

Portrayals of domestic abuse and passive resistance in "sweat"



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Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat," published in 1926, focuses on Delia and Sykes Jones and their volatile marriage. The protagonist, Delia Jones, suffers at the hands of her abusive husband, the antagonist, Sykes. In her work, Hurston discusses the various forms in which domestic abuse manifests itself. Abuse is not exclusive to physical violence; rather, abuse may take the form of emotional manipulation and degradation. Though Delia is a victim of both Sykes's physical and emotional abuse, Hurston ultimately uses her character to demonstrate a sense of female power and righteousness. When Sykes is ironically killed as the result of his abusive nature, Hurston creates a space to explore the exertion of feminine power in the form of passive resistance. It may be argued that Delia's character exemplifies the constraints on female autonomy in the institution of marriage and showcases the passive expression of resistance that must be used to exert power in such a confined position.

The short story begins with what could be interpreted as a playful joke between husband and wife. Delia is busy with laundry when Sykes sneaks up and plays a prank on her. He tosses a bull whip around Delia's shoulders, and she mistakes the whip, as he had intended, for a snake. Though this interaction may seem innocent enough, it quickly becomes apparent that the Jones's marriage is not a happy or healthy one. Sykes intentionally preys on Delia's fear of snakes, and he plays this joke with malicious intent. Hurston writes, "A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. [...] She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright" (349). Knowing that Delia would be terrified by the

idea of a snake, Sykes uses Delia's fears to gain superiority over her. In this situation, he has all the power, and she is left at his mercy. Though seemingly powerless in this interaction and, more broadly, in her marriage, Delia attempts to defend herself against her husband's abusive nature without overstepping her position as his inferior. She tries to reason with her husband, telling him that his foolishness will be the death of her, but he is not willing to admit any fault. Instead, he further demeans his wife by calling her racial slurs and begins to undermine the importance of her work, kicking and dirtying the laundry that she had been working on.

The beginning of the story and the depiction of Sykes abuse encapsulates the horror of the Jones's marriage. It is a marriage in which Delia suffers in her powerless position while Sykes abuses his inherent male power and dominant position. Though Delia attempts to speak up for herself, to express some form of autonomy and self-worth, she is ultimately stuck in this abusive relationship with no legitimate way of escaping it. The people of the town are aware of Sykes's abuse, but they are also aware that there is no way to end it or help Delia. One of the townspeople, Clarke, says, "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 a sugar-cane. It's round, juicy and sweet when dey gets 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 throws 'em away" (352). Sykes's abuse is treated as a fact of life. It is as though it is natural for a man to act this way. It is acceptable for a man to physically abuse his wife, to demean the value of her work, to belittle her

appearance, and to cheat on her and bring other women into her home. This acceptance of Sykes abuse exemplifies the unfair division of power between genders. Further, it demonstrates Delia's true strength and ability to suffer through this abuse. She, as society dictates, is not capable of rebelling against her husband. Instead, she must essentially grin and bear his abuse.

When Sykes is killed by a rattlesnake that he had maliciously brought into the house to manipulate Delia, it becomes apparent that Delia is not entirely submissive in her marriage. Delia arguably could have saved Sykes. She could have warned him about the snake. She could have run to his rescue and taken him to a hospital for treatment. However, as an act of passive resistance, Delia sits as her husband dies. Having suffered through Sykes's abuse without any legitimate form of escape, Delia is justified in her final decision not to help her husband in his final moments. Because she was never capable of standing up for herself in a way that was taken seriously, her only option to express some sense of power was to express it passively. This may be viewed as a criticism of the confining nature of gender roles in the institution of marriage as well as a comment on the nature of feminine power.

Delia Jones's character may be viewed as an example of passive resistance as a form of feminine power. Because of her prescribed role in her marriage, Delia is forced to sit idly by as her husband abuses her. She is not capable of standing up for herself or changing her situation. She is stuck in an abusive marriage because of the socially constructed standards surrounding gender roles in the institution of marriage. While Sykes's abuse is accepted as a fact of life, Delia is expected to live as his inferior. Because of her confined

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position as a wife, she is unable to express any legitimate form of power. This seemingly powerless position forces Delia to express her power through an act of passive resistance. She does not purposely kill her husband, but she willingly allows his death to occur. Delia, after all of the abuse she has suffered, is able to stand up for herself by doing nothing.

Work Cited

Hurston, Zora Neale. "Sweat." *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 3rd ed., vol. 2, W. W. Norton, 2007, pp. 349-357.