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The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's "Sweat"

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S SHORT STORY "SWEAT," FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1926 in *Fire!!*, is both supremely readable and beautifully teachable: short, accessible at the literal level, satisfactory in its "eye for an eye" justice, and rich in revisionary Biblical symbolism, the radical nature of which can sometimes pass unremarked. Scholars have noted that a Biblical framework is established by the story of a man and woman locked in struggle and blame, by the story's setting (a house and garden whose equilibrium is shattered by the arrival of a snake), and by references explicitly associating Delia with Christ. Mary Jane Lupton calls "Sweat" "an Adam and Eve in reverse, a very unblissful bower which is made peaceful when the snake . . . bites the man" (50-51). Barbara Williams adds, "Neither the failures of the villains [nor] the hardships of the victimized can be attributed to a simple, single cause, such as slavery, or modern American society; these ills exist because of original sin." Fred Fetrow devotes his entire essay to an examination of the Biblical parallels in "Sweat," concluding that

> Hurston's retelling of the Paradise Lost myth shifts the blame from the female temptress in league with the serpent to the oppressive male who would use the snake for his own evil purposes. . . . She seems to say that both sexes are guilty of cruelty to the other, but men have more power to be cruel and therefore are more guilty by default. (277)

This scholarship does not fully explore the implications of the story's Biblical paradigms, or the extent to which they render "Sweat" at once startlingly radical and ultimately conservative in its attribution of responsibility for domestic violence, first to masculine sexuality and ultimately to original sin.

Such an exploration has implications not only for a fully developed critical reading of "Sweat" but also for the ways in which we teach this

story to inexperienced critical readers. Student readers, after all, often bring to the table a host of opinions about Biblical stories and how they are to be read. For such students, the tension in which radical values and conservative ones remain throughout the story—neither canceling the other—can change what initially appears to be a validation of divine justice and human closure into a new experience of ambiguity, as this text both interrogates and validates New Testament Christianity's sacrificial solution to original sin and the fall of humankind. In "Sweat," the Biblical story of Genesis has been rewritten to associate men—not women—with original sin, with the cause as well as the results of the fall of man; to attribute New Testament Christian values (meekness, sinlessness, forgiveness, and hard work) to a black woman, well before most white readers understood that the historical Christ is unlikely to have been "white"; to present the snake, even the Satanic snake, as more benign than many a man; and to position black women as creators of an Eden which is spoiled only by the presence of men, not by that of the snake or any other animal. The story's apparent conventionality—its Biblical allusion and imagery, its constant references to traditional Christian values, the tidy revenge by which, even as predicted, Sykes reaps what he has sown—only thinly conceals its much more radical Biblical revisions. The result is a story which initially appears satisfying, even comforting; my students generally embrace it with enthusiasm. But its complications become progressively more disturbing as the reader slips into a world in which Biblical parallels abound, but in which nothing is quite as it was in the original texts, and in which the appealing solution of snake-bites-abuser begins to reveal less appealing observations about domestic violence. Students who initially proclaim this a great story, a wonderful story of true Christian values, are sometimes less vocal by the end of class.

Religious motifs first appear in the second sentence of the story, which (as Fetrow notes) begins and ends on Sundays, with references to hymns; by the third paragraph, however, the more literal story, and Hurston's editing of the Genesis template to incorporate issues of gender and history, gathers momentum as the abusive Sykes tosses his bull whip over his wife's shoulder: "something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders" (197). The scene progresses to verbal and then to physical abuse—Sykes mocks Delia's fear, insults her intelligence, makes her race (the same as his) a matter of contempt, and derides her work—but the motif is clear from, and the parallels are established by,

the description of the whip. The whip compresses into a single image a host of associations: domestic violence (Sykes's "brutal beating" of Delia, [199]); the historical violence of slavery (both that of African Americans and that of the Hebrews in Egypt, a story upon which many African American traditions of Christianity draw heavily); the literal snake still to come; the original sin that the snake connotes; and a phallic and violent male sexuality. Delia is frightened by the fact that the whip looks like a snake, certainly, and her hatred and fear of snakes because of their traditional association with sin is a motif from the outset; however, the use of the whip, rather than some other phallic or serpentine object, also positions Sykes as would-be owner and Delia as slave. Sykes apparently wishes to take the place of the "white folks," the former masters who are mentioned twice in the story as distant authorities, in the hierarchy of power. As Green notes, "With our focus diverted from the ethnic issue [by the fact that there are virtually no white characters], [Hurston] can direct our attention to what she views as a larger issue: the master-slave narrative that underlies the male dominance of woman, with the woman filling the role of slave to her male counterpart's role of master" (106).

Hurston's concerns with sex, gender, and race are further conflated via the description of the whip. "Long, round, limp and black" simultaneously suggests phallic imagery and emasculation; if Sykes's surrogate phallus is "limp," a need to compensate for sexual uncertainty or failure may be the root of the violence against Delia and of his need to control and dominate her. The connotations of the whip that Green identifies also suggest that Sykes's emasculation may be related to his position as a black man in a largely white nation, especially in the context of Sykes's hatred of the white people's white clothes that Delia washes to earn their living. His feeling may be exacerbated by his paradoxically having been taught to drive by a white woman. White patrons "give" Sykes mobility and Delia a livelihood, but they can do so only because of their disproportionate power and privilege. It is no great step in any relationship from relief or gratitude to profound resentment of such unjust power.

Incidentally, as Hurston's readers will remember, this play of gratitude and resentment at the intersection of race and gender appeared again eleven years later, more explicitly, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Nanny tells Janie that

> de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (14)

Nanny's observation is even more apposite to "Sweat," which offers Delia none of Janie's options. Delia lacks the beauty—that is, the "white" hair and coloring—that gives Janie power over men; Delia cannot leave home and take her chances elsewhere without losing all she has built; she cannot kill Sykes, as Janie ultimately kills Tea Cake, and expect the same amnesty, because she is hindered by her Christian beliefs, her mule-like status as a washerwoman rather than a mayor's wife, and her lack of beauty and charm.

In "Sweat," black women's roles are restricted to those that early twentieth-century American culture allows them; they have no independent means, no quasi-mystical power to attract male protectors. Their choices are to be despicable temptresses (like Bertha) or good women who work like mules. Delia's choice is obvious. Both slave-like and Christ-like, she can only endure; one reason she must is that, whatever social or psychological issues may underlie Sykes's violence, his association with the symbols of Genesis—snake, tree, garden—does suggest, as Williams notes, that in Hurston's view at this time, the ultimate cause is original sin. The "white folks" are unjustly privileged socially and financially; men exert unjust physical, financial, and social dominance over women; but this is because the world is that way—because of sin and the fall of humankind, rather than because of a situation which can be rectified through social change prompted by the well-meaning. In a fallen world, social ills are results rather than causes of essential evil, and no amount of social justice—even in Eatonville—can undo that sin. Like the mule, Delia cannot overcome sin's consequences, or even really question or challenge them; she can only endure them—a different message than Janie Crawford later offers Hurston's readers, and a more unnerving one.

Once it is clear that original sin is inescapable and that its consequences must run their course, Delia's effort to avoid quarreling with Sykes positions her as "good" to the point of being Christ-like, thus introducing the story's New Testament allusions. Her meekness makes sense in the context of a theology in which humble suffering is the mark

of both true virtue and divine understanding. She seeks to avoid "fuss" because she has just come from church, which inspires Sykes's derision and accusations of hypocrisy because she is working on the Sabbath (though he, of course, has been committing adultery on the Sabbath). Delia's tireless work with the laundry, and her patience with Sykes's devaluation of that work, initially position her as "good," a goodness established beyond question by the end of the story. Work makes Delia's goodness and patience evident not only through its usefulness (as it provides for the couple and pays for their home), but in its obedience to divine decree. As Williams notes,

> [While] "Sweat" [sic] . . . is foundational to the plot and to character development [in] that Delia's only source of satisfaction comes from her labor, a more important correlation exists between this image and the fall of man. God, as Righteous Judge, sentenced fallen man to a lifetime of hard labor: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground"; the implicit first death sentence follows: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3:19).

Delia's goodness is embodied in her obedience to God's command; she is serving her sentence. As Lupton remarks, "Sweat" "reads more like a parable of good woman/bad man than like an analysis of human behavior, so weighted is it against the evil man" (50). This is certainly the case (even in her final lines, Hurston insulates Delia against any possible blame for not helping the reprehensible Sykes, because "Orlando with its doctors was too far" [207]); but it also behooves us to inquire why Hurston would insist so strongly on Delia's utter rectitude.

One answer is that Delia's Christ-like goodness is defined and signified by her "habitual meekness" (198). The word suggests the prophecies of Psalm 37:11 and Matthew 5:5 that the meek shall inherit the earth. This meekness is Delia's defining characteristic, although it seems to "slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf" when, in her first show of physical resistance, she threatens to strike Sykes with an iron skillet (198).[1] The occasional shift from meekness to anger does not disqualify Delia from divinity, of course; even Christ could be moved to anger by blatant injustice (as with the money changers in the temple in John 2.) Later, Delia's Christ-like characteristics are made entirely explicit as we learn that her "work-worn knees crawled over the earth

[1] See Seidel's discussion of the frying pan as a tool of domestic creation turned to purposes of defense.

in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months" (202). She suffers in the garden of the Passion and drags herself back to her own torment not once but "many times," offering only brief moments of resistance.

It is tempting to read the incident involving the skillet as one in which defending herself ultimately frees Delia from Sykes's domination; it's certainly possible that this defiance is what goads him into bringing the snake into the house and thus precipitates the events culminating in his death. However, this is Delia's last active rebellion as well as her first. From this point forward, her resistance consists of reciting the consolations of faith: "Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing" (199); attempting "a timid friendliness" in hopes of better treatment from Sykes (202), which works as well as such tactics generally do with abusers; pleading with him to remove the rattlesnake; and a brief verbal confrontation that temporarily drives him from the house but also incites him to set the snake into her laundry basket, presumably as a plot to kill her. The meek may inherit, but meekness necessarily precludes dramatic action on one's own behalf. As with the patient Griselda of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, Delia's virtue lies in endurance, not defiance, because the outcome, in the terms of the story, is not within her control. What Delia does, and must do, is remain passive, obedient to the punishment of God upon humankind for sin: she refuses to abandon her house, and she prays, sings, and attends church, waiting upon her *deus ex colubra*. Her deliverance has not come at any time during the past fifteen years prior to the events of the story; as far as she knows, it may never come, as it never does for too many abused women in real life. All she can do is wait for Sykes to reap his sowing. She is meek and good because meekness is her only option.

As Seidel discusses, Delia's creative role in the house augments and complicates her extraordinary goodness and its spiritual implications, which Hurston takes great pains to establish. Her artistic role is more evident, however, in her creation of the garden: "She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely" (199). This is not only the role of the artist, however; it is the role of God in the Genesis story, a rather different story from that of Christ. Delia does not merely live in the house and the garden; she has created them, one by one, and she has seen that they are good ("lovely").

This is perhaps our initial cue that Delia is not only virtuous, but positively divine, despite her passive role in her own domain. Delia is first presented as human, earning bread with the sweat of her brow, like Eve after the fall; then in a unilateral role, like God at the creation; later still as a passive but faithful sufferer of God's will, like Christ. This makes for a hodgepodge of Biblical allusions—is Delia Eve, or God, or Christ, or is there some way in which she can be all three? In "Sweat," it seems possible, since women are not excluded from the realm of the divine or that of the Christ figure. It is here that "Sweat" assumes its most radical positions; indeed, it takes only Hurston's reversals of gender to make Eve appear much more divine than the traditional Genesis story allows. Eventually the "eye for an eye" violence of the Old Testament seems to subsume the later texts, with their focus on mercy and forgiveness, but it does so in a way that maintains the virtue of—or, rather, the necessity for—Delia's meekness.

The advent of the snake is, of course, the point at which the parallels to Genesis become inescapable; it is also the point at which Hurston's divergences from the traditional stories become most striking, and the point at which we begin to see what story Hurston is really telling: a new Genesis, which, like the original, explains the workings of a fallen world, but from a very different perspective. Here it is the man who brings the serpent into paradise (Lupton 50-51, Fetrow 274)—a serpent symbolic of both sin and the phallus, because Hurston's story causally connects original sin with male sexuality. Sykes, we are told early on, married for lust: "She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh" (199). It is the woman who (unlike Eve) fears and resists the snake; it is the woman who is affiliated with Christ and symbols common to Christianity (the association of the snake with Satan, for example); and it is the woman who obeys God's dictates and who is apparently as free from original sin as any character can be within the framework of a post-lapsarian world. And while all this might be sufficiently striking to merit notice, it is also the snake—conflated with Satan by Delia's own words, as well as by centuries of church tradition—that enables Delia's freedom from her oppressor, the snake working what the reader may take to be God's justice. The snake, a reptile of rare discernment, spares Delia and strikes Sykes instead, setting her free to enjoy her work-stained, lovely, self-created Eden.

In particular, the rattlesnake's role highlights Hurston's changes to the original. Student readers are quick to pick up on the medieval association

of the snake with Satan (and are often unaware that the book of Genesis makes no such connection); their reading is borne out in this text, of course, by Delia's reference to the snake as "ol' satan" (205) and, later, "ol' scratch" (206), a common early twentieth-century usage for the devil dating back at least to Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1824.) Moreover, the snake clearly harkens back to the phallic imagery of the first scene: with the snake, Sykes adds another phallic symbol to that of the whip, one more deadly to Delia than either of the originals—and more deadly to Sykes. Sin in this configuration does not just come "from men." Rather, it comes from lust, "a longing after the flesh," and specifically from the phallus, an instrument of generation transformed by Hurston's vision into a serpent of evil, reproducing original sin again and again—first through Sykes's marriage for lust and then through his adulteries with Bertha. And while they threaten Delia, male lust and sexuality destroy Sykes. Even as Sykes "is gointer reap his sowing" (199) as promised, sin destroys itself *through* itself. Sex and snakes, the manifestations of Sykes's evil, destroy him. This is a radical revision of Genesis which the original text does not encourage.

But despite all these indicators of the snake's phallic and devilish nature, the snake's deeds are complicated. "Sweat" predates Hurston's trips to Haiti by more than a decade; however, the story's use of the snake as an agent of eventual justice prefigures her later acquaintance with Damballah, the largely benign serpent of the sun and of all life (*Tell My Horse* 116-20). Later, after Haiti, Hurston associates Damballah with Moses, the Biblical and folk hero who brings not only the children of Israel out of Egypt, but who, in African American folk tradition, will also bring black Americans out of slavery, as the snake does for Delia. Hurston's use of the snake to free the protagonist suggests that even at this early stage, her relationship with the nonhuman (including the frightening nonhuman) partakes of a broader worldview than her characters are allowed. Her snake, far from being just a snake, stands in *both* for an evil associated with Satan, with men, and with masculine sexuality, *and* for the liberating snake-staff of Moses (Exodus 2: 2-4), which embodies the power of God to smite the wicked.

The snake may also be connected with Christ (like Delia) by the fact that it appears to be dead when Sykes first brings it home, but awakens after three days. "Ol' Satan" or not, this snake is associated with the fraught but probably favorable color white, as "his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes" (204). Hurston even

grants the snake the human, or perhaps godly, quality of sex: the serpent is referred to as "he," not "it," a gendering which connects the snake both to Sykes and sin and to the male Judeo-Christian deity. Nor is the snake vile or hideous; after Sykes releases it into the bedroom, Delia sees "him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed" (206). "Awful" suggests less ugly than awe-inspiring, appropriately enough for a creature of power and dread. Awe is often cited as an appropriate response to the divine, connoting not only fear, but fear mingled with the veneration or worship suitable to beauty, the serpent's other attribute. This is a great deal of symbolic weight for one rattlesnake to bear, but Hurston manages it.

Most importantly, however, in striking the blasphemous Sykes and sparing the virtuous Delia, the rattlesnake works what readers may hope to be God's will. This hearkens back to the theological tenet that even Satan must work God's will in the end, being (as C. S. Lewis pointed out in a later preface to *The Screwtape Letters*) the equal and opposite of Archangel Michael, not of God himself. However, it may equally suggest the point already discussed: that for Hurston in this story, the troubles of the world, including original sin, are both human and masculine in origin. The snake causes no trouble until Sykes confines and provokes it. In this construction, sin comes not from any diabolical outside agency, but from humankind's—specifically, from man's—insecurity and desire for power, a desire which may be linked easily enough to sexual insecurity by the initial description of the whip as "limp." By contrast, Hurston presents woman—specifically, black woman—as both godlike in her in creative powers and Christlike in her patience and meekness. The snake may be simultaneously "only an animal" (to which the assignation of moral blame in the medieval tradition is inappropriate), a symbol of diabolical evil, and an agent of divine justice. Constructing the snake in this way undercuts another assumption of the original Genesis account. Hurston questions the story in which woman is responsible for all the world's ills, and reverses it to suggest that, on the contrary, man is to blame; but she also raises questions about the traditional hierarchy of man over beast—questions whose intensity seems to have increased over the subsequent fifteen years, as Hurston encountered and studied the more immanent and animistic religions of Haitian and Gulf Coast Voodoo or Voudoun. If a serpent can work divine justice more effectively than a man, perhaps subduing the earth and having dominion

over it—like men's dominion over women—are less desirable and moral acts than the original Genesis story implies.

Such a reading is reinforced by the role of the story's other men. The speakers on the store porch do not embody the evil of Sykes, but neither are they able (or even really inclined) to put a stop to it. These men, in the story's central section, constitute a chorus that clarifies the situation for any reader still in doubt; they praise Delia's hard work, and note that it is necessary in view of Sykes's shiftlessness. However, they also excoriate Sykes's mistress Bertha on the grounds of her weight and, interestingly, her blackness ("dat eight-rock couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done throwed out de back do' 'way las' yeah" [200]). They blame Bertha for both her race and color ("eight-rock") and her gender (200). The discussion's centerpiece is Joe Clarke's comment on Sykes:

> 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. . . . 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. . . . 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. (201)

Joe tangentially recognizes men's treatment of women as objectification: he sees that women are essentially commodities for (some) men (see Meisenhelder). More directly, however, he acknowledges and names original sin in Sykes when he says there is no law that can make a man be decent if decency is not "in him" to begin with. That is, he acknowledges that no social institution can alter what is wrong with Sykes, and perhaps no social institution (even racism) has caused it, either.

Old Man Anderson suggests the only alternative: the men ought to kill Sykes, the only way to put an end to his evil. The men grunt in approval, but Anderson seems more annoyed by Sykes's "biggety" ways than by his treatment of Delia, noting that "He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done teached 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live—an' we oughter kill 'im" (201). Delia's sufferings are incidental: Old Man Anderson is concerned with Sykes's overbearing attitude toward the men of the town, not his abuse of his wife. The proposed killing, of course, is not to be: not because of any doubt that it would be a noble act, a premise

which the story never questions, but because the men are too trifling to carry it through. Even Delia only nods "briefly" at the men as she drives past, recognizing perhaps that they are complicit in Sykes's treatment of women. In the most humorous line of a grim story, we find that Sykes will be spared not because the men fear retribution, or because they have moral qualms of any kind, but because it is simply too hot for such energetic work as murder: "the heat was melting their civic virtue" (201). The men decide to eat watermelon instead. These are the "good" men in Hurston's paradigm: intelligent enough to recognize evil, but too lazy, self-centered, and greedy to do anything about it. Delia can hope for nothing from any man.

Hurston's interrogation of the Biblical hierarchy of man over woman, and man over beast, also accounts for the story's final sentence: "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" (207). Here, in both echo and defiance of Genesis' construction of knowledge of good and evil as the source of the fall, the verb "to know" is used three times (and arguably a fourth time by the use of the richly consonant adverb "now"). The Chinaberry tree's fruit may be inedible, but knowledge has become paramount; Sykes must bear witness to the results of his own evil, while a still-merciful Delia ("a surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye") must turn away and can only cling to the tree itself for support (207).

In the end, however, this text's many radical elements—a black female Christ figure, a complicated (but ultimately just) serpent, a condemnation of all visible men, and a dramatic rewriting of Eve's culpability and of patriarchal paradigms of behavior—are balanced and perhaps undone by what is conservative in the story. Read as commentary on domestic violence (much less as advice for its victims), this story is painful. Victims, the story suggests, must be patient and meek, because they cannot placate the abusers and they cannot change original sin. Nothing they can do will change their abusers: not meekness, not defiance. Violence or retaliation (the skillet) will be met with escalation, and attempts at murder (as with the rattlesnake) are quite likely. What the husbands do is wrong, to be sure, but righteousness must be the victims' only consolation; they can hope for no help from their communities, even when their communities recognize the problem. Their only hope is divine retribution. In this text,

if the divine does not act and the snake does not present itself, such a woman has no hope for herself, or her garden, or peace. All she can do is watch and pray, emulating the passivity which Delia has applied to her situation for—when the story begins—fifteen years. If her husband decides to kill her, she can perhaps flee, losing everything she has built, but she cannot stop him. She cannot even prevent him from bringing her supplanter into her own house; Sykes's conviction that he "owns" the town is, practically speaking, the truth.

What victim of domestic violence can bear to hear that she must wait until her husband's own evil destroys him? What if it never does? Students satisfied by the story's comforting "eye for an eye" justice often miss the fact that Delia has been enduring torment for a decade and a half, and might easily have repeated those years three times over if the rattlesnake had failed to materialize (if Delia is around thirty-five at the time of the story, she might expect to live to her allotted threescore years and ten, or more. So might Sykes.) To leave would be to lose her home, her creation, her livelihood, her church: everything that makes her life bearable. To strike out against Sykes provokes further retaliation, as we see when the rest of the story unfolds from Delia's single moment threatening Sykes with the skillet. To kill him would be ruinous both materially (she would be imprisoned, perhaps hanged) and morally (within the Christian paradigm, she might be damned), because neither the law nor the New Testament offers amnesty to a murderous wife, no matter how murderous the husband. St. Paul, after all, tells women to obey their spouses (Ephesians 5:22), and while the churches of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have grappled extensively with this text, its literal reading seems clear in offering no hope to Delia.

This is a bitter moral for a story which initially offered such satisfaction. A woman endowed with all the agency of creator, a Christ figure, a revisionist Eve, is nonetheless forbidden by an unjust world to use that agency except in saintly patience, in what amounts to acquiescence in her own torture and potential murder. But it is the fate that Hurston documents for abused women. The story removes, in turn, the hope of help through personal action (the frying pan and, conversely, Delia's "timid friendliness") and through social intervention (the men on the porch, the "white folks" who are invoked but never actually called upon—perhaps Delia knows how little help they would really provide). A battered woman can only endure, and only God can save her—if God will. In Hurston's construction, the founding stories of Judeo-Christian

traditions are finally presented as radically inaccurate, casting the blame on women for flaws which the author locates instead in men and masculine sexuality. New Testament Christianity's focus on meekness, on endurance, on living in the hope of another world, may require us to eschew our own agency in this one; it encourages us to endure when, perhaps, endurance will lead only to the grave, if no other force intervenes. Sometimes, of course, other forces do intervene. Often they do not.

This is a discouraging message from a story so rich in revision and in its condemnation of abuses of power and love; each time I teach this story, my students have found it understandably unsettling, for all kinds of reasons. Any given class typically offers a wide spectrum in its students' knowledge of the Bible, literal and figurative; their awareness of racism and how it can preclude options which the more privileged among them take for granted; their expectations concerning African American and female authors. In particular, many students tend to expect a story by an African American author of the early twentieth century to be "about" race and thus to center any investigations of evil upon race relations. Others expect a story that relies so strongly on Biblical imagery and allusion to be "about" divine justice. "Sweat" is, of course, at least partly "about" divine justice, but not in the way that students coming from a more straightforward or literal theological background expect. To teach "Sweat" as the complex and ambiguous story it is, then, is to offer our classes much more than an acquaintance with a small piece of early twentieth-century or Harlem Renaissance content—more even than a compelling introduction to a characteristically rich and complicated author. Rather, it is an opportunity for students to bring textual evidence to bear on the assumptions they themselves bring to the critical table and to consider a wide range of disturbing questions: to what extent human evil might be tied to gender relations as well as racial ones, and to what extent social intervention can address either; whether popular conceptions of divine justice hold up as well under the lens of oppression as students may believe they will; what it means to subdue the earth and have dominion over it, and whether, as Lynn White suggests, this concept has determined our relations with the nonhuman world (9); and whether, even today, the possibilities of relief and escape for the oppressed have really broadened as much as we would prefer to hope. This final issue is central to "Sweat"; certainly in Hurston's time and context, her discouraging message of despair rings

unfortunately true (horrified looks are usually the first sign that students are beginning to comprehend how well-founded such despair may be). Women in 1928 had few options in the face of men's abuse of power, particularly black women without financial resources beyond their own unending labor.

"Sweat" is not *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie can leave Logan Killicks for Joe Starks, and she can run away with Tea Cake, largely because of Joe Starks's money and because she can trade on the commodity of her beauty. She can also leave because, as Southerland, Lamothe, and Pavlic (among others) have noted, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is set less within a Christian framework than within that of Haitian Voodoo. Janie symbolically enacts the role of Erzulie, a goddess with exceptional sexual freedom and power over men. She can set out in search of the horizon, and hope to find love there, because the novel's symbols (trees, mirrors, vevers) chart her journey toward initiation in a supernatural tradition based upon changing the world by the means at one's own disposal, a philosophy Hurston espouses in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (226). But the world of "Sweat" is one in which the protagonist has no means at her disposal. In this world, the divine eventually wreaks justice on the wicked; but from a human perspective, if the mills of God grind small, they may also grind too slowly for the relief of women. Certainly Delia has no control over how or when or whether it is accomplished. And no contemporary reader need look far afield to find examples in which the world of "Sweat" is still the world of the twenty-first century. This may be why the story ends where it does, with Delia permitted neither to show nor even to feel relief, with no glimpse of the better days that we may hope will come afterwards. It may be that her goodness and mercy allow her to feel no relief at the painful demise of the man she once loved; equally, however, it may be that even Hurston herself could not imagine better days for Delia, in a world where the work of justice must be left to reptiles, in which original sin is impervious to human efforts, and in which, too often, those efforts are never made at all.

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