*Sweat,* A Journey of Oppression in the Eyes of a Believer

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March 1st, 2019

ENG490-50 Independent Study

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Zora Neale Hurston is a famous African American author from the Harlem Renaissance who is known for many influential and powerful literary works. She has based multiple books on the South and the problem of racism, and has used her hometown of Eatonville, Florida for the settings in some of her books. Her stories are told from the African American perspective of everyday life, such as family and love, as well as the battle with racism for blacks in the early 20th century. Her own struggles as an African American woman are incorporated as well. At first glance, Hurston’s books are stories of black people using strong southern dialect and managing jobs, small town talk, and relationships. The key to understanding the depth of her stories and appreciating the underlying meanings is to understand the vast amount of symbolism used. Hurston is famous for her use of symbolism. In her book from 1926, *Sweat* told the story of a black women who worked herself to the bone and dealt with an abusive husband for over fifteen years. The repeated phrases and parallelisms used in this book show the struggles and triumphs of the main character’s life as an African American woman. In *Sweat,* Hurston reveals the struggle and the resurrection of freedom of African American women through symbols like sweat, snakes, laundry, and biblical symbols.

Hurston has received backlash for frequently making it seem like one has to behave as or abide by the white community. This seems true in the works that I have read, however, she is also a large advocate for self-help and has the same mindset as Booker T. Washington regarding politics and social equality. In *Sweat,* the main character, Delia, is an abusive relationship for over fifteen years and eventually gains the strength to resist his abuse. The community recognizes how hard she works and that she is a good wife. Her no-good husband, Sykes, beats her and scolds her for working for white people and being too skinny. The story used the word sweat over and over. Delia sweats from working so hard to get her own house by washing the white people’s clothes. That is the literal and physical sweat that Hurston narrates. Sweat symbolizes labor, anger, or uneasiness. It is repeated on multiple occasions that she “puts her blood, sweat, and tears” into all that she does. The snake makes her sweat, as well as laboring and working in her garden. The sweat that she puts into her house brings her joy. Her abusive husband and snakes make her sweat. Sweat is used as an indicator of her feelings and effort that she puts into in a situation, good or bad. Hurston included this because many people like Delia labored and faced hardships in the Post-Reconstruction South. Many beads of sweat went into the making of their lives and providing for their families. Sweat was a necessity to surviving.

The main symbol used throughout the story is a snake. From a biblical standpoint, the snake has been known as evil and malevolent. Understanding the use of the snake develops a deeper meaning to the dominance that is held over African American women during this time. In the beginning of the story, Sykes throws a bull whip on her knowing that she will think it’s a snake and scare her. He makes her feel inferior to him, even though he does not work or own anything, and also to the white people for having to take so much time to do their laundry. There is a physical snake and a metaphorical snake present, which is Sykes, however, both represent evil in Delia’s life. Sykes brings a snake into the house in effort to drive Delia out; which Hurston includes to show him bringing evil into Delia’s life. She fears both the rattlesnake and Sykes in the beginning, but over the duration of the story she loses fear for both. She halts in the doorway and makes eye contact with the rattlesnake, and also holds a frying pan to Sykes. Delia remains strong and in good faith of the Lord, and eventually through dramatic irony Sykes dies from the snake that he brought into the house. Religion was very influential in Hurston’s life and she uses it here to show how keeping faith and standing up to evil leads to triumph.

In multiple parts of the story, Delia is working on the laundry. Hurston purposefully includes that the laundry is white. The color white signifies purity and innocence. Sykes hates the laundry for what seems like a racial reason, but I think he was spiteful of her good morale. He continuously tries to get her to stop doing the laundry and kicks it. He even threatens to drag it outside and destroy it. The laundry is a parallel to Delia’s own purity. He walks all over her and beats her, but at the end she remains absolute in her character. This was a widely acceptable aspect of marriage during the first half of the 20th century, which Hurston clearly acknowledges is unjust. Delia continues to do the laundry and one day, Sykes puts the rattlesnake in the large basket. He tried to dissipate her purity with his evil. Sykes eventually “reaped what he sowed” and was bitten by the snake that day. The story says, “what goes over the devil’s back must come back around his belly,” and that is exactly what happened to Sykes.

Delia has an irrational fetish for the laundry that is past just her livelihood. She is anal about doing it thoroughly and on time, and the town’s people mention that she never misses a single day. She has no children to take care of and so she spends her time obsessing over the laundry. None of this laundry belongs to her, yet she treats it better than if it were hers. This signifies the interdependent relationship between the blacks and the whites. The black people rely on the whites to provide them with money and protection, and the white people need the African Americans for services. Delia is living in a white man’s world and is severely oppressed. Hurston brilliantly tied this symbol of the laundry into an aspect of racism during the 1920’s.

The last symbol I noticed was the love for her house. I found it odd that she cherished a little old house where she got beaten every day. As I read further, I understood that the house was actually her haven. This was the only thing in her world that truly belonged to her. Her husband and laundry did not belong to her, but this house was just *hers*. She worked and paid for it with a modest living and cared for it like a palace. She planted flowers and trees and cared for her garden. This was a biblical analogy for the Garden of Eden. She created a beautiful and modest home in the midst of so much evil and hatred in her world. Although, Hurston made it clear that the snake could not tempt Delia like it did Eden, and she could carry on an honest and proud woman. This showed the progression and grace of African American women, like Hurston herself. Being surrounded in world of evil, hatred, and racism it is easy to be succumbed. We all have the power to make decisions daily and hopefully be at peace with those we make.

Hurston was long time teacher and writer about African Americans in difficult situations that can choose good or evil, and hard work or laziness. Through back breaking work, Delia was able to provide for herself and live wholesomely. She was loyal to her marriage through it all and eventually received her freedom. Hurston uses an array of symbols to tell an engaging story, but allows us to study African American history and culture when taking a deeper look into the symbolic meanings throughout the story. The use of sweat showed the hard work needed to survive. Snakes symbolized the evil in life, and that through persistence one can overcome the hardships. The laundry expressed the purity of hardworking African American women, but also the reliance on white people for their livelihood. Hurston is famous for including many biblical references and scripture in her work because it was not only an influence in her life, but feels it is necessary for the reader to connect with the spirits of the African Americans in the stories and experience God working in their lives. *Sweat* is a story dedicated to the diligent, oppressed, and strong African American women who struggled and overcame during a time of intense racism and intramarital abuse.