grabs Slemmons with his left hand and strikes him with his right. After Slemmons scrambles into the night, Joe finds the gold watch charm in his fist, “and not knowing what to do with all his feelings, he put Slemmons’ watch charm in his pants pocket and took a good laugh and went to bed” (94).

Joe’s laughter should not be confused with that of the many tricksters and clowns of African-American folklore and literature who craftily get what they want via humorous guises and ruses. These folk types are documented in John W. Robert’s From Trickster to Badman; a paragon example is the Invisible Man’s risible grandfather in Ralph Ellison’s novel. By contrast, Joe’s pathological laughter derives from his debility caused by Missie May’s infidelity.

The next morning, at Joe’s request, Missie May gratefully fixes her husband a hearty breakfast only to find the gold coin left on the table as a demeaning tip for her services. Three months later, Joe is home at midnight complaining of back pains. Missie May rubs him with liniment and “Before morning, youth triumphed and Missie exulted” (95). In plainer language, they make love for the first time in a quarter of a year. While making the bed the next morning, Missie May finds the gold coin. Upon closer inspection, she sees “that it was no gold piece. It was a gilded half dollar” (95). Missie May is crushed when she realizes that her husband 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). Missie May now realizes “why Slemmons had forbidden anyone to touch his gold. He trusted village eyes at a distance not to recognize his stick-pin as a gilded quarter, and his watch charm as a four-bit piece” (96).

This is where Hurston seems to have made a two-bit error. Joe has earlier informed Missie May that Slemmons has “a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin” and “a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain” (90). In fact, the appropriate coins to gild, based on their similar sizes, would be a nickel and a quarter, to be passed as five- and ten-dollar gold pieces. The nickel and five-dollar gold piece have diameters of 21.2 and 21.6 millimeters, respectively – that is, nearly indistinguishable by the naked eye. Thus a quarter, too large at 24.3 mm, could not be gilded and passed as a 21.6 mm five-dollar gold piece. And certainly a fifty-cent piece, at 30.6 mm, would be easily detected as a fraudulent copy of the noticeably smaller 27 mm ten-dollar gold piece.

Further, the five-cent piece plated to look like a five-dollar gold piece would not have been an Indian Head (Buffalo Nickel), minted from 1913 to 1938, but a Liberty Head (“V” Nickel), minted from 1883 to 1913, because the five-dollar gold piece minted from 1866 to 1908 has the head of Liberty, personified as a woman, on the coin’s obverse and looks, at a glance, like Liberty’s image on the “V” Nickel, especially since both heads are encircled by the thirteen colonial stars.

Aside from the coins’ sizes, the problem with gilding a quarter and passing it as a five-dollar gold piece is, first, that Liberty’s profile on the Barber Quarter, minted from 1892 to 1916, faces right, whereas Liberty’s profile on both five- and ten-dollar gold pieces faces left, making any gilded quarter look instantly peculiar and therefore suspicious. Second, the symbolic stars on the Barber Quarter are not in the same location as those on the nickel. Third, the motto “In God We Trust,” prominently displayed over Liberty’s head on the Barber Quarter, is absent from the obverse of five-dollar gold pieces. Moreover, the Standing Liberty Quarter, minted from 1916 to 1930, would not be a viable alternative to counterfeit because its obverse looks nothing like the obverse of either gold piece.

The easiest coin to gild and pass as authentic, then, was the Liberty Nickel as a five-dollar gold piece, and it was in fact commonly attempted, much in the manner that contemporary children plate pennies with mercury to give them a new-dime sheen.

After briefly considering leaving Joe, Missie May decides that she will endure Joe’s humiliations until he abandons her. “If she had not the substance of marriage she had the outside show” (96). Her thought reinforces what every character in the story believes – that the exterior and counterfeit can pass for the interior and genuine.

Some unspecified time later, Joe takes over Missie May’s job of chopping wood, declaring, “You ain’t got no business choppin’ wood, and you
know it . . . Ah ain’t blind. You makin’ feet for shoes”(96). When Missie May says that the baby is “gointer to be a boy chile and de very spit of you;” Joe, having seen real and fake coins, as well as true and phony wives, that look like spitting images of each other, cautiously says, “You reckon, Missie May?”(96).

Even the etymology of the phrase “spitting image,” originally “spirit and image,” emphasizes Hurston’s theme that, like coins, people and words are not always what they seem. John Lowe notes Hurston’s penchant for significant punning when he observes, “Appropriately, and ironically, [Missie May] bases her ‘reading’ of Slemmons on a glimpse she caught of him when she was purchasing a box of 1ye”(76).

By Missie May’s ambiguous reply, “Who else could it look lak?”(96) she seems to imply either that her attempted affair with Slemmons was never consummated or that Joe knows he had made love to her three months after he had run Slemmons from their bed and would be able, when she gives birth, to do the easy math for himself to discover that the baby could only be his.

Adding to the reader’s momentary confusion regarding paternity is the fact that “six months later Missie May took to bed” to have her baby (96). Joe’s mother’s statement further piques the reader’s suspicion: “You oughter be mighty proud cause he sho is de spittin’ image of yuh, son . . . . And you know Ah’m mighty proud too, son, cause Ah never thought well of you marriyin’ 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”(97). What needs to be accounted for, then, are three months, the first trimester, because if Joe made love to Missie May three months after the Slemmons affair and noticed her pregnancy three months later, then her delivery six months thereafter would make Slemmons’ paternity impossible.

During the unspecified length of time that passes between Joe’s making love to Missie May and his noticing her pregnancy, the narrator reports that Missie May “saw no more of the coin for some time” and that Joe’s “health kept poor, and he came home at least every ten days to be rubbed”(96). Also, the sun trails “its robes of weeks and days” before Joe comes home to find Missie May chopping wood (96). The emphasized passages suggest that the child is in fact the real McCoy, not a counterfeit, genuinely Joe’s. If the reader takes into consideration a fact given in the narrative, that Joe and Missie May renew their affection three months after the Slemmons affair, it is clear that Missie May’s baby is born a full year after Slemmons is run out of town.

The Saturday following the birth of his son, Joe grocery shops in Orlando, something he hasn’t done in over a year. When the white clerk greets him by saying, “Ain’t seen you in a long time,” Joe’s reply, “Nope, Ah ain’t been heah. Been round in spots and places,” indicates that he is still imitating Slemmons, the counterfeit Scoundrel whose deceptive facade caused his wife to stray (97). The reader might wonder how much Joe has learned from his experience if he continues to use the impostor Slemmons as his role model.

In their introductory essay to Hurston’s Complete Stories, Henry Louis Gates and Sieglind Lemke are more optimistic: “Due to the happy ending – the fact that their love could be retrieved and reactivated – the story teaches us about the importance of an emotional attachment over material wealth, about a justice that transcends grief, and about the power of reconciliation”(Hurston xix). Unfortunately, this sentimental interpretation isn’t borne out by the story’s subtext.

After Joe banteras with the clerk and exits, the clerk says to his next customer, “Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin’ all the time. Nothin’ worries ’em”(98). The passage serves to highlight the discouraging fact that neither interracial nor intraracial communication seems likely when, in T. S. Eliot’s words, there is “time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”

Nor, in the story’s closing scene, has Joe apparently learned much about the questionable use of money as an attractant or reward, for his approach home is signaled to Missie May by “the ring of singing metal on wood. Fifteen times”(98), just as before Slemmons’ interruption of Joe’s marital bliss, Joe had ritualistically hurted nine silver dollars through their front door “every Saturday”(87). After all, it was likely, or partly, Joe’s rewarding of his wife with silver that made her susceptible to the lure of Slemmons’ gold.

When Joe catches Slemmons with his wife, “Joe had both chance and time to kill the intruder in his helpless condition – half in and half out of his pants – but he was too weak to take action”(93). Through the haze of his emotional confusion, Joe hears “his wife sobbing and Slemmons pleading for his life. Offering to buy it with all that he had”(93). From that experience, Joe should have learned that one can buy neither love nor life, yet at story’s end he throws fifteen silver dollars to Missie May, not because he
has earned an unlikely raise of six dollars at the fertilizer plant but to competitively best and replace his rival’s fake fifteen dollars with fifteen real ones. Citing J. E. Cirlo’s *Dictionary of Symbols* to bolster their argument, Chinn and Dunn engage in a bit of numerological over-interpretation of the nine and fifteen dollars:

In the symbolism attached to numbers, multiples include the properties of their parts. Both nine and fifteen as multiples of three include “biological synthesis, childbirth and the solution of a conflict.” Nine is “the triplification of the triple[...]” the end-limit of the numerical series before its return to unity,” while five is associated with a people and the five senses, health and love, and spring, “signifying] the organic fullness of life as opposed to the rigidity of death.” In the symbolism of numbers, five and fifteen both are erotic. (786-87)

Less ingenious than the above interpretation, but more likely what Hurston had in mind, is the equation of the original nine silver dollars with a full-term pregnancy, thus linking Joe to productivity and virility. The six additional dollars at story’s end recall the crucial six months after Joe notices Missie May’s pregnancy. If she had delivered sooner, the baby might have been Slemmons’. Also, Joe’s association with the sun, the fertilizer plant, and the “soul food” he eats suggests his warm, fertile, substantial love, whereas Slemmons’ ownership of an ice-cream parlor aligns him with frigidity, transient love (lust), insubstantial nourishment, frivolity, and ultimately sterility.

When Joe shows the grocery clerk the gilded fifty-cent piece and the clerk asks what he is going to do with it, Joe replies, “Goiner buy my wife some good ole [mo]lasses kisses wid it” (98). The candy kisses are superficial, arguably counterfeit, substitutes for authentic kisses betokening a durable love, but it is the first part of the sentence that is more telling: “Goiner buy my wife” suggests that marriage often resembles a transaction involving an exchange of goods for services; in other words, holy matrimony can become a form of prostitution. Or, looked at in terms of the story’s major trope, prostitution is a counterfeit form of marriage. The story’s concluding paragraph rings a final irony in this fable about love, money, and deception when Missie May calls out to her husband and we discover for the first time that this poor man trying to imitate a rich man is named Joe Banks.

In this Depression-era tale about counterfeiting, even the characters’ names are like bogus coins. As Chinn and Dunn note, “Similarly anchored in history is the family name Banks, which normally evokes security, but here raises images of vulnerability and false security in light of massive bank failures after the stock market crash” (778). In fact, every major character is like a gilded coin: Banks is not rich, Slemmons is not slim, and Missie May may or may not be a “real wife.” Joe’s last name fits him only when he throws money into his house as if it were a piggy bank.

Some kinds of lying (fiction) and liars (fictionists) speak a higher truth. And what is fiction but an imitation (counterfeit) of life? In their anthropological approach, Chinn and Dunn state, “Hurston performs on paper, much as the storytellers she knew in Eatonville performed on the front porch of the store, and she believed in mimicry, as opposed to imitation, as an art form. Thus, putting folklore on paper was an extension of her own values” (782). In “The Gilded Six-Bits,” mimesis becomes metafiction in that all of the imitations ultimately reveal something about the nature of fiction and fictionists.

A stereotype is another type of counterfeit. Commenting on the story’s conclusion, Chinn and Dunn note the utility of stereotypes:

In a classic example of racial deception that echoes slavery survival strategies, Joe lies to the white storekeeper when asked how he got the gold-plated half dollar. Acknowledging that he took it “[i]t even a stray nigger,” Joe refuses to admit that he too had been fooled by Slemmons, pretending instead to have seen through the city-slicker’s act from the beginning. Joe’s deception leads the clerk to believe that the “darkies” simply spend their lives “[l]aughin’ all the time. Nothin’ worries ’em.” Joe reveals nothing of the complexity of his real life, his struggle with Missie May, or his own culpability in the incident with Slemmons. In doing so, he protects himself from any advice or judgment that the store clerk may have been inclined to offer and simply lets the clerk’s stereotypical image stand. (789-90)

It is by now a platitude to say that if art often imitates life, life sometimes imitates art. Chinn and Dunn conclude their article by citing Hemenway’s exposure of Hurston as a plagiarist. They seek Hurston’s partial redemption by pointing out that she often blurred “the lines between
fact and fiction, imitation and mimicry”(790), but fail to note the ultimate, cruel irony – that plagiarism is simply another type of counterfeiting.

Haunting the background of “The Gilded Six-Bits” are numerous references to black and white, with their corresponding implications of marginality and “passing,” yet another kind of counterfeiting. The house is “whitewashed,” the porch “scrubbed white,” and Sleemmons’ corpulence makes him “look lak a rich white man”(86, 86, 89). The veneer of white throughout the story evokes the caution in Matthew 23:27 to beware of “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.“ Further, when Joe says, “He got de finest clothes Ah ever seen on a colored man’s back”(89, emphasis added), the privileging of white over black is reinforced.

Moreover, “white womens in Chicago give ’im all dat gold money”(90). The narrator’s description of Missie May’s “dark-brown skin”(86) further reminds us that Sleemmons is just the kind of man who, were his skin light enough, would “pass” for white in much the same way that he tries to “pass” silver pocket change as gold bullion.

“The Gilded Six-Bits” reads like a parable, partly because of Hurston’s refrain-like personifications of Time and the Sun as “the impersonal old man”(95). Every confidence man needs a gull, and Missie May mocks the gullibility of her husband and his friends when she says, “Dat stray nigger jes’ tell y’all anything and y’all b’lieve it“ (90). One of the things Sleemmons teaches the local men is the slang term “forty” (or “forte”), meaning the cream of the crop, perfection, the acme of its kind. Moreover, when Sleemmons tells Joe, “Dat wife of yours is jes’ thirty-eight and two,” he demonstrates the flexibility and ambiguity of language, which we can make mean whatever we want and which we can use to deceive. Even unintentionally, people often say more than they know or mean, as when Missie May, rebutting Joe’s claim that no one would lose gold money around their house, unwittingly says, “You don’t know what been lost ’round heah” (91), the irony being that her innocence and faithfulness have already been lost, in principle if not yet in fact. Thus, the numerous facades in the story – of house, people, money, and language – gather momentum as the plot thickens so that the reader, by the end of “The Gilded Six-Bits,” had better get the message: in all matters regarding rich and poor, black and white, male and female, Caveat emptor. Indeed, Caveat lector.

Notes

1. References to “The Gilded Six-Bits” will appear parenthetically in the text.

Works Cited

Chinn, Nancy, and Elizabeth E. Dunn. “‘The Ring of Singing Metal on Wood’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Artistry in ‘The Gilded Six-Bits.’” Mississippi Quarterly 49.4 (Fall 1996): 775-790


