

Fiction as Ethnography: Impact of Zora Neale Hurston's Academic Training on Her Creative Work

Soonha Abro

MPhil Candidate, Department of English, Iqra University, Gulshan Campus, Karachi, Pakistan

soonha.g27544@iqra.edu.pk | ORCID: 0009-0006-6957-7854

Abstract

This paper explores how Zora Neale Hurston's training as an ethnographer impacted her creative work as a fiction writer. It achieves its stated objective by first theorizing upon the topic by juxtaposing Hurston's ethnographic career and research work with those of two women ethnographers, Cuba's Lydia Cabrera and Poland's Anzia Yezierska, to illustrate how Hurston utilized her academic training and inside knowledge of her community to develop special methodologies uniquely designed to address her specific challenges in conducting ethnographic research on Black American minority culture. Next, the paper theorizes Hurston's use of various ethnographic details, such as religious imagery derived from local spiritual and cultural practices, as well as feminist Biblical revisionism. Two short stories by Hurston, "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," are thoroughly analyzed for their aspects of material culture (specifically religious symbolism and money), representation of women's economic empowerment, and depiction of marriage. The paper concludes that Hurston's earliest work was more likely to have benefited from her recollections and experiences of her native Black American culture as compared to her later work, which included richer ethnographic details.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, fiction as ethnography, black women's writing, feminist literature, American South

The relationship between fiction and ethnography has been studied extensively previously, with conclusions that differ widely between generations of scholars and across disciplines. The former is naturally fictitious, and yet a fictional text is nearly always rooted in reality, whereas the latter is an academic subfield that falls within the ambit of anthropology. Any ethnographer would be required to negotiate certain sets of methodological tools and guidelines to produce an ethnographic text that can be considered as suitably valid research. Essentially, the only, and probably the most important, similarity between a fictional and an ethnographic text is that they are both based on narrative. Both texts are effectively stories, each with its own separate methodologies and narrative techniques, as

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



well as unique creative approaches and practices. Zora Neale Hurston, an author and ethnographer, for instance, had to develop a separate methodology for her work because the existing ethnographic methods at the time adversely affected her fieldwork (Jirousek 20-21). Overlaps are, however, also possible between these two forms of narrative media. For example, an entire fiction text could be created from the findings of ethnographic or other academic fieldwork, as reflected in Hurston's short story, "Sweat."

This paper postulates that Hurston's training as an ethnographer had a definite and profound impact on her creative work, greatly enhancing her observational skills. It demonstrates how Hurston's deep insight into the rural African-American community reveals her in-depth knowledge of her community and profession. The paper also explores the thematic relevance of some short stories by Hurston for their literary and ethnographic merit and sociopolitical importance. The first section presents a theoretical overview of selected scholarly material that enhances our comprehension of the wide range of themes and issues that come into play in both Hurston's ethnographic research and in her creative work. Next, the paper provides a literary analysis of two of Hurston's short stories, "Sweat" (first published in 1926) and "The Gilded Six-Bits" (first published in 1933). It addresses and analyzes some important ethnographic details, such as elements of material culture, language, as well as the themes of marriage and women's economic independence, in the following sections.

This section addresses two main objectives. First, it provides an insight into Hurston's background and training as an ethnographer, and attempts to comprehend how it influenced her fiction. Second, it offers a thematic understanding of her short stories, particularly in terms of the use of language and religious symbolism in her fiction. It also analyzes the representation of heterosexual conjugal relations, the problem of domestic abuse within the community, and women's empowerment with a particular focus on Black women's economic independence. Two of the secondary texts, by Lynda Hoffman-Jeep and Lori Jirousek, are comparative pieces juxtaposing Hurston's work with those of other women ethnographers. As a result, there are several overlapping areas in both articles. However, these articles were selected for their analyses of Hurston's ethnographic research work because they help us to understand and interpret the ethnographic details in her fiction. Articles by Cheryl A. Wall, Catherine Carter, and Tammy Jenkins analyze various thematic aspects of Hurston's fiction and illustrate how she drew upon her skills as an ethnographer, the data she collected as part of her ethnographic research, the kind of narrative strategies she employed while putting together her collected data, and how she used all of it to embellish her stories.

In her 2005 essay, "Creating Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia Cabrera," Lynda Hoffman-Jeep analyzes Hurston's role as a "native ethnographer" who "recreate[d]" in writing a culture she had experienced firsthand, and invigorates it with certain creative strategies as part of her experimental response to the scholarly traditions of ethnography (337). She juxtaposes Hurston's origins and her work on Black American folklore with the work of Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera on Afro-Cuban folklore. The first section outlines Hurston's educational career to illustrate how she began researching Black American minority culture, although she was a native of the said culture. Hoffman-Jeep also writes about how Hurston's experiences of studying in an entirely white academic environment at Barnard College helped to provide her with a certain emotional distance that enabled her to view her connection with the Black American minority culture objectively when and as required. However, Hurston simultaneously dealt with the implications of being a Black person studying in a predominantly white university and with her hyperawareness of her different cultural identity. In doing so, Hoffman-Jeep addresses the importance of the "paradoxical and yet fundamental role" played by the physical and emotional distances in "facilitating insight and recognition, while simultaneously promoting a scholar's self-construction" (337). She then analyzes Hurston's use of the spyglass metaphor, which is most interesting and is closely connected to her scholarly self, because it shows that she recognizes that her investigations are covert, and therefore involve numerous maneuvers that are necessary for Hurston's field research. In the second section, Hoffman-Jeep delves into an analysis of the various conceptual problems that occur within the standard methodology of native ethnography. Although it might be a good idea to send a native anthropologist or ethnographer, well-trained in their discipline's modes of collecting data, to gather field work data on a particular group, such as the Black American minority culture in Eatonville, US, the fact that many such native anthropologists/ethnographers possess what is known as the "multiple planes of identification" (qtd. in Hoffman-Jeep 345) can have implications for the authenticity of the finished product of that research. However, both Hurston and Cabrera were able to successfully negotiate their so-called multiple planes of identification in their undertakings of their respective collections of folktales, resulting in what could be considered a type of feminist experimental ethnography.

Similarly, Lori Jirousek juxtaposes Hurston with a Polish ethnographer, Anzia Yezierska, in her essay, "Ethnics and Ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska." However, she provides a more detailed insight into their struggles with the traditional practice of participant observation, and their complex relationships with their mentors, Franz Boas and John Dewey,

respectively. Jirousek also notes their struggles faced by Hurston and Yeziarska in gaining the acceptance and trust of their informants, and asserts, like Hoffman-Jeep, that both Hurston and Yeziarska had to negotiate their way through the traditional ethnographical methodologies. Hurston was particularly successful in eventually gaining her informants' trust by personally engaging with them. When writing *Mules and Men*, she becomes an almost-character in the text instead of maintaining the conventional passivity and detachment of an ethnographer. Jirousek conjectures that by authoring an "ethnographic fiction" (qtd. in Jirousek 22) that will eventually subvert the "Boasian standards of objectivity and accuracy," Hurston injects subjectivity into her work by mixing the genres of pure narrative and social science research to gain greater accuracy. She believes that an accurate ethnographic text has no pretense of objectivity, but instead it assumes its form from the perspectives and interests of the informants' community. Moreover, an ethnographic text would be more accurate if it directly incorporates the informants' participation, while keeping the entire process transparent. Having achieved this, Hurston was able to gain the acceptance and confidence of the community and thus greater access to folklore material to share with the readers. The format of her text mirrors this "mutual personal exchange," which results in the emergence of a plot and characters (Jirousek 22), thus resembling a fiction text. The article, then, discusses Yeziarska's experiences while conducting her ethnographic research, which produced very different results compared to Hurston's. Jirousek concludes by stating that Hurston, along with Yeziarska, inaugurated their creative writing careers in significant ways through their ethnographic fieldwork and mentors. They produced exceptional "cross-genre texts" that encapsulated "ethnic informant voices" in a remarkable manner, while also functioning as "models of sensitive and personal cultural documentation for future writers of fiction and ethnography" (Jirousek 30).

Cheryl A. Wall's 1989 essay, "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment," analyzes how the narrative strategies used by Hurston in *Mules and Men* depict a "successful quest" (Wall 661) for women's empowerment. She provides an immensely detailed insight into Hurston's structuring and flow of the narrative, which is introduced by a narrator named Zora, and assimilates the exact "structural patterns of the folk tales" (Wall 666) through her in-depth discussion. The interludes between the folk tales are peppered with what Wall terms as the "between-story conversation[s]," while "directional markers" are used to signal the exact points of transition between the tales, the interludes, and the sections of the book. This enhances the vividness of her narrative of Black American folklore. Moreover, the real-life character of Big Sweet, with whom Hurston spent a lot of time during her fieldwork, appears to be rather an important

symbol of women's empowerment. There are, of course, other women that Hurston's narrator-persona interacts with during her fieldwork, but Big Sweet receives greater attention from Wall in her analysis. Wall's detailed analysis of *Mules and Men* also establishes clear connections between Hurston's collected data from her ethnographical fieldwork and her fiction, especially her novels like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, and by implication, with her short stories as well; for example, the symbol of the porch frequently crops up in her fiction, such as in one of her earlier short stories, "Sweat."

Catherine Carter analyzes the radical conservatism and revisionist Biblical symbolism in Hurston's short story, "Sweat," in her essay, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus." According to her, Hurston rewrites the Biblical story of Genesis to associate men instead of women with the original sin, both as its cause and the result of the fall. She also attributes Christ-like values like meekness, forgiveness, and hard work to Delia Jones, a Black woman, in anticipation of the eventual realization by the white Western world that historical Jesus Christ was unlikely to be "white." Carter also explores how the snake and its role in the story depict it as a divine figure, while the whip, which initially resembles the snake in its body and movement, eventually develops into a phallic symbol that connotes evil, devilish tendencies. Discussing heterosexual relationships in the context of the story, she argues that Sykes and Delia's conjugal relationship echoes the master-slave relationship from the slavery era. This master-slave connection, in her opinion, is symbolized by the whip that Sykes uses to beat Delia. However, Carter finds that the story relays "a discouraging message" for domestic violence survivors despite its rich revisionism and its overall "condemnation for the many instances of abuses of power and love" (617). Nevertheless, she agrees in her conclusion that the lack of options for Delia resulted directly from the then-contemporary, real-life situations where women did have limited options when faced with domestic abuse.

Tammy Jenkins undertakes a more in-depth exploration of African religious symbols and lore in Hurston's "Sweat," juxtaposing it with her novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. She first describes both New Orleans Vodou and the Hoodoo, which initially started in the Mississippi Delta and was then transported to Haiti. Both of them are "eclectic practices" that are derived from not only the old African religions, but also from the various branches of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition of the New World. They draw upon language, culture, lore, and various other cultural elements from their surroundings to reinvent the old African religious practices. This echoes Hurston's experiences with these religio-cultural practices that she encountered during her ethnographic fieldwork and forms an entire section in her ethnographic text, *Mules and Men*. She, then,

moves on to a detailed discussion on how the Vodou and Hoodoo practices are alluded to in “Sweat.” Just like Carter drew upon Biblical connotations to examine the symbolism of the snake and the chinaberry tree, Jenkins draws upon specific figures and symbols from the Vodou and Hoodoo practices to the same effect. She also interprets Hurston’s use of words depicting color to establish a connection between the African spiritual practices, Vodou, and Hoodoo. Most important, however, is the fact mentioned by Jenkins that “Sweat” was written in 1926 and was one of Hurston’s earliest writings. She had not yet embarked on her ethnographic fieldwork, during which she visited New Orleans and Haiti. As a result, she incorporates very few “elements from African-derived religious practices” (Jenkins 222) in “Sweat.”

The first two essays by Hoffman-Jeep and Jirousek, respectively, provide detailed and insightful overviews of Hurston’s ethnographic research work and methodology. Despite some overlapping areas of discussion, their overall focus and conclusions are not identical. These are followed by an outline of some important points from Wall’s in-depth analysis of Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, which reflects upon her use of narrative methods in the context of female empowerment. The essays by Carter and Jenkins offer contrasting, yet fascinating perspectives on the religious imagery in “Sweat” and, therefore, form an important part of the next section of the paper, which explores two of Hurston’s short stories: one of her earliest, “Sweat” (1926), and one of her later works, “The Gilded Six-Bits” (1933), focusing on material culture (religion, religious symbolism, and money), the representation of women’s economic empowerment, and the depiction of conjugal relationships.

Material culture refers to any tangible features of culture that cannot disintegrate easily, in case humans perish. These include objects such as utensils, weapons, tools, art, ornaments, written documents, religious artifacts, money, and clothing. Interestingly, both “Sweat” and “The Gilded Six-Bits” utilize certain aspects of material culture more symbolically; specifically, these stories depict the religious symbolism of material objects and the significance of money. Regarding the former, it must be noted that, conceptually, religious symbolism is deeply intertwined with material culture as they coalesce into assigning a symbolic, religious significance to tactile objects that have no prior symbolic significance attached to them. Once this special significance has been ascribed to these physical objects, only then do they acquire meaning as significant religious artifacts of a spiritual material culture.

Although “Sweat” was written before Hurston undertook her ethnographic research project, the story is nevertheless chock-full of rich and varied religious symbolism derived simultaneously from both Biblical and African religious

practices. It is possible that Hurston drew upon her native knowledge and experiences of Black American religious practices, with the Christian religious tradition as its central focus, when she wrote the story. This is evident through its depiction of Delia as a Christ figure and the use and subversion of various Biblical imagery, symbols, and motifs. However, some scholars observe that the same imagery, symbols, and motifs are derived from old African religious practices, such as Hoodoo and Vodou. On the other hand, money plays a significant role both as a motif and a vital part of the story's plot in "The Gilded Six-Bits."

At the beginning of the first story, Hurston describes Sykes' whip as a "long, round, limp and black" object, which "slithers to the floor" ("Sweat" 73), suggesting the whip's resemblance to a snake's body shape and style of movement. At this point in the story, Sykes' whip functions as a simple material object that has not yet been ascribed any overt religious symbolism. However, the specificity of its description foreshadows the introduction of the real, live snake as a character, central to the story's plot, a few pages later. This whip incident also establishes Delia's phobia of snakes, as well as reveals Sykes' tendency to exploit her fear for his amusement, exposes his scorn towards her, and displays how he attempts to assert his dominance over her (Jenkins 219). Thus, it provides an insight into the abusive conjugal relationship between Delia and Sykes, the two main characters, and also successfully establishes the chain of religious symbolism that plays such a crucial role in the story. According to Carter, the whip packs various connotations, especially of violence, from gendered, historical, and religious perspectives. The whip, functioning as a phallic symbol, denotes "violent male sexuality" and represents, by extension, the domestic violence that Sykes inflicts on his wife, Delia. Historically, the whip represents the violence connected to the slavery of both the Black Americans and the Hebrews in Egypt, a religious tale that has heavily influenced African American Christian traditions. The historical and religious relevance of the whip is interesting because it symbolizes the master-slave relationship by situating Sykes in the role of a potential master and Delia in the role of a slave (Carter 607). Here, the whip's religious symbolism is limited entirely to Abrahamic religions, specifically Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, Jenkins also makes a similar argument that Sykes's use of the whip to threaten Delia is reminiscent of its similar use by the slave owners to evoke fear in their slaves and guarantee their obedience. However, the crux of her argument is the opposite of Carter's, whose argument focuses more on the Abrahamic religious symbolism for her analysis of the whip. Jenkins, on the other hand, claims that by using the whip to frighten Delia, Sykes activates a series of events that allow her to call upon the spirit of Ogun, who is the god of iron in the Vodou pantheon (219), exhibited as she grabbed "the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose" ("Sweat" 75). By assuming this defensive position and

holding a metal object, Delia begins her journey towards an initiation into the Vodou rituals and practices (Jenkins 219). This is an interesting point because one may also read Delia's defensive pose from a gendered point of view, in which one witnesses a woman finally standing up and retaliating against her abusive husband who frequently assaults her most brutally. This gendered reading could also be one's very first impression of the short story. Similarly, in the scene where one of the villagers asks Sykes how he caught the snake, he cockily replies that he is a "snake charmer" ("Sweat" 81). Jenkins also reads this as "a reference to Sykes possibly being a devotee of Damballah, the serpent god of Haitian Vodou, and Li Grande Zombi, the snake god of New Orleans Hoodoo" (219). It should be noted that both Damballah and Li Grande Zombi are immensely powerful spiritual entities in their respective pantheons, are symbols of wisdom, peace, and purity, as well as the creators of the universe and sources of life force. Hence, they carry chiefly positive connotations. Although Jenkins' reading is rather intriguing and definitely merits further study for acquiring a better understanding of the topic, it still renders Sykes, most undeservedly, into an almost god-like, divine figure who carries great wisdom and spiritual power. Jenkins' argument is, thus, in sharp contrast with that of Carter's, who perceives the snake to signify Delia's deliverance from her husband's brutality, an image that essentially subverts the symbol of the Biblical serpent who led Eve, the first woman, astray and caused her to commit the original sin. Instead, the snake is now the "agent of divine justice" (Carter 613). Jenkins also explores the imagery evoked by the "love feast" that Delia attends at the church in the story's climax. This event is full of warmth, because of which she becomes "full of spirit" ("Sweat" 82), hinting that while participating in a Vodou or Hoodoo ceremony, she became "spiritually possessed by one of the Iwas" (Jenkins 219). Here, Jenkins's exploration of the imagery of the love feast echoes the earlier arguments made by her, as well as Carter, that position Delia as the source of resistance of a woman against patriarchy, the oppressed slave against the oppressive master, the tyrannized subject against a tyrannical ruler, if we also consider the significance of the story's Biblical connotations. Therefore, one postulates that essentially, the central theme of resistance against abuse and oppression underscores all the historical and religious symbolism of material objects, such as the infamous whip, in the story.

Both Carter and Jenkins concur that Delia symbolizes, or resembles, the Christ figure, or even a prophetic figure, whether examined through the lens of the Judeo-Christian tradition or the old African religious traditions, though the latter connects her to first being an initiate, then becoming an experienced practitioner of Hoodoo and Vodou. Hurston portrays her as an extremely hardworking woman who is deeply respected by all the villagers. Dedication

to one's work is considered quite a Christian value and thus serves the purpose well within the story. But what evokes the image of the Christ figure is Delia's "habitual meekness" ("Sweat" 75), her absolute calmness, and "triumphant indifference to all that [Sykes] was or did" ("Sweat" 76). However, she also displays more human qualities like genuine anger, resistance against oppression, and assertiveness. One perceives Delia's calm indifference as more of a trauma response to the domestic violence and abuse she suffers regularly; one does not always have the physical, mental, or emotional capacity to continue fighting and arguing pointlessly in such domestic situations. Hurston strikes a good balance between Delia's calm indifference, her assertiveness, and self-assuredness, as well as her acts of resistance in the story. This is what the generic, non-religious, and non-Christian reader perceives more readily than her Christ-figure qualities.

Another interesting aspect of material culture in "Sweat" is the use of color words to denote specific material objects central to the story, which Jenkins discusses in her article, making connections between the African spiritual practices and those of Vodou and Hoodoo. Colors like red and white feature extensively throughout the story and are used to refer to tangible objects or liquids. For example, the color red signifies Delia's steadily increasing rage when she angrily stares at the snake and does not run away like she did previously. Hurston describes her rage as "a red fury that grew bloodier" with every second that passed ("Sweat" 81). Jenkins connects this symbolism of the color red and Delia's act with her initiation ceremony, where the color red is characterized by Petro Iwas (219). The color red also denotes the color of blood, a material object in liquid form, which is rather significant in the story for its instances and open threats of domestic violence, as well as Sykes' eventual death by snakebite. At the beginning of the story, Delia is sorting the whites from the colored laundry and piling them separately. Jenkins reads this as a symbol of Delia's initiation "as a devotee in service to the Iwas." Similarly, Sykes' trampling and soiling the white-colored clothes ("Sweat" 74) signifies his status as the uninitiated (Jenkins 220).

The motif of money, another more tangible aspect of material culture, plays an important role in Hurston's later short story "The Gilded Six-Bits," functioning as a literary device that moves the plot forward. Although money also serves as a source of conjugal bonding between the protagonists, that aspect will be addressed in the later sections of this paper. Here, the focus lies mainly on how the motif of money functions as a symbol of greed, as well as of wrath, which are all Biblical sins. Missie and Joe are happily married, and though they are not very rich, they have a rather satisfying conjugal life. Though Joe is in awe of Slemmons' quality dressing, he does not express any desire to emulate him. But Missie shows some implicit interest in Slemmons' apparent wealth,

thus expressing the sin of greed. The first instance of this occurs after they visit Slemmons' ice cream parlor, where Missie insinuates that maybe one day they "might find some" gold while "goin' along the de road" ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 91). On one level, this is an abstract possibility, or a piece of common knowledge that might happen someday. However, in the story, one knows that this is where Missie may have planned her next steps. When her betrayal is revealed, Joe hides the gold coin in his trouser pockets to torture Missie passively in revenge, thus giving in to the sin of wrath ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 95).

While depicting Delia as a hardworking washerwoman in "Sweat," Hurston demonstrates how economic independence strengthens a woman and enables her to achieve the power and confidence to resist her abuser, as well as regain her freedom from abuse, violence, and oppression. This is illustrated in the following passage:

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

"What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it." ("Sweat" 75)

Here, Hurston establishes sweat as a motif to symbolize Delia's struggle to feed herself and take care of the household expenditures. She does so by repeating the word "sweat" eight times in this short passage to emphasize its symbolism. Delia's economic struggle began in the early days of her marriage to Sykes. As the men on the store porch corroborate, she would have starved to death if she had not commenced working as a washerwoman ("Sweat" 77). The above passage also shows that Delia is at a stage where she can now successfully assert her true position as the sole breadwinner of the household, and by extension, her economic independence. Not only does she possess confident self-awareness regarding her position, but she has also won the respect of her fellow villagers, both men and women, as illustrated in the porch scene ("Sweat" 76-77). Even Sykes is aware of it and reacts by constantly degrading Delia, and makes ludicrous, but simultaneously abusive, violent, and rather dangerous, attempts to assuage his bruised ego, which makes him an even more unsympathetic character than he already is ("Sweat" 73-76).

Though marriage is a central theme in both "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," the stories present vastly contrasting representations of it. "Sweat" illustrates an

abusive and toxic marriage between Delia and Sykes, which ends with the latter's sudden death. Alternately, "The Gilded Six-Bits" highlights a happy, loving marriage between Missie and Joe that experiences a temporary rough patch as a result of Missie's greed for money.

Delia and Sykes have been unhappily married for fifteen long years. Their marriage has now soured into an abusive and physically violent relationship that has left large amounts of "debris that clutter[s] their matrimonial trail" ("Sweat" 75). The true extent of their conjugal state is expressed in the passage that follows the iron skillet scene and Sykes' subsequent exit from the house. Delia lies in bed and reminisces about their marriage and thinks about how she was the one who "brought love to the union and [Sykes] brought a longing after the flesh," hinting at his past adulterous behavior. In the same passage, the reader also discovers that the domestic violence began within two months of their wedding, a very short time indeed ("Sweat" 75). Sykes is also abusive in other ways and has been beating Delia up for nearly as long as they have been married. He leaves no stone unturned in degrading her at every chance he gets, and also openly engages in adultery, parading his mistress through their village for everyone to see. Nevertheless, Delia remains patient and avoids confronting him about his relationship with Bertha, as well as avoiding her fellow villagers to remain "blind and deaf" ("Sweat" 79) towards her husband's infidelity. On one level, Delia's patience, silence, and lack of confrontation as an act of willful ignorance appear to encourage the interpretation that she is a Christ-like figure, as discussed above. But on another deeper level, one might also interpret her patience, silence, and lack of confrontation as a trauma response to the betrayal by her abusive husband, who blatantly carries on with his adulterous activities in public. Their conjugal relationship contains echoes of the slavery era's master-slave relationship, which is symbolized by the whip that Sykes uses to beat Delia in the story (Carter 607), as discussed above. At various times during the story, one may wonder why Hurston does not allow Delia to throw him out of her house, an act that would effectively end her conjugal relations with Sykes in the eyes of the entire village. Carter also raises this question and firmly believes that "Sweat" conveys a "discouraging message" for domestic violence survivors (617). This is a valid argument because Delia does possess the material means to take the practical step to separate from Sykes. One may even conclude that such an ending to Delia's story reveals Hurston's awareness as an insider, if not a fully trained ethnographer, that it was not entirely socially acceptable for a woman, even if she were financially stable, to separate from her husband, no matter how abusive and violent he may be towards her. This can only be explained by the influence of the social factors in taking such a decision, like having nowhere to seek refuge and support, and experiencing social ostracism, which were

important factors in 1920s America, and continue to be so today. Thus, it may be concluded that Hurston chose to end the story in a truthful manner that suited the actual social conditions of the community she was a part of.

On the other hand, the nature of conjugal relations in “The Gilded Six-Bits” is vastly different. Missie and Joe share a happy, contented conjugal relationship, which is reflected in the aura of their house and garden (86). The story quickly establishes their easy camaraderie, as well as mutual love and understanding, by depicting their Saturday routine, where Joe drops nine silver dollars on their porch and Missie pretends to be annoyed and chases after him. The chase culminates on their kitchen floor in a “furious mass of male and female energy” (“The Gilded Six-Bits” 87), a rough-and-tough cuddling session, the tone of their conversation suggesting that they are not only husband and wife, but also friends, as well as passionate lovers. Missie rummages through Joe’s pockets to extricate the little presents he has brought for her. There is also a slight hint of violence and rough sexual behavior on Missie’s part here, as can be perceived from Joe’s shouts and her attempts to be forceful. This may be considered as a foreshadowing of Missie’s betrayal, as it hints at her greed, and probably also lust to some extent, as something insatiable. On the other hand, Joe represents a rare sensitivity and a certain passivity, unlike Sykes Jones. He appears to be submissive to his wife, and quite happily so. So, when he discovers his wife’s betrayal, he is understandably angry and hurt, and one would expect him to react much more violently in contradiction to his inherently passive nature. However, his revenge turns out to be as passive as he is himself: he carries the gold coin in his pocket at all times and leaves it around the house where Missie may find it to remind her of her misdeeds and convey to her that he still remembers the incident. But, unlike Sykes’ overtly violent actions, Joe’s revenge proves to be more mentally violent, and an intriguingly more effective method of getting his way with his wife and asserting his position as the husband and breadwinner.

Of course, the most vital difference between the two marriages discussed here and their eventual resolutions, notwithstanding the amount of time they have been married for, is the presence of love, or absence thereof, in their conjugal relationship. Missie and Joe rekindle their relationship because their love is not subjected to overt violence and abuse by either of them. The implicit mental torture of Joe’s revenge loses some of its edge because Missie May is overcome with a great sense of shame and guilt at her adulterous actions. Delia and Sykes, on the other hand, are unable to do so because they never really shared that kind of love, because she “brought the love” and he “brought the longing after the flesh” (“Sweat” 75) to their conjugal relationship, which ended practically two months into their marriage.

Hurston did indeed possess a deep insight into the rural African-American culture, mainly because she hailed from that cultural background. The richness of the imagery and symbolism, as well as her in-depth knowledge of what could and could not be acceptable in such a village society as depicted in her earliest short story, "Sweat," illustrates her profound knowledge of her community. Hurston also possessed a thorough knowledge of ethnography through her training, which helped to polish her intrinsic observation skills. The detailed summaries of her ethnographic training and fieldwork experiences provided in the theoretical overview portion help form an overall picture of Hurston the ethnographer. Furthermore, the detailed textual analysis of her short stories, "Sweat" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," focuses on many important ethnographic details, such as certain elements of material culture, specifically religious symbolism of otherwise unconnected tangible objects and money, as well as the themes of marriage and women's economic independence. It is, however, important to note that "Sweat" was published in 1926, much before Hurston conducted her ethnographic research and published *Mules and Men* (1935) based on that research. On the surface, this seems to defeat the objective of this paper, but it can be countered by the fact that she graduated the following year in 1927 from Barnard College with a BA in Anthropology (Hoffman-Jeep 339). This means that when she wrote and published "Sweat," she already possessed considerable knowledge of anthropology. Also, the textual evidence provided above illustrates that many images, symbols, and motifs in "Sweat" also occur in her other works, and their authenticity is thereby validated in comparison to Hurston's *Mules and Men*. Therefore, this paper concludes that although Hurston's training as an ethnographer did produce a profound impact on her creative work, her earliest work was more likely to have benefited from her recollections and experiences of her native Black American culture, as compared to her later work, which included richer ethnographic details.

Works Cited

- Carter, Catherine. "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's 'Sweat'." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2014, pp. 605-620. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26467997>.
- "Dambala." *Lwa and Order: An Exploration of Haitian Vodou*, lwaandorder.com/dambala/. Accessed 24 August 2025.
- Goldammer, Kurt Moritz Artur. "Religious Symbolism and Iconography." *Britannica.com*, www.britannica.com/topic/religious-symbolism. Accessed 24 August 2025.
- Hoffman-Jeep, Lynda. "Creating Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia

- Cabrera." *African American Review*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2005, pp. 337-353. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40033668>.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Sweat." *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008, pp. 73-85.
- . "The Gilded Six-Bits." *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008, pp. 86-98.
- Jenkins, Tammy. "Writing Vodou into Literature: Exploring Diasporic Religious Symbols and Lore in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 215-224. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jafireli.4.2.0215>.
- Jirousek, Lori. "Ethnics and Ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2006, pp. 19-32. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831790>.
- Ray, Michael. "Material Culture." *Britannica.com*, www.britannica.com/topic/material-culture. Accessed 24 August 2025.
- St. Marc, Jean-Luc. "Big Zombie: The Old Snake Spirit of New Orleans Voodoo." *Louisiana Voodoo*, louisianavoodoo.com/de/li-grand-zombi/. Accessed 24 August 2025.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1989, pp. 661-680. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904095>.