

The pursuit of happiness and the veil



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

W. E. B. DuBois and Zora Neal Hurston, undoubtedly, had two distinct ways of writing, one through an analytical form of storytelling with interwoven fragments of moralistic and ethical themes and one through short fiction that exemplified the distinctiveness of black culture and dialects. Though these styles are diverse, they both harkened on the condition of blackness and each presented poignant narratives that existed to both study and challenge the position of black people as a whole. *The Gilded Six-Bits* by Zora Neal Hurston and *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. DuBois both put black culture and black intellectualism into the conversation surrounding political and socioeconomic inequalities. Additionally, these works forced blacks and whites alike to assess and reevaluate ideas surrounding identity and what it means to take ownership of one's own culture and exist in contentment. Joe, Otis T. Slemmons, and the W. E. B. DuBois' son all represent the idea that whiteness, through a black cultural lens, is something one puts on and despite attempts to escape *The Veil* there is an ever present barrier that prevents blacks from reaching the illusion of happiness.

The transformation from contentedness to materialistic desire for wealth and the ideal of happiness nearly ruins Joe and Missie May's marriage. It is the need for stability and lineage that keeps them together in the end. The opening lines of the narrative creates a sense of a community united by its outlook towards growth. Hurston writes, " 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" (1033). Joe and Missie May appear happy when they play around and perform their game, but it is the underlying sinful desires that creep through despite their attempted separation from the world

around them. Missie May scrubs her dark skin with white soap in bathes and galvanized tub. When Joe enters the house he rids himself of the dirty fertilizer. There is the distinct undertone of uncleanliness that lurks just below the surface just out of the peripheral of the happily married couple that does not truly come to the surface until Otis steps into the picture. Just before Joe walks in on Missie May and Otis' sexual encounter he contemplates his future with Missie May, he analyzes, " creation obsessed him...a little boy child would be about right" (1037). Like many previous authors, including DuBois, there is an incomprehensible desire for strong paternal lineage; this desire may derive from the separation of families during slavery or a wide range of ancestral bonds, but Joe seems to buy into this philosophy. Similar to how his community depends on the G and G Fertilizer works, Joe puts all his faith into the stability that he thinks he has with his wife and the certainty of an equally stable future.

Despite Joe's optimistic viewpoint, it is evident that his desire for happiness is different from Missie May's desire for the same thing. Joe explains after he comes back from work, " You ain't hongry, sugar...youse jes' a little empty. Ah could eat up camp meetin', back off ' ssociation, and drink Jurdan dry" (1034). Joe likens his hunger to a spiritual desire, he is so hungry he could fill himself with the Jordan River, which has distinctly religious connotations. Joe tells Missie May that she is just empty which means it is necessary to fill herself up but not explicitly in a spiritual manner. Missie May's emptiness causes her to look for fulfillment in other ways, through her sexual encounter with Otis and her envy for the gilded six-bits. After the brief affair Missie May has with Otis she believes her marriage is over, she even debates leaving Joe

forever, but she can't bring herself to leave. Joe chastises, " Missie May, you cry too much. Don't look back lak Lot's wife and turn to salt" (1039). Missie May, similarly to Lot's wife, struggled with her faith in the future. Her indiscretion and adultery in the past held her hidden desires and view of happiness though, as she would come to find out, she desired nothing but a masquerade. Otis Slemmons introduces something into the lives of Missie May and Joe, and it's the notion of economic inferiority and material desire and it, regardless of their decision to stay together, destroys their marriage.

Otis T. Slemmons represents, like the snake in the Christian creation myth, the introduction of sin, knowledge, and desire into the lives of Joe and Missie May. Otis' clothes, girth, and money causes the couple to liken him with robber barons such as Rockefeller and Henry Ford. Without his presence, Joe and Missie May would not have become aware of the economic disparity within the black community. Previously their view on wealth, power, and the performance of masculine superiority only existed as something that was distinctly white and in a far off community. Joe praises, " He got de finest clothes Ah ever seen on a colored man's back" (1035). The focus on clothes in relation to how Otis presents his material wealth, exemplifies two notions; that economic superiority is solely represented through material ownership and whiteness, from Joe and Missie May's point of view, is something one puts on. Once Otis infiltrates their home, he has the power to ruin them, before he was only outside of the house. Missie May and Joe only travel to the ice cream parlor to see Otis. The moment Joe and Missie May begin to talk about Otis, desire and jealousy enter their lives and it causes them both to make uncharacteristically flawed choices. Missie May desires the " wealth"

that Otis possesses, thinking that it will make her happy. Joe, understanding that he cannot compete with Otis' economic status, desires to possess women like Otis does. Joe covets, " Sho wish it wuz mine. And whut make it so cool, he got money ' cumulated. And womens give it all to ' im" (1035). There is an immediate gendered gap between the desires of Joe and Missie May, women as a whole become possessions that drive and empower men. The commodification of Missie May and the expression of ownership and power through the possession of the six-bits presents the notion that Missie May's sexuality becomes something that is traded between the men. By the end of the narrative, Joe tosses fifteen coins on the porch rather than nine, signifying that the desire for economic prosperity rules their marriage and they cannot rid themselves of the sinful desires that Otis introduced into their lives. They are no longer free in their expression of love but rather oppressed by outside forces. The couple can never obtain the contentment that they had or the contentment that they wanted because their present actions limit their opportunities for serenity.

W. E. B. DuBois' unnamed son tragically dies before he is able to obtain an identity. By dying he escapes the tragedy of The Veil, or the systematic oppression that entraps blacks into a state of inequalities and internalized racism. DuBois describes, " He knew no color-line, poor dear,-and the Veil, though it shadowed him, had not darkened half his sun" (741). The baby is innocent and he is not yet black nor white. The Veil is a mere shadow in his world, he has hope and the ability to escape. Blackness was created as an opposition to white, without this dichotomy, whites could not retain their own identity as blackness interferes with the possession of the American identity.

The unnamed boy, if he had lived, could take ownership of his identity as a black man and as an American. The Veil, as DuBois defines, limits blacks in their pursuit of a better life because they have little to no opportunity of escaping it. W. E. B. DuBois asserts, “ The price of culture is a Lie” (DuBois, 738). Or in other words, in order to take ownership of one’s identity, and of one’s culture, it is imperative that as a collective whole black people have to forget; not forgive. As DuBois argues and demonstrates through the tragic death of his son, this boy was able to live outside of The Veil, but his only true freedom came through death. As a theorist and analyst, the conclusion that death is the only way out is not a viable result, so DuBois challenges black people to seek refuge in their future in order to own their identities and create their own happiness. In relation to Missie May and Joe, the child was innocent and unadulterated by the desires of the world, he did not desire prosperity because he had no concept of what prosperity entailed within the realm of his existence.

What Zora Neal Huston and W. E. B. DuBois present is an insight into the turmoil of the black identity as it relates to overall contentment in life. Most analytics focus primarily on political or social disparities between blacks and whites and how those factors limit economic disparities between the two communities. The Gilded Six-Bits alters that narrative, as it focuses on how economics reshapes sociopolitical as well as moral ideology within the black community that resides in Eatonville and more specifically Joe and Missie May’s lives. W. E. B. DuBois does not specifically comment on happiness as a tangible goal among blacks, but he does force readers to note the freedom that exists just outside of The Veil. DuBois’ son does not have the

opportunity to pursue his own happiness, to cultivate his own community, or to define his own identity but he does have the luxury of innocence and the void of a stereotyped existence. Despite DuBois' theorizing and Hurston's narrative voice, both authors suggest that happiness can exist within the black community if they resist the temptations of materialism and if they can be empowered on their own without relying on oppositional identities to define themselves. Both these works delve into notions of Pan-African (American)ism, as *The Gilded Six-Bits* takes place in Eatonville and DuBois' work attempts to holistically study and describe the condition of black Americans. Through this Pan-African-Americanism these writers dictate how one can foresee the strength of the black community despite the obtrusive nature of white American ideology seeping in. Happiness is not something that W. E. B. DuBois suggests is the end goal for African Americans, his goals are self-sustainability, power through identity, and most importantly freedom. Ultimately freedom is happiness, the simplistic nature of contentedness and desire for familial growth is the most innocent and prosperous form of happiness that there ever can be in DuBois' ideal world and in Joe and Missie May's world as well just before Otis, and sin, entered into their life.

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