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Laura Lindenberger

Georgia College & State University

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"Sweat:" Through the Lens of Womanness

Laura Lindenberger

Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat," written in 1926, explores a variety of complex issues within a politically, racially, and sexually charged backdrop. The story of Delia, an African-American laundress, who has been married to an abusive husband for fifteen years, "Sweat" questions roles of women and African-Americans within a social and personal context, and how those roles can be changed through an exploration of self-identity. Within the historical time frame of its writing, "Sweat" brings up an interesting dialogue between oppression and repression of women, as well as an emerging identification of women with their gender and the restrictions imposed by society based on race, sex, and class.

The title of Hurston's short story immediately conjures a world of associations within the spectrum of female experience. Sweat is often, although not always, associated with masculinity, physical labor, and athletic prowess. To associate sweat with the world of women is to question gender roles and the typical assumption of women as domestic laborers whose labors are important in their effects, but generally light tasks of home making. Delia is employed in the grueling work of laundering the clothes of whites in her community. She supports herself and her husband, Sykes, through the money she makes by doing other peoples' laundry. This tough image of a sweating, working Delia contrasts with the archetypal female imagery of water and fluid. Women, often associated with the body, have been symbolically linked with natural fluids for centuries. That Delia's story is called "Sweat" conforms to the idea of an essential femininity within the symbol of water, but simultaneously asserts the ability of a woman to break gender barriers and do "men's work" while maintaining a sense of her body and womanliness. It's interesting to note that Delia's work-hardened body is what Sykes, her husband, holds against her. He only likes fat women, women who overindulge and whose excesses arouse him. Delia's sweat, which has sustained and supported Sykes for years, disgusts him. As he repeatedly tells her, "Ah'm so tired of you Ah don't know whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!" (1001). As a literary device, Delia's body serves to reinforce her growing independence. That her body does not please her husband but is perfectly suited to her work shows that her

priorities have changed from caring for Sykes to becoming a woman who can take care of herself and stand up to Sykes' abuse. And, when Delia takes a physically confrontational response to Sykes, he is unsure of what to do and backs away from her. Delia's shift from passive observer to active participant in her own redemption is the true transformation within the story and leads to less of a moral dilemma at the end, when she questions her wifehood by not answering Sykes' cries for help. Because Delia has become a woman in her own right, when Sykes is bitten by the rattlesnake and lies dying, Delia's incoherent decision to stand by while he dies is more of an assertion of her individuality and independence than the failure of a wife to protect her husband. Essentially, Delia has moved beyond caring for Sykes to caring for her own emotional and physical needs.

One of the mystifying characteristics of Delia is her necessary combination of poverty and race as oppressing factors that must be grown into, adapted to, and hopefully overcome. Race is something that Sykes brings up in the first argument he incites at the beginning of the story. Sykes has a problem with Delia doing laundry for wealthier white members of the community and although he brings up race, he seems to be even more frustrated with being supported by his wife. Sykes' ideas about society are convoluted and complex. He is at once frustrated by his inability to overcome the oppression of white society and his need to be supported by his wife, which questions his assumed gender roles and masculinity (although he never seems to be overly concerned with working himself out of the situation he is in). In an attempt to discredit Delia's work by attacking her religion, he says, "You ain't nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians – sing, whoop, and shout; then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath" (1000). When Sykes attacks her religion, Delia suddenly defies his power and responds bravely and angrily to his accusations and abuse. This moment of transformative anger pushes Delia into an attitude of independence and strength, which she maintains throughout the rest of the story. Yet another important difference between Delia and Sykes is their unique attempts at coming to terms with issues of race and poverty. While Sykes lets his social position, which is more closely related to his character than to his race, bring him down to a level of frustration and defeated apathy, Delia removes herself from social hierarchies to complete the work she does to support herself. Her dignity, then, is in a decision to remain aloof from the tragically poor, tragically

colored mentality that has bogged down her husband.

One of the questions feminist critics often ask about a work relates to the issue of language and communication within a story. The gender of the narrator and authorial decisions about gender imagery create stepping-stones for a feminist discussion of the implications of a great work. In "Sweat," the omniscient narrator remains un-gendered, leaving the perspective from which the story is told undefined. And, regardless of gender, Hurston creates a definite demarcation between good and bad with Delia and Sykes. Gender does become important, however, in degrees of good and bad and how they play themselves out within a social context. How Sykes gets away with his abusive behavior and how Delia manages to continue living with him with little or no creative or emotional outlet, are both direct effects of an environment that encourages certain gender roles, of which Hurston was certainly aware.

The Florida villagers with whom Delia lives, although generally disapproving of Sykes, are partially responsible for Delia's situation. The passive interest of the village men who watch as Delia works on a day when "Even conversation had collapsed under the heat," (1002) reflect an ambivalence in regard to Delia's situation that is incredibly disappointing and reflective of a patriarchal decision to avoid meddling in the affairs of another man. As hopeful as it sounds, Clarke's indictment of Sykes only serves to perpetuate the idea that an abusive man is not responsible for his actions. When he speaks for the first time, Clarke points out, "Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im" (1002). Apparently, Sykes' brutality is just a character flaw to these men and although Old Man Anderson suggests dragging Sykes to a swamp and beating sense into him, "civic virtue" is hard to maintain in such intense heat. As the men of the community (who seem to have no pressing work or responsibilities to attend to) sit and reflect on the past, they offer important insight into the communal image of responsibility breakdown within interpersonal relationships. Walter Thomas, in his musings on how Sykes and Delia got married, comments on the value of a wife like Delia and her attributes. Thomas says:

[H]e [Sykes] usester eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil' 'oman he got. She wuz ez pretty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh l losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind (1002).

This difference in mentality and equation of Delia's beauty with that of a puppy affirms a vision of women as possessions who have control over men only through the threat of dispossessing themselves.

Community values and societal views on relationships are important shaping influences on Delia and Sykes' relationship and are inherent to Sykes and Delia's ideas about gender roles within the household. What makes "Sweat" remarkable is that Delia is able to finally question those roles and move out of their confines.

Sykes' abuse of Delia is founded on deep-rooted convictions about the power of the man within the household and the community. His actions are excusable within the community understanding that he and Delia are married and despite Sykes' infidelities, he and Delia's wedding vows bind them together until they are parted by death. His cultural values seem to point to a strong man of the house who supports his wife and family financially and emotionally. Sykes fails miserably to provide this support for Delia, but attempts in his own warped ways to impress this kind of support on his lover, Bertha. By putting her up in a hotel (until his wife is out of the way and he can move her into Delia's house), buying her sweets, and by assuring her "that he was the swellest man in the state" (1003), Sykes is becoming the husband figure that his culture tells him he should be. What he becomes to Delia, then, is rooted in his insecurities with that role and his need to assert some sort of authority within the home.

Sykes' authority within the home leads eventually to his demise. When Sykes attempts to capitalize on Delia's fear of snakes by moving a rattlesnake into her house, he has made a blindly stupid mistake. The snake poisons Sykes literally and, in a figurative sense, is symbolically representative of the poison and deception that has come to be characteristic of their relationship. When the snake bites Sykes, Delia is faced with her first moral dilemma as a freed woman. Calmly and eerily confident in her response, Delia watches as Sykes dies from his snakebite. Thoughts of Orlando and getting him to a doctor flash through her head, but her rational side realizes that her efforts would be futile. Instead of panicking or responding rashly, Delia goes through her options, realizes that none of them would offer Sykes any hope by this point, and she remains standing by her front door watching "that eye which must know by now that she knew" (1008). Delia's reaction hardly seems womanly in the sense of the woman as wife and gentle protector. Although she must have been this type of wife at some point in their relationship,

Sykes has helped to build her into a wife who does not have any emotional response whatsoever (within the story) to her husband's death. Hurston creates the story to emphasize this lack of emotional connection between not only Delia and Sykes but also the reader and Sykes. Sykes' death is self-inflicted through his evil need to instill fear in Delia.

Feminist evaluations and re-evaluations of "Sweat," are essential to building a relationship between Hurston's subtleties and the story's main plot, which both raise questions of femininity and gender roles within societal classifications of class and race. By looking at "Sweat" with feminist questions in mind, the reader can explore historical attitudes, as well as themes of women's rights, independence, and emotional maturation within social constructions. Delia's relationship to her community, her husband, and herself as a woman in these constructs, are interesting sociological studies of the experience of womanhood and offer important vision into the emotional maturation of one woman within a patriarchal society.

Work Cited

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