Spunk

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Zora Neale Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, in the late nineteenth century. Eatonville was the first incorporated black township in the US, and Hurston thrived there, surrounded by diverse and successful black people who would later become the source of inspiration for many of her fictional characters. She had a happy and enriching childhood until her mother died when Hurston was just 13. Her father remarried quickly, and Hurston came to consider home a poor and loveless place. As soon as she could, Hurston moved to Maryland where she worked a series of menial jobs. Hurston's early writing coincided with New York's Harlem Renaissance—an artistic black liberation movement spanning the 1920s—and it was in New York where she first impressed the city's literary elite. Her writing career took off in 1925 when she won second place for both the fiction and drama categories in a writing competition launched by the magazine *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. As an exciting and charismatic newcomer in New York's fashionable artistic circles, Hurston's talents finally began to be recognized. It was because of her literary success that she received a scholarship to study anthropology at Barnard College, Columbia University. However, many Harlem Renaissance writers later criticized Hurston's writing for its portrayal of rural, black communities. In particular, it was her celebration of the idiomatic vernacular she heard in the American South that was deemed to be degrading to black folk, and counter-productive to the black liberation movement. Hurston's commitment to depicting black cultures without censorship often meant that her fiction exposed patriarchal power structures within the communities she fictionalized. This also garnered criticism from peers from within the Harlem Renaissance, who argued that she risked reinforcing stereotypes to her mostly white audience. It is largely due to her divergence from the political and cultural aims of the Harlem Renaissance that Hurston's career faced obscurity in her later life. Despite the acclaim she received in the years that she was writing, Hurston never earned enough money to support herself. Having escaped rural poverty in Florida as a young woman, it is bitterly ironic that she also died there, aged 69, poor and alone.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eatonville, Florida, was one of the first all-black municipalities to be officially recognized in the U.S. after President Abraham Lincoln issued an executive order for the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in 1863. While these all-black towns often existed because racist police departments refused to serve black communities, this environment meant that Hurston grew up surrounded by successful black role models and diverse cultural customs. Her early experiences in Eatonville were clearly very formative because she set many of her stories, and based many of her characters, on what she observed there. Her interest in oral tradition stems from the stories she would have heard on porches and verandas across her local neighborhood.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While Hurston did have a complex (and sometimes fraught) relationship with the Harlem Renaissance and its proponents, her early literary success was due, at least in part, to the movement. Her early works debuted alongside the work of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Bennett, W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric D. Walrond and many other significant Harlem Renaissance writers. Jessie Redmon Fauset, like Hurston, used her writing to critique the racism and sexism experienced by African-American women, most famously in her second novel, *Plum Bun*. Similarly, with her celebrated novel, *Passing*, Nella Larson is another example of a female Harlem Renaissance writer determined to highlight the intersections of race and gender in America. Like "Spunk," Hurston's celebrated novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* interrogates power, masculinity, judgement, and jealousy and is also set in a town like Eatonville, where Hurston grew up. The novel portrays black experiences without directly tackling the theme of racism in America. Notably, it was after reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that the prominent African American writer Alice Walker began researching Hurston and discovered that most of her writing was out of print. Years after Hurston's death, in the mid-1970s, Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington began to reexamine Hurston's fiction from a black, feminist perspective, proclaiming Hurston the lost foremother of black feminism. Walker subsequently published an essay entitled, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," which helped to restore popular and academic interest in Hurston's work. Hurston's political ideology is also frequently likened to that of Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, and Ayn Rand, Libertarian women writers who celebrated individualism and embraced this philosophy in their writing. Paterson, Lane, and Hurston, for example, were all vocally against the New Deal welfare state, enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Spunk"
- **Where Written:** Likely in New York

- **When Published:** June 1925
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short story, African American literature, Black feminist fiction
- **Setting:** A small rural town, based closely on Eatonville, Florida, where Hurston grew up.
- **Climax:** Legendary throughout the town for his bravery when working at the sawmill, Spunk is eventually killed when he falls upon a moving saw.
- **Antagonist:** Spunk Banks
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Young at Heart. When Hurston moved to Baltimore at age 26, she was impoverished and desperate to continue her education, having never graduated from high school. In order to access free, public education, she pretended to be 16 years old. For the rest of her life, Hurston lived as if she were 10 years younger.

Rediscovering a Southern Genius. Hurston's grave remained unmarked for 13 years. It was later discovered by the African American writer Alice Walker, who was fascinated by both Hurston's writing and her tragic demise. Walker paid for a headstone to commemorate Hurston and her achievements, with the words "A Genius of the South [...] Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist" engraved upon it.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Spunk" opens with a description of Spunk Banks, a man respected and revered in the community for his strength and courage at the local sawmill, where he works. One day, the villagers at the general store are surprised to see Spunk walking boldly up the village's only street with Lena Kanty, a married woman, on his arm. One bystander, Elijah Mosley, commends Spunk for his audacity and fearlessness, while Walter Thomas is shocked at Spunk's conspicuousness.

The men in the general store have hardly finished gossiping about Spunk when Joe Kanty, Lena's husband, enters. Joe is nervous, self-conscious, and clumsy—the complete opposite of Spunk. The men in the store are aware that Joe already knows that his wife has just passed by with another man, and so Joe's inaction and passivity renders him weak and pathetic in their eyes. Elijah begins to taunt Joe about Lena's disloyalty, eliciting laughter from all the men but Walter, who accuses Elijah of being cruel.

Following the torment and humiliation he experiences in the general store, Joe announces that he is going to find Lena and "fetch her back." He shows the men the "large and shiny" razor that he has been hiding in his pocket, presumably to use in combat with Spunk. Elijah praises Joe for this new approach and suggests that Joe is finally behaving "like a man."

As Joe stalks off into the woods in search for Lena and Spunk, Walter warns that Spunk will likely murder Joe, should he try to attack Spunk with the razor. Elijah dismisses Walter's concern and tells the men a story about an altercation between Spunk, Joe, and Lena just the week before, when Joe had tried to win Lena back and failed miserably. According to Elijah's version of events, Lena had looked at Spunk "with her eyes so full of love that they wuz runnin' over" when he declared that she belonged to him and that he would look after her from now on.

While the men wait eagerly for Joe to return, they hear "the sharp report of a pistol somewhere distant." Spunk emerges "leisurely" from the woods with Lena and enters the general store. He explains to the men, without remorse, that he had to shoot Joe in order to defend himself. While the men direct some of their horror towards Elijah, who had previously assured them that Spunk would never direct his gun at Joe, Spunk seems wholly unfazed by the events in the woods. Although he is arrested, Spunk is found not guilty after a short trial, and he continues about his normal life with Lena and at work at the sawmill.

Some time later, on the first night that he and Lena have moved in together, Spunk encounters a **wild bobcat** slinking around outside his window. Spunk promptly fetches his gun. Upon making eye contact with the cat, however, Spunk felt unable to shoot the creature, convinced that it was Joe "sneaked back from Hell" to haunt him. The men discuss whether the bobcat could indeed be Joe, as they've never seen a cat like that before. Walter declares that he thinks Joe "wuz a braver man than Spunk," and that Spunk is deserving of punishment.

The next evening, the men gather to discuss the most recent victim of the circle saw. That day, Spunk had been "loadin' a wagon" when he fell onto the moving saw. Elijah describes how Spunk was cursing and swearing the whole time, accusing Joe of having pushed him into the machinery.

At Spunk's funeral wake, Lena mourns loudly while Spunk's dead body lies on a makeshift cooling board. When Jeff Kanty—Joe's father—arrives, he looks down at the body, picturing himself as Spunk's killer. Meanwhile, the village men make crude remarks about Lena while the women wonder who her next partner will be.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Spunk Banks – As the eponymous character, Spunk could be understood as the story's protagonist. However, through his conflict with Joe Kanty, it becomes apparent that Spunk is more suited to the role of antihero or antagonist. The story

opens with Spunk walking boldly past a crowd of villagers, arm in arm with Lena Kanty, Joe's wife. As his name might suggest, Spunk embodies an expression of ideal masculinity; he is strong, daring, and unapologetically bold when "sauntering" past the general store—what appears to be the town's major hangout—with another man's wife. It is through these qualities that Spunk gains the respect and horror-fascination of the men in the village, who seem to envy, fear, and admire Spunk. When Joe follows Spunk and Lena into the woods to confront them about their affair, armed only with a razor, Spunk shoots his opponent dead, later declaring that the murder was simply an act of "self-defense." At first, Spunk is remarkably cavalier about the murder, claiming that he "didn't wanna shoot" Joe, but that "he made me do it," and ordering the villagers to remove Joe's body "in a careless voice." Later on, however, Spunk becomes unnerved when confronted with a **"black bob-cat,"** who he believes is Joe's spirit, come back to haunt and punish him for his wrongs. Eventually, Spunk's unfaltering pursuit of power and dominance leads to his own untimely demise when he falls upon **the circle saw** at the sawmill where he works. Convinced that Joe's spirit has pushed him, Spunk dies without dignity, angrily "cussin'" and shouting as the life drains out of him. The funeral wake is symbolic of Spunk's downfall, where his body lies under a "dingy sheet" while the men make "course conjectures" about Lena.

Joe Kanty – The protagonist of the story, Joe Kanty is nervous, awkward and physically inferior to Spunk Banks, his rival. Joe is publically shamed and humiliated when a group of village folk witness Spunk arm in arm with Lena Kanty, Joe's wife. The men in the general store, who admire and revere Spunk, continually accuse Joe of weakness. His masculinity is called into question because of his inability to both control his wife and to challenge Spunk. Angered and spurred on by the men's taunting, Joe follows Spunk and Lena into the woods, armed with nothing but a razor, despite knowing that Spunk carries a gun with him. The altercation that follows leads to Joe's murder, leaving Spunk free to marry Lena (although Spunk is arrested for the murder, the trial is short, and he is quickly set free). However, the night that Spunk and Lena move in together, Spunk encounters a mysterious **bobcat** prowling around his property and howling at the top of its lungs, which Spunk believes is the reincarnated spirit of Joe. It remains ambiguous whether the bobcat is actually Joe or just a superstitious figment of Spunk's imagination. Likewise, when Spunk falls on a **saw** at the sawmill, he claims with dying breath that it was Joe who pushed him to his death. Once again, it's unclear if this is actually true, but it seems that Joe's masculinity is finally redeemed through Spunk's downfall. Walter Thomas's posthumous endorsement of Joe says as much, asserting that "Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk" the whole time. After all, Joe was genuinely terrified of Spunk and toted a lousy weapon, and yet he still mustered the courage to stick up to Spunk and fight.

Lena Kanty – Lena Kanty, Joe's wife and Spunk's lover, is "a small pretty woman." She is introduced when walking through the village "clinging lovingly" to Spunk. Joe and Spunk compete for Lena throughout the story, but her voice is markedly absent throughout. Lena's only line of dialogue is reported through Elijah Mosley, who recounts an altercation between Lena, Joe, and Spunk the week before. According to Elijah, when Joe pleaded Lena to return home to him, she "looked at him real disgusted," until Spunk grabbed her by the arm and declared, "Lena, youse mine." Lena is remarkably passive until she "speaks up" to explain that she wants to at least remain in her house because it was passed down to her by her father. Lena's autonomy and agency is immediately undermined, however, when Spunk warns her that, although she can keep her house, "when youse inside don't forgit youse mine." Elijah reports that Lena looked at Spunk with "eyes so full of love that they wuz runnin' over," but it's possible that Lena's tears symbolize the fear she feels under Spunk's controlling demands. Lena's body is not only a site of desire and control for Joe and Spunk, but also a battleground for them to assert their competing masculinities.

Elijah Mosley – Elijah works at the sawmill with Spunk Banks and admires him greatly for his strength and gumption. Frequenting the general store after work, Elijah enjoys gossiping and telling stories to the men there, who often take Elijah's word as gospel. A large portion of the story is narrated through Elijah's direct speech and, although the village men trust him, he is ultimately an unreliable narrator. As the ringleader of the men folk, for example, Elijah plays a crucial part in Joe Kanty's murder. He shames, taunts and emasculates Joe in front of the men, who then join in, provoking and angering Joe to follow the lovers into the woods, where he is promptly shot and killed. Although Elijah assures the men that "Spunk wouldn't shoot no unarmed man," this turns out to be false. Elijah's irresponsible storytelling has real, moral consequences. He is positioned as a foil to Walter Thomas, who takes a gentler and more compassionate approach to storytelling and to Joe's situation in general.

Walter Thomas – Walter Thomas is unique in that he is the only man in the village to speak out against perceived injustices (save for Joe Kanty, whose version of speaking up is meek and ineffective). Walter challenges the status quo and voices his opinions openly, seemingly unperturbed by the fierce backlash he might receive from his male peers. Firstly, Walter voices his discomfort about how the men—namely Elijah— treat Joe Kanty in the general store. Walter "grumble[s]" his disapproval of Elijah's bullying and "chide[s]" him, warning that "Spunk will sho' kill" Joe as a result of the men's actions, a prediction that turns out to be true. Secondly, Walter raises concerns about the immorality of Spunk's affair, saying "tain't right the way he carries on wid Lena Kanty." Finally, after Joe's murder, Walter boldly declares that "Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk," a

statement that receives "derision" from the other men. In contrast to Elijah, Walter is interested in truth and justice. For Walter, Spunk receives the punishment he deserves when he's faced with Joe's ghost and has to reckon with his past immorality.

The Men in the General Store – Having worked a hard day of physical labor at the sawmill, the local men fraternize at the general store, drinking and swapping stories. They represent a toxic expression of masculinity in the way that they band together to police and monitor the behavior of men like Joe Kanty, who they perceive as weak, and idolize men like Spunk, who, despite his glaring flaws, they revere and admire. Under Elijah's leadership, this male pack blindly follows Elijah's lead as he taunts and teases Joe, thinking nothing of the consequences.

Jeff Kanty – Old Jeff Kanty, Joe's father, plays an important symbolic role in the story's ending. He arrives at Lena's house to attend Spunk's funeral wake. The third person narrator reveals that Jeff would have been "afraid to come within ten feet" of Spunk just a few hours before, but now he feels powerful and formidable as he stands "triumphantly" over him. Glaring at Spunk's dead body, Jeff imagines that "his fingers had been the teeth of steel" responsible for Spunk's death. Through Spunk's undignified death, it is implied that Jeff finally gets revenge for the murder of his son.

The Sheriff – After Joe's murder, the villagers wait for the sheriff to arrive from Orlando, Florida, to arrest Spunk for his crime. It is likely that the sheriff would have been a white man, and, given the quick and ineffectual trial that follows, the sheriff represents both the authority, and the incompetence, of the American legal system.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tes' Miller – A local man who was killed when working on **the circle saw** in the past. Elijah uses the tragic tale of Tes' Miller to illustrate Spunk's courage and bravery on the saw.

Skint Miller – A local man who helps Elijah lift Spunk's injured body off **the saw** and lay him on the ground to die.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POWER AND MASCULINITY

Zora Neale Hurston's "Spunk" tells the tragic tale of two men and their virulent contest for one woman's love. The two male characters at the heart of the story—Spunk Banks and Joe Kanty—are positioned as foils to one another when Spunk walks boldly through the neighborhood with Joe's wife, Lena Kanty. Through these characters, and other men's reactions to them, Hurston critiques notions of ideal or hegemonic masculinity. Examining the catastrophic consequences of the anger, shame, and jealousy experienced by men in pursuit of dominance, Hurston's story is a damning indictment of American masculinity.

Admired by men and desired by women, Spunk embodies a socially constructed notion of ideal masculinity. The story opens with a telling description of Spunk, a "giant" man who "sauntered" through the town with "a small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm." The juxtaposition between the "small" woman and Spunk's large frame emphasizes his physical dominance. He is clearly confident, and his name, "Spunk," has connotations of bravery, virility, and manliness. His authority and status is illustrated when Elijah Mosley slaps his leg "gleefully" in approval of Spunk's boldness. Rather than condoning Spunk for strutting "round wid another man's wife," Elijah admires him for being "brassy as tacks." Elijah conflates Spunk's strength and dominance at work with his ability to win over Lena, and thus his romantic conquest is positioned as courageous, rather than immoral. Spunk's hegemonic masculinity is reinforced when Joe Kanty enters the store wearing "overalls much too large" for him. Shrunken, nervous, and embarrassed, Joe's inferior masculinity serves to strengthen Spunk's through contrast, revealing how physical strength and dominance over women constitute successful masculinity, regardless of honor or morality.

The men in Hurston's story are motivated far more by their need for male approval than they are by their heterosexual desires. Throughout the story, feelings of jealousy and shame and are used to police and monitor men's behaviors and reinforce notions of ideal masculinity. When Spunk leads Lena past the general store, he is performing for—and showing off to—the men in the village. His scandalous parade down the "one street" is certainly not for Lena, who risks her reputation by being seen in public with Spunk. Instead, when he displays Lena proudly, he welcomes gossip, envy, and admiration from his peers. When Joe enters the store shortly afterwards, the men "looked at each other and winked," a silent and demeaning gesture that symbolizes the way in which power circulates among men. Joe is emasculated, while the other men maintain their power through his subjugation. Elijah intentionally humiliates Joe by asking after Lena, performing the role of bully for the benefit of the other men in the store, who undoubtedly enjoy watching the "pain" spread across Joe's face. Constantly calling Joe's masculinity into question, Elijah suggests that it isn't "decent for a man to take and take" and demands that Joe talk "like a man." For Elijah, Joe's passivity over the Lena

situation renders him weak and unmanly. Although Walter Thomas tries to stop Elijah's teasing, the other men laugh "boisterously behind Joe's back" as they watch him walk nervously into the woods after Spunk, who they know will be carrying a gun. Elijah and "the loungers in the store" are therefore at least partially responsible for Joe's death. In the end, it is not Lena's affair that emasculates Joe, but the winking, mocking, laughing, and bullying that subsequently leads Joe to confront Spunk, with only a razor to protect him.

The tragic ending of "Spunk" illustrates the violent and destructive nature of men's pursuit of power. Hurston demonstrates the dangerous repercussions of unchecked hypermasculinity when Spunk murders Joe in the woods. Joe's anger, stoked by the men's teasing, leads him into the woods to confront Spunk, who mercilessly shoots his unarmed assailant. Spunk's unnecessary violence doesn't lessen his status among the village men, who both revere and fear Spunk. Indeed, when one of the men explains that he's "skeered of dat man when he gits hot," it becomes clear that admiration is not enough to maintain Spunk's dominant position in the community; he relies on fear too. However, Spunk faces his own guilty conscience, which manifests in the form of the **black bobcat** that spooks him in the dead of night. Convinced that he is being haunted by Joe's spirit, Spunk then suffers from a lack of confidence when using **the circle saw** at work. When he eventually falls onto the moving saw, Spunk's desperate desire for power and admiration leads him to shout out that it was Joe who pushed him; even in death, Spunk refuses to be humiliated or to lose face in front of his male peers. Ultimately, even Spunk is unable to embody the expression of masculinity that gave him notoriety in the community. Spunk's funeral is modest and unremarkable; a "dingy shroud" covers his body as it lies upon some carpentry equipment. Joe's father, Jeff Kanty, "stood leering triumphantly down upon the fallen giant." The word "fallen" evokes Spunk's dishonor and disgrace, while Jeff imagines himself as a victorious champion, responsible for avenging Spunk. Jeff feels powerful precisely because of his domineering position as he looms over Spunk's dead body. Hurston has replaced Spunk with the figure of yet another callous and violent man, thus illustrating the destructive and interminable nature of men's pursuit of power.

On the surface, this is a story about two men's fervent love for Lena, but she is curiously absent throughout. In reality, this is a tale about men performing masculinity for one another, each one striving for authority and dominance. Feelings of jealousy, shame, fear, and admiration circulate throughout the story as masculine currencies, used to generate, deprive, or distribute power among the male pack. Ultimately, at the story's tragic close, Spunk has ended an innocent man's life and destroyed his own, through his unwavering pursuit of physical and social dominance.

WOMEN AND MISOGYNY

Writing during the Harlem Renaissance—an intellectual and artistic black liberation movement that aimed to celebrate black culture and interpret the African American experience in new and positive ways—black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston often felt they had to choose between fighting for the freedom of the black community, or fighting for the rights of women. Amid the context of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston garnered strong criticism from many of her black peers, who accused her work of pandering to white audiences, and who deemed her use of rural dialect to be a debasing portrayal of blackness. In contrast, more recent feminist readings of Hurston's work have argued that her focus on poor, rural characters served to undermine the male-dominated, middle-class, and urban-centric nature of New York's Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, in "Spunk," Hurston explores the intersections of misogyny, racism, and classism, perhaps as a way of highlighting the intensified inequalities experienced by black women in America.

In "Spunk," Hurston examines the ways in which women are controlled and objectified by men. It is no accident that Lena is introduced initially as the "small pretty woman" clinging to Spunk's arm. By not immediately naming Lena, the story reduces her to her body and to her "pretty" appearance, reflecting the way in which women are valued primarily for their looks. In fact, the story is markedly male-dominated throughout, with Lena being the only named female character. Lena is positioned as an object of desire, rather than an active agent in her own love affair. For instance, Elijah explains that "Spunk wants Lena," and that he'll do anything to have her. In this context, Spunk is likened to an "alpha male" who is free to take his pick of the pack, and Lena's needs and wants become irrelevant. Elijah recalls a conversation he overheard between the two rivals, in which Spunk claimed that "Lena was his." Not only has Lena become Spunk's property—to be owned, possessed, and controlled—but she is also equated with an animal or pet when Spunk confronts Joe, saying, "Call her and see if she'll come. A woman knows her boss an' she answers when he calls." Even while mourning Spunk's death, Lena is sexualized by the drunken men attending the funeral, who make "coarse conjectures" about her. She is subjugated and dehumanized again and again by the men who supposedly love her, and her body becomes a site of patriarchal control, as the men argue over their rights to it.

Hurston empowers Lena with property rights in order to draw attention to the precarious nature of women's lives in a patriarchal context. Lena doesn't have any dialogue in the story, but through Elijah's storytelling, her one line of reported speech reveals that she is afforded some security through the house passed down to her by her father: "Thass mah house […] Papa gimme that." Because she owns her own property, Lena is

able to "speak up" for herself and asserts that she doesn't want to leave her home. Lena's property thus gives her a degree of resistance from patriarchal control, and in fact, it equips her with a voice for the first time in the story. However, Spunk is clearly threatened by this statement and declares that "when youse inside don't forgit youse mine," rendering her an object of his control once more. Spunk's continued use of imperatives makes it clear that Lena has little choice in the matter. The house is therefore a metaphor for women's need for control and security, but ultimately, Lena is trapped in a male-dominated system and, even in her own house, she must obey and worship Spunk.

Hurston interrogates the misogyny surrounding women's reputations through the story's ending. As Lena mourns for Spunk with "lamentations [that] were deep and loud," the rest of the community discuss who will "be Lena's next." Lena's reputation as a "good" woman has been sullied through her adulterous relationship with Spunk. Spunk's actions, on the other hand, never faced the same level of critique from the community, highlighting the double standard applied to women's sexuality. Lena is expected to find a new man, partly because she is now considered a "loose" woman, but also because women were perceived to be dependent on men. Lena still owns property, however, and she fills it with "magnolia blossoms" for the wake. The flowers are decidedly feminine, and their strong smell represents her newly harnessed control over the house, and perhaps, finally, over her life.

Through the character of Lena, and the curious absence of other women in the story, Hurston interrogates power and misogyny in a poor, rural community. Women (namely Lena) are silenced, sexualized, objectified, or made invisible by the men who purport to protect and care for them. Hurston illustrates how men render women property, fashioning them into tools to demonstrate their power in society, and how they utilize women's bodies as objects of desire. Written at a time when Hurston was under pressure to contribute to an important black liberation and anti-racism movement, "Spunk" sends a clear message: there will be no freedom unless women are liberated too.

LEGAL JUSTICE VS. MORAL JUSTICE

Born in 1891, Zora Neale Hurston's childhood was hugely influenced by religion. Her father was a Baptist preacher and her mother developed the Christian curriculum at their local church. After training as an anthropologist at university, however, Hurston devoted much of her writing to capturing the rituals and spirituality of the black folk religion practiced in the American South. Morality, superstition, and spirituality are central motifs in Zora Neale Hurston's "Spunk." Through this portrait of small-town life, Hurston examines community dynamics in a rural setting after a scandalous love affair sparks a series of immoral events. Hurston captures and pays tribute to black folklore and African-derived religious beliefs by illustrating how, in the absence of legal justice, moral justice will prevail.

In "Spunk," the American legal system proves an incompetent defender of justice. After Spunk has murdered Joe in broad daylight, he walks "leisurely" into the general store, announces "calmly" that Joe has been shot, and then "saunter[s]" away home. He appears to feel no guilt for his crime whatsoever, instructing someone "in a careless voice" to bury Joe's body. That Spunk *should* feel remorse is clear when considering that the men in the general store had sent Joe off into the woods on Elijah's assumption that Spunk would never be so cruel as to "shoot no unarmed man." The men underestimated both Joe and Spunk when presuming that neither one would go through with the fight. Rather than Spunk, it is Elijah who faces allegations and judgment from the village men, who glare at him "accusingly" for his role in Joe's murder. By blaming Elijah, the men shirk responsibility for the part that they also played when mocking, jeering, and taunting Joe for not being "man enough" to fetch his wife back. The sheriff from Orlando symbolizes the arrival of law and order. Until he reaches the town, the community has been waiting in a morally liminal state; everybody knows that Spunk should be locked up, and yet "no one did anything but talk." During the trial, Spunk pleads not guilty due to self-defense and walks "out of the court house to freedom again." Hurston reveals the inadequate nature of the American justice system when suggesting that Spunk's callous actions warrant more serious punishment and retribution. Further, the system is incapable of holding the general community accountable for their collective role in Joe's death, a role that is left to Walter Thomas, who becomes the unofficial arbitrator of morality in the absence of law enforcement.

Hurston suggests that folk spirituality is the most potent and effective harbinger of justice; although the legal justice system fails to hold Spunk accountable for his wrongdoings, moral justice is served when Joe's restless soul returns to haunt Joe. After moving in with Lena, Spunk is haunted by the sight of "**a big black bob-cat**" outside their house. When he gets his gun and tries to kill the creature, the wild cat howls loudly at Spunk until he got "so nervoused up he couldn't shoot." When Elijah explains that the cat was "black all over, you hear me, *black*," he emphasizes the spiritual power of the creature, and juxtaposes it with the sheriff from Orlando, who would have likely been white, given the time in which Hurston was writing. The bobcat is an example of the superstitious customs and black American folklore that Hurston was intensely interested in exploring throughout her writing, and it signals the arrival of moral justice in the village. When Walter Thomas exclaims that Spunk "oughter be nervous after what he done," it is the first time that another character in the story has placed blame or judgment on Spunk's shoulders. Through Walter's perspective, Spunk is no

longer the admired town hero, but a despicable criminal. Although he faces "derision from the group" of men, Walter asserts that "Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk," thus inverting the power dynamics seen earlier in the story.

Spunk believes that the bobcat is Joe's spirit, come back to seek revenge. Whether the bobcat is actually a vengeful Joe, or merely a manifestation of Spunk's guilty conscience, his superstitions materially, and catastrophically, affect his fate. Spunk fears the bobcat immensely, and this anxiety begins to undermine his confidence and mastery when using **the circle saw** at the sawmill, where he works. One day, while at work, Spunk has a terrible accident and falls onto the moving saw. The cause of Spunk's death is ambiguous; it is unclear whether the spirit of Joe pushes Spunk, as he claims, or whether he has been so disturbed by the bobcat that he loses his nerve and makes a fatal mistake when working near the saw. What is clear, however, is that through spirits, superstitions, and powerful folk stories—not law and order—Joe is finally granted justice, and Spunk receives the punishment he deserves.

In "Spunk," Hurston positions judicial law and folklore in opposition with one another. The sheriff and the courthouse represent official justice procedures, while the bobcat symbolizes a spiritual morality. The juxtaposition reveals the futility and ineptitude of the official (white man's) legal system, in contrast to the superstitious (black) justice that finally triggers Spunk's moral reckoning.

STORYTELLING

Growing up in Eatonville, Orlando, the country's first incorporated black township, Hurston loved to observe members of the local community sharing stories on from their porches. For Hurston, storytelling and folklore were important traditions that needed to be preserved, and she delighted in encapsulating the rich cultural and linguistic landscape of the rural South through her writing. Many of her stories are set in a town much like Eatonville, where her black characters speak in Southern vernacular. The majority of "Spunk" is told through the direct or reported speech of men in the community, stories that are framed by a distinct, third-person narrative voice. Hurston was interested in depicting the daily realities of the communities she observed and admired; in "Spunk," she explores the parameters of storytelling as a means of preserving black voices, traditions, and experiences.

Oral storytelling is an important occupation for the town folk in "Spunk," and most of the story's action is told through their voices. By positioning the black, rural characters as storytellers in their own right, Hurston closes the gap between her and the marginalized communities she depicts, amplifying their perspectives and insisting that they are heard. The opening of the story is told through the perspective of an omniscient third-person narrator. The omniscient narrator employs refined vocabulary, using words such as "sauntered" and "nonchalance," that is in direct contrast with the local dialect used by Elijah Mosley and the town folk for the majority of the story. The fact that Elijah and Walter's voices dominate "Spunk" suggests that their insight is just as, if not more, valuable than the omniscient narrator's. Elijah is a fantastic storyteller and captures the attention of all those around him whenever he speaks. Employing colorful imagery with ease and mastery, and narrating his stories through long, extended passages of speech, it's easy to forget that Elijah isn't the story's official narrator. When he describes how Joe's "Adam's apple was galloping up and down his neck like a race horse," and speculates that Joe must have "wore out half a dozen Adam's apples since Spunk's been on the job with Lena," for example, Elijah effectively makes the men in the general store hang off his every word. The dialect and vernacular used by the characters in "Spunk," is often difficult to read. The coarse language and the many local references might have seemed very alien to audiences or publishers from New York during the Harlem Renaissance. Instead of censoring or toning-down her characters' local dialect, however, Hurston refuses to pander to white or middle-class audiences, choosing instead to make a political statement about power and representation.

Through the different modes of narration in the story, Hurston examines the importance of ethical and truthful storytelling. Despite Elijah's obvious charm, he turns out to be a very unreliable narrator. Initially, he makes a grave mistake when assuring the men in the general store that Joe would never dare attack Spunk. What's more, his misplaced trust in Spunk leads him to suggest that Spunk is far too honorable to shoot an unarmed man (Joe is practically unarmed, in that he only has a razor blade). Joe's murder might have been avoided altogether, had Elijah used his gift and charisma to dissuade Joe from pursuing Spunk, rather than shaming and provoking him. When Elijah relays to the crowd of men a whole conversation that took place between Lena, Spunk and Joe "one day las' week," it becomes apparent that his stories cannot be wholly accurate. It would be near impossible for Elijah to have heard, let alone remembered, all of the dialogue that took place in a private conversation a week before. The fact that Elijah begins his tale by first checking if the men know anything about this conversation, throws into question whether the story has any truth to it at all. In a way, it doesn't matter, because the men are gathered and eager for a story that confirms their worldview and opinions about the situation.

In contrast to Elijah, Walter undermines and challenges the status quo throughout the story. In the beginning, Walter is the only man to voice his concern about the way Elijah and the men are mocking Joe. In fact, he challenges Elijah three times: "Aw 'Lige, you oughtn't to do nothin' like that," "You oughn't to said whut you did to him, 'Lige," and "Spunk will sho' kill him." In the context of the hazing he has just witnessed, Walter is brave to

stand up against Elijah in this way. Later on, Walter articulates his disapproval of Spunk loudly. Despite "derision" from the group, he continues his monologue in support of Joe, imploring the men to see Spunk for his faults. In this way, the contrast between Elijah and Walter mirrors the opposition between Spunk and Joe, with one side clearly more representative of honesty, decency, and goodness than the other. Through their different approaches to storytelling, Hurston illustrates the importance of truth telling above all else. While Elijah's stories were clearly more gripping, Walter was brave enough to challenge people's perceptions and pursue the truth, a commitment that Hurston valued in her own writing.

On the one hand, by endowing Elijah and Walter with a powerful gift for storytelling, Hurston memorializes the tradition of oral storytelling and celebrates black dialects and vernacular. On the other, she sends an important message about the ethics of storytelling, warning speakers and writers about the ethical responsibility they have to share the truth. In a way, Hurston's story is also a message for readers and listeners. She challenges her readers, in contrast to the men in the store, to think critically about the messages and stories that they receive, particularly about marginalized and vulnerable people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BOBCAT

The big, black bobcat that appears towards the end of the story, after Spunk has murdered Joe Kanty in the woods, symbolizes justice. Spunk and Lena's first night in their new house together is interrupted when the wild cat circles their house, howling loudly. Spunk takes his gun to the window, preparing to shoot the creature, but is startled when the cat looks him directly in the eye. Spunk is unable to shoot the bobcat and claims that it is Joe, come back from "Hell" to seek revenge. As an anthropologist, Hurston was fascinated with African-derived religious customs and superstitions and she often celebrated and paid tribute to vanishing black spiritual traditions through her writing. Walter Thomas gives credibility to Spunk's superstition when agreeing that the bobcat must be a manifestation of Joe's spirit because they have never seen a creature like it locally. The villagers' credulousness reveals a shared belief system within the community; they don't need evidence to prove that the bobcat is Joe, because they feel that it must be the truth. When Walter hears about the incident, he declares that Spunk "oughter be nervous after what he done." In this context, the bobcat comes to represent justice; Walter believes that Spunk deserves to be punished after taking Joe's wife and then murdering him so ruthlessly. Spunk did not face significant legal retribution for his crime (he is arrested, but his trial is short, and he's quickly set free), so the arrival of the bobcat symbolizes a form of just retribution.

In addition, Walter publicly denounces Spunk when arguing that Joe was the bigger man all along, explaining that Joe challenged Spunk knowing that he would be carrying a gun, while Joe had a measly razor. Not only is the bobcat a catalyst, then, to Spunk's bloody demise on **the circle saw**, but his inability to shoot the bobcat is also the reason that he begins to lose respect in the community. Spunk was previously envied and admired throughout the community for his fearless and unflappable approach to the dangerous circle saw, but after his disturbing encounter with the bobcat, Spunk begins to lose his nerve at work. It is unclear whether the bobcat is actually Joe or not, but Spunk's superstitions have a real, material impact on his fate. His distrust and fear manifests itself at work where he is unable to work the circle saw safely. Ultimately, Spunk does not die courageously attempting to conquer the saw, but falls onto it clumsily while loading wood onto a wagon nearby. In this sense, Spunk cannot be martyred in the village for his strength or bravery, but rather, he dies in an undignified way, cursing, shouting and blaming Joe for pushing him, as justice is finally served.

THE CIRCLE SAW

On one level, the circle saw—a piece of equipment at the sawmill where the men in the village work—represents the disposable nature of black lives in the South, as poor men in communities like Eatonville are subject to perilous and precarious physical labor. It is clear that death has been normalized for the men who work at the sawmill because Elijah provides a graphic yet flippant account of Tes' Miller, who died when "cut to giblets" on the circle saw. In contrast to Tes' Miller, who is presented as a victim of the circle saw, Elijah positions Spunk Banks as a master of the dangerous machinery. Spunk is fearless at work and is able to work the circle saw when the other men are too "skeered to go near it." The circle saw, then, also symbolizes strength, power and masculinity because Spunk gains his reputation in the community precisely because of his affinity with the saw. Further, at the very end of the story, Joe's father, Jeff Kanty, stands over Spunk's dead body, imagining that "his fingers had been the teeth of steel that laid him low." Here, Jeff conflates the saw with victory and dominance, enjoying the prospect of yielding as much power as the circle saw, and conquering his enemy. In "Spunk," the circle saw is evidence of the limitations placed upon black men in poor, rural communities; with few opportunities to explore other lines of work, the men must work at the sawmill, where they are required to be fearless, physically assertive, and unfeeling to the death surrounding them. Hurston reveals how

this environment creates callous and controlling men like Spunk Banks, who treat women possessively and challenge male rivals aggressively.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1996.

Spunk Quotes

A giant of a brown skinned man sauntered up the one street of the Village and out into the palmetto thickets with a small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm.

Related Characters: Lena Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this opening line, the story's antagonist Spunk Banks is immediately positioned as a formidable and daring man. His physical dominance is illustrated through the word "giant," and his stature is further emphasized in comparison to the "small pretty woman" on his arm. The small village only has "one street," and, following Spunk's parade, its inhabitants instantly begin gossiping about what they have seen. The fact that Spunk casually "sauntered" up the only street in the neighborhood becomes more scandalous when the reader learns that he is with Lena Kanty, a married woman. When Spunk struts past the general store—which he must know will be occupied by the local men—it is either to intentionally show off to them, or simply because he doesn't fear the consequences of the village learning about his affair.

The description of Lena as the "small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm" positions her as Spunk's accessory or plaything. Although the narrator reveals that Lena has loving feelings towards Spunk, she is objectified when the men's discussion remains focused on determining whether Spunk has rights to Lena rather than treating Lena as a person with her own desires who can make her own choices.

"He rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty."

Related Characters: Elijah Mosley (speaker), Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Elijah likens Spunk's mastery of the machinery at the sawmill where he works to his prowess with women. Elijah presents this similarity as a matter of fearlessness; Spunk doesn't worry about the dangers at work, or about people seeing him with Lena. His boldness is due in part to his reputation in the community, whereby his status protects him from judgment or criticism. However, his fearlessness also stems from his physical power; no one would dare challenge Spunk because of his overwhelming size and strength. Elijah seems to both admire and envy Spunk for his success at work and with women, and he rejoices in Spunk's callous dominance. In this context, Spunk embodies a certain expression of masculinity, where carelessness, virility, confidence, and strength constitute successful manhood.

A round-shouldered figure in overalls much too large, came nervously in the door and the talking ceased. The men looked at each other and winked.

Related Characters: The Men in the General Store, Joe Kanty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In complete contrast to Spunk, who embodies ideal masculinity, Joe Kanty represents timidity, weakness, and passivity. Joe's physical inferiority is emphasized through the description of his clothes, which are "much too large for him." If large, strong men like Spunk end up with "small pretty" women like Lena, the description of Joe in his oversized uniform renders him unmanly and almost feminine. Joe is feminized as a way of emasculating him, while Spunk, and his affair with Lena, is legitimized. Joe is nervous to visit the general store because he knows that he will face ridicule from the men, who have seen Lena and Spunk pass by. Indeed, when Joe enters, the men stop

talking and begin to wink at one another. This silent gesture is intended to shame, humiliate and exclude Joe. The men wink and jeer as a way of policing the boundaries of correct or desirable masculinity. Through excluding Joe from their definition of masculinity, the men each secure their own position within the ranks of the fraternity, and thus, it is through the rejection of Joe that they protect and preserve their own masculinity and sense of belonging.

> "'Tain't cause Joe's timid at all [...] If Joe was a passel of wile cats Spunk would tackle the job just the same."

Related Characters: Elijah Mosley (speaker), Spunk Banks, Walter Thomas, Joe Kanty

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When the men watch Joe Kanty walk towards the woods in search of Spunk, knowing that Joe has a razor blade with him and that Spunk will be armed with a gun, Walter Thomas warns Elijah that they are sending Joe to his death. Walter also insists that Spunk's affair is morally wrong and that he only "carries on wid Lena" because Joe is weak and passive, which implies that Spunk is both cowardly and a bully. When Elijah asserts that Spunk would fight a whole "passel of wile cats" in order to win over Lena, he speaks to Spunk's physical strength, but also to his pride and mental determination. Elijah's statement also reveals Spunk's ruthlessness and violent nature, because it suggests that he would attack and shoot down Joe as easily as he would a wild animal.

This quote is significant because it foreshadows multiple later events in the story. First, Elijah's statement turns out to be true because Spunk does mercilessly shoot Joe. Second, Hurston's wild cat reference evokes Joe's later reincarnation as a wild cat, where his spirit returns to challenge Spunk. As the reader learns, Elijah's assessment here is entirely wrong; when it comes to it, Spunk is unable to "tackle the job" against just one black bobcat, never mind a pack of them. Elijah's confidence here is misplaced, and it later becomes apparent that he is a very unreliable storyteller. Nevertheless, at this point in the narrative, the men in the general store are more than happy to believe Elijah's version of events because it suits their understanding of Spunk, Joe, and permissible masculinity at large.

> "Call her and see if she'll come. A woman knows her boss an' she answers when he calls."

Related Characters: Elijah Mosley (speaker), Lena Kanty, Joe Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After Joe enters the woods in search of Spunk, Elijah begins telling Walter and the men an anecdote about Spunk, Lena, and Joe from the week before. Elijah reports how Spunk had challenged Joe to take Lena back, asserting both his superiority over Joe and his control over Lena. Lena is stripped entirely of her agency over the situation when she is, once again, dehumanized and reduced to the status of Spunk's property. She is likened to a house pet when Spunk explains, "A woman knows her boss an' she answers when he calls." The pronouns in this sentence reveal the gendered power imbalance, because "boss" is presented as inherently masculine, while "woman" equates to assistant, object, or house pet. Through this quote, Hurston draws attention to the patriarchal nature of Joe and Spunk's rivalry, as they compete to demonstrate who has the power or ability to own and control Lena.

> He could work again, ride the dangerous log-carriage that fed the singing, snarling, biting, circle-saw.

Related Characters: Joe Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After Spunk has killed Joe in the palmetto forest, he faces a short trial in which he is found not guilty, on account of pleading self-defense. The third-person narrator recounts how Spunk returns to his ordinary life, enjoying his time

with Lena and continuing his work at the sawmill. This quote is perhaps the most lyrical in the whole short story and draws attention to dangers of the "circle-saw" through the evocative description, "singing, snarling, biting." The imagery presents the circle saw as a threatening wild animal, set to attack the men who use it at any moment. Again, the narrator foreshadows Spunk's demise by drawing attention to the precarious nature of his work, but also, by likening the circle saw to the wild cat that later haunts Spunk. By conflating the black bob cat—the physical manifestation of Joe's haunting spirit—and the circle saw, the narrator reveals the extent to which Spunk's bloody death is just revenge. Rather than tragic, then, Spunk's demise on the circle saw indicates that moral justice has been served for Joe's untimely death.

"…a big black bob-cat, black all over, you hear me, *black*, walked round and round that house and howled like forty, an' when Spunk got his gun […] he says it stood right still an' looked him in the eye, […] He says it was Joe done sneaked back from Hell!"

Related Characters: Elijah Mosley (speaker), Joe Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

When Elijah describes the mysterious bobcat that confronted Spunk outside of his new home with Lena, Elijah emphasizes that it was "black all over, you hear me, *black*." The bobcat's blackness is an important yet ambiguous motif. On the one hand, its blackness signifies a dark omen or warning. However, while for Spunk and Elijah it connotes an angry and powerful spirit from "Hell," the bobcat's blackness is also a reference to black folklore and voodoo culture, a central focus in Hurston's academic research as an anthropologist in Haiti and Jamaica. Through the lens of folk spirituality, the bobcat also represents retribution, because Joe's spirit is able to seek just revenge for the crimes that Spunk was never officially punished for. The blackness could also be understood as a more literal reference to race and black culture in post-emancipation America. Black townships like Eatonville, where "Spunk" is set, were established precisely in response to racism in the American South where (white) police forces refused to serve black people in mixed communities. The "*black*" bobcat is therefore juxtaposed with the *white* sheriff who comes from Orlando after Joe's murder. The sheriff represents the white man's legal justice system—which proves to be inept and inadequate— while the black bobcat symbolizes moral justice, because its presence later causes Spunk's clumsy and fatal fall onto the moving saw at work. By presenting the moral codes of spiritual black folklore as more fair and effective than the official legal system, Hurston highlights the strength of black communities and condemns racism in America.

"Humph!" sniffed Walter, "he oughter be nervous after what he done. Ah reckon Joe come back to dare him to marry Lena, or to come out an' fight […] Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk."

Related Characters: Walter Thomas (speaker), Joe Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After Elijah has described Spunk's incident with the black bobcat to the men, Walter outspokenly expresses his disapproval of Spunk. According to Walter, Spunk deserves to have been spooked by the presence of the bobcat outside his house; the creature symbolizes justice and rightful revenge. Despite "derision from the group," Walter continues by expressing that he thinks Joe "was a braver man than Spunk" all along. The fact that Joe was physically inferior to Spunk, and knew that Spunk was a "crack shot" with his gun, yet continued to pursue him anyway, demonstrates his superior courage and bravery.

For Walter, it makes perfect sense that Joe had come back to "fight Spunk," and Walter doesn't question for a moment that the bobcat is Joe's spirit reincarnated. In fact, for the men in the village, (a setting based closely on Hurston's hometown of Eatonville, which she famously describes as having no jailhouse) the bobcat symbolizes the arrival of moral justice, in the absence of legal justice. To some extent, Walter's monologue strips Spunk of his authoritative status in the community—the men's attitudes toward him begin to shift and become decidedly more negative after this—and

works to celebrate and commemorate Joe for the first time. Due to Walter, Joe is belatedly positioned as the story's hero or protagonist, and Spunk as the antihero or antagonist.

> "The fust thing he said wuz, 'He pushed me, 'Lige—the dirty hound pushed me in the back!"—He was spittin' blood at ev'ry breath."

Related Characters: Elijah Mosley (speaker), Joe Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

As Walter and Elijah walk towards Lena's house for Spunk's funeral wake, Elijah recounts how Spunk died. This line of dialogue is reported by Elijah, who describes how Spunk cursed and shouted in his last moments, accusing Joe of having "pushed me" onto the moving circle saw. One the one hand, Spunk's final words represent his frantic attempts to blame somebody—anybody—for his accident, rather than risk losing respect from the men at the sawmill. On the other hand, it is possible that Joe's spirit was actually responsible for fatally pushing Spunk. Either way, Spunk once more accuses Joe of having attacked him from "the back" like a coward, thus positioning himself as courageous and more honorable in comparison. Spunk's death, however, is far from dignified; Elijah describes in graphic detail how Spunk was "spittin' blood" between each obscene profanity and curse.

> Everyone in the Village was there, even old Jeff Kanty, Joe's father, who [...] stood leering triumphantly down upon the fallen giant as if his fingers had been the teeth of steel that laid him low.

Related Characters: Jeff Kanty, Spunk Banks

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

When Jeff Kanty imagines himself as "the teeth of steel that laid [Spunk] low," he fantasizes about avenging Joe's death, something he was too afraid to do while Spunk was alive. The violent imagery here depicts the danger and destruction as inherent to the men's definition of masculinity. The narrator describes Spunk as a "fallen giant," which at once refers to his literal fall, and evokes figurative ideas of disgrace and dishonor. Jeff glares "triumphantly" at Spunk's dead body without compassion, and thus Spunk's funeral ceremony is sullied with feelings of hatred and animosity. Even though "Everyone in the Village was there," Jeff's presence suggests that the headcount might not be an accurate representation of how much Spunk was truly respected during his life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SPUNK

The men in the general store watch with interest as Spunk Banks, "a giant of a brown skinned man," struts through the only street in the village with Lena, Joe Kanty's wife, on his arm. Spunk's bold parade elicits admiration from Elijah, who praises Spunk for being so confident and self-assured. Elijah emphasizes Spunk's strength and courage by sharing an anecdote from the sawmill, where they both work. Elijah explains how, just moments after 'Tes Miller's tragic death on **the dangerous circle saw**, Spunk had stepped "right up" to use the machinery, when everyone else had been too "skeered to go near it."

Through Elijah's dialogue, Hurston quickly positions Spunk as the epitome of archetypal masculinity. Spunk embodies strength, pride, and potency and is envied by the other men, who look up to him for both his fearlessness at work and his success with women. It is clear that, for Elijah, the moral repercussions of Spunk's involvement with Lena, a married woman, are of little importance. Spunk's physical dominance and status in the community permit him to bypass societal notions of honor, respectability, and decency, which would typically require him to be more discreet about the affair.

Moments later, Lena's husband, Joe, arrives and orders a drink. Elijah immediately begins taunting Joe by asking after Lena. Walter tries to get Elijah to stop, but Elijah presses on, telling Joe that his wife coincidentally just passed by. Joe is nervous and embarrassed because he knows that the village men have seen Lena and Spunk together, and "he knew that the men knew *he* knew."

Joe is immediately positioned as a contrasting character to Spunk. The two rival men embody diametrically opposed characteristics; while Spunk is large, bold, and shameless, Joe is shrunken, nervous, and ashamed. Walter and Elijah are also portrayed as contrasting characters to one another, where the former represents compassion and goodness, and the latter cruelty and judgment.

Joe is visibly upset and humiliated by Elijah's cruel teasing—"One could actually *see* the pain he was suffering"—and declares to the "men lounging in the general store" that he is going to "fetch" Lena back. As he speaks, Joe pulls a "hollow ground razor" from his pocket, declaring that "Spunk's done gone too fur."

While Spunk seems immune to critique, Joe is easily shamed and humiliated by Elijah and the men, who taunt him for being too weak and passive about his wife's affair. These accusations emasculate Joe and push him to reveal his hidden razor — an attempt to prove his worthiness and masculinity after all. Joe dehumanizes Lena when he shares his plans to "fetch" her, as if she were an animal or object without autonomy or agency of her own.

The men laugh "boisterously" as they watch Joe "shamble woodward" in search of Spunk and Lena. Walter warns Elijah that he and the other men have sent Joe to his death, declaring that "Spunk will sho' kill him."

The use of the adverb "boisterously" to describe the men's laughter evokes the thoughtlessness of their bullying. For the men, the laughter is playful and harmless, but for Joe, it has real, material consequences. Here, then, male laughter becomes a poignant metaphor for masculine power and dominance. The men use laughter as a way of policing Joe's masculinity and demanding that he conform to their strict and rigid notions of manhood. Walter's warning is a chilling reminder of the dangerous and destructive nature of unchecked masculinity, in contrast to the lighthearted attitude of the other men.

Elijah ignores Walter's warning, assuring the men that Joe is calling their "bluff." He thinks that Spunk would never actually shoot Joe, nor would Joe be stupid enough to confront Spunk "knowing he totes that Army 45." Elijah predicts that Joe will avoid an altercation altogether with Spunk, "hide that razor," and then "sneak back home to bed."

That Walter's warning goes unheeded by Elijah and the men demonstrates the depth of their carelessness. Elijah's prediction underestimates both Joe's bravery and Spunk's callousness. Elijah makes the mistake of conflating Spunk's virile masculinity with honor and virtue, an assumption that costs Joe his life.

Elijah then tells a story about how Joe had meekly confronted Lena and Spunk the week before. Elijah denounces Walter's accusation that Spunk only "carries on wid Lena" because her husband is timid and passive, asserting that even if Joe "was a passel of wile cats Spunk would tackle the job just the same."

Elijah's monologue centers him as the narrative voice for this part of the story. It is unlikely that he could accurately remember the conversation that passed between Lena, Spunk, and Joe the week before, and therefore, it becomes clear that his storytelling is unreliable. Nevertheless, his assertion that Spunk would fight Joe even if he "was a passel of wile cats" is an important one because it foreshadows later events in the story, when Joe's spirit returns in the form of a wild cat.

Elijah reports how Lena was "disgusted" by her husband when he begged for her to come back to him, and how Spunk authoritatively took Lena by the arm, declaring "youse mine." Lena emphasized that she didn't want to leave her house, explaining that her father had given it to her. Spunk assured her that she need not "give up whut's yours, but when youse inside don't forgit youse mine." When Lena and Spunk walked off together, Joe "jus' stood there," powerless to stop them.

Elijah's story reinforces archetypal constructions of masculinity when suggesting that Joe's passivity was repulsive to his wife, Lena. In contrast, despite the dishonorable nature of the affair, Elijah casts Spunk as a Lothario like figure, able to successfully woo and court women through his charm and appearance. However, the description that follows portrays Spunk as quite the opposite of charming; Elijah recounts how Spunk grabbed Lena by the arm and pulled her away. Here, then, Spunk uses his strength and power to get what he wants, while Lena is controlled, objectified, and reduced to male property.

The narrator interjects that "Joe Kanty never came back." The men in the general store hear "the sharp report of a pistol" ringing out from the woods, and soon after, Spunk nonchalantly enters the general store and explains his version of events to the men.

The narrator reveals that Walter's predictions were disturbingly accurate, while Elijah's were naïve and misinformed: Spunk did in fact murder Joe. The fact that Spunk is indifferent to Joe's death illustrates his cruel nature. Further, it suggests that Spunk knows that no one will challenge him, and that he won't face repercussions for his actions.

While Lena cries, Spunk claims that Joe cowardly tried to attack him from behind, so Spunk was merely acting in self-defense by shooting his attacker. The men follow Spunk out of the general store and into the woods, where he shows off Joe's "crumple[d] and limp" body. His hand is "still clutching his razor." The men look at Elijah "accusingly," and later talk about "locking [Spunk] up" for his crime, but it's just empty talk.

Spunk shows no remorse for Joe's death. He displays Joe's lifeless body in the way a trophy hunter would show off game he'd hunted in the forest. The men take no collective responsibility for the part they played in leading Joe to his death, but look "accusingly" at Elijah in order to shift the blame. Although it is quite clear that Spunk could have fought Joe off without actually killing him, the villagers refrain from challenging Spunk, presumably because they are too scared.

A sheriff from Orlando later arrests Spunk, but after a short trial, Spunk walks free. Some time later, Walter and Elijah discuss how Spunk and Lena have moved in together and are about to get married. The conversation then shifts to a mysterious altercation Spunk had with **a bobcat**.

The arrival of the sheriff symbolizes the arrival of the white man's legal system in this black community. The sheriff's authority is not often needed or used in the village. Indeed, Hurston based the setting on her hometown, Eatonville, which didn't have a jailhouse while she lived there. While the sheriff supposedly represents law and order, Hurston illustrates the incompetence of the legal justice system when Spunk remains unpunished for his crime.

According to Elijah, on Spunk's first night in the house with Lena, he was startled when a massive **black bobcat** prowled around the exterior of the house, howling loudly. When Spunk attempted to shoot the wildcat from the window, it looked him directly in the eye. Convinced that the creature was Joe, "sneaked back from Hell," Spunk found himself unable to shoot the bobcat.

In the dead of night, the same day he has moved in with Lena, Spunk is finally confronted with the moral reckoning he deserves. While the white legal justice system was unable to hold Spunk accountable for his crimes, the "black" bobcat forces Spunk to face his conscience. Through the black bobcat, Hurston acknowledges an alternative belief system, one shared by the black community and routed in African-derived folklore, that proves to be more effective in bringing justice to the town. This scene also symbolizes Spunk's emasculation, because, despite being a good shot, he is unable to "tackle" the wild creature, contrary to Elijah's earlier assertions.

Unsympathetic, Walter declares that Spunk "oughter be nervous after what he done," and argues that Joe was more courageous than Spunk all along. After all, Joe was terrified and was armed with nothing but a measly razor, and yet was still willing to fight his bully—it's less impressive when Spunk gets into fights, because he's practically fearless.

As ever, Walter challenges the status quo when professing that Spunk deserves to feel concerned about the bobcat. Walter renegotiates the terms of masculinity when claiming that Joe was more courageous than Spunk all along.

The men protest at this assessment, but then one of them explains that he witnessed Spunk getting anxious when he was working on the machinery at the sawmill earlier that day. When Spunk blamed his "wobblin'" on the equipment, the machinist declared that **the saw** was functioning just fine. Unsatisfied with this response, Spunk then accused one of the other men of pushing him, which is what must have made the machine shake, but "'twant nobody close to 'im."

Walter's statement prompts an important turning point with regard to how the men in the community perceive Spunk. When an unnamed villager describes how Spunk claimed that the machinery at work was faulty, rather than admitting that he was having a bad day, Spunk is portrayed as a liar and a coward. Spunk is desperate to maintain his status and reputation among the men, even if it means scapegoating them in the process.

The following day, the men discuss Spunk once more, but there is "no laughter. No badinage this time." Elijah and Walter somberly discuss Spunk's death as they walk slowly towards Lena's house for the funeral wake. Elijah explains how Spunk fell onto **the circle saw** at work, and how in his last moments, Spunk accused Joe of pushing him onto the deadly machinery. Walter speculates that Joe and Spunk's spirits must be having "a powerful tussle [...] some-where ovah Jordan"; he believes that "Joe's ready for Spunk an' ain't skeered anymore."

It remains ambiguous whether Spunk died on the circle saw through a mistake of his own, or whether he was somehow pushed by Joe's spirit. Either way, it is clear that, ever since Spunk saw the bobcat, his confidence has been undermined, and his nerves have plagued him. For Walter, Spunk's death represents justice because now Joe and Spunk's spirits can have a fair and equal fight "ovah Jordan."

At the funeral wake, Lena grieves passionately. When Jeff Kanty arrives, he takes pleasure in imagining himself as **the saw** that caused Spunk's death. Although he used to be terrified of Spunk, Jeff now looms down over Spunk's dead body, feeling powerful and victorious. Meanwhile, Spunk's body lies under a "dingy sheet," and upon a modest homemade cooling board, which had been balanced on some "saw horses." The men drink whiskey and make "coarse conjectures," and the women eat "heartily" and gossip about "who would be Lena's next."

By substituting one domineering male figure, Spunk, with that of yet another controlling and authoritative bully, Jeff, Hurston reveals the cyclical nature of patriarchal power structures. Further, it is clear that the men in the village have not considered the moral implications of their cruel and toxic behavior, and it is likely that the village will continue to operate as it has always done—by objectifying women, pitting men against each other, and policing the very rigid parameters of masculinity.

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