Sweat By Zora Neale Hurston: Short Story Literary Analysis

In the 1920s, women were supposed to conform to being a good woman. White women had gained some leniency away from the husband with the rise of feminism but for African American women, the struggle was much harder. Women were told to conform to the culture of having to rely on a man. Even if an African American woman worked, they were still constrained to the “occupational restriction to dirty work, such as domestic service.” (Branch) Women could still be providing the income but the man was still ahead of the household. Then women saw the unfairness of the higher standard and thus began the feminist movement, which allowed many African American women to tell their stance through literary works. Zora Neale Hurston is a prime example of this and through her short story “Sweat,” uses symbolism to provide an empowered female character that defies culture normality and embodies the meaning of becoming an independent woman.

In the short story, symbolism is the key component in understanding how Delia, the lead character, develops into an independent woman. For instance, Delia is a hard-working woman who works as a washerwoman. This represents “women’s history of difficult, back-breaking labor' (Hatfield). The notion of her labor introduces the concept of efforts to provide structure and stability in her life. Delia separates her laundry into dark and light piles which coordinate with her trying to find a sort of order since she would begin to have control over the color of the clothes. Syke is Delia’s abusive and unfaithful husband who just brings chaos into her world and while Delia is retrieving her washtub, Syke “stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things.” (Hurston) This further escalates the fact that even while trying to find stability within her work, her husband manages to destroy what she has done. The actions by her husband will lead up to Delia’s change of character into becoming the independent woman we later see in the story.

Another symbolic gesture towards Delia’s development would be a snake. Delia has a fear of snakes and Syke uses this to advantage. At the beginning of the story, while Delia is doing laundry, he puts his bullwhip upon her, fooling her into thinking it was a snake. The use of his scare tactic introduces the concept of Syke regarding Delia with no respect. Delia works hard and provides for the two but Syke is ungrateful for her doing so. Later in the text, Syke uses her fear of snakes again by giving Delia a rattlesnake. Rattlesnakes are poisonous and left untreated can kill a person with one bite. This is also seen as irony since later in the story, the snake gets loose and hides under the stove. Syke then goes near the stove and encounters the rattlesnake which then proceeds to bite him, leading him to his death. Delia then proceeds to let him die and this is where we ultimately see her change in character. She has already realized that Syke is not a good man and she chooses to take a path of freedom rather than save him which would not allow her to relinquish herself from his corruptness in their relationship, gaining independence.

Another prime example of symbolism used to undermine the culture normality of women would be the title itself, “Sweat.” Sweat signifies the effort put into hard work. Delia is hard-working women and Hurston uses the line, “Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!” (Hurston) This is another example of her changing character. The reader now knows that she has had enough with the way she has lived her life. It also is a

reminder of Syke, one of the not so clean thing in Delia’s life. Now, with the change in Delia's outlook, the reader can be informed that all her sweat and hard work would have paid off by the end of the story since she gained freedom and is now independent.

Zora Neal Hurston manages to use symbolism as a way to reach readers through the short story 'Sweat', and through the character Delia, readers can understand that a woman does not need a man and can become empowered and independent.

Works Cited

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