
Sweat gets a whole new array of meanings to suggest short story "Sweat" conflicts

Sweat

"Sweat" by Zora Neale Hurston, is a short story that takes place in Florida. The story tells the life of a hard-working wash woman named Delia, who's the protagonist and her abusive worthless husband Sykes who's the antagonist. The story shows how Sykes takes pride in living off of his wife's work and the way he mistreats her, which causes for Delia to stand up for herself and morph into a different woman that isn't the humble and timid person Sykes married. "Sweat" is a good title for the story because the author makes use of several connotations of the word and brings these definitions and ideas together to suggest the many conflicts of the story as well as its troubling ending.

Sweat is first shown is through Delia's line of work, she's a wash woman and therefore she dedicates her life to her input of work around the clock. "But she was a wash woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the solid clothes on Saturday when she returned to the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start" (pg. 59). This is why sweat showed the amount of time and effort Delia would put into her job to make sure everything was done a certain way.

Another way it's shown is by Delia's irritation towards her husband; "a state of impatience, irritation, anxiety, or the like, such as to induce sweat; a flurry, hurry, fume" (Oxford Dictionary). Her fume with Sykes is present at the beginning of the story when her husband comes back with her horse and carriage and scares her with the whip, which caused it to appear like a snake when he blatantly knows how terrified she is of them, and then criticizes her line of work. "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 sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!"... "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house"... "Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it" (pgs. 59-61). Their conversation shows that Delia patients had worn thin for Sykes and she began to move from her timid quite self to a person with a voice because she's tired of the blatant disregard for how hard she works to support not only herself but Sykes as well.

Next, it is shown by Sykes actions towards Delia. He treats her as if she's worthless to him. Therefore, he lashes out at her through violence; physical, emotional, mental, verbal, and spiritual. It stated in the story that two months into their marriage Sykes brutally beat Delia. Throughout the story, it shows that he's a bully by how he talks to her and belittles her in front of the town and in her own house, along with how he shows off his mistress like she's a prize around town. "Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see. "Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey" (pg. 64). At this moment it showed Sykes found pride in prancing around with his mistress and not doing it in secret to show Delia, how he was someone with "power".

Sweat also presents itself as the protagonist own personal hell and it shows her pain and

suffering caused by Sykes; “the life-blood; to lose one’s life-blood” (Oxford Dictionary). Due to Delia being trapped in her marriage, she had no idea what Sykes would do next or how he would react. It made it as if she was a prisoner in her own marriage, and the only escape that she was the knowledge that her house would always hers and that was the one object Sykes couldn’t take from her. The reason being she knew that she worked for her house, she earned it with hard work, long hours, and her sweat. The house gave her window of hope and the power to push forward. “Don’t think Ah’m goin tuh be run ‘way fum mah house neither. Ah’m goinn’ tuh de white folks bout you, muh young man, de very nex’ time you lay yo’ han’s on me. Mah cup is done run ovah” (pg. 67).

The events throughout the story lead to the fatal event at the end, “She saw him on hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept and inch or two toward her- all that he was able, and she saw his horrible swollen neck and his one eye shinning with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs” (pg 69). As depicted by the scene Sykes was in the stages of dying, yet Delia showed that she didn’t care about his state of being. As a result of how he treated her throughout their marriage, Delia allowed him “to lose one’s life-blood” (Oxford Dictionary).

“Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston, is a short story that has multiple connotations of the meanings of sweat. Throughout the story, they are all shown through the diction of the protagonist and the antagonist, the setting, and the interactions between Delia and Sykes.