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### Character Motivation and Fetishistic Commodities

“The Gilded Six-Bits” by Zora Neale Hurston is one of many great short stories from the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the more common points of analysis of the piece include race, gender, and society. By performing an analytical reading of “The Gilded Six-Bits” using Slavoj Žižek’s theory of ideology one can gain a deeper understanding of the motivation of Missie May in her act of adultery. By analyzing her and other characters using a combination of psychoanalysis and theories of ideology one can be clear that at the root of her motivation was the ideological desire for a commodity fetish while being in a state of false consciousness.

Throughout Žižek’s essay “The Sublime Object of Ideology” he lays out his theories of ideology and how they manifest in society while motivating and altering their perceptions. Combining ideas from Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan he identifies three main concepts that must be understood, false consciousness, commodity fetishes, and reification. He defines false consciousness based off of the traditional Marxist definition as being one of two things: as the lack of perception of the real material conditions that are in existence or the nature of social relations in society due to the operations of society. He draws from Marx’s idea that every “ideological universal” in the world is false (Žižek 716). Žižek further adds to this theory by stressing that ideology is not just an illusory depiction of reality but rather it is the reality

itself that is ideological. He argues that it is not just what is around society that is ideological, but rather the people in society are ideological themselves (Žižek 716). It is in this state of false consciousness that society is mystified by ideology. Žižek drew from both Freud and Marx in their analysis of commodity of dreams. In both theories the idea is to avoid fetishistic fascination of commodities. He, however, identifies the problem as being able to explain why work in a commodity assumed a value form (Žižek 712). According to Marx, a commodity fetish is simply when a commodity takes on a signifier for something that it is not. He asserts that when a commodity fetish is developed society becomes alienated from the operations behind the product. When that commodity becomes a “thing” itself it has gone through reification. Once a commodity has reached this stage the identity of the commodity no longer has anything to do with the reality of the commodity (Žižek 719). Žižek furthers this argument to add that one must not only look at what the ideological subject or individual *thinks* or *knows* but also what the individual is *doing*. He argues that a subject realizes on an everyday level the relations between people and things (commodity fetishism) but what they do not know is that their social activity is guided by these fetish illusions. He asserts that these concepts are not just a theory but a practice as well. The illusion is on the side of reality as well as knowledge (Žižek 720-21). Žižek also draws from Peter Sloterdijk and Marx to identify the two parts of ideology. The first part is what is called mystification, where the consumer is truly unaware of the ideological influences behind a commodity. The second is cynicism which is the idea that there are consumers that are aware of the ideological influences behind a commodity but choose to ignore it because there is nothing they can do about it (Žižek 718).

Missie May and Joe are in a state of false consciousness throughout the story because they are unable to see the real material conditions of existences that Slemmons lives in due to the

operations in society. Joe is convinced that Slemmons is a wealthy man who has achieved great success in his life because of the way that Slemmons dresses, talks, and is shaped. What Joe does not realize is that all of these methods of defining Slemmons into the social class that he believes he belongs are methods that are given to him by Slemmons. Marx argued that those who own means of production are those who determine the dominant ideas that keep the dominant part in place. Slemmons was a business man in the town therefore he was one who the working class looked to for methods to critique such things. Slemmons is part of the super structure that produces ideology that holds together the base which helps society stay stagnant. Due to the ideologies and commonly held beliefs that Slemmons is distributing Joe and Missie Mae are unable to see through his façade. The super structure that they are working within does not allow them to be able to see through his pretence at the beginning of the story.

In addition, there are many characteristics of Otis Slemmons that become commodity fetishes that undergoes reifications through Joe and Missie May's interpretation of such characteristics. The first of such characteristics is Slemmons's clothes. Joe tells Missie May, "Yea, he's up-to-date. He got the finest clothes Ah ever seen on a colored man's back" (Hurston). Slemmons's clothes no longer are just articles of cloth that cover his body. Through Joe's interpretation they have become a status symbol. He has put his clothes through reification making them signify something more than what they simply are. They have now become a signifier for a wealthy person whose life is to be envied. Slemmons's figure is another such example. Joe states, "He jes' got a corperation. Dat make m' look lak a rich white man. All rich mens is got some belly on'em" (Hurston). Joe has created a commodity fetish with Slemmons's figure by asserting that his large stomach is not just a sign that he has eaten more than he needed, but rather of his social and financial status. Joe has turned Slemmons's figure into something that

is desired; even worthy of imitation and envy. Even Slemmons's words are turned into a commodity fetish by Joe and Missie May. The words are no longer simply random words or weird phrases that a man is using, instead they get turned into something that is indicative of a social or financial status and thus should be envied.

Similarly, there are also many rituals that become commodity fetishes that define Joe and Missie May's relationship throughout the story. One is the throwing of money on the wood floor every Saturday. The excitement that entrails is not at all about the actual monetary value of the pieces but rather it the game and the money pieces serve as a signifier for something much more meaningful in their relationship. When picking the coins off of the wood floor to set by her plate Missie May does not think about the work that went into Joe earning those coins. That is not to say that she is unaware of the severe manual labor of his work or the toll that it takes on his body, but in that moment during the little game she is not thinking of those things just as society can be aware of sweat shops in china that produces clothing but many do not think of such things while purchasing a sweater. During this game the coins are no longer about their monetary value. At the end of the story the coins signify the end of their marital troubles which is something completely different than what the coins actually are in reality. The coins no longer signify something that in reality they are.

The most important and significant of all of the commodity fetishes is that of the fixation on the gold pieces. Both Missie May and Joe are fascinated with Slemmons's gold pieces and mouth full of gold. Joe associates Slemmons's wealth with his gold pieces. His fetish is not based off of the monetary value of the gold piece but rather the status that it signifies. Joe says that he wishes he could be him so that he could have the gold piece not because of the money but because of what the gold piece signifies. Joe does not even seem to care about or question

Slemmons's means of obtaining the money; he isn't thinking of that he is only thinking that he would like the money so that people would think of him the same way they think of Slemmons. Similarly Missie May also becomes fixated on this commodity fetish. The coin undergoes reification by Missie May because she starts to believe that by having sex with Slemmons in order to get the coin, her husband will become who he wants to be. She is not thinking of the monetary or realistic value of the coins, she is only thinking of what the coins signify to her and Joe. Although aware, she ignores the operations that must take place in order to get the coin. She is not focused on the idea that in order to quench her husband's desire to possess the coin she must break the sanctity of their marriage. Similarly, once the coin is within the possession of the couple they both know the operations behind how the coin was obtained yet they are both in a state of cynicism where each of them just ignores the operations. As the story continues the signifier of the coin changes. In the beginning it signified status instead of money to the Banks. After they have taken possession of the coin it acts as a signifier of their broken marriage. In the end Joe actually turns the coin into candy kisses which also act as a commodity fetish because it signifies their repaired marriage instead of just candy. Each time the coin does not signify what it should in reality.

Žižek stated that there are two parts of ideology, mystification and cynicism. Hurston presents her reader with an example of both. At the beginning of the story Joe is in a state of mystification. He believes everything that Slemmons is saying and easily buys into the popular ideological concepts that define financial and social status without question. Missie May recognizes that her husband is being pulled into these ideological traps and tries to point them out. She tries to counter Joe's analysis of Slemmons by giving examples of very wealthy people such as Henry Ford and Rockefeller who both do not have a large stomach. She is also trying to

tell Joe that his clothes are no better than Joe's are. She tries to show Joe how trapped in the ideological concepts he is by challenging his ideas but ultimately fails. In addition she ends up giving into these ideologies. Although she is still aware of the ideologies and operations behind gaining possession of the coin she still gives into them. Because of that she is part of the cynicism side of ideology. She understands that the operations behind the product but ignores them. After Joe catches Slemmons with Missie May he now realizes the operations that took place behind obtaining possession of the coin but like Missie May ignores them and thus aligns himself into the cynicism side of ideology with Missie May.

The main agent that propels character's actions in the story is commodity fetishism. Missie May was driven by her and Joe's commodity fetish of Slemmons's gold piece in which they had reified by associating the gold piece with Slemmons's appearance of high social and financial status. Both characters were products of the ideological state they were living in and although ultimately aware of the conditions behind such products were unable to escape them.

Works Cited

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