
An unhappy marriage, turned into a torment filled relationship, ended through karmic justice, in Sweat

Sweat Essay

In "Sweat," Zora Neale Hurston uses characterization of Delia and Sykes, the symbolism of the house, and Sykes' ironic death to tell the story of Delia and Sykes and advance the plot.

In the story, Delia is immediately characterized as a hard-working woman by showing her doing laundry though, "Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time." Her hard-working nature and the dedication she has to her job contrasts greatly with her husband Sykes who "aint wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em" according to the townspeople. The contrast between the Sykes and Delia's gives the reader insight into the reasons for their failing marriage. Their ruined marriage drives the plot because it is the reason Syke's brings a snake into their home. Knowing how terrified his wife is of snakes, Syke's says, "Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo' uh him dan you!" His disdain for Delia is the reason for her own internal rebellion against Sykes. Delia is also characterized as skinny, and reminded constantly by Sykes of her lack appeal to him. He tells Delia, "Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!" His hatred for his wife is clear to the reader and constantly reiterated.

The house in which Delia and Sykes live is a representation of their marriage. A home is often seen as the foundation of a marriage and the place where husbands and wives create and strengthen their families. The state of Sykes' and Delia's home showed the state of their marriage. Delia states that "Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it." She's the one who actually cares about the house just as she's the one who has actually done right by her spouse. Sykes however does not provide for the house, just as he doesn't provide for Delia. Delia says that Sykes, " wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck." He doesn't care about his home or his marriage. The poor foundation of the marriage characterizes the entire relationship as unstable and impossible to repair. The house also represents a safety net and haven for Delia. She knows that she has the rights to the house and that with hard work she had earned the house, it's something that even Sykes can't take away from her. However, on the night that Sykes dies, she realizes that, "He done had dat 'oman heah in mah house, too." Sykes allowing Bertha into their home, when before Bertha had only gone as far as the gate to call for Sykes, Delia's safety net is torn. He's tainted the one place where she could really pretend that their was still hope for her marriage. The amount of disdain for their marriage that Sykes displays by letting his mistress into his wife's home was the reason that Delia allowed Sykes to die, instead of calling for help.

Hurston uses the ironic ending to leave readers with the lesson, whatever you do comes back to you. Sykes is killed by the snake that he brings into the house to torment his wife, and though he says, "Ah'm a snake charmer an' knows how tuh handle 'em," the snake ends up being victorious over his capturer. The circumstances of Sykes' death show readers that he wasn't able to get away with his unfaithfulness to Delia and his deceit, despite his confidence. Sykes' death allows Delia to be free. The moral created by the irony characterizes Delia and Sykes' marriage as wrong and unfruitful. It encourages readers to stray from poisonous relationships such as theirs.

Through the characterization, the symbolism of the house, and the theme of the story created by Sykes' ironic death, Zora Neale Hurston tells the story of an unhappy marriage that eventually leads to the death of the husband.

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