



Transcending Race and Gender in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat"

Dr. Hemalatha S

Assistant Professor of English, Mahatma Gandhi Government Arts College
(Affiliated to Pondicherry University), Mahe, India

Received: 25 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 19 Aug 2026; Accepted: 23 Aug 2026; Available online: 27 Aug 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Zora Neale Hurston is an eminent African American writer who is prominent in the Harlem Renaissance, a predominantly black cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Being a respected African American author in 1920s America was no small feat. The black Americans faced routine discrimination in almost all aspects of life. On top of all that, Hurston mainly wrote about the experiences of southern African Americans — a segment of the population that remained largely disenfranchised until at least the late 1960s. She has written a number of award-winning plays, novels and short stories. Her short story "Sweat" is a female empowerment text about a woman overcoming her abusive husband. It portrays a story of domestically abused, religiously devout laundress, Delia and her adulterous, deadbeat husband, Sykes. Hurston's black female identity is clearly reflected in this story. Her gender and race have undoubtedly shaped the story, imbuing its content with a deep political statement on social inequality. As in many of Hurston's works, symbolism plays a key role in understanding the story. Hurston addresses a number of themes, such as the trials of femininity, which she explores with compelling and efficient symbolism. Zora Neale Hurston's work represents a noteworthy milestone in the fight for equality for black female authors, and will forever be celebrated in literature as a strong black female voice. While the content "Sweat" may have been influenced by her gender and race, her skill as a writer transcends both gender and race.



Keywords— Women Empowerment, Black feminism, gender, race

I. INTRODUCTION

Harlem Renaissance was an artistic and literary movement rooted in New York City's Harlem neighborhood during the 1920s. It marked the first major, centralized outpouring of African American creative expression in American history. Zora Neale Hurston served an influential role during this time period. It is important to understand the significance of this era in history and how African American people were able to develop and adapt their own ideals, morals, and customs through creativity and art. Hurston has written short stories and novels that managed to become a well-known presence in the Harlem social circuit. The Black Americans faced routine discrimination in almost all aspects of life. Hurston's works mainly focus on the life and experiences of Southern African Americans, a segment of the population that largely disenfranchised until at least the late 1960s.

In 1926, a group of writers from the younger generation of the "New Negro" movement in New York City, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, decided to organize the quarterly magazine *Fire!!* Frustrated by the responsibilities thrust on them by Alain Locke and other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, these writers wanted to express their own ideas without the artistic constraints of a political agenda. And, although they only managed to publish one issue because of a host of complications, the magazine left behind one of the most lasting legacies of the radical younger generation of black writers, still considered Hurston's best fiction of the period: a short story titled "Sweat."

II. DELIA JONES: STRENGTH, LABOUR AND SELF RELIANCE

"Sweat," a short story by Zora Neale Hurston, is a female empowerment text about a woman overcoming her abusive husband. The story is set in central Florida, near Orlando and is about Delia Jones, a Negro washerwoman whose struggles against society and her own husband, Sykes, finally erupt into an act of passive aggression, totally changing the complexion of her life. The story begins as Delia is sorting clothes on a spring night in Florida at her home. Being a washer woman, she has the habit of working late on Sunday nights to get start on her work for the week. Because she spends her day time in church. While working Delia is singing a mournful song and wondering where her husband, Sykes, has gone with her horse and working equipment. As she ponders his whereabouts, she feels something like a snake fall around her shoulders and screams, and later she finds her husband standing over her with the bullwhip he uses to ride the horses. Delia has a fear for snake and Sykes often takes advantage of her fear and frightens her. This very striking image of him portrays Sykes as an imposing and oppressive figure who enjoys the torment of his wife.

Delia is angry with Sykes and scolds him because he purposefully made the bullwhip look like a snake. But he doesn't seem to concern about her feelings but instead he yells her for having the white people's clothes at their home. He doesn't like her washing the white people clothes and he has already warned her regarding that but still Delia has to earn for her family so she doesn't heed to his words. As she tries to ignore him, he kicks the near pile she has made all over. He just wants to provoke her with his words so that she will erupt in anger and fights with him. Delia who has tolerated his abusive words so far, is very tired of it and she screams about how she has been working hard and how he has spoiled her hard labour in a fraction of second. In the verge of anger, she picks up an iron skillet from the stove as if to strike him. Though she tries to strike him, she hasn't: "It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did." This shows that Sykes not only verbally abuse her but physically too. Sykes is taken back by her action, as he never expects her to raise against him. She usually used to bottle up her emotions and anger.

III. GENDER AND PATRIARCHAL POWER

Left alone, Delia is pondering over her unhappy married life. Sykes used to spend all of her hard-earned money for buying gifts for another woman, Bertha, with whom he has illegal relationship. The only thing that gives her peace of mind is going to church and maintain her house. He usually comes back in around dawn and steals the

covers before a new scene begins. Through this Hurston projects the troubled household of Delia and that her patience with her abusive husband is going to have some kind of resolution. She hopes that "whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly" which means that she knows eventually Sykes will get what's coming to him.

Hurston depicts Sykes as an ill-hearted monster and the people in the town pity for Delia for her suffering. Whenever Delia sets out to do her washing and passes by a group of men sitting at a store, they used to comment on how she used to be and how it is such a shame that she's beaten so often and lost her good looks. They talk about Sykes' behaviour with Bertha and they generally frown upon him. The author shows how the whole town seems to have a negative reaction against him and she creates the same effect in the minds of the readers too. One day on her way back, Delia sees Sykes out front of Bertha's telling her that he will buy her whatever she wants. Delia is so disheartened on seeing him spending her hard-earned money for some other women. He doesn't go for work but loots all her earning by just imposing his dominance of being a husband. Here Hurston makes a point on how the black women suppressed not only in the outer world but also in their own domestic world.

IV. RACE, GENDER AND CLASS: INTERSECTIONAL MARGINALISATION

Bertha's stay in the town has created rift between Delia and Sykes. They have fought all the time. Even though Delia has attempted to sort out the issues, she has been repulsed each time. As time passes the rupture in their relation widens. Tired of Delia and seeking out freedom with his mistress Bertha, Sykes hatches a plan to poison Delia by planting a rattlesnake in her washing clothes. But instead of Delia, it is Sykes who is poisoned by the rattlesnake, fatally, in the neck. In response, Delia sits meditatively below a chinaberry tree waiting for her husband to expire, and ignoring his pleas for aid. Through the ending of the story, Hurston explores the theme of freedom as Delia finally reaches a place where she can be released from the oppressive Sykes. The burden placed on Delia through her work and white society is heavy enough without having to endure the abuse inflicted on her by her husband. Delia is a religious woman and could never bring herself to inflict intentional harm, but she has been pushed to a place of no return when her last vestige of hope, her little house, is threatened. Through, Delia, Hurston throws light on how the grief and desperation which drive this woman to this point.

As in many of Hurston's works, symbolism is key to understanding the story. For instance, the rattle snake is

one example of symbolism used to represent Delia's fears and Sykes' inconsideration towards Delia's feelings. The Chinaberry tree symbolizing womanhood and fertility, has triumphed in the end. An interplay of white and black -- symbolizing clean and dirty, darkness and light, or even good and bad -- interplays throughout the short story.

Through "Sweat", Hurston digs out the problem of oppression within the black community. Sykes's ceaseless cruelty towards his wife is by far the most difficult part of Delia's situation, and she must seek emancipation from her tyrannical husband before she tries to address the wider system of racial inequality. This is not to say that Hurston oversimplifies Delia's problems; her poverty and hard work are inextricably connected with whites, for whom she must work. A major irony in the story is that Delia must work so hard to clean white people's clothes while her own clothes are dirtied with sweat and blood. It is precisely the combination of white racism and spousal abuse that leads Delia to a level of desperation not at all uncommon amongst black women attempting to carry the burden of two forces of oppression at once.

V. CONCLUSION

It is Hurston's exploration of the feminine experience that is the most overt component of the story, particularly the way in which women are objectified. Delia is seen as a strictly corporeal being. This is demonstrated when her husband, Sykes, defines her in strictly physical terms. He states, for instance, that he "hates skinny wimmen", defining her not in terms of her personal characteristics, but rather in physical terms. The suppressive nature of Delia's experience as a woman is exacerbated by the physical toll of both abuse and labour. Sykes abuses Delia physically, psychologically, and economically. Though Delia initially "seems as though she is manacled to certain gender stereotypes, she finds liberation through them and refuses to be defined as a victim" (Horn). She is, for instance, confined to the domestic sphere. Hurston makes this suggestion overt as she places Delia in the kitchen in the opening scene, and moreover, has Delia doing laundry. Both the kitchen and this chore are signifiers of the domestic sphere. However, it is by embracing her domestic duties that Delia is able to secure a degree of autonomy. Zora Neale Hurston not only represents a strong black female voice, but also ultimately creates meaningful, beautiful literature. Her writing skill transcends both gender and race.

REFERENCES

- [1] Hurston, Zora Neale. "Sweat." *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. Oxford: OUP, 1992.

- [2] Horn, Jason. "'Sweat' by Zora Neale Hurston: An Ecofeminist Master Class in Dialect and Symbolism." *Literary Ladies Guide*, 6 June 2017, updated 17 Sept. 2023.