Sweat Study Guide

Sweat by Zora Neale Hurston

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In 1926, a group of writers from the younger generation of the "New Negro" movement inNew York City, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, decided to organize the quarterly magazine *Fire!!* Frustrated by the responsibilities thrust on them by Alain Locke and other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, these writers wanted to express their own ideas without the artistic constraints of a political agenda. And, although they only managed to publish one issue because of a host of complications, the magazine left behind one of the most lasting legacies of the radical younger generation of black writers, still considered Hurston's best fiction of the period: a short story titled "Sweat."

Now available in the complete collection of Hurston's stories published by HarperCollins (1995), "Sweat" focuses on the turning point in the life of Delia Jones, a washerwoman from Hurston's hometown ofEatonville, Florida. Beginning with an outburst against her abusive husband and finishing with her involvement in his death, the story follows Delia through a transformation, an upheaval of values that Hurston is interested in setting in the context of the Harlem Renaissance inNew York City. The author makes use of biblical allusion and African American folk culture to attack issues of gender and oppression that were taboo topics at the time and continue to have a wide significance today.

Author Biography

Born in 1901, Hurston grew up inEatonville, Florida, a town with an entirely African American population that was a lasting inspiration for her writings. Hurston's mother was perhaps the most important part of this cultural heritage, since she encouraged her daughter's "large spirit" and protected her from the bad influence of her father. Unfortunately, Hurston's mother died when Hurston was a teenager. Soon after her mother's death, Hurston was sent away to school inJacksonville. She went on to work as a maid for a white family, eventually joined a theatrical troupe, and then attended preparatory school at Morgan Academy inBaltimore.

Hurston continued to work her way throughHoward University, the most famous institution for black scholars in the country, from which she graduated in 1924. By this time, Hurston had begun to write short fiction, and the eminent black writers Alain Locke and Charles Johnson had noticed her. Johnson encouraged Hurston to move to New York, where the black artistic and cultural movement later known as the Harlem Renaissance was thriving. Hurston did so and successfully continued to build contacts with key figures of the movement, working as a secretary to the writer Fannie Hurst, until the novelist Annie Meyer offered her a scholarship atColumbia University to study anthropology.

The only black woman atColumbia, Hurston became a leading figure of the New Negro movement, publishing plays and short stories. In 1926, Hurston wrote "Sweat" for *Fire!!,* a magazine that was intended to express the artistic goals of the younger generation of black writers, as opposed to the seasoned and carefully political generation of Alain Locke. Hurston then began to travel to the South and collect folklore that she would use in a book of anthropology titled *Mules and Men* (1935). Hurston's most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* was published in 1937, followed by another anthropological work, her autobiography, two additional novels, and a play.

Hurston failed to support herself by her writings and suffered a decline in popularity during her later years spent in Florida. This was due, in part, to her politics; Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), was severely criticized by leaders of the New York black community because it vocalized the author's opposition to desegregation, as well as other views that were considered outdated.

Hurston continued to publish but became increasingly obscure until her death in 1960 in a Florida welfare home.

Plot Summary

Set in a small all-black Florida town nearOrlando, "Sweat" opens with Delia Jones soaking some clothes on a Sunday night. She is wondering where her husband has gone with her horse and buckboard (a simple carriage), when suddenly a bullwhip drops over her shoulder and terrifies her. Her husband, Sykes, then bursts out laughing at this joke he has played, since he is well aware of Delia's fear of snakes, and proceeds to taunt her and kick around the clothes she had put into piles.

Delia tries to ignore him, but Sykes continues to threaten her, saying that she should not be working on Sunday. Although Delia goes to church each week, she cannot manage to deliver clean clothes in time to the white people she works for if, as is considered correct practice, she does no work on Sunday. And so, in contrast to her usual meekness, Delia shouts that she will not lose the house she has worked so hard for and threatens Sykes with a frying pan. Sykes is too surprised to beat her, so he just says he hates skinny women and goes to his portly mistress for the night. Remembering all of the times Sykes wasted her money, slept with other women, and beat her, and realizing that the only thing left to care about is her "lovely" home, Delia goes to sleep. When Sykes finally comes home and kicks her feet out of the way, she resolves to remain indifferent to him.

The next very hot Saturday, Delia passes Joe Clarke's store on her way to deliver the clean clothes and pick up the dirty piles. The porch of the store is the gathering place for the joking, gossiping men of the town, and today they are talking about how Sykes is a scoundrel who beats Delia and runs around on her. But they ask for a melon, instead of following an intention to teach him a lesson, and leave when Sykes shows up with his current mistress, Bertha. Sykes buys her expensive things at the store with Delia watching, indicating how much of Delia's money he regularly spends on his cheating.

A month goes by, with the heat rising and Delia continuing to sweat at her washerwoman work. One day she comes home to find Sykes laughing next to a large wooden box covered with wire and telling her he has brought her something. Delia nearly faints when she sees that it contains a rattlesnake. Despite her pleading, he refuses to kill it and even shows it off to other townspeople. Delia is driven to fury, and at dinner she tells Sykes that she's put up with his beating and stealing, but she isn't going to put up with the snake. He tells her he'll beat her again if she stays around him, and she tells him she hates him like a "suck-egg dog," or a dog that steals eggs and sucks them dry, and threatens to tell the white people about him.

Sykes leaves, and by the time she goes to church the next day, Delia still hasn't seen him. She feels better and comes home singing a spiritual song, but she quiets down when, at the kitchen door, she cannot hear the snake in its box. After using the last match behind the stove and noticing with anger that Sykes had brought his mistress into her house, Delia brings the dirty clothes into the small bedroom to sort them and starts to sing again. But when she goes to take the clothes out of the basket, she suddenly springs back to the door because the viper is lying inside.

Terrified, Delia manages to run out of the house and lie in the barn for an hour before going to sleep. She wakes up to the sound of Sykes demolishing the wooden box, and she crouches beneath the bedroom window. She can hear the rattlesnake whirring inside. Sykes, whose head is clearing from gin, hears nothing until he reaches behind the stove to look for a match. But they are all gone, and Sykes hears the rattling right beneath him, so he leaps up on the bed. Delia can hear a horrible scream as Sykes is being attacked, and she becomes ill. While lying down to recover, she hears Sykes moan her name and gets up to walk towards the door. He crawls towards her and realizes that she had been there the whole time.

Summary

"Sweat" is the short story of Delia Jones, a Negro washerwoman whose struggles against society and her own husband finally erupt into an act of passive aggression, totally changing the complexion of her life.

As the story opens, Delia Jones sorts clothes on the kitchen floor of her home. It is eleven o'clock on a Sunday evening in July in a small town in Florida. Mondays are long days for Delia, who earns her money as a washerwoman. This Sunday night ritual helps to ease her burden for the next day.

Delia is content and hums to herself all the while wondering where her husband, Sykes, is and why he has not returned with her horse and cart. As Delia is lost in her own thoughts, a long, black, limp object touches her shoulder, and she screams with fright. Realizing it is a bullwhip and not a snake, Delia relaxes a little bit and screams at her husband for creating fear in her.

Sykes is contemptuous of Delia for her industriousness and for being thin, and he enjoys scaring her. Sykes calls out Delia's two-faced position of going to church all day on Sunday and then washing the clothes of white people on Sunday night. Delia has her weekly schedule of picking up and delivering laundry on Saturdays, and it takes her all week to complete her work.

Sykes kicks the sorted clothes together on the floor, and Delia erupts at the behavior. Delia has taken Sykes' physical and mental abuse for the fifteen years of their marriage and has reached her limit. The sweat of Delia's work built the house, and she has fixed it the way she likes it, complete with every tree and flower planted. Delia picks up a frying pan as a threat to Sykes and tells him that he and his newest girlfriend will not get any piece of Delia's home.

Sykes does not know how to respond to this newly assertive Delia and taunts her for being too skinny before leaving to be with his fat girlfriend. Delia curls her tiny self up in the big featherbed and realizes that she can no longer hope for love in light of all the abuse and infidelity from Sykes. Her little house is all she has to hold onto. Delia is awakened by Sykes, who roughly kicks her feet and pulls the covers from her in the bed, but Delia is now resolved to ignore her abusive husband.

On the next Saturday morning, the regular customers at Joe Clarke's general store are sitting on the store's porch and watch Delia pass by in her cart as she makes her laundry deliveries. The men conclude that Delia is a fine, hard-working woman and surely deserves better than the likes of Sykes Jones for a husband. One of the men comments that he would have married Delia himself if Sykes had not found her first.

The men do not condone Sykes' laziness, abusive behavior and infidelity and would like to take Sykes and his new girlfriend out into the swamp and kill them or at least beat them senseless. Realizing that this idea is just talk, the men change the subject and ask

Joe Clarke to bring out a cold watermelon. The refreshment must wait, however, when the sight of Sykes and his girlfriend approaching the store makes the men scatter.

Sykes offers to buy anything in the store for his new woman, Bertha, just as Delia is passing by on her way home, and it pleases Sykes that Delia has caught sight of him buying things for Bertha. After the pair leaves, the men return to the porch and resume their watermelon feast. The men know that Sykes has paid Bertha's rent at Della Lewis' boarding house for three months and has promised Bertha his house as soon as he can get Delia out of it.

Delia's humiliation knows no end, and she avoids people in town because of what they know about her and Sykes. The summer continues to swelter into August, and Delia's life is nothing but sweat and work. Then, one day she returns home, and Sykes blocks her from entering the house. Delia sees a box on the porch and realizes that it is a wooden crate with a wire grate over the top.

Sykes pretends that the contents of the box are a gift for Delia, who screams and nearly faints when she realizes there is a six-foot rattlesnake inside. Knowing Delia's fear of snakes, Sykes finds the situation extremely amusing and will not get rid of the reptile despite Delia's repeated pleas. Sykes even takes every opportunity to show the snake to some of the men in town, and his prowess in taming reptiles makes him feel superior.

One evening during supper, Delia tells Sykes that she has endured his beatings and his running around with other women for all their married life, but she will not tolerate the snake in her house any longer. Once more Sykes is shocked by Delia's assertiveness and retorts that he hates Delia and is tired of being with her. Delia returns the insults and warns Sykes that she will tell the white people if he ever touches her violently again.

Sykes leaves the house and does not return, leaving Delia alone on Sunday morning to attend the all-day church service in peace. When Delia returns home, the snake is quiet in its crate, and Delia can sense that another woman has been in her house. Delia lights a lamp and begins her Sunday night laundry ritual. She recoils in horror to find the rattler in her hamper of dirty clothes.

Delia stands paralyzed in terror and watches the snake coil onto the bed. Finally finding the strength to move, Delia runs to the kitchen where the wind blows out her lamp. Delia finds her way to the hayloft in the barn before she can feel safe again. Delia recovers her wits and lies in the hay thinking about her life. She finally falls asleep.

Delia wakes in the morning to the sounds of Sykes destroying the snake's crate. Delia watches from the hayloft as Sykes stands for a few moments at the kitchen door before entering the house. Moving stealthily now, Delia climbs down from her perch in the barn and moves to peer into the bedroom window. Delia knows that the sounds coming from Sykes moving in the house will awaken the rattlesnake.

Sykes does not hear the snake as he tries to find a match to light the lamp. Not able to see the snake in the darkness, Sykes jumps up on the bed, and Delia can hear Sykes'

screams of horror as the snake attacks its owner. Delia feels ill from the sounds coming from the bedroom window, and she crawls to one of her flowerbeds to lie still. Sykes calls out for help, but Delia stays silent.

Finally, Delia moves toward the house, and she can hear Sykes' voice rise hopefully as she approaches. Delia is struck by the horror of Sykes' constricting throat and swollen eye. She runs outside to wait for Sykes to die with the realization that Delia has known all along what was happening to her husband.

Analysis

The author explores the theme of freedom as Delia finally reaches a place where she can be released from the oppressive Sykes. The burdens placed on Delia through her work and white society are heavy enough without having to endure the abuse inflicted on her by her husband. Delia is a religious woman and could never bring herself to inflict intentional harm, but she has been pushed to a place of no return when her last vestige of hope, her little house, is threatened.

The author does not want the reader to pass judgment on Delia's act of letting her husband die but instead to understand the grief and desperation which drive this woman to this point. At the time the story was written in 1926, African Americans still had not begun to realize any civil rights, and black women had an especially difficult life, subservient to black men who were oppressed by white men. Delia represents all black women whose work sustains families in spite of physical, mental and emotional abuse.

The author uses sexual and religious symbolism in the story to represent important themes in the lives of black women. Oppressed black men would often times inflict inappropriate sexual behavior on their women as a means of control. The "long, round, limp and black" bullwhip which brushes Delia's shoulder and the rattlesnake itself are obvious phallic symbols by which Sykes controls Delia. Sykes even shows off the rattlesnake to the men in town so that his boasts symbolize his superior masculinity and prowess.

The snake also evokes the role of the serpent, or the devil, in the Garden of Eden story. Delia is finally pushed to accept the gift of freedom, through from an evil source. Delia clings to her religion as the last stalwart of hope during her period of extreme trials this summer. The author tells us that "Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months." Delia's suffering is of Biblical proportions, and she finds faith in spite of her sorrow.

Another important literary element in the story is dialogue. The author uses a dialect common to blacks in the South, apparent in the colloquialisms and style used by all the characters. For example, when Sykes lets the bullwhip graze Delia's shoulder, she responds, saying, "Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me - looks just like a snake, an' you know how skeered Ah is of snakes. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'm gointuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness."

The story is also filled with other literary elements, such as similes. One example appears when Sykes senses Delia's newfound assertiveness. "Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf." The visual imagery presented in this simple sentence speaks volumes about Delia's new state of mind.

Finally, the importance of the story's title, "Sweat," implies more than the obvious meaning stemming from Delia's hard work. The author wants the reader to understand that the sweat symbolizes all salty bodily fluids - blood, sweat and tears - which Delia has endured and suffered and is at last able to dry.

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Characters

Bertha

Bertha is Sykes's plump mistress, with whom he is openly cheating on Delia. Elijah Moseley calls her a "big black greasy Mogul" (this last word referring to the Muslim rulers ofIndia between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries), a description that connotes some of the white stereotypes and racist caricatures of the time as to what kind of women were attractive to black men. Bertha has picked up a bad reputation in her previous town and carried it to Eatonville; she is bold enough, unlike Sykes's previous mistresses, to call for him at Delia's gate. For three months, she has been living in Della Lewis's disreputable inn, and Delia can tell that Sykes has brought her into their house.

Dave Carter

One of the men on the porch of Joe Clarke's store, Dave mentions that Bertha looks like an alligator when she opens her mouth to laugh. The character of the same name in Hurston's play *Mule Bone* (coauthored with Langston Hughes) is described as a "Dancer, Baptist, soft, happy-go-lucky character, slightly dumb."

Joe Clarke

Joe runs the general store on the main street. His character is based on the real man of the same name who ran the general store during Hurston's childhood, and the gathering of people on this porch is an important and omnipresent element in much of her fiction. Eatonville residents gathered there to joke and gossip, but there was also philosophy, politics, and storytelling in their conversations, as Joe demonstrates in his commentary about men who abuse their wives like "a joint uh sugar-cane," throwing them away when they're finished with them.

Delia Jones

The protagonist of the story, Delia is a washerwoman fighting to keep her house and her sanity. She is a thin woman with sagging, overworked shoulders, and she is deathly afraid of snakes, a fear that her husband cruelly exploits. "Sweat" marks a turning point in her life, when she has finally had enough, and the reader can notice an entirely "new Delia" emerging between the first time she confronts Sykes and his death.

As the men on the porch of Joe Clarke's store remember, Delia used to be a very pretty young woman until her husband began to abuse her. It is clear from lines such as "Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf' that she had taken his beatings, unfaithfulness, and squandering of her money without a

fight for a very long time. But Delia also says to Sykes, "Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh," and the reader can infer from the vehemence of this outburst that she used to love him quite a lot before they were married fifteen years ago and his cruelty began.

The story does not describe how their marriage came to be so miserable, but Sykes is the main source of Delia's problems. She does not complain about working so hard for white people to pay for her "lovely" home, and Joe Lindsay notes how she delivers the clean clothes every week without fail. Imagery like "Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth inGethsemane and up the rocks of Cavalry many, many times during these months" paints her as a victim, a martyr even, of intersecting oppressions, from the white community and from her husband. She has tried meekness, friendliness, and hard work to get along with Sykes and finally only wants to be left in peace to do her work, to live in the house she has worked for, and to worship on Sundays. It is only when she cannot possibly take the abuse from her husband anymore that she begins to be aggressive towards him and, as a sort of last measure, to refuse to help while he is dying.

Nevertheless, the reader is left contemplating Delia's actions during her husband's death. Hurston seems to emphasize that Delia is driven to this end with no alternative, but she also suggests an element of emancipation and a refusal to bow to conventional ethics in her character. This "new Delia" has changed quite radically, and along with her newfound freedom has come a loss of innocence.

Sykes Jones

The wife beater who is duly punished by the end of "Sweat," Sykes is Delia's husband of fifteen years. Since two months after their marriage, he has physically and verbally abused his wife, as well as frequently cheating on her and wasting her money. He is no longer attracted to skinny women and prefers his mistresses to be portly and, if his current lady is an indication, disreputable. Sykes is a prankster whose fascination with snakes leads to his death by the same creature he caught to exasperate his wife.

The men on Joe Clarke's porch point out that there are plenty of men like Sykes who wring "every drop uh pleasure" out of their wives, cheat on them, and are overbearing and self-important profligates. It is possible that Sykes was not always this way, since Jim Merchant mentions that he used to be very "skeered uh losin" Delia when they first married. But he has become more brazen and open in his abuse even since the beginning of the story, although Delia's finally standing up for herself seems to halt his beatings.

Some of Sykes's characteristics, particularly his attraction to big women and his money-wasting, were common stereotypes that white people held about black men, reinforced in various racist publications during the time in which Hurston wrote the story. In fact, he embodies a great many bad traits that leaders of the Harlem Renaissance discouraged black authors from portraying, such as heavy drinking, sexual deviance, and

irresponsibility. And, at moments such as Delia's threatening to go "tuh de white folks bout *you,"* Sykes seems less demonic and more victimized himself as a result of his ignoring white value systems. Indeed, Hurston allows the reader some room to pity him in the closing moment of the story, when his neck is swollen and he has "one open eye shining with hope" despite the fact that his wife has left him to die.

Jim Merchant

Jim comments on Sykes' s habit of cheating and relates the time that Sykes tried to seduce his wife. Like the other men gossiping on Joe Clarke's porch, he jokes in heavy Eatonville slang and provides some important insight into the general attitude of the town towards Delia, Sykes, and Bertha.

Elijah Moseley

Elijah is the man from Joe's porch who jeers at Sykes's treatment of women and pesters Joe for a watermelon.

Old ManAnderson

Suggesting that the men whip and kill Sykes, Old Man Anderson does not follow through on his advice to the rest of the men on the porch.

Walter Thomas

Walter remembers that Delia used to be a pretty young woman before she married Sykes.

Themes

Oppression

One of Hurston's central preoccupations in "Sweat" is the problem of oppression within the black community. Sykes's ceaseless cruelty towards his wife is by far the most difficult part of Delia's situation, and she must seek emancipation from her tyrannical husband before she tries to address the wider system of racial inequality.

This is not to say that Hurston oversimplifies Delia's problems; her poverty and hard work are inextricably connected with whites, for whom she must work. A major irony in the story is that Delia must work so hard to clean white people's clothes while her own clothes are dirtied with sweat and blood. It is precisely the combination of white racism and spousal abuse that leads Delia to a level of desperation not at all uncommon amongst black women attempting to carry the burden of two forces of oppression at once. Given the reality of her social and economic situation, Delia can no longer remain indifferent to her increasingly abusive husband, as she has attempted to do for fifteen years.

The story does not provide any neat solutions; indeed, Delia's options are quite limited. Hurston is careful to emphasize that a black washerwoman is not able to clean away the abuse of a philandering and merciless husband while following a strict and meek Christian moral code. As she must work on Sundays (against convention) in order to fulfill the heavy obligations to her white oppressors, Delia eventually finds that she must resort to a conventionally immoral way of dealing with Sykes. Whether she is justified in standing by while he dies, and whether Hurston is advocating a transgression of a widely accepted moral standard, is not entirely clear, but Hurston certainly illustrates the stark desperation of Delia's situation in vivid detail.

The editors of *Fire!!* may have felt that they needed to publish their own magazine in order to bring up these issues at all; the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance did not approve of topics like immorality and oppression within the black community. Wishing to portray blacks as civilized, modern, and virtuous people, Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois were hesitant to highlight conditions that would be detrimental to their agenda. They were interested in trying to decrease the large numbers of black men lynched each year more than they were interested in allowing black writers free rein in their work. But Hurston and her peers professed that they were unwilling to accept any artistic compromise, which is why "Sweat" does not compromise in portraying all sides of a black woman's oppressive reality.

Sex and Love

The prominence of phallic snake imagery, as well as the infidelity and the sexual power struggle in the story, makes sex a key theme in "Sweat." When Hurston writes in the

opening of the story that "something long, round, limp and black" fell on Delia's shoulders, she is playing a prank on the reader in somewhat the same way that Sykes is playing a trick on Delia. This phallic reference is purposefully shocking so it can begin to ask questions about sex and love in the context of the Jones' s marriage.

The first thing the reader wonders is why Delia is so terrified of this "bull whip," which falls on her shoulders, emphasizing that it represents the burden of oppression. It soon becomes clear that her fear derives from the beatings to which she has been subjected for fifteen years. Sykes seems to be painted, through the description of his fixation with snakes, as an aggressive rapist figure. Hurston does not, however, treat this theme as a simple complaint about male phallic tyranny. Indeed, the fact that this bull whip is "limp," combined with Delia's insults, such as calling her husband a "suck-egg dog" whose "black hide" is like "uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber," questions what the author is really saying about Sykes's sexuality.

In his book *Jump at the Sun,* the critic John Lowe highlights these instances of Delia's "verbally emasculating" her husband (a concept related to castration, or taking away "manhood") and argues that Hurston must be thinking about "the emasculation of the black man by a racist, capitalist society." This suggests a more complex power dynamic between Delia and Sykes than at first seems to be the case; for example, Hurston seems conscious of the impotence Sykes faces as a black man, exhibiting some of the stereotypical traits that leaders of the Harlem Renaissance attempted to shun.

Although she does not seem to be vindicating Sykes, the author is certainly playing with the idea of a reversal of sexual power into the hands of a thin woman who toils ceaselessly for white people. In fact, Sykes's sexuality (associated with black folk values) is his undoing. As Lowe points out, it is when he jumps on the bed, the sexual space in the home, that he is finally poisoned by the representation of his violent sexuality. The manner in which this violent sexuality plays into the conflict of the forces of racial and domestic oppression in the story adds a complex and ambiguous dimension to the couple's sexual power struggle.

Style

Biblical Allusion

Hurston makes a number of allusions to the Bible in "Sweat" that underscore her authorial intentions. Perhaps the most important is the allusion to the Garden of Eden, with the serpent taking on its role of temptation (common to the Western Christian interpretation of the story ofEden) and giving Delia the opportunity to allow for her husband's death. Delia's character may not seem much like Eve's, but Delia does obtain from the serpent the forbidden knowledge of how to disregard convention and subvert Christian morality.

The implications of this allusion are unclear, however. Hurston might be condemning Delia's complicity with the serpent, or she might be praising her ability to bend the rules of Christian morality so that Sykes is punished by his own evil device□an idea Delia expresses as "whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly." This reference to the Devil is one of the phallic references discussed above and highlights the fact that, like the function of sexual imagery in the story, Hurston's biblical allusions are highly ambiguous.

Further complicating the meaning of these allusions are Delia's song about crossing the Jordan, which refers to Joshua leading the nation of Israel across the river, and her crawling "over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary," which were journeys of Jesus. They place Delia in the role of leading her people to a new destiny, either as a warrior or a martyr, although this becomes much less clear when seen together with her more subversive role as the enabler of the serpent. Perhaps the best way to regard Hurston's biblical allusions is as a method of emphasizing Delia's ability to draw power from all sources available to her and to manifest it in the manner most pertinent to her struggle.

Black Southern Dialect

Hurston is famous for her thorough knowledge of black slang and folk culture, and her use of black southern dialect is an important stylistic device in "Sweat." The dialect itself, aside from portraying the authentic speech patterns of Eatonville, allows Hurston to take ownership of the language. Like Delia, who assumes power through the story by shouting back at Sykes and insulting him, the author gains her own autonomy over the meaning of the text by putting it into the rhythm of her community's speech pattern.

Hurston's ability to switch between Eatonville dialect and technically grammatical English allows her to act as a sort of intermediary and interpreter, bringing southern folk wisdom to New York. The philosophy expounded, for example by Joe Clarke, about using one's wife like sugar cane, is a kind of wisdom very specific to the metaphors, rhythm, and imagery available in Eatonville slang. Relating this, as well as phrases such

as "suck-egg dog" (a seemingly contradictory phrase perfect for relating Sykes's violently sexual emasculation) in authentic phonetics gives Hurston authority in her radical politics and themes; she manages to pose as an ambassador of her culture's wisdom. Nonbourgeois black readers might be more willing to accept ideas in this form than in the language of a doctoral student atColumbia, since folk wisdom seems much more tried and true than the whims of an individual, ambitious writer, especially when it is presented in authentic dialect.

Historical Context

Prior to and during World War I, African American demographics underwent a major shift, with over a million black people migrating north. Filled with hope of more jobs and less racial oppression, many black Southerners saw cities such as New York andChicago as the land of their deliverance, although this was not always true in practice. Instead, blacks largely found it difficult to settle in and, after the war, tended not to benefit economically from the "Roaring Twenties," finding themselves segregated to poor racial ghettos such as Harlem inNew York City. The Ku Klux Klan remained active, actually increasing in membership during these years, and segregation was widespread.

What the newly arrived blacks in New York did find, however, between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression, was an unprecedented flowering of black art and culture later coined the "Harlem Renaissance." Institutions like the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were becoming increasingly influential, and black political thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois held more power and were much less conciliatory to the white gentry than were their predecessors. Black culture was suffused with the ideology of the "New Negro," which emphasized abandoning traditionalist values and becoming a modern American citizen exercising the right to vote□and cultured leaders like Alain Locke were actively supporting this ideology in their magazines.

But Hurston's reaction to the values of this movement demonstrates that they were not entirely pervasive, especially within the younger generation of writers living inHarlem. When she moved to New York towards the end of the "Great Migration" northwards, Hurston was more idealistic about the unity and agenda of the New Negro movement than she later became. She was invited to New York by Locke himself and proceeded to ingratiate herself with a number of key political and artistic figures inHarlem, writing against Marcus Garvey and in favor of Du Bois and his efforts to lower mortality rates and work for the benefit of his people.

After publishing a short story in Locke's *New Negro* magazine, however, she and some of her peers began to be skeptical about elements of the magazine's artistic agenda, such as its tendency to avoid commonly caricatured folk traits such as black superstition. As Robert Hemenway writes in his literary biography of Hurston, "The established bourgeois position was that black art should avoid reinforcing racist stereotypes by refusing to portray the lowest elements of the race." The magazine *Fire!!* was created to refute these black bourgeois values when they clashed with "pure" artistic goals.

Spearheaded by Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, *Fire!!* had major difficulties getting published at all, including a lack of money and a fire in an apartment that destroyed several hundred copies, and the editors managed to publish only one issue before the magazine collapsed. But "Sweat," along with the other pieces published in 1926, was a major achievement for Hurston and her subsection of Harlem

Renaissance writers, earning them a little-acknowledged uniqueness within a movement whose leaders wanted to portray a unified front to the country.

Walker was one of the first to champion Hurston's talent, placing a gravestone on the field where Hurston was buried in an unmarked plot and writing about her rediscovery, in essays such as the forward to Hemenway's literary biography of Hurston.

The black feminist criticism that dominated Hurston's revival largely focused on her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* but critics have also discussed the intersection of race and gender in "Sweat" since the late 1970s. Hemenway discusses "Sweat" as a "remarkable work, her best fiction of the period," portending the "unlimited potential in Hurston's folk material when an organic form grew from the subject matter." John Lowe discusses the sexual and racial politics, as well as the folk roots, of the story in his book *Jump at the Sun,* and other critics tend to discuss it in these terms as well, always setting it in the context of the political climate of the Harlem Renaissance.

Critical Overview

Fire!! received a critical review of mild disinterest. Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway explains that the editors planned, even hoped, for Du Bois to dislike it because he had previously condemned the notion of apolitical writing and his disfavor would confirm that the magazine was indeed "pure." But Du Bois's NAACP journal simply ignored *Fire!!,* aside from a bland endorsement, leaving the editors actually brainstorming for ways of making the magazine more offensive. Hemenway writes that Benjamin Brawley, "a pillar of the black literary establishment," disliked it intensely. Alain Locke only bothered to censure the magazine's "effete echoes of contemporary decadence" but later praised its "anti-Puritanism." This critical response was the final factor, after all of the difficulties in publication, that led to the magazine's collapse: It was not received as controversial enough to procure any heated condemnation or acclaim.

"Sweat" itself received no major critical attention until Hurston's revival by black feminist writers over fifteen years after her death. All of her writing was very highly regarded during the Harlem Renaissance, and she was thought to be one of the most prodigious writers in her generation, but Hurston rapidly lost her fame and even the ability to publish her works. By the end of her life, she was almost completely ignored by the literary community, in part because of her old-fashioned politics on issues such as segregation. Black feminist writer Alice

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell examines the place of "Sweat" within the political climate of theHarlem Renaissance.

"Sweat" is an intriguing story in terms of what it is "supposed" to be about, especially in its treatment of racial issues. The key piece of a magazine eager to defy the Harlem Renaissance artistic agenda, the story would have been expected to exercise its artistic freedom and break the taboos of leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois. Hurston had certainly grown irritated with the pressure from Du Bois and Alain Locke, her former mentor, to write with politics in mind. As she later wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road,* "from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject." Given this sentiment, one might even expect her to have made a particular effort to spite Du Bois's politicized view of art and write something that would be offensive to the Harlem Renaissance leadership.

And there is evidence that "Sweat" does defy Du Bois's agenda, since it is the story of a conflict between an abusive black man and his wife, one that results in the wife's standing by while her husband dies. As far as the black literary elite inHarlem was concerned, authors were supposed to play down interracial problems and instead help to achieve a unity of purpose and direction for the ideal of the New Negro. In 1925, Locke wrote in the *New Negro* that Hurston and her peers "have no thought of their racy folk types as typical of anything but themselves or of their being taken or mistaken as racially representative." This comment actually comes out of an essay that considers this ignorance a positive sign for the newly developing black consciousness and their unprecedented freedom to write what they wish, but Locke remains condescending towards authors who choose to place the race in this light. One would expect him to find a story like "Sweat" inappropriate and counterproductive to the goals of his movement.

Du Bois, who, unlike Locke, never claimed to be exclusively interested in "art for art's sake," was even more condemnatory of stories with plots he considered unflattering to African Americans. Describing the obligations of black writers to the New Negro movement, Du Bois describes the important political influence of black artists in his article "The Creative Impulse," proclaiming, "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." Locke was irritated when literature displayed poor, uneducated blacks, which (he felt) reinforced stereotypes and impeded progress, but Du Bois was irate, especially if they reflected some of the common white stereotypes against blacks. Du Bois was also more specific about the stereotypes to avoid, writing that whites want to see "Uncle Toms, Topsies, good 'darkies' and clowns" and that black writers should refuse to give them anything that could be construed as such.

So it is difficult to see how these black leaders could fail to condemn "Sweat." Sykes in particular has many of the "folk" characteristics of which Locke disapproved, such as a preference for larger women and a problem with wasting money, which many whites placed on blacks as a race. And Du Bois might even have seen Delia as an "Uncle

Tom," which refers to the servile title character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and came to be used as a label for blacks who tried to emulate or gain favor with whites. Indeed, Delia says she does not mind dirtying her black skin with sweat and blood in order to clean the clothes of white people, and she actually tells Sykes "Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout *you,* mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han' s on me." One would expect Du Bois to be particularly angry that Delia, in a way, carries out this warning, leaving Sykes to his death so she can be left to earn her living as a diligent servant of whites.

In reality, however, Locke and Du Bois ignored the story. Locke made only two short and conflicting references to the entire *Fire!!* magazine, and Du Bois did not even mention it. There was some very negative criticism from Benjamin Brawley, a prominent academic and black leader, but the major players in Harlem Renaissance leadership did not appear to be offended enough to comment.

They could have been purposefully ignoring "Sweat" and the rest of the magazine because they were worried about attracting attention to it, but this does not explain why the *Crisis,* the NAACP journal edited by Du Bois, made a brief and positive announcement of the magazine's publication. It is more likely that Hurston's short story did not offend Du Bois or Locke because it had more in common with the spirit of the movement than she and her fellow editors of *Fire!!* would have liked to admit. Indeed, a closer look at the thematic implications of "Sweat" reveals, ironically, that it can be read as an allegory for the birth of the New Negro that is distinctly in line with the conception of Locke and Du Bois. To illustrate this point, it is necessary to examine Delia's moral journey, concentrating on the values she denies and gains, and revealing how she comes to be what the black leaders actually meant by a "New Negro."

It is clear that "Sweat" is about some kind of birth. The story is heavily allusive to the Garden of Eden in the Bible, complete with the snake of temptation, and Delia is, in a sense, reborn at the end of the story with a radically different life view. This birth is not a straightforward representation of the Bible, however; it is complicated by other biblical references to the life of Jesus ("over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary") and to the journey of the nation of Israel under Joshua *("Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time"),* by which Hurston begins to develop an allegory of the birth and emancipation of a people that mixes and matches biblical stories suitable for her goals.

In fact, in the role of the prophet or deliverer, Delia undergoes a process of reinterpreting biblical authority, just as she reinterprets the religious custom of not working on the Sabbath, in order to provide herself a realistic and original solution to her difficult life. For example, she reinterprets the "awful calm" she finds after nearly being killed by the snake into the "calm time" for crossing the Jordan, and she reassigns the meaning of her sweaty hard work for white people, in a way, in order to baptize her followers, because a prophet always has followers, in the "salty stream that had been pressed from her heart," the baptismal font of her sweat. But perhaps the clearest example is her reversal of the story of the Garden of Eden by refusing to act in the

passive role of Eve and turning the symbol of abusive male power, the snake, against itself.

The allegorical lesson of "Sweat," then, must consist of the value system that Delia gains from this process of reinterpretation and rebirth. And, this is where the story's biblical imagery and allegory connect specifically to the prevailing concept of the New Negro.

The principle value system Delia denies and from which she leads her people away is that of Sykes and his abusive, phallic sexuality associated with the snake. By the end of the story, Delia has not simply retained her "triumphant indifference to all that he was or did"; she has actively and violently allowed what "goes over the Devil's back" to "come under his belly." And her vehement rejection is not just of Sykes's abuse; it is of all "he was or did"□his laziness, his preference for large women, his money-wasting, and his prankster pleasure-seeking□all of which are symbols of the discriminatory white stereotypes of blacks and the "folk type" that so irritated Locke. Under this allegorical interpretation, the whole point of "Sweat" is to reject the value system of the "old" Negro and start anew. Perhaps this accounts for Locke's indifference to *Fire!!* Its feature piece seems superficially offensive but actually reinforces basic New Negro ideology, such as the importance of entering a new cosmopolitan moral system and denying the folk values that Harlem Renaissance leadership considered detrimental to the image of the race.

It is important to note, however, that "Sweat" also considers the negative consequences of this New Negro rebirth. From the story's treatment of white oppression, for example, it is clear that Hurston is worried about the predominance of Du Bois and Locke's artistic agenda. In rejecting Sykes, Delia is also rejecting a philosophy that, albeit violent and abusive, refuses white oppression as her own does not. When Sykes says, "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house," he is demonstrating independence from white capitalist (and exploitative) values, unlike his wife, and Hurston is sympathetic to this. The critic John Lowe even suggests in his book *Jump at the Sun* that the story laments and condemns Sykes's indirect murder. By this logic, Hurston's allegory of the rise of New Negro philosophy is somewhat ironic or at least ambivalent.

Nevertheless, Hurston's ambivalence about the process she is allegorizing does not prevent her, like Delia, from allowing Sykes's ideology to destroy itself. The reader, and the author, ultimately side with Delia, and the allegory of "Sweat" overturns sympathy with the "old" Negro. Hurston's political statement is subtle about what it affirms, but it does ultimately reinforce the New Negro politics of Locke and Du Bois.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Sweat," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Champion discusses gender oppression in "Sweat," and its symbolically negative outcome.

Even more than "The Gilded Six-Bits," "Sweat" exposes gender oppression by revealing the plight of women in a sexist society. The protagonist, Delia, works long hours washing laundry for white customers, whose economic privilege is contrasted with Delia's economic status: not only can she not afford to hire someone to wash her laundry, but she must also wash wealthy people's laundry to provide for herself. While the story demonstrates the disparity of wealth between the wealthy Winter Park whites and the poor Eatonville blacks, the main plot of the story does not center on this form of economic exploitation, but rather upon how Delia's husband, Sykes, exploits her. Ironically, throughout the course of the story, sweat signifies Delia's exploited labor and Sykes's poisoned mental state that ultimately leads to the physical poisoning that kills him. Additionally, "Sweat" exposes gender oppression and economic exploitation by suggesting that "what goes around comes around."

The story opens with a technical description of Delia's labor that reveals that she works long hours every day of the week. Early on, the narrative establishes that Sykes both physically and mentally torments Delia. Scolding him for scaring her by sliding across her knee a bullwhip that she thinks is a snake, Delia says she may die from his foolishness. More interestingly, she asks him, "where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony," informing him that the pony belongs to her and that she pays for its upkeep. He responds by reminding her that he has told her repeatedly "to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house" and by claiming that she should not "wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath." Although the argument begins with a physical scare, it soon turns to a quarrel about economics. After scolding him for scaring her, Delia reminds him that she owns the pony, the means by which Sykes leaves the house. His rebuke reveals his resentment that Delia owns the material goods he wishes to use to entice Bertha to remain his girlfriend. He promises to give Bertha the house as soon as he "kin git dat 'omanoutadere." Sykes pays Bertha's rent and spends money to take her toWinter Park for dates. He promises her that he will give her whatever she wants: "Dis is mah town an' you sho' kin have it." Significantly, when Delia sees Sykes with Bertha, he is at the store purchasing groceries for her and telling her to "git, whutsoever yo' heart desires." Not only does Sykes spend Delia's money on Bertha, he wants to give Delia's other possessions to her.

Delia develops from a meek woman who acquiesces to Sykes's abuse to one who defends herself both verbally and physically. Although Delia has suffered abuse from Sykes for fifteen years, she has yet to refute him. However, during this particular argument that has turned to economics, her "habitual meekness slips," and she responds to Sykes's verbal abuse with the assertion that she has been washing clothes and sweating for fifteen years to feed him and to pay for her house. Later, when he refuses to remove the snake from the house, she says, "Ah hates you, Sykes. . .. Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah

belly is full up tuh mah neck." Significantly, she ends her argument by saying, "Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman al yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house" (emphasis added). Although the story involves a love triangle, the more important conflict is the battle between Sykes and Delia for possession of the house. Delia is much more concerned with protecting her property than she is with redeeming her marriage.

Hoping that Sykes will receive retribution for abusing her, a week before he dies, she says, "Whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther. Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." Also, announcing that she refuses to leave her house, Delia threatens to report Sykes to the white people. Apparently, this threat scares him, for the next day he puts the snake in Delia's laundry basket. However, Delia does not depend on the "law" for justice. She seems to agree with the Eatonville community, which acknowledges both that there "oughter be a law about" Sykes and that "taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im." Depending on forces above the law, Delia allows Sykes's retribution to come to him "naturally. " Unlike the conjure that renders poetic justice in many of Hurston's works, Sykes's own action renders justice in "Sweat": the very snake he intends to bite Delia bites him instead.

Sykes's self-inflicted poisoning brings about poetic justice, as he is the victim of his attempt to kill Delia and thus gain possession of the house; but the sweat that comes from Delia's exploited labor is not self-inflicted: it is inflicted upon her by a vile social system that privileges wealthy whites. This vile social system also, to be sure, victimizes Sykes. As Lillie P. Howard points out, Sykes clearly is Delia's antagonist, but part of the reason he resents her is "because her work makes him feel like less than a man. He resents her working for the white folks, washing their dirty laundry, but he does not resent it enough to remove the need for her to do so." Similarly, Lowe argues that although readers empathize with Delia, "the emasculation of the black man by a racist, capitalist society is on Hurston's mind too. ..."

Critics argue whether or not Delia's refusal to help Sykes after the snake has bitten him exemplifies her spiritual downfall. Lowe says, "Delia's Christian righteousness, evident in the scene when she returns from a 'Love Feast' at church, also seems challenged by her failure to seek help for Sykes after he has been bitten by the snake at the end of the story and by her deliberate showing herself to him so he will know she knows what he attempted and that there is no hope for him." Cheryl A. Wall says, "Delia makes no effort to warn, rescue, or even comfort Sykes. She exacts her revenge but at a terrible spiritual cost. .. . The narrator does not pass judgment. Yet, how will Delia, good Christian though she has tried to be, ever crossJordan in a calm time?" Contrary to Wall and Lowe, Myles Hurd argues, "Because Hurston exerts quite a bit of creative energy in outlining Sykes's outrageous behavior and in subsequently punishing him for his misdeeds, Delia's virtue is too often easily overshadowed by his villainy." Hurd suggests that because Sykes is a "more dramatically compelling" character than Delia, some "readers overeagerly expect Delia to counter his evil, rather than allow herself to be repeatedly buffeted by it." When readers consider that the sweat, or poison, eventually seeps out of Delia's body, the title of the story suggests that she is not spiritually corrupt. Similar to the poison that kills Sykes, Delia's sweat represents both literal bodily toxins

and symbolic poisons that represent the social system that has caused her to sweat. Sykes is possessed by an evil that consumes his soul and eventually kills him; however, Delia remains pure because the sweat, the toxin or poison that represents the social system that exploits her, is released from her body and does not corrupt her physically or spiritually.

In an interesting twist that parallels the snake that bites Sykes instead of Delia, at the end of the story, "the man who has loomed above her through the years now crawls toward her, his fallen state emphasized by the frame of the door and Delia's standing figure; the man who has treated her with continuous contempt and cruelty now hopes for help from her." At the end of the story, Delia notices Sykes looking to her with hope; however, she also realizes that the same eye that looks to her for help cannot "fail to see the tubs" as well. As he lies dying, he is forced to look at the tubs, the tools of Delia's exploited labor. It is significant that while he is in the process of dying from self-inflicted poison, Sykes is forced to observe the tubs, the source of Delia's sweat, symbolizing the poisoned social system. Perhaps the tubs represent for Sykes the very property he had hoped to acquire by killing her because he is reminded of the labor Delia has exchanged for the property. Earlier, in his attempt to kill her and thus gain possession of the house, Sykes places the snake in the laundry basket, another emblem of Delia's exploited labor. Sykes's use of a tool of Delia's labor as a tool for his effort to acquire her property reminds readers that only through intense sweat, exploited labor, has Delia been able to buy a house for herself. However, Delia is determined not to allow Sykes to take possession of the house. In addition to releasing her from his emotional and physical abuse, Sykes's death releases the threat that Delia's house will be taken away from her.

The title "Sweat" refers both to Delia's hard work necessary to survive economically in a society that offers limited employment opportunities to African American women and to the emotional and physical agony Sykes's abuse causes her. As David Headon acknowledges, the story "forcefully establishes an integral part of the political agenda of black literature of this century. . . . Hurston places at the foreground feminist questions concerning the exploitation, intimidation, and oppression inherent in so many relations." Breaking from literature that so often perpetuates stereotypical roles for women, "'Sweat is in fact, protest literature." Hurston simultaneously discourages those who try to reinforce sexist modes of oppression and encourages women to defy sexism by illustrating how those who abuse women are doomed.

Source: Laurie Champion, "Socioeconomics in Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston," in *Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 40, No. 13, Fall 2001, pp. 79-92.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Lowe discusses the framework of comic expressions present in "Sweat."

Hurston's comic gifts, simmering in "Muttsy," came to a boil with *Fire!!* the magazine issued by the "New Negro" group in 1926. "Sweat," the more gripping of her two contributions, details the grim story of hardworking Delia Jones and her no-good, philandering husband, also a devotee of practical jokes. Hurston cleverly turns this aspect of her villain into a structural device, for the entire story turns on the idea of jokes and joking. She begins with one of Sykes's cruel jokes: he throws his "long, round, limp and black" bullwhip around Delia's shoulders as she sorts the wash she must do for white folk in order to support herself. Sykes's prank, motivated by Delia's abnormal fear of snakes, begins the sexual imagery that makes the story more complex. Is Delia's fear of the explicitly phallic nature of the snakes a sign of her innate fear of sex or, more likely, a fear that has been beaten into her? What has caused Sykes to seek the beds of other women? The story raises but never really answers these questions, yet suggests Sykes cannot stand his wife's supporting them by washing the soiled sheets, towels, and undergarments of white folks. Lillie Howard thinks that "whether [Delia] needs Sykes at all is questionable and perhaps he senses this and looks elsewhere for someone who does need him." On the other hand, Delia reflects that she "had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh." Only two months into the marriage he beats her. Why?

In any case, Sykes' s laughter at his wife and her fears fill the story; he continually slaps his leg and doubles over with merriment at the expense of the "big fool" he married fifteen years ago. Clearly, his insults deflect attention away from the "big fool" he knows he appears to be in the community, as he has never held a steady job himself and depends on Delia for his livelihood. Hurston in this story seems to be developing gender-specific forms of humor, which will be extremely important in *Jonah, Their Eyes,* and *Seraph.*

We may thus notice a difference in the rhetoric employed here. Delia too, although grimly serious in her defiance of Sykes, uses the deadly comic signifying language of female rivalry; referring to her husband's mistress, she states," 'That ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin' with aint comin' heah to pile up on *mah* sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost.'" Later, alone, Delia takes comfort in folk wisdom: "'Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing.'"

The appearance of the communal comic chorus in the personages of the loiterers on Joe Clarke's porch constitutes another significant development in Hurston's craft. When Delia passes by with her pony cart delivering clothes, they render the community's sense of pity for her and contempt toward Sykes, especially regarding his new mistress: "'How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he's layin' roun' wid, gits me. Ah

swear dat eight-rock couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done throwed out de back do "way las' yeah.'" The men's humor rises a notch as they wryly observe that Sykes has always preferred heavy lovers over the thin Delia. Hurston signifies here on jokes in the black community about some men's preference for hefty women. A classic blues expression goes: "Big fat momma wid de meat shakin' on huh bones / Evah time she wiggles, skinny woman los' huh home." The last line should particularly intrigue readers of "Sweat," for Sykes' s plot is designed not so much to kill Delia but to secure her property.

Significantly, all of the men on the porch continually chew cane, but they do not throw the knots as usual, which creates a foundation for the extended natural metaphor that Clarke, their leader, uses to summarize the inversion of the story they are actually helping us to read.

"Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man behave decent if it aint in 'im. There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. Buts dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way."

This casually brilliant rendering of a tragic truth provides a double irony for readers who know all of Hurston's work, for this same Joe Clarke emerges as a wife-beater himself in "The Eatonville Anthology" and becomes the model for Jody Starks in *Their Eyes,* who treats Janie like a mule he owns. Furthermore, the liquid squeezed out, the receptacle discarded, mirrors the title figuration of a woman's sweat and her weary body.

Normally comic expressions can be used to deadly effect as well. In the heat of August's "Dog Days!," the "maddog" Sykes plays his ultimate and cruelest joke to drive Delia from the house that he has promised to Bertha. He keeps a caged rattlesnake on the porch, knowing Delia fears even earthworms. When she asks him to kill the rattler, he replies with a comically coined word and devastating irony: " 'Doan ast me tuh do nothin' fuh yuh. Goin' roun' tryin' tuh be so damn aster-perious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo' uh him dan you! Dat's a nice snake an' anybody doan lak 'im kin jes' hit de grit.'" When Delia's fury overflows into courage, she tells Sykes, " 'Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog,'" and, of course, the imagery seems right, for Sykes's gender is usually associated with dogs, and a "suck-egg" dog would be a predator of women, egg bearers. Hurston would later use the egg and snake symbolism to characterize the couple in *Jonah.*

When Sykes replies with insults about her looks, she replies in kind, joining a verbal duel that finally silences him: "'Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks boutyou, mah young man; de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah.'" Delia here effectively "caps" Joe by verbally emasculating

him, in a doubled way. The "wrinkled rubber" seems obvious enough, but the buzzard reference varies her refrain that he is not man enough to support her; he just preys on her. This speech has much in common with Janie's silencing of Joe in the great scene in *Their Eyes,* but our pleasure in "Sweat" at Sykes's punishment is compromised by the ambiguity of our response throughout the story. Certainly, we feel for Delia, but the emasculation of the black man by a racist, capitalist society is on Hurston's mind here too, and Delia's threat to bring the white folks, whose laundry she washes, down on Joe, partially mitigates our natural inclinations to champion Delia; so does her tendency to taunt Joe about the fact that she brings home the bacon. Delia's Christian righteousness, evident in the scene when she returns from a "Love Feast" at church, also seems challenged by her failure to seek help for Sykes after he has been bitten by the snake at the end of the story and by her deliberate showing herself to him so he will know she knows what he attempted and that there is no hope for him.

This climax occurs when Joe, trapped in the dark bedroom with the snake he left in Delia's basket, jumps in terror onto the bed, where he thinks he'll be safe; the snake, of course, lies coiled there. In Tennessee Williams' s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* Big Mama, advising her daughter-in-law, Maggie, pats the bed she is sitting on and tells her that all the big problems in marriages can ultimately be traced *here;* Hurston, at least in this story, would seem to agree. The final joke on Sykes is that his obsession with male, phallic power, and the way he misuses it in his marriage, finally kills him, in a doubly figurative and dreadfully comic way.

What made this story special? For one thing, it was written after Hurston had been collecting black folklore for several years in the South and returned to live in Eatonville. When writing this story, she seemed to have learned how intertwined comedy and tragedy were in folk culture and also how the comic was embedded in the cosmic. These relationships are always manifest in her best work, like "The Gilded Six-Bits."

Source: John Lowe, "'Cast in Yo' Nets Right Here': Finding a Comic Voice," in *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy,* University of Illinois Press, 1994, pp. 71-79.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Seidel analyzes Hurston's narrative technique and the metaphor of the working woman as artist in "Sweat."

Zora Neal Hurston's short story "Sweat" (1926) presents a radical transformation of an oppressed black domestic worker who attempts to envision her work as a work of art. The story is remarkable in Hurston's body of work for its harsh, unrelenting indictment of the economic and personal degradation of marriage in a racist and sexist society.

To accomplish this, "Sweat" functions at one level as a documentary of the economic situation of Eatonville in the early decades of the twentieth century. Hurston uses a naturalistic narrator to comment on the roles of Delia and Sykes Jones as workers as well as marriage partners, but ultimately the story veers away from naturalistic fiction and becomes a modernist rumination on Delia as an artist figure. The story's coherence of theme and structure makes it one of Hurston's most powerful pieces of fiction.

Preserved not only as a place but as an idea of a place,Eatonville, Florida, retains the atmosphere of which Hurston wrote. As putatively the oldest town in theUnited States incorporated by blacks, Eatonville possesses understandable pride in its unique history. When Hurston writes of Eatonville in "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," she implies that her childhood place was idyllic because "it is exclusively a colored town," one in which the young Zora was happily unaware of the restrictions that race conferred elsewhere. However, this gloss of nostalgia can be read simultaneously with "Sweat," published only two years earlier. Although Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, writes perceptively that "Sweat" is a personal story without identifiable local folklore, in the story Hurston reveals the somber and multifaced variations of life in Eatonville in the first part of this century.

Economically Eatonville in "Sweat" exists as a twin, a double with its neighbor, the town ofWinter Park. Far from being identical, the twin towns are configured like Siamese twins, joined as they are by economic necessity. Winter Park is an all-white, wealthy town that caters to rich northerners from New England who journey south each fall to "winter" in Florida□"snowbirds," as the natives call them.Winter Park then as now boasts brick streets, huge oaks, landscaped lakes, and large, spacious houses. To clean these houses, tend these gardens, cook the meals, and watch the children ofWinter Park, residents of Eatonville made a daily exodus across the railroad tracks on which Amtrak now runs to work as domestics. This pattern has been described in detail by sociologist John Dollard whose study *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937) remains the classic contemporaneous account of a small segregated town in the 1920s and 1930s, approximately the time in which the action of "Sweat" occurs. What is unique about Eatonville andWinter Park is that they are not one town divided in two but two towns. Eatonville's self-governance, its pride in its historic traditions, and its social mores were thus able to develop far more autonomously than those in the many towns of which Dollard wrote where the black community had to struggle to develop a sense of independent identity.

In "Sweat" we see the results of this economic situation. On Saturdays the men of the town congregate on the porch of the general store chewing sugarcane and discussing the lamentable marriage of Delia and Sykes Jones. Although these men may be employed during the week, Sykes is not. Some working people mentioned besides Joe Clarke, the store owner, are the woman who runs a rooming house where Bertha, Sykes's mistress, stays, the minister of the church Delia attends, and the people who organize dances that Sykes frequents. Work as farm laborers on land owned by whites is probably available, but it pays very little and is seasonal. Jacqueline Jones points out that in 1900, not long before the time of the story, 50 to 70 percent of adult black women were employed full time as compared to only 20 percent of men. A black man might be unemployed 50 percent of the time. One reason that unemployed men congregated at the local general store was not merely out of idleness, as whites alleged, nor out of a desire to create oral narratives, as we Hurston critics would like to imagine, but there they could be "visible to potential employers," as Jones asserts.

There is not enough work for the men as it is, but the townspeople discuss Sykes's particular aversion to what work is available. Old manAnderson reports that Sykes was always "ovahbearin' but since dat white w'eman from up north done teached 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live□an' we oughter kill 'im." The identity of this woman and her exact role in Sykes's life is not referred to again, but if she was aWinter Park woman, then perhaps Sykes worked for a time as a driver for residents there. All the more ironic, then, his comment to Delia in which he berates her for doing white people's laundry: "ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa this house." The comment suggests that Sykes does not work out of protest against the economic system of Eatonville in which blacks are dependent on whites for their livelihood. Has he chosen to be unemployed to resist the system? Within the story, this reading is fragile at best. The townspeople point out that Sykes has used and abused Delia; he has "squeezed" her dry, like a piece of sugarcane. They report that she was in her youth a pert, lively, and pretty girl, but that marriage to a man like Sykes has worn her out.

In fact, Delia's work is their only source of income. In the early days of their marriage Sykes was employed, but he "took his wages toOrlando," the large city about ten miles from Eatonville, where he spent every penny. At some point Sykes stopped working and began to rely entirely on Delia for income. As she says, "Mah tub full of suds is filled yo belly with vittles more times than yo hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house." Delia's sense of ownership is that of the traditional work ethic; if one works hard, one can buy a house and support a family. That Delia is the breadwinner, however, is a role reversal but not ostensibly a liberation; her sweat has brought her some meager material rewards but has enraged her husband. Although she may at one time have considered stopping work so that Sykes might be impelled to "feel like man again" and become a worker once more, at the time of the story that possibility is long past. Sykes wants her to stop working so she can be dainty, not sweaty, fat, not thin. Moreover, he wants to oust her from the house so that he and his girlfriend can live there. Robert Hemenway perceptively notes that Sykes's exaggerated reliance on phallic objects□bull whips and snakes in particular□ is an over compensation for his "emasculated" condition as a dependent of his wife. Sykes's brutality is a chosen

compensation because he does not participate in the work of the community. He chooses instead to become the town's womanizer and bully who spends his earnings when he has them; he lives for the moment and for himself.

Houston A. Baker's ideological analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emphasizes what he calls the "economics of slavery" in Hurston's works. This term refers to the historical use of human beings for profit, a potent theme he identifies in African-American authors from Linda Brent and Frederick Douglass to Hurston. In this context, one can point out that Delia's work, difficult as it is, is productive; it allows her to sustain herself (and Sykes) and to become a landowner, a rare situation for blacks, as John Dollard points out. With her house she possesses not only a piece of property, but she also gains the right to declare herself as a person, not a piece of property. Because Sykes has not shared in the labor that results in the purchase of this property, he remains in a dependent state. He is rebellious against Delia whom he feels controls him by denying him the house he feels ought to be his; his only reason for this assertion is that he is a man and Delia is his wife.

Thus, the economics of slavery in "Sweat" becomes a meditation on marriage as an institution that perpetuates possession of women for profit. Indeed, Sykes is the slaveholder here; he does not work, he is sustained by the harsh physical labor of a black woman, he relies on the work of another person to obtain his own pleasure (in this case buying presents for his mistress Bertha). He regards Delia's property and her body as his possessions to be disposed of as he pleases. Sykes's brutal beatings of Delia and his insulting remarks about her appearance are the tools with which he perpetuates her subordination to him for the sixteen years of their marriage.

Sykes has been transformed during his marriage, or perhaps because of it, from contributor to the family economy to the chief recipient of its benefits. Delia is a producer of goods (she grows food) and a provider of services (cooks, cleans); she also works at a service activity that brings in cash. Sykes responds by becoming a consumer. He uses her to buy the goods and services he desires (Bertha's favors, liquor, dances, etc.) rather than using this income to contribute to the family. Because he is a consumer only, he cannot become an owner of real estate, for he has a cash-flow problem. As a result, to use Walter Benn Michaels's terminology, Sykes determines to possess the owner, to regard her body and her property as his possessions. Like the Simon Legrees of abolitionist fiction, Sykes proves his ownership by the brutality he shows toward Delia. His hatred of her rests not on a feeling of inferiority because she owns the house; rather, he hates her because as one of his consumable goods, she ought to be desirable, not sweaty; compliant, not resisting. He prefers Bertha because her fatness suggests an overly fed commodity; like a cow, she has been opulently and extravagantly fed beyond her needs. Sykes desires the large and the luxurious commodity; he does not want what he needs.

Given this hopeless set of economic forces, the story does not sink into a trough of despair, largely because of Hurston' s choice of its narrative point of view. While generally Hurston is associated with the lyrical, oral structure of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the narrative strategy of "Sweat" is a sophisticated amalgam of

the naturalistic narrator and narrative voice that Henry Louis Gates identifies in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as that of "speakerly text." Gates defines such a text as incorporating oral tradition, indirect discourse, and a transcendent, lyrical voice that is "primarily . . . oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature." Gates points out further that in oral tradition the speaker tells the story to a listener who is part of the teller's group; thus, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Janie tells her tale to her friend, Phoeby, with the result that the first-person narrative is subtly shaped by the implied and the explicit dialogue. This type of novel is sharply defined in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), in which the epistolary frame embodies the dialogic, oral tradition to which Gates refers. Gates contrasts this narrative mode with that of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). In that work the third-person narrator is a removed authoritative, third commentor who possesses the knowledge of the larger context but does not permit characters to develop self-knowledge. Hurston's speakerly text exists to permit the main character, Janie, to search for self-knowledge, indeed for self, in a way that focuses on central themes but does not rely on the architectural plot scaffolding that characterizes Wright's fiction.

It is important to recognize that the narrative mode of "Sweat" is more similar to that of *Native Son* than *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* In "Sweat" the third-person narrator speaks in past tense about the events in the lives of Delia and Sykes. The narrator's voice is one of an educated observer who has complete knowledge of the sociology of the town of Eatonville, its place as a poor, all-black town in central Florida, and the litany of troubles in Delia's fifteen-year-long marriage. This narrator is, in short, the narrator of naturalism, who sees Delia's life as a short, brutish thing because of the nature of marriage within an economic miasma of poverty and powerlessness. At first glance, the story conforms to Donald Pizer's definition of naturalistic fiction as that which "unites detailed documentation of the more sensationalistic aspects of experience with heavily ideological [often allegorical] themes, the burden of these themes being the demonstration that man is circumscribed." Not only has Delia's life been a stream of "her tears, her sweat, her blood," as the narrator despairingly reports, but her marriage to a womanizer and wife-beater becomes worse when he also adds attempted murder to the list of forces that literally threaten her. This narrative mode allows Hurston a wider context for Delia's misery, the context of the economics of a central Florida community composed of black women who work as domestics in elite, whiteWinter Park. Hurston's narrator is especially effective when speaking of the setting itself, the long, hot central Florida August that both parallels and contributes to the climax of the story. The narrator gives shape to the natural cycles that influence Delia and Sykes, as in this passage that forms a transition to the story's climax: "The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows . .. grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind .. . and man and dogs went mad." But the perils of choosing an omniscient naturalistic narrator sometimes results in heavy-handed didacticism: "Delia's workworn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks ofCalvary many, many times."

Because Hurston's narrator in "Sweat" has many features of the naturalistic narrator, the question arises as to whether this story itself is naturalistic. Donald Pizer points out that the 1930s was a time when naturalistic fiction such as *The Grapes of Wrath* offered at

least partial solutions to the problems besetting the protagonist. One of the remarkable aspects of "Sweat" is Hurston's variation and escape from the naturalistic narrator. In the classic rhetoric of naturalism, characters are often curiously untouched by self-insight, as Pizer points out. In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), for example, Carrie's victimization is unchallenged by anything more than a vague film of discontent that she feels now and then. Delia does fall from a state of relative success only to become brutalized, but she then begins the treacherous journey to self-knowledge and then self-esteem, the very journey that Janie makes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Delia's marriage is far worse than any of Janie's; her economic situation is more impoverished. She does not have a friend like Phoeby or a grandmother to provide support, information, sympathy, and love. Yet Delia does change and grow in spite of her circumstances and her narrator. How does Delia (and Hurston) escape the narrator?

Hurston moves beyond the naturalistic narrator by employing a Henry Louis Gatesian dual focus; she uses the townspeople as a chorus who comment orally on the characters of Delia and Sykes. From them we learn of Delia's former beauty, of Sykes's early infatuation with her, of his difficult and brutal personality. We also learn that the town does not condone this behavior at all, but considers it an anomoly at best that their town should have produced a Sykes. Hurston sets up a dialogue between the narrator and the townspeople, the result of which is a double focus upon central characters. Unlike a Greek chorus, the townspeople are not omniscient; they are, on the contrary, interested in maintaining peace and harmony. They praise Delia's work, regarding her weekly delivery schedule with respect: "hot or col', rain or shine, j es ez reg' lar ez de weeks roll roun' Delia carries em an' fetches 'em on Sat'day." Delia's work has become a predictable ritual for the town. Their reaction clarifies the attitude toward work: Work is admirable; the fact that Delia works on a Saturday and is as predictable as the seasons establishes her as worthy of their respect.

It is her work and her own attitude toward it that ultimately allow Delia to become a person who possesses self-esteem, pride, and the ability to create an ordered and harmonious existence. Delia has created her small world; she has lovingly planted trees and flowers in the garden around her house; her home and garden are ' lovely, lovely" to her, as the narrator explains. For all her woes, Delia takes joy in her tidy house, her garden, and her work. These images establish the archetypal undertone of the story, that of the Edenic place. Hurston presents Delia's portion of Eden/Eatonville as a female-created place, ordered and beautiful because of the efforts of a woman.

Among Delia's efforts, and the central focus of the story, is her work. Although the stereotype of the mammy is all too pervasive as a symbol of black women's work, Jacqueline Jones points out that the most frequent job for black women in the early twentieth century was not as a full-time domestic in the household of whites. For over 50 percent of working black women, "washing and ironing clothes provided an opportunity to work without the interference of whites, and with the help of their own children, at home." Mothers generally were reluctant to leave their own young children and to tolerate the all too frequent humiliation by their white women employers. Being a "washerwoman" was as arduous a task as being a field hand, and thus was of lower

status and lower pay than that of a maid or cook within a household□but it did offer a measure of independence.

Jones found that the typical laundry woman collected clothes on Monday, boiled them in a large pot, scrubbed them, "rinsed, starched, wrung out, hung up, and ironed" often in the hot days of summer. Starch and soap she paid out of the one or two dollars a week she received. She delivered the clothes on Saturday and collected the next week's if she was lucky; otherwise she had to return on Monday. This pattern matches Delia's, but her work assumes an importance beyond sociological accuracy.

Delia's work acts as a metaphor for the work of the human creator, that is, the artist. Susan Gubar describes metaphors for the female artist in her essay "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity." She comments that "many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art. . .. Within the life of domesticity, the body is the only accessible medium for self expression." When we apply these statements to Delia, the sweat of her body, which has laundered, cooked, and scrubbed, is the corporal medium of her art. Her basket of pristine laundry stands as the artistic object created by her body. Her creation exists surrounded by home and garden, a miniatureEden made by a woman.

The laundry is a brilliant and evocative symbol in the story. It is, of course, white, pure white, the narrator reports; its whiteness and purity connote Delia's innate goodness as opposed to the evil darkness of Sykes's snake. The whiteness also indicates that her created object is indeed a blank page waiting for inscription; however, the appropriate inscriber, Delia, must of necessity keep her canvas blank; only Sykes writes upon it with the dirt of his boots and eventually the male object, the snake/ penis, that symbolizes his desire to be the controller of the objects Delia's body has created.

The laundry has been created by the sweat and blood of her body; it rests quiet and serene like a tabularasa, awaiting purposeful fulfillment. Nestled snugly in a basket, the laundry is an object Delia protects and to which she devotes her time, her attention, and her body. The laundry thus functions as a cherished child, the child of their own that Sykes and Delia do not have. One can only speculate that Delia's hard-muscled thinness coupled with the stress of the work itself and the cruelty of her husband have rendered her physically infertile. How much more pregnant, then, the potential fruit-fulness of the laundry, the object of Delia's devotion, the object of Sykes's hatred. Had the laundry been literally a child, the story would devolve into a naturalistic tale on child abuse. But Hurston establishes herself as a writer, *the* Afro-American writer of her time and among the greatest in our century, by transcending such a cul-de-sac.

In *Invisible Man,* written twenty-four years after "Sweat," Ralph Ellison's nameless narrator, himself a blank page, ruminates on the qualities of whiteness and blackness in the brilliant section in the paint factory. The whiteness of the paint, considered so desirable, so good, so pure by white customers, results from the minute drops of blackness carefully, artistically added by the black paint makers.Ellison's scene is prefigured in "Sweat." Hurston takes the discourse on whiteness suggested by the laundry far beyond the stereotype that white is right and black is invisible. One could

line up the side of the good in the story with Delia, the laundry, and whiteness opposed to Sykes, the snake, and blackness, but this easy dichotomy would overlook Hurston's ultimate accomplishment. The laundry created by Delia does not belong to her. The laundry, her creation, belongs to the white people ofWinter Park, her patrons, who will be the ultimate inscribers of it; they will turn the laundry into clothes. Delia has prepared the perfect canvas for her patrons, but she is not able to participate in the use, evaluation, or assignment of worth to the creation. Like Hurston as an artist, Delia depends ultimately on the white patron for recognition. As Hurston was in the late 1920s the companion of Fannie Hurst, a white patron indeed, the story shades into a troubling comment on Hurston's relationship with her employer as a restriction on her art. Delia does not own her art. If the laundry represents a baby, then the baby is not Delia's; it is a white person's baby whom Delia tends so carefully. She is its mammy, creating the child but not owning it. But again, Hurston avoids the simple sociological statement of making the object of Delia's sweat an actual child.

In keeping with the Edenic imagery is the serpent in Delia's house, her husband. Sykes is not an Adam at all; his potential as a mate has been supplanted by the bullwhip he carries, which is the satanic object associated with a snake as it "slithers to the floor" when he threatens to strike Delia with it, as Robert Hemenway has noted. Sykes attempts to destroy everything Delia has created. He begins by complaining that she should "keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house," and purposely kicks the neatly folded stack of white laundry into a dirty, disordered heap. His demand is irrational on a literal level because these clothes are their only source of money. In an ironic way, however, Sykes is reflecting a lingering Adamic need to establish his home as terrain in which he too has power. He owns nothing of his own; the house legally belongs to Delia. His protest against a white-controlled labor system embodies a somber problem for black men, but Sykes's anger and frustration cannot be directed toward the white perpetrators of his situation because he lacks the power to change the status quo. Instead he passes his days with careless pursuits and becomes increasingly violent with Delia. Her response to his violence has been excruciatingly passive, but when Sykes criticizes her work, he is not only protesting against his own economic condition. He has intuitively violated the one object, the laundry, that Delia values about all others.

Sykes's attack on the laundry brings about Delia's first assertion against him in fifteen years of marriage. When she grabs a heavy iron skillet from the stove, she is threatening her husband with a female object used for creation, in this case a cooking pot. Sykes responds by threatening her with the object of male creativity and violence with which he is most familiar, the bullwhip. The choices of these objects reveal that to Hurston, male creativity (the whip) exists only to injure and destroy; female creativity (the pot) *can* be used destructively but is intended primarily to be positive, that is, to cook and create a meal. Thus, women can use their creative power to defend themselves against the destruction that is the only intended use of male power.

The scene acts as a foreshadowing of the couple' s climactic confrontation when Sykes brings home in a crate the satanic object of destruction, a snake. He leaves the snake in the kitchen for several days; Delia is terrified and terrorized by the snake, but she repeats her assertive stance by ordering her husband to remove it. Sykes responds by

criticizing Delia's appearance. This apparent non sequitur reveals Sykes's attempt to control Delia by reminding her of the role he expects her to play, that of wife/ sex object, prettied up and passive for the husband's use. Sykes criticizes her thin, hard-muscled body; he prefers fat women with flaccid bodies. Delia is strong because she works hard, another Sojourner Truth in her ability to work like a man. But as a representative of patriarchal masculinity, Sykes cannot prize Delia for what she is; he expects her to make herself, her body, into the image he prefers.

In the climax of the story Delia picks up the basket of white laundry and sees the snake in it. She drops the basket, runs outside in terror, and huddles in a gully beside a creek; Sykes returns home to the darkened house, picks up the snake's cage, and discards it. In this way the reader realizes that Sykes knew the snake was no longer in the cage; thus, it was Sykes who had placed it in the basket in order to murder Delia. When he goes inside to verify her death, he cannot see the snake in the dark house. Delia must decide whether to call out to warn her husband. If she does, he will live another day to take her life. She can save his life or she can save her own. In placing the snake in the laundry, Sykes has violated Delia's creation; he has disordered her house and finally actually intends to take her life. Delia chooses not to call out; the snake strikes, and Delia is permitted the gruesome revenge of seeing Sykes die before her eyes.

Delia's decision involves not only saving her life but preserving her vision of reality; her alternative choice would be to save her oppressor and thereby perpetuate not only her bondage to him but also to the corrupt, diseased vision of life he represents. As a female artist figure, Delia represents the power of the female artist who must adopt strategies that directly and violently bring change and allow her art to thrive. The debased condition of Sykes and of their marriage, even though it is in part a product of the economic disenfranchisement of black men, is not salvageable in this desperate story. Delia's choice implies that the oppressors of the woman worker/artist must be eliminated because they are evil, that the oppressors will bring about their own destruction. The tension for the black woman of creating art in a milieu controlled absolutely by whites remains unresolved. Hurston's story suggests that women artists must be free to create art and to contribute to a harmonious, ordered world. The issue of the need for a world that suits both men and women remains to be addressed, a task Hurston takes up in her later writing, especially in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The issue of the situation of the black female artist remained her lifelong subject.

Source: Kathryn Lee Seidel, "The Artist in the Kitchen: The Economics of Creativity in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" in *Zora in Florida,* edited by Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel, University of Central Florida Press, 1991, pp. 110-20.

Topics for Further Study

Read the rest of the material in *Fire!!* How do Hurston's pieces compare with those of her colleagues? Are they operating under the same artistic agenda? Describe the agenda(s) that you observe. Do you find the content radical? If you were a leader of the New Negro movement, how would you evaluate or critique the work of these authors?

Consider some of the reasons for Hurston's declining popularity and alienation from the literary community. For example, read her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and review the history of race relations between 1920 and 1960. Discuss why some of her political views might have been unpopular, and explain why you think she came to these conclusions. What led to Hurston's unpopularity besides her stance on certain political issues? Describe the elements of "Sweat" that might have alienated her readership, and explain how the characteristics that later made her unpopular are noticeable, or missing, in the story.

Listen to some of the music from the Harlem Renaissance, such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and especially the lyrics of singers such as Bessie Smith. What do the rhythms of jazz and blues have in common with the writings of Hurston and her colleagues? Compare the character, style, and sexuality of Bessie Smith's songs with Delia Jones and "Sweat," particularly in terms of empowerment and female autonomy. How is Hurston's treatment of black folk culture different from the cultural style preserved in the music? How do they employ similar techniques?

Hurston underwent a major revival in the 1970s, particularly by the writer Alice Walker. How, and on what grounds, did writers of this period identify with Hurston? Discuss why one might consider Hurston a feminist. Read Walker's *The Color Purple* and compare its themes to those of "Sweat." How have understandings and theories of race and gender changed since Hurston's lifetime? Do you think Hurston's works will continue to be popular in the future? Why or why not?

Read several historical accounts of the Harlem Renaissance, both from the primary sources and from contemporary analysts. How does "Sweat" fit in with the politics and artistic theories of Hurston's contemporaries? How do her writings reflect the sentiment of the time? Make a case for why she can, or cannot, be fairly called a "New Negro." How does she think of and refer to herself in relation to this term? What impact do you think her writings had on the Renaissance community, and how do you think her career might have differed had she lived during a different moment in black history, such as after the Civil Rights movement?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Racism towards African Americans is an extreme problem, in both the southern and northern states. Much of the optimism of blacks moving to the North is turning out to be an illusion. Education is poorly funded, poverty is widespread, and 281 blacks, compared with 34 whites, are lynched during the decade.

Today: Racial discrimination is illegal, but it has not been completely abolished in practice. The Supreme Court has ruled to continue the process of "affirmative action" in public universities, a sign that the legal system desires to remain committed to equalizing the opportunities afforded to all racial groups.

1920s: The American economy is booming. The stock market is rising at unprecedented rates, and many Americans are becoming rich, although money and jobs are not generally trickling down to the poorer black classes.

Today: The United States has a powerful economy, but it has failed to completely recover from the downturn coinciding with the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York. Unemployment is particularly high for black workers□over double the jobless percentage for whites.

1920s: Harlem is a burgeoning urban center, full of black artistic achievement and exciting new ideas, but housing is becoming increasingly cramped, and poverty is widespread.

Today: After a long and severe decline since the 1930s in housing conditions, crime, and poverty, conditions have now drastically improved. Harlem property value is among the fastest rising inNew York City, although some people are afraid this has created an unaffordable housing crisis and a negative impact on the local culture.

1920s: Spousal abuse goes largely unpunished, as police and courts rarely have the right to intervene.

Today: *The Violence Against Women Bill* of 1991 and other measures introduced to protect women within the home are likely to have decreased levels of spousal abuse, but it remains a major problem.

What Do I Read Next?

Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is probably the most important of Hurston' s works to read after "Sweat." Also set in Eatonville, it follows the story of Janie Crawford and her clashes with the moral code of the town.

The Color Purple (1982) is Alice Walker's novel about the difficult life of a girl named Celie, whose fortunes finally begin to change with the arrival of her husband's lover in her home. Not only is this highly regarded novel heavily allusive to Hurston's work, it addresses some of the themes of "Sweat" in a more modern and thorough light.

The New Negro, an anthology of some of the most influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was published by Alain Locke in 1925. It includes Hurston's short story "Spunk," and it is a superb way to enter the literary world of the time.

In his controversial history, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Houston A. Baker Jr contends that the Harlem Renaissance is unfairly judged by the standards of European modernism and instead should be seen in the light of its own rich discourse.

The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (1994) provides an excellent range of the accessible and sensitive poet who went on from Hurston's group of friends to become possibly the most celebrated black writer of the century.

The one published issue of the magazine *Fire!!* was reprinted by the Negro Universities Press in 1970 and again by Fire!! Press in 1982. Its collection of writings by Hurston and her peers reveals the context and medium of "Sweat" as well as a broad sense of their artistic goals

Further Study

Croft, Robert W., *A Zora Neale Hurston Companion,* Greenwood Press, 2002.

This indexed overview considers Hurston's literary career as a whole and provides a useful reference source for examining the author's short fiction in relation to her other writings.

Gates, Henry L., *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* Amistad Press, 1999.

This collection of analysis of Hurston's entire body of work provides a series of essays from diverse critical lenses and time periods.

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters,* edited by Carla Kaplan, Doubleday, 2002.

A comprehensive collection of Hurston's letters, this volume is vividly suggestive about her life, writings, and decline in popularity.

Miles, Diana, *Women, Violence, & Testimony in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston,* Peter Lang Publishing, 2003.

Miles's book focuses on some of the most important themes in "Sweat," as evidenced in several of Hurston's other works. It is an excellent resource for readers interested in the most recent theories on the author.

Watson, Steven, *TheHarlem Renaissance: Hub of American Culture, 1920-1930,* Pantheon Books, 1995.

Outlining the key elements of the historical movement inHarlem, Watson provides photographs and poetry to illustrate his presentation of the cultural climate at the time.

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DuBois,W. E. B., "The Creative Impulse," in *The "Crisis" Writings,* Fawcett Publications, 1972, pp. 286-88.

Hemenway, Robert E., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography,* Camden Press, 1986, pp. 41-50, 70-73, 148; originally published by the University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Hughes, Langston, and Zora Neale Hurston, *Mule Bone: A Comedy on Negro Life in Three Acts,* Perennial Press, 1991, pp. 1-2.

Hurston, Zora Neale, *The Complete Stories,* edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., HarperCollins, 1995, pp. 73-85.

--------, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* Harper & Row, 1984, p.206; originally published by J. B. Lippincott, 1942.

Locke, Alain, "Negro Youth Speaks," in *The New Negro,* edited by Alain Locke, Atheneum, 1968, p. 50; originally published by Albert & Charles Boni, 1925.

Lowe, John, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy,* University of Illinois Press, 1994, p. 74.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535