

Sweat



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Although she was born in Alabama, Hurston's family moved to Eatonville, Florida—the first all-black town to incorporate in the United States—when she was a small child. She considered Eatonville her hometown and used it as a setting for many of her stories. She had a relatively happy childhood until the death of her mother in 1904, after which she held a variety of odd jobs and eventually joined a Gilbert and Sullivan traveling company as a maid. Hurston earned an associate degree from Howard University in 1924 and moved to New York City, where she met a number of major authors from the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes. She began to publish short stories in various periodicals and to study anthropology at Barnard College. Hurston studied under renowned anthropologist Franz Boaz and became the first black woman to graduate from Barnard in 1928. She would go on to use her anthropological training in collecting African American folklore in the South. Hurston was married three times, with her first two marriages ending in divorce. She published a variety of fiction and nonfiction writings over the course of her life, most famously her 1937 novel [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#). Hurston continued to write, teach, and collect folklore, winning prestigious awards such as the Guggenheim for her research. In her later years, however, she suffered a number of personal and financial difficulties, ultimately dying in poverty in 1960.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sweat," along with most of Hurston's other works, was written and takes place after the 1865 abolition of slavery in the United States but before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, during the period known as Jim Crow. Segregation (meaning separate facilities and institutions for white and black people) was the law of the land in the American South, leading to the establishment of all-black towns like Eatonville, Florida. During the early twentieth century, many black writers and artists moved to Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. These creative intellectuals formed the artistic and literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, to which Hurston was a major contributor.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hurston's early writings took place during the African American literature and arts movement called the Harlem Renaissance. "Sweat," for example, initially appeared in the sole issue of the literary magazine *Fire!!*, which Hurston co-organized with other writers active during this period in

Harlem, New York. Among this group were novelist Wallace Thurman, author of *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), as well as poets Langston Hughes, author of *The Weary Blues* (1926), and Countee Cullen, author of *Color* (1925). While "Sweat" is one of Hurston's most significant early works, she is better known for her novel [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#) (1937), which is a coming of age novel also set in Central Florida. Similar themes of domestic abuse can also be found in works such as Alice Walker's [The Color Purple](#) (1982).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sweat
- **When Written:** 1920s
- **Where Written:** Harlem, New York
- **When Published:** 1926
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** 1920s Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town to incorporate in the United States
- **Climax:** When Sykes returns to the house and is bitten by the rattlesnake
- **Antagonist:** Sykes
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Revived Influence Hurston's writings fell out of the public eye until Alice Walker revived interest in Hurston's work with the 1975 essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," published in *Ms.* magazine. Hurston is now widely acknowledged as one of the foremost authors of the Harlem Renaissance, and the most successful black woman writer of the early twentieth century.

New Birthday. Hurston started claiming to be 10 years younger than she actually was in order to finish her high school education at the age of 26; from this time on, she told others that she had been born in 1901 in Eatonville.



PLOT SUMMARY

"Sweat" tells the story of a woman in an unhappy and abusive marriage who is eventually freed through an ironic twist of fate.

The story opens on a Sunday night with Delia Jones, a hardworking washerwoman, sorting the week's laundry. Her husband, Sykes, returns home and plays a nasty trick on her with his horsewhip, which resembles a **snake**. She is frightened

and scolds him, but he simply laughs. Sykes calls Delia a hypocrite for working on Sunday after church, stomps on the clothes, and threatens her with physical violence. Delia abandons her meek posture and stands to defend herself. She proclaims that her sweat paid for the house and she will do as she pleases in it, threatening Sykes with a cast iron skillet. Sykes, surprised, slinks away to spend the night with his mistress. Delia finishes her work and goes to bed. She lies awake, remembering the hopeful early days of her marriage and its swift turn to abuse. When Sykes returns home in the night to claim his place in bed, she no longer cares what he says or does.

The following Saturday, Delia is passing the town store with her pony and cart to deliver clean clothes. A group of village men gathered on the shop's porch begin discussing Delia and Sykes. They comment on Delia's hard work and condemn Sykes for his abuse and infidelity. Joe Clarke, the storeowner, compares abusive husbands to men chewing sugarcane, who squeeze all the goodness out of something and throw away the remainder. Another man comments that they all ought to take Sykes and his mistress down to the swamp and beat them both, and the others seem to agree, but they stay on the porch and eat a melon instead. Sykes and his mistress Bertha appear, and a hush falls on the porch. Sykes makes a great show of ordering food for Bertha just as Delia drives past.

Time passes, and Bertha has now been in town for three months, with Sykes paying for her room in a boarding house. He promises to move her into his and Delia's house as soon as he can get Delia out of it. Delia, meanwhile, has been through a great deal of hard work and embarrassment. She tries to ignore the situation, but Bertha keeps coming by the house. Delia and Sykes fight constantly.

One hot day in August, Delia comes home to find that Sykes has caught a rattlesnake and placed it in a box by the kitchen door in order to scare her away. Delia is terrified and demands that he take it away, but she is met only with laughter and denial. People from the village come by to ask Sykes about the snake, and one man advises him to kill it, but to no avail. The snake remains in its screen-covered box by the kitchen door, and after several days digesting its latest meal, becomes more active and begins rattling its tail. Delia again tells Sykes to take the snake away, but Sykes responds that he doesn't care how she feels. Delia then astonishes Sykes by proclaiming that she hates him and telling him to get out of the house. They trade more insults, but Sykes leaves without carrying out any of his threats.

The next day, Sunday, Delia goes to church in the next town over and stays for the evening service. She comes home after dark singing hymns. When she arrives, she finds the snake is absent from its box, and feels the sudden hope that Sykes might have had a change of heart. She goes to strike a match for light and, finding only one, concludes that Sykes and Bertha must have been there while she was gone. Delia starts to sort her

washing, but upon opening the laundry hamper, she is horrified to find the snake waiting in the basket. He begins to slither out onto the bed, and Delia flees across the yard to the hay barn. She climbs up onto the hay and stays there for hours, first deathly afraid, then enraged, then horribly calm. She concludes that she has done her best and "Gawd knows taint mah fault."

Delia falls asleep and awakens to hear Sykes destroying the snake's box in the pre-dawn light. She watches him go inside, then creeps down to peer through the bedroom window. Delia hears the snake rattling, but Sykes hears nothing until he knocks a pot lid down trying to find a match. He suddenly thinks he hears the rattle under the stove, and he flees to the bedroom. Delia hears Sykes's cries as he is bitten and his struggle with the snake. She feels ill and begins to creep away, but finds herself frozen when Sykes calls out for her. Eventually she gets up and sees Sykes crawling out, his neck swollen from the snakebite. She knows that it is too late to save Sykes, and she goes to wait in the yard, helpless to keep him from realizing that she knows of his fate.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Delia Jones – Delia is the protagonist and main character of "Sweat." A hardworking middle-aged black woman, she makes her living washing other people's clothes. Delia is married to the lazy and abusive Sykes. Her many years of work and suffering have stolen her former beauty, leaving her with "knotty, muscled limbs" and "hard, knuckly hands." Although she married Sykes for love, she has come to realize that all she can hope for now is some measure of peace. She wants to spend the rest of her life in the little home that she has earned through her hard work. She has a deep fear of **snakes** that Sykes exploits to torment her. Delia attends church regularly and turns to Christianity for comfort through her abusive relationship. She maintains a Christ-like attitude of patient suffering, although she is willing to defend herself from Sykes when he goes too far.

Sykes – Sykes is Delia's abusive husband and the antagonist of "Sweat." He first appears in the story by playing a nasty trick on Delia, and this event proves to represent his character as a whole. He has spent most of their marriage abusing Delia both physically and emotionally, and when she finally begins to defend herself, he does not know how to respond. He soon takes a mistress named Bertha and shows off around town with her. Sykes is so determined to hurt Delia and take the house that he resorts to unsafe extremes—like bringing a **rattlesnake** into the house to scare her off—which eventually lead to his own death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bertha – Bertha is Sykes’ mistress from another town. She comes to live in a boarding house that he pays for. Most of the men of the town dislike Bertha and consider her ugly, but Sykes prefers her over Delia.

Joe Clarke – Joe owns the village store and has the respect of the neighbors who spend time on his porch. He explains Sykes’ abusive mindset to the other men using the metaphor of chewing sugarcane.

Clarke, the store owner, speaks up to define the dynamics of Sykes’ particular kind of misogynistic attitude as one that brings unhappiness. He compares sexist men’s abuse of their wives to a man chewing sugarcane: they use up all the sweetness, then resent the bitterness and damage their abuse has created. Clarke asserts that men like Sykes know what they are doing, and hate themselves for it, and then hate the women they abuse as a way to protect themselves. The other men then all agree. However, despite their wisdom about abuse and condemnation of its practice, one could argue that these men then don’t do enough to intervene. When Sykes shows up to the store, they do all leave, essentially shunning him. But they never step in, and no one ever tries to protect Delia.

Despite the men’s apathy when it comes to direct action, “Sweat” as a whole never seeks to justify or excuse domestic violence. It presents abuse, from beginning to end, as destructive, cruel, unjustifiable, and—as Sykes’ abusive action of bringing the **snake** into the domestic “Eden” of the house would suggest—even evil.



THEMES

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



DOMESTIC ABUSE

In “Sweat,” Hurston clearly and directly condemns domestic abuse. Her condemnation functions in two ways. First, she depicts Delia and Sykes’ marriage as being wrecked by Sykes’ emotional and physical abuse. Second, she uses the viewpoints of other men in the town to *also* criticize Sykes’ behavior. In this way, Hurston does not allow abuse to be portrayed as the inevitable product of a patriarchal society. Instead, she shows it, quite simply, to be evil, and as something that can’t be explained away or justified.

Near the end of the story, as Delia finally tells Sykes to leave after his years of emotional and physical abuse, she says: “Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh.” Delia makes clear here that she married Sykes for love, and the story makes clear that she only ever acted out of love: she worked hard to provide for her husband, she meekly obeyed him, she endured his beatings, and she did not fight back against his constant infidelity. Sykes, though, never ceased to beat her, to berate her, to play tricks on her, and to hate her all the more, it seems, for enduring his abuse. At no point in the story is it ever suggested, by anyone other than Sykes, that their marriage is wrecked by anyone other than Sykes. His emotional and physical abuse is always held front and center as cruel, unjust, and evil.

Halfway through, the story shifts for a few paragraphs from Delia’s point of view to that of a group of men gathered on the porch of a town store, as they see Delia out working and they talk about her and Sykes. This part of the story is rather remarkable because of the way that the men, roundly and completely, condemn Sykes’ behavior. None of the men at any time suggests that Delia deserves or somehow caused Sykes’ abuse of her. They don’t shame Delia, or claim that she’s deficient in some way. It’s quite the opposite: the men blame Sykes and see his abuse of his wife as unacceptable. In fact, Joe



CHRISTIANITY

Christian belief plays a major role in “Sweat,” both in the characters’ lives and words, and in the way that the story itself interacts with Biblical stories.

This is particularly clear in the way faith serves as a source of emotional support for Delia, how Sykes hypocritically uses Christian ideals to assert social control over Delia, and the Biblically-inflected concept of justice that unfolds over the course of the story. Ultimately, Hurston uses “Sweat” to portray a modern alternative to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, one that complicates the idea of “meekness” and also relocates the source of “original sin.”

Hurston portrays true Christian faith as offering a person support through all manner of hardship. Delia is able to continue working hard and endure Sykes’ abuse at least in part because she finds solace in Christianity. Delia and Sykes’ first fight of the story takes place on Sunday night, after she has returned from church. While lying in bed after the confrontation, Delia feels able to “build a spiritual earthworks” to defend against his “shells.” These terms liken their conflict to spiritual warfare, using the language of the battlefield from the recently concluded World War I. Delia’s faith is her defense in this war. Hurston also explicitly compares Delia’s suffering at the hands of Sykes to that of Christ before the crucifixion. At one point, the story describes Delia as crawling “over the earth at Gethsemane and up the rocks at Calvary,” both important sites in the Bible story of Jesus’s crucifixion. This reference portrays Delia as an innocent victim who will suffer—who has willingly endured suffering—but will eventually triumph.

Whereas Delia’s faith is true and authentic, Sykes uses Christian ideas and beliefs almost exclusively as a way to try to control Delia, and his words are contradicted by his actions.

Sykes calls Delia a hypocrite for going to church on Sunday and then working afterward, on what is supposed to be her day of rest. But Sykes' accusation of hypocrisy is immediately revealed as better aimed at himself: first, because it is his own laziness and carelessness with money that means Delia has to work so hard in the first place, and second because Sykes is calling Delia a hypocrite for a minor offense when he routinely breaks major Christian tenets by beating Delia and committing adultery. He also uses the **snake**, a symbol of evil in Christian iconography, to try to take what is not his. In the Book of Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve to disobey God's will. In "Sweat," Sykes' use of the rattlesnake to chase Delia out of her house—out of her Eden, which she built with her work and around which she painstakingly planted every tree—implies that he is in alliance with evil against the will of God. That Delia addresses the snake as "ol' satan" only reinforces this connection.

The plot of "Sweat" centers on a Biblical ideal of justice, with Sykes punished for his faithlessness—to both Delia and to God—and Delia rewarded for her faith. In the initial confrontation between the married couple, Hurston immediately establishes Delia as meek, but only in the context of describing Delia's "habitual meekness" as falling away "like a blown scarf" when Delia picks up a frying pan and tells Sykes that she will no longer put up with his abuse. It is this action—this putting off of meekness by a normally meek woman—that puts into motion the events of the rest of the story. Yet even as Delia throws aside her meekness in regard to Sykes, she remains "meek" and faithful in her relationship to God. She does not decide to do away with Sykes, and she does not pray or demand that God do something to Sykes. Rather, even as she has suddenly stood up to Sykes she continues to put herself and her future in the hands of God. This is evident the night after the fight, when Delia thinks that Sykes will come to justice, or "reap his sowing," one way or another. Ironically, that reckoning comes through Sykes' choice to bring the rattlesnake into the house—to bring the snake into Delia's Eden to try to scare her into leaving the house to him, and then secretly releasing it in hopes that it will kill her. When Delia escapes the snake, and then later listens from outside as Sykes is fatally bitten when he goes back to check on his handiwork, it seems like the story indicates a triumph of the meek, as the cruel and evil abuser is ironically done in by his own evil plan.

But the story doesn't end in a moment of triumph or joy for Delia. After Delia listens to the commotion of Sykes trying and failing to beat back the snake, she creeps up to the door and sees Sykes, dying and swollen from the snake bite, with just one eye still open. "A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs." Delia, in this moment, realizes that Sykes, seeing the clothes-washing tubs in the kitchen, must know that she knew the snake was in the house. In other words, she knew the danger he faced and did not warn him. Sykes let the snake loose in Eden

and heeded its call. Sykes, in this story, is like Eve, who first encountered and was swayed by the snake. But Delia, like Adam, does not emerge unscathed either. Rather, she made her meekness into a weapon when she did not warn Sykes before he went into the house. The story ends with Delia still fixated on Sykes' eye, as she waits outside the house and "knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew." The focus on the words "knew" and "know" can't be an accident in a story that so clearly echoes the story of the Garden of Eden—which centers around the eating of the forbidden fruit of the *knowledge* of good and evil. Delia is a sympathetic character, and the reader is likely to feel that her actions are justified—and that Sykes' death is a kind of justice—but the ending of the story suggests that in allowing Sykes to die, Delia also has been made all too knowledgeable of good and evil, and may have been cast out of her Eden forever.



HARD WORK VS. ENTITLEMENT

"Sweat" is structured around the contrast between Delia and her husband Sykes, and nothing is more basic to that contrast than their attitudes towards work. Through these two characters, Hurston affirms the value of hard work as a foundation for both moral integrity and survival under difficult conditions. Likewise, she condemns Sykes' sense of lazy entitlement as morally bankrupt.

Hard work is associated with integrity and worthiness in "Sweat." The fact that Delia has labored—and sweated—to care for her household means that she has a substantial claim to the house. Delia's long years of work as a washerwoman give her a sense of self-worth that not even Sykes can threaten. When he tries to prevent her from taking in washing, she replies that her washing has fed him and paid for the house, and therefore she has the right to continue doing it. Rather than respond, Sykes leaves. It seems that even Sykes finds it difficult to deny Delia's right to the house, which is why he eventually resorts to trying to scare her out of it or to kill her, rather than to just claiming it as his own. As discussed in the theme of Christianity, Hurston portrays Delia's suffering as Christ-like. This comparison is explicitly connected to her years of hard work: it is "Delia's work-worn knees" that are described as crawling over the Biblical locations of Gethsemane and Calvary.

Entitlement is morally and practically untenable, Hurston suggests. Sykes believes that he should have possession of the house and anything else Delia has worked for without owing her any loyalty—simply because he is a man and her husband, presumably. This attitude, however, makes him a pariah in the community, and eventually leads to his death. Sykes' demands on Delia are shown to be hypocritical from the beginning. He tries to control her in the house that her work paid for, a fact that she points out during their initial argument. He promises his mistress Bertha that she will be able to live in the house,

even though Delia has a much greater claim on it than he does. He believes that he is entitled to what he wants without consideration for who actually worked for it. The men of the community judge Sykes not only for his infidelity, but also for failing to contribute financially to the household. They consider him worthless, critiquing his failure to perform any portion of “a husband’s duty,” which would include helping his wife to pay the bills. Ultimately, Sykes’ sense of entitlement to the house leads him to catch the **rattlesnake** to scare Delia off—he’s trying to claim her house and get rid of her without doing any real work. Despite her protests, and comments from other community members that he ought to kill the snake with a club to the head, Sykes persists and is eventually (and ironically) killed by the snake.

While Delia and Sykes operate on two different extremes of work and entitlement, the story also makes room for those in the middle. The minor characters in “Sweat” appear mainly while socializing with one another, rather than working. Still, they are not portrayed in as negative a light as Sykes. When they ask the storekeeper to bring out a watermelon, they all eventually agree to make a small contribution to pay for it, and the negotiation is friendly. By respecting one another and contributing as much as they can, the townspeople maintain their social relationships. This is especially important in light of the story’s setting as a whole—a poor, all-black town in the Jim Crow South. In the face of such harsh institutional barriers, no one has much to spare, and certainly no one can afford to be entitled to another person’s work—but by working together, members of the community can find room for both leisure and labor.

Hurston develops a stark contrast between the virtuous, hard-working character of Delia and the unlikeable, entitled Sykes. However, she also allows space for ordinary people who do not have Delia’s saint-like perseverance. The most important thing in “Sweat” is not capacity to work, but respect for work, both other people’s and one’s own.



RACE AND CLASS

While “Sweat” is closely focused on the troubled relationship between Delia and Sykes, it is also set in a poor, all-black town in segregated 1920s

Florida. The theme of race and class, although it is not a central part of the story’s plot, inevitably comes into play in such a setting. Zora Neale Hurston uses this aspect of the story to explore the effects of race and class as it impacts the couple and their broader community. In doing so, she captures a community shaped by racism and poverty, and shows how these factors shape the lives of those affected by them.

Poverty is one of the main sources of hardship in Delia’s life, and it structures her relationship with Sykes. Delia works so hard at her washing that she cannot take a whole day off each week; she has spent her many years of “sweat, sweat, sweat!”

on this task to keep the household running. Sykes resents Delia’s work even though it supports him, too. He tries to assert a middle-class ideal of the man as head of the household by telling her to take her washing outside, and threatening her with violence if she does not comply. Because they are poor and Delia is a working woman, Sykes does not have financial control over her, and instead uses physical abuse to assert his will. Sykes doesn’t have access to legal resources to throw Delia out of their house, so he resorts to planting a **rattlesnake** to scare her.

Sykes and Delia’s different relationships to whiteness—and white people—are also partially responsible for his failure and her success in life. Sykes resents whiteness and all things associated with it. While the individual reasons for this are not clearly articulated, simply living in the Jim Crow South is certainly justification enough for such resentment—but Sykes lets this resentment get in the way of his own happiness, and uses it as a weapon against his innocent wife as well. He scolds Delia for washing “white folks clothes” and tells her to keep them out of the house. Delia takes a more practical approach. She lives in the world she has, rather than getting caught up in resentment. Her job as a washerwoman, for instance, relies on white people’s desire for her services. Further, she threatens Sykes with telling the “white folks” about his abuse if he lays hands on her again, suggesting that her work for white patrons give her some leverage against her husband. Sykes, in contrast, is not as successful in coping with the effects of racism, segregation, and poverty. He takes out his frustrations not on those actually perpetuating oppression, but rather on Delia, and he is condemned by the narrative for that domestic abuse.

The exploration of race and class in “Sweat” shows the ways in which features of a story’s setting can pervade every aspect of the characters’ lives. Zora Neale Hurston portrays racism and poverty as serious problems that can provoke a variety of responses, some more useful than others. In particular, with the character of Sykes, she shows that the stress of inhabiting a marginalized social position may partially explain morally objectionable behavior, but it does not excuse such a choice. Regardless of his reasons for abusing Delia, Sykes is morally condemned. Delia stands as a counter-example, showing that it is possible to behave ethically even in the face of race- and class-related stress.



SYMBOLS

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



SNAKES

Since Delia is afraid of snakes, Sykes uses snakes and snake-like objects repeatedly to frighten her.

From a symbolic perspective, then, the snake could be a representation of Sykes' cruelty. In a broader context, however, the snake also connects to the Christian themes at play in "Sweat." In Christian iconography, the snake is associated with temptation due to its role in the Book of Genesis. In the Garden of Eden, the first snake (later associated with Satan in Christian theology) tempts Eve to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God has expressly forbidden. Eve in turn tempts Adam to eat as well, leading God to expel them both from the Eden. In "Sweat," Sykes is the one "tempted" by the snake as a way to get rid of Delia and claim the house as his own. The sinful nature of his effort comes up in the very first scene of the story, when Delia explicitly tells him that "it's a sin" to frighten her with his snake-like whip. Sykes persists with his snake tricks, however, and in the end is bitten by the rattlesnake he brought to scare Delia away. As the story closes, both Sykes and Delia gain deathly knowledge brought about by the snake: "...she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew." Like Adam and Eve gaining knowledge but also being expelled from paradise into a world of death, Sykes and Delia also now "know" dark truths because of a snake. Snakes therefore symbolize not only Sykes' cruelty, but also temptation and a fall from grace.

both as irresponsible "foolishness," and as sinful, in contrast to her serious work of sorting laundry after church.

The bullwhip as a simulated snake reinforces the presence of "sin" in Sykes' practical joke on Delia, as the snake is associated with the Devil in Christian iconography. The serpent led Eve into temptation in the Garden of Eden, which in turn led to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden and the beginning of mortality. Delia's exclamation that one day she will "drop dead" reinforces this scene's subtle foreshadowing of a snake bringing death into the house.

☞ Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

Related Characters: Delia Jones (speaker), Sykes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

While she has tried to ignore Sykes and continue with her work, Delia decides in this moment that she is no longer willing to put up with threats of physical violence. Meekness may be a virtue, but it is not suited to the situation at hand.

Here readers see a little more of the power imbalance that has enabled Sykes' abuse. Delia is obviously much smaller than her "strapping hulk" of a husband. Standing up to him requires a great deal of bravery on her part. She is emboldened, however, by the knowledge of her hard work in contrast to Sykes' rampant entitlement. Delia's washing supports them both, and she will not be prevented from doing her job.

This passage gives the story its title "Sweat"—the title refers to Delia's fifteen years of hard work to survive in poverty and with limited opportunities.

☞ 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.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 2008.

Sweat Quotes

☞ Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes... You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'm gointuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness.

Related Characters: Delia Jones (speaker), Sykes



Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Delia clearly expresses how upset she is by Sykes' prank, making it clear that he understands the cruel effects of his behavior and is deliberately making her suffer by exploiting her fear of snakes to frighten her. Delia frames this behavior

Related Characters: Delia Jones (speaker), Sykes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76


Explanation and Analysis

After Delia and Sykes' initial argument, he flees the house and she is left to think over what has become of her marriage. This phrase is the conclusion that Delia comes to: Sykes will eventually get what he deserves for his cruel and sinful actions. She accepts that she cannot change him or make him see the error of his ways. Nor is it her job to punish him for his bad deeds. She chooses instead to trust in a sort of cosmic or divine justice.

One might restate the idea that "whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly" as "what goes around comes around." The notion that people will be punished or rewarded according to their actions is common to a number of religious and spiritual beliefs. In a Christian context, this judgment is up to God, and is most commonly associated with the afterlife, Heaven and Hell. Delia trusts that whatever happens to Sykes will be determined by God as a result of his own actions, and not because of any failure on her part to make him see the error of his ways.

☝ Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be 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. But 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 thows '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..

Related Characters: Joe Clarke (speaker), Delia Jones, Sykes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 77-78

Explanation and Analysis


Joe Clarke provides this explanation of the psychology of abuse when a group of village men are gathered on his porch, watching Delia pass by and wondering why Sykes treats her so badly. Joe draws on a common object with

which the men are all familiar, sugar cane, to make his case. This image provides a possible way of understanding why Sykes acts the way he does.

According to Joe, the process of abuse is one of compulsive destruction, self-hatred, and resentment. Sykes may not even have the capacity to be "decent," and he hates Delia for reminding him of all his abusive actions. As the story offers much less in the way of access to Sykes' thoughts than Delia's, this theory is one of the main possible insights into Sykes as an abusive husband.

☝ Sho' you kin have dat lil' ole house soon's Ah kin git dat 'oman outa dere. Everything b'longs tuh me an' you sho' kin have it. Ah sho' 'bominates uh skinny 'oman. Lawdy, you sho' is got one portly shape on you! you kin git *anything* you wants. Dis is *mah* town an' you sho' kin have it.

Related Characters: Sykes (speaker), Delia Jones, Bertha

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

After Bertha has been in town for a few months, Sykes begins promising her that she can live in his and Delia's house. He feels entitled to do with the house as he wishes, despite the fact that Delia's hard work paid for everything. Sykes is not interested in Delia as a person with rights and feelings. As Joe Clarke suggested, he wants to throw her away like a dried-out piece of sugar cane that is no longer good to chew on. Sykes wants to start over with Bertha, who is still plump and attractive in his eyes. He treats the women in his life as interchangeable at a moment's whim.

☝ Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia's house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Related Characters: Sykes, Delia Jones, Bertha

Related Themes:    


Page Number: 79


Explanation and Analysis

Between Sykes' determination to rub his infidelity in her face and the never-ending demands of her job, Delia has a very difficult time in the months after Bertha comes to town. While she was able to stand up to physical threats, there is little she can do about the embarrassment and isolation of seeing Sykes with his mistress.

By referring to the Biblical locations of Gethsemane and Calvary, this passage implicitly compares Delia to Jesus Christ as a figure of patient suffering. Like Christ, she does not retaliate against those who harm her. She has been worn down by many years of struggling to survive. She simply endures, and tries not to see the cruel scenario being played out before her. Unfortunately, she cannot entirely prevent herself from seeing, hearing, or *knowing* what is happening.

☛ The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces the final segment of the story, which plays out in the terrible, maddening heat of summer. Certainly this is a time in which sweat might play an especially large role!


The description of the heat as “smiting all things living” gives a sense of impending judgment: “smiting” is an action typically carried out by divine figures. Withered and brown vegetation hints at impending death. The image of the snake is also reintroduced here, specifically paired with blindness, which hints at themes of unmediated justice or violence. If “men and dogs” become “mad,” one can expect poor judgment and bizarre choices to come. In short, this description of the weather sets a foreboding tone for the remainder of the story.

☛ “Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin’!”
She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

“Sykes! Sykes, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake ‘way from heah! You *gottuh*. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!”

“Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin’ uh de kin’—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin’ but die....”

Related Characters: Delia Jones, Sykes (speaker)

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

In a mirror image of the story's opening scene, Delia comes home and Sykes presents her with a real snake, as opposed to the bullwhip he pretended was a snake before. This scene is first and foremost an escalation of his cruelty. Furthermore, his capturing a rattlesnake is a dangerous act that hints at the madness supposedly brought on by summer heat. He has grown reckless in his desire to claim the house and expel Delia.



Repeating their previous exchanges, Delia asks Sykes to stop tormenting her and he refuses, demonstrating his cruelty. He believes himself utterly entitled to act however he pleases. He also makes the curious statement that he does not have to do anything but die. Indeed, mortality was the primary consequence of Adam and Eve to disobeying God's law in the Garden of Eden, along with physical and reproductive labor. As readers have seen, the snake as an image is also closely associated with this Biblical story, representing the Devil. Sykes' actions are thus symbolically associated with original sin, as well as being cruel and abusive.


☛ “Sykes, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake ‘way fum heah.
You done starved me an’ Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin’ dat varmint heah.”

[...] “A whole lot Ah keer ‘bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin’ no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh ‘im tuh go. So fur as beatin’ is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you ginter take ef yuh stay ‘roun’ *me*.”

Delia pushed bad her plate and got up from the table. “Ah hates you, Sykes, she said calmly. “Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh.”

Related Characters: Delia Jones, Sykes (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis



After the snake finishes digesting its large meal of frogs and grows more active, Delia's determination to be rid of it is revitalized. She has once again hit a point of being totally fed up with Sykes' behavior. He reinforces the fact that he does not care at all about her feelings. In fact, he goes so far as to threaten to beat her again, so determined is he to get rid of her and have the house for himself and Bertha.


In this moment, Delia goes beyond simply not caring what Sykes says or does. Her love has turned to hatred, and she is no longer willing to tolerate even having him in the house. Scenes like this one demonstrate that abuse victims can feel many different ways about the perpetrators, and often the emotional shift is slow when the relationship was once based on love.

☛ Finally she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

"Well, Ah done de bes' Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault."

Related Characters: Delia Jones (speaker), Sykes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

When Delia returns home from church and finds the snake loose in her laundry basket, she flees in terror to the barn. There she moves through another process of transformation in her emotions towards Sykes and his actions. When she has calmed down from her fright, she finds herself enraged, and rightfully so.


By spending time thinking over past experiences and her own feelings, Delia concludes that she will take no more

part in the situation with the snake. She knows on some level that Sykes could be hurt by the snake. Just as she concluded initially that she did not have to save him spiritually, she decides here that she does not have to rescue him from physical danger of his own making. He brought the snake, a symbol of sin, into the house, and he can deal with it one way or another.

☛ Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man could possibly express, without a recognizable human sound.

Related Characters: Sykes, Delia Jones

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 84-85


Explanation and Analysis


Delia waits outside the house and listens to Sykes' encounter with the rattlesnake. She does not warn him, however, so he stumbles upon the snake and it bites him. The terror that Sykes has subjected Delia to for years comes back upon him in this moment. It is so horrific that he seems to lose his humanity in this moment.

Readers do not witness the actual moment of the snakebite. We know only the terrible sounds that Delia hears through the window, and from this we feel the horror of the kind of rough justice occurring. Sykes has indeed "reaped his sowing," suffering from the bite of the creature he used to torment Delia. While it is a kind of reckoning for his sins, it is awful to witness.

☛ A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

Related Characters: Sykes, Delia Jones

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

As Sykes is dying, he calls out to Delia, and she realizes that he will see signs of her presence and know that she didn't warn him about the snake. She feels deeply troubled by this terrible knowledge that they must share in the moment of his death. It is too late to help Sykes, so there is nothing she

can do but wait for the "cold river" of death to take him, ending the reciprocal moment of seeing and knowing.

Like Adam and Eve's time in the Garden of Eden, "Sweat" ends with the gaining of deathly knowledge. The serpent tempted Eve, and she tempted Adam to eat forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge. In Sykes and Delia's case, he is the one who introduces the snake, and he is ultimately laid low by it, but Delia does not emerge unscathed. She may be free of abuse now, but she can never un-see Sykes' terrible death.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

SWEAT

On a Sunday night, Delia Jones, a hardworking washerwoman, is sorting the week's laundry. Her husband, Sykes, returns home and plays a nasty trick on her with his horsewhip, which resembles a **snake**—he throws it onto her shoulder, terrifying her. When Delia realizes what has happened, she tells Sykes that it's a "sin" to frighten her in this way. Sykes is amused and unconcerned.

Sykes redirects the conversation to reprimand Delia for bringing "white folks' clothes" into the house, obviously trying to pick a fight. Delia refuses to take his bait. She continues with her washing as he calls her a hypocrite for working on Sunday after church and he stomps on the clothes.

When his insults and interference fail to get a rise out of Delia, Sykes threatens her with physical violence. Delia abandons her meek posture and stands to defend herself. She proclaims that her sweat paid for the house and she will do as she pleases in it, threatening Sykes with a cast iron skillet. Sykes, surprised and somewhat cowed, slinks away with a parting insult to spend the night somewhere that Delia "knew too well."

Delia finishes her work and goes to bed. She lies awake, remembering the hopeful early days of her marriage and its swift turn to abuse. She mourns the effect that years of hard work and violence have had on her former beauty. While she thinks that it is too late for her to find love, she consoles herself with the thought of finding peace in her lovely home.

This scene introduces Delia as a hard worker. Sykes' cruelty to Delia sets the tone for their relationship throughout the story, showing Sykes to be abusive and sadistic. The specific trick he plays on her, using his whip to mimic a snake, sets up snakes as threats and associates both the snake and Sykes' abuse with the Christian concept of sin.



Sykes continues his abuse of Delia by expressing frustration with her work, although her work reminds him of their position as poor black people in a racist and segregated society. His effort to twist Delia's Christian belief against her fails because she is more interested in behaving virtuously and making ends meet than in his opinion.



While Delia usually embodies meekness as a virtue, she is no longer willing to accept Sykes' threats towards her. Her years of hard work to build and maintain their home have brought her a sense of well-earned pride. Sykes, not knowing how to deal with a victim who fights back, flees the situation. His cowardice contributes to his negative image as a domestic abuser. His flight to somewhere Delia "knew" begins to subtly introduce the idea of knowledge as tied to negativity and sin, as it is implied that Sykes has gone somewhere unpleasant and upsetting to Delia.



This passage explores the effects of abuse on its victims—in Delia's case, it has harmed her both physically and emotionally. Sykes took advantage of her love and has tried to take everything away from her. Her only hope left is to enjoy the fruits of her many years of hard labor.



Thinking more about the ways that Sykes has wronged her, Delia concludes that he will eventually get what is coming to him. This thought helps her to create a “spiritual earthworks” to defend her emotions from Sykes. Having found emotional peace, Delia goes to sleep. When Sykes returns home late in the night to rudely claim his place in bed, she no longer cares what he says or does.

The following Saturday, Delia is passing the town store with her pony and cart to deliver clean clothes. A group of village men who are gathered on the shop’s porch begin discussing Delia and Sykes. They comment on Delia’s hard work and condemn Sykes for his abuse and infidelity. They think that Delia has to work so much because Sykes does not fulfill his responsibility to support her.

Several men lament the effects of Sykes’ abuse on Delia. They wonder about his preference for other women and about why he has treated her so badly. Joe Clarke, the storeowner, compares abusive husbands to men chewing sugarcane, who squeeze all the goodness out of something and throw away the remainder. Another man comments that they all ought to take Sykes and his mistress down to the swamp and beat them both, and the others seem to agree.

However, the men find that “the heat [is] melting their civic virtue” and they stay on the porch instead of taking any action based on their discussion. They ask Joe to bring out a melon to share. Everyone chips in and they are about to slice up a large melon when Sykes and his mistress Bertha appear. A hush falls on the porch and the men hide the melon away in order to exclude the newcomers.

Sykes makes a great show of ordering food for Bertha just as Delia drives past. He seems to enjoy flaunting his infidelity in public in order to hurt Delia and impress Bertha. Sykes and Bertha leave, and the men on the porch enjoy their melon while critiquing Bertha.

Delia’s thoughts in this moment elaborate her Christian belief that Sykes will eventually be punished for his sins. This belief brings her comfort and the ability to emotionally withdraw from the relationship, thus protecting herself from the emotional harm of further disappointment.



Here readers see that Delia’s hard work and Sykes’ abuse are both well known in the community. Further, the villagers confirm the moral values set up in the opening scene of the story: Sykes’ behavior is unacceptable, and Delia is simply doing her best. Although these men live in the same poor black town as Delia, not everyone here has to work quite so hard. Sykes has made her life exceptionally difficult.



The men in this conversation do not consider domestic abuse to be normal, and they struggle to understand why Sykes would disrespect Delia so thoroughly. Joe Clarke’s explanation illustrates the way that abusers may treat their victims as objects rather than people. This group of men appears to see both infidelity and abuse as worthy of punishment, as might be consistent with a Christian moral framework, since they include Sykes’ mistress in the call to action.



Despite their good intentions, even people who see the wrongness of abuse are often unwilling to intercede. Instead, they decide to reap the benefits of community collaboration in the form of a shared melon. Although they are living under the same conditions of poverty and segregation as Delia, they are able to rely on their social bonds to access things they might not be able to afford on their own. They express their disapproval of Sykes through social exclusion rather than direct action.



Sykes demonstrates that his taking a mistress is, at least in part, simply one more way of being cruel to Delia. He also seems to enjoy playing the role of the benefactor in his relationship, suggesting that Delia’s independent income from work may be threatening to his ego. Once again, the village men’s disapproval of Sykes becomes disapproval of his mistress.



Some time after, the narrator states that Bertha has now been in town for three months, and Sykes is paying for her room in a boarding house (the only one that will take her). Sykes promises to move Bertha into his and Delia's house as soon as he can get Delia out of it.

Delia, meanwhile, has been through a great deal of hard work and embarrassment. She has been "over the earth at Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary." She has tried to ignore the situation, but Bertha keeps coming by the house. Delia and Sykes fight constantly.

One hot day in August, Delia comes home to find that Sykes has caught a **rattlesnake** and placed it in a box by the kitchen door—seemingly in order to scare her away. Delia startles with fright and demands that Sykes take it away, but she is met only with laughter and denial. Later people from the village come by to ask Sykes about the snake, and one man advises him to kill it, but to no avail.

The **snake** remains in its screen-covered box by the kitchen door, and after several days digesting its latest meal, it becomes more active and begins rattling its tail. Delia gets angry and once again tells Sykes to take the snake away, saying that she will not stand for this treatment. Sykes responds that he doesn't care how she feels. Delia gets up from the dinner table and astonishes Sykes by proclaiming that she hates him and telling him to get out of the house. They trade a few more insults, but Sykes leaves without carrying out any of his threats.

The following day, Sunday, Delia goes to church in the next town over and stays for the evening service, which raises her spirits. She comes home after dark singing hymns. When she arrives, she finds the **snake** is absent from its box, and she is struck with the sudden hope that Sykes might have had a change of heart. She goes to strike a match for light and, finding only one, concludes that Sykes and Bertha must have been there while she was gone.

Here readers see that Sykes' abuse of Delia has shifted towards trying to get rid of her. He considers himself entitled to the house, despite all the sweat she has poured into its maintenance. The fact that only one boarding house in town will take Bertha further drives home the community's disapproval of Sykes' abuse and infidelity.



Delia continues to struggle against poverty as well as the emotional difficulties of her position. The mentions of suffering at Gethsemane and Calvary connect Delia to Biblical accounts of Christ's suffering prior to his crucifixion. She unquestionably has the moral high ground in this scenario, while Bertha and Sykes' attempts to torment her are morally reprehensible.



The rattlesnake represents an escalation of Sykes' abuse of Delia, from a false snake to the real thing. All the people around Sykes warn him of its danger, but he will not listen. In Christian iconography, snakes are associated with the Devil and with temptation towards sin. In the book of Genesis, for example, the serpent tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. By recalling this story with the snake as a tool for Sykes' cruelty, Hurston foreshadows a coming downfall.



Both the snake and Delia "warn" Sykes to change his behavior in their own ways. Like Delia shedding her meek demeanor, the snake awakens from its sluggish state and starts to rattle. Sykes continues to demonstrate his cruelty and cowardice by fleeing rather than doing anything that might actually resolve the situation. Delia's righteous anger is enough to chase him off for a while, but not to inspire him to change his ways. The snake as a danger and as a symbol of sin remains.



Delia continues to find comfort in Christianity, and her lightness of heart brings a renewed hope for positive change. Perhaps the snake (and the evil abuse that it symbolizes) is really gone! Her long experience of Sykes' behavior, however, brings Delia back down to reality.



Delia starts in on sorting her washing, but upon opening the laundry hamper, she is horrified to find the **snake** waiting in the basket. It begins to slither out just as a gust of wind blows out the lantern and Delia flees across the yard to the hay barn.

As always, Delia wants to return to her work, which brings her comfort and stability in the midst of a difficult life. In a horrifying mirror of the opening scene, she is interrupted by a real snake and forced to flee to safety. The danger may have been invisible at first, but it was still there.



Delia climbs up onto the hay and stays there for hours, first deathly afraid, then enraged, then horribly calm. She concludes that she has done her best and “Gawd knows taint mah fault.” She falls asleep.

Delia has to process the latest deadly manifestation of Sykes’ abuse. Much like her experience of building a “spiritual earthworks,” she returns to the conclusion that none of this is her fault, with the implication that Sykes will have to deal with the consequences of his own actions. On some level, Delia knows that something bad is about to happen.



Delia awakens to hear Sykes destroying the **snake’s** box in the pre-dawn light. She watches him linger outside the kitchen and then go inside, and she creeps down to peer through the bedroom window.

Instead of going out to meet Sykes, Delia simply watches him arrive. Part of her calm seems to include the decision to let Sykes confront what he has done on his own.



Delia hears the **snake** rattling, and the narrator notes that the rattlesnake is a “ventriloquist” and can be hard to locate from sound alone. Sykes hears nothing until he knocks a pot lid down trying to find a match. He suddenly thinks he hears the rattle under the stove, and he flees to the bedroom, exclaiming in fear.

Delia knows that the snake is in the house, but she has given up on trying to do anything for Sykes. Finally he is the one afraid. This moment is, in many ways, a reckoning. After many years of bringing Delia fear and pain, Sykes is now the one to suffer.



Sykes freezes for a moment, then begins moving again and, hearing the **rattlesnake**, leaps onto the bed. Delia then hears a horrible, almost inhuman cry, followed by more screams, and sees Sykes pull a stick from the window to beat the snake with. She feels ill and begins to creep away when she hears him calling for her. She finds herself unable to move, listening to him cry out.

Sykes’ confrontation with the rattlesnake is also a moment of coming face to face with the abuse and sin it represents. He brought all of this into the house, damaging his own soul and humanity. Although she knows that Sykes has brought this upon himself, Delia struggles to turn aside because she is a compassionate person at heart.



Eventually Delia gets up and sees Sykes crawling out on hands and knees, his neck swollen from the **snake** bite. She feels an immense wave of pity, knowing that it is too late to save Sykes, and she goes to wait in the yard, understanding that he knows that she knows what is happening to him.

By the time Sykes is bitten by the snake, Delia cannot change course. She has left him to “reap his sowing” as she thought early in the story, and both of them have come into horrible knowledge. The emphasis on knowing in this final scene once again evokes the Book of Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from God’s grace. By eating the forbidden fruit, they gained the knowledge of good and evil, and thus could no longer be innocent. In Delia and Sykes’ case, a snake has also brought knowledge and a downfall. While Delia will now be free of Sykes’ abuse, witnessing his death is its own loss of innocence, and she is pained by it even while she knows she was justified in not intervening.





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