

## The Portrayal of a Black Woman's Perseverance in Zora Neale Hurston's Short Story Entitled *Sweat*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the perseverance of the black female protagonist portrayed in the short story entitled *Sweat* written by Zora Neale Hurston. The perseverance is used by the black female protagonist to face the domestic violence done by her abusive husband. The concept of perseverance and domestic violence are used to analyze the life of the black female protagonist. The combination of library method with its close reading, qualitative analysis, and contextual literary method focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic elements are used. The result shows that the perseverance applied by the black female protagonist enables her to survive the domestic violence leading to her freedom from her abusive husband who dies because of his own evil plan actually directed to his wife.

**Keywords:** perseverance, domestic violence, contextual literary method.

### INTRODUCTION

*Sweat* (1926) written by Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960), a Harlem Renaissance female writer, talks about a black couple, Delia Jones and Sykes Jones. Delia washed the whites' clothes at home to support their living because Sykes had no job. Sykes objected to Delia's job although he knew that he also depended on the money Delia earned. Delia was unmoved by Sykes's strong objection. Sykes is a coarse man who also had another woman. He often used Delia's fear on snakes to frighten her, such as using a big whip looking like a snake to scare her and deliberately keeping a rattle-snake at home to terrify her. The frightened Delia bore all this patiently. One day, after a big quarrel, Sykes tried to harm Delia by putting the rattlesnake into the washing tub. The alert Delia was safe and the snake hid on the bed. The drunken Sykes, coming home in the dark night, was bitten by the rattlesnake. Even though he begged Delia to help him, she left him dying alone in the house since there was not enough time to call the doctor in the nearby city considering that the rattlesnake's bites are so poisonous.

This short story shows about the perseverance of Delia Jones in facing her miserable condition. To analyze Delia's perseverance, the concept of perseverance including its characteristics is needed. Another concept to support the analysis on Delia's perseverance is the concept of domestic violence which is closely related to Delia's perseverance.

According to Wheatley, "The word "perseverance" in Latin means, "one who sees through to the end," "one who doesn't yield." In English, it describes how we maintain our activity in spite of difficulties. Tenacity, steadfastness, persistence, doggedness—these are all common synonyms" (2010: 3). In other words, perseverance is a pliable endurance to face difficulties, miseries, or hardships. Wheatley also gives the characteristics of perseverance. Some of its supporting characteristics that are relevant in analyzing Delia's perseverance are as follows. The first is "Fearlessness". According to Wheatley, someone must be friends with fear because "by acknowledging and moving closer, fear dissipates and fearlessness arises" (2010: 33).

Fearlessness will strengthen perseverance. Another characteristic of perseverance, still according to Wheatley, is “Choice” because perseverance is a repetitive, everlasting choice (2010: 59). Wheatley also says that “Discipline” will support “the capacity to persevere” (2010: 81). Another characteristic of perseverance is “Clarity”. Wheatley suggests studying the obstructing problems well to be able to see the complicated problem clearly so that “Every situation is workable ... to keep our heads above water” (2010: 114). Wheatley’s another characteristic of perseverance is what she terms “Life is Life”. She states that a relax way of facing difficulties in life while waiting for the opportunities will support perseverance (2010: 117). Another of Wheatley’s term is “Just Like Me”. Wheatley stresses that the realization that everybody faces sufferings will result in “more accepting of difficulty, less battered by bad moments” (2010: 119). Wheatley also emphasizes that “Patience” is needed in perseverance. Because “Perseverance is a journey seemingly without end” (2010: 141), patience is an essential support. Meanwhile, Piper briefly affirms that “Perseverance is a gift” (2002: 22).

Another concept reviewed due to its close relation to the topic of perseverance is the concept of domestic violence. Jackson states that “domestic violence” is a broad term that includes threats or violent acts against an existing or former intimate partner (2007: 255). Meanwhile, Summers and Hoffman assert that in the United States “Domestic violence, more specifically, refers to the abuse by one person of another in an intimate relationship” (2002: 169). Their definition is not too different from Jackson’s. Focusing on intimate relationship, Summers and Hoffman add that the violence manifests in various forms such as “physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and even stalking. The intent of the abuse is controlled by one intimate over another” (2002: 170). Lockton proposes four types of domestic violence; namely, physical assault, sexual violence, threats of violence, and psychological

abuse (1997: 7-18), while Mullender offers three types of domestic violence; namely, “Physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse” (1996: 19-26).

Considering the relevance with the analysis, only some of the forms of violence will be briefly reviewed. According to Mullender, physical abuse is “The most familiar form of abuse men inflict on their female partners” (1996: 19). Emotional abuse may take the form of “threats, gestures and glares” (Mullender, 1996: 23) and both “Emotional and psychological abuse is devastating” (Mullender, 1996: 24). Lockton states that threat of violence “can inject just as much terror as the actual act (1997: 15), while psychological abuse may be in the form of “insults and humiliation” (1997: 16). Concerning the causes of domestic violence, Lockton mentions that one of them is “Stress inducing factors such as unemployment” (1997: 26). Thus, domestic violence may take physical and non-physical forms triggered by many causes, one of them is the male’s insecurity feeling due to his unemployed state.

## METHODOLOGY

A combination of methods is used to analyze the topic of the black female protagonist’s perseverance in Hurston’s *Sweat*. Data from the short story and from the supporting concepts are compiled using library research method with its close-reading technique. The analysis in general is using qualitative method. Meanwhile, the literary analysis is done using contextual method which is a combination of analyzing intrinsic elements and extrinsic elements. The analysis on intrinsic elements mainly focuses on the characters and conflicts, especially on the black female and male protagonists. The extrinsic analysis borrows the concept of perseverance and domestic violence.

## DISCUSSION

The short story entitled *Sweat* written by Zora Neale Hurston indicates that the wife’s perseverance in facing domestic violence will

finally free her from the sufferings while the abusive husband gets absolute punishment from the tool of terror actually directed to his wife. Based on this finding, the analysis concerning the female and male protagonists will center on the topic of perseverance and domestic violence.

Delia Jones, or Delia, is the wife of Sykes Jones. She is a small woman who was pretty before becoming Sykes's wife as can be seen from the words of Walter Thomas who likes her before: "she wuz a right pretty litle trick when he got huh. Ah'd uh mah'ied huh mahseff if he hadnter beat me to it" (Hurston, 1985: 1642). In her fifteen years of marriage she has experienced many unpleasant treatments from her coarse husband. Not long after the marriage, she gets "the first brutal beating" (Hurston, 1985: 1642) followed by his spending his money in the city without giving her anything (Hurston, 1985: 1642). Facing the physical abuse while depending on something economically drives Delia to find a job to support her own life. She becomes a washwoman for the white people. On Saturday, she routinely delivers the clean clothes while picking up the dirty clothes which she sorts and washes on Sunday (Hurston, 1985: 1640). This event implies Delia's "Life is Life", "Patience" and "Discipline" to earn money leading to her perseverance in facing her husband's ill treatment to her.

Her jobless husband dislikes her washing the clothes of the white people, as can be seen in his words: "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house" (Hurston, 1985: 1640). This is an unreasonable objection considering that he does not give any money to Delia. Delia always ignores his objection because it is the only way she can get money to eat for both of them. Seeing that Delia disobeys his objection, Sykes uses Delia's fear on snakes to frighten her. He uses the big whip which looks like a snake to scare Delia who keeps sorting the dirty clothes before soaking them: "something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulder and

slithered to the floor beside her. 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" (Hurston, 1985: 1640). Delia is so angry when Sykes laughs at her dread, but she keeps doing her business of sorting the clothes. Delia's reaction makes Sykes manifest his anger by trampling the dirty clothes hoping that Delia will get angrier. However, Delia tends to be indifferent to Sykes's provocation. This event shows Delia's perseverance. She applies "Clarity" by evaluating the event in a clear mind preventing her being provoked by Sykes upsetting actions.

Seeing that his provoking action of trampling the clothes several times gets no expected response from Delia, Sykes verbally threatens Delia: "Next time, Ah'm gointer kick'em outdoors" (Hurston, 1985: 1640). Delia's calmness in facing Sykes's annoying action is supported by her having visiting the church for sacrament (Hurston, 1985: 1641). However, when Sykes keeps verbally threatening to hurt her, Delia faces the intimidating Sykes fearlessly: "Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her" (Hurston, 1985: 1641). Her fearlessness in facing the frightening Sykes supports her perseverance in living her miserable life. She tries to tell Sykes that her life is full of hard work since the marriage: "Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years, Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat. Cry and sweat, pray and sweat!" (Hurston, 1985: 1641).

However the exasperating Sykes still does not feel that it is his responsibility as a husband to earn money for them. To show that she can stand on her own feet and does not afraid of Sykes: "She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he

usually did” (Hurstun, 1985: 1641). Delia’s courage makes Sykes pusillanimous. This shows that actually Sykes is a coward, all this time he is tyrannical to his wife because she is meek. Once she shows courage he does not dare to strike her as usual. Delia herself, gaining “Fearlessness” and “Clarity”, is able to show her steadfastness in the miserable marriage. She shows her position, refusing Sykes’s brutal action.

Delia also knows that Sykes, apart from his abusive attitudes, has another woman. Her perseverance in confronting this marriage problem can be seen here: “Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. It is too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one her trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely” (Hurstun, 1985: 1642). Although she realizes that other women are “Just Like Me”, she is different from them because she can decide with “Clarity” what can be saved from her wrecked marriage. To point her standing place in the house, Delia pointedly refuses any intention on the side of Sykes and his mistress to drive her out of the house: “that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin’ with aint comin’ heah to pile up on mah sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin’ on this place, and Ah’m gointer stay right heah till Ah toted out foot foremost” (Hurstun, 1985: 1641).

Sykes, outwardly intimidating but inwardly coward, is not only surprised of the courage now possessed by Delia, but he also feels helpless now. The only left harassment that he has is a psychological abuse in the form of insulting Delia’s appearance: “Well, you better quit gittin’ me riled up, else they’ll be totin’ you out sooner than you expect. Ah’m so tired of you Ah don’t know what to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!” (Hurstun, 1985: 1641). By insulting his wife as skinny woman he impliedly shows that her mistress who is fat is much better than his wife, Delia.

Helpless but not satisfied yet to abuse Delia that now has attained “Fearlessness”, Sykes displaces his anger to the inanimate object: “he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him” (Hurstun, 1985: 1641). The new Delia is a strong woman, physically from hard work for years, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually from her perseverance facing the abusive treatment for years. This can be seen in Delia’s present state: “A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did” (Hurstun, 1985: 1642).

Behind Delia’s back, Sykes promises to his mistress, Bertha, that they will move to Delia’s house: “Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ‘oman outa dere” (Hurstun, 1985: 1644). It shows how scheming Sykes is. He, who has no share in the house at all, plans to drive Delia, who sweats for the house, out of her house. To realize his evil plan, but he has no more courage to do it by himself, the cunning Sykes brings a rattlesnake, a very poisonous snake, home to scare Delia out of the house or better to put Delia to death. He puts the snake in a soap box and braggingly he says: “he’s gointer stay right heah till he die. He wouldn’t bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle ‘im. Nohow he would’t risk breakin’ out his fangs ‘gin yo’ skinny laigs” (Hurstun, 1985: 1645). Delia, scared to death with snakes, changes her fear into anger, to the snake and to Sykes who enjoys Delia’s fear and the meal provided by Delia: “Ah hates you, Sykes.” She said calmly. “Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an’ took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck” (Hurstun, 1985: 1646). Delia’s “Fearlessness” to express her wounded feeling stuns Sykes who keeps trying to intimidate Delia for his own benefits. Sykes, still wants to terrorize Delia, leaves the house while threatening her, however his efforts have no more effect on Delia.

Weekend passes peacefully for Delia. She goes to church to attain spiritual calmness and returns home in a happy spirit. She realizes that Sykes has entered the house and taken almost all of her stock of matches. Using the only one

left, she lights the oil lamp and starts her weekend's ritual, sorting the dirty clothes to be washed. Always alert to her surrounding, the result of being treated badly all the years, she quickly perceives that the poisonous rattlesnake is inside the washing basket that she always uses: "She threw back the lid of the basket almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, she sprang back toward the door. *There lay the snake in the basket!*" (Hurston, 1985: 1647). This must be Sykes's evil plan when he returns home while Delia is still in the church. He cruelly hopes that Delia will be bitten to death by the rattlesnake when she is doing her sorting the dirty clothes.

Delia, tries to overcome her panic, watches the snake's movement. When she sees that it slithers to the bed, she runs out of the room and spends the whole night in the hay barn. In the darkness Delia contemplates the recent scary event: "'With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm. 'Well, Ah done de bes' Ah could. If things aint right, Gowd knows taint mah fault'" (Hurston, 1985: 1648). She is in the peak of her emotional turmoil. She gives in, she lets what will happen next to God. She is too tired to do anything else at the moment.

Delia, in her hiding place, quietly listens to the whirring voice of the poisonous rattle snake on the bed. She hears Sykes coming home and damaging the snake's box. Maybe to give the reason if the snake bites Delia because that is what she cruelly hopes for. He does not know that Delia is safely hiding in the hay barn. In the darkness, because there is no more matches to light the oil lamp, the drunken Sykes finally hears the whirring sound of the snake. Incorrectly guessing the snake's position, he jumps into what he thinks is the safest spot, the bed. It is a fatal decision, because the snake is in the ready-to-bite position on the bed: "primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed. Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened

chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound" (Hurston, 1985: 1649). Sykes is bitten by his own poisonous rattlesnake wickedly prepared for Delia.

After being able to recover herself from her scare of Sykes's deathly screams, Delia hears Sykes desperately calls her name. Approaching Sykes, Delia sees that he is: "on his hands and knees as soon as she reaches the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope" (Hurston, 1985: 1649). Sykes gets the bitter fruit of his evil plan. Even though at first Delia feels sorry for him, but the nearest doctor is still too far to fetch. She leaves Sykes to die alone. Finally Delia is free from the brutal Sykes. Delia's perseverance helps her to survive through the abusive marriage life of fifteen years.

## CONCLUSION

Hurston's short story entitled *Sweat* indicates that perseverance helps to go through the miserable years as represented by Delia Jones's experience of facing her abusive husband, Sykes Jones. Sykes's insecurity as a jobless husband is covered in rudeness, cruelty, and mocks besides having another woman. For fifteen years Delia applies elements of perseverance, such as "Fearlessness", "Choice", "Discipline", "Clarity", "Life is Life", "Just Like Me", and "Patience". She can survive against Sykes's domestic violence in the forms of physical abuse, psychological abuse, and threats of violence. Even Sykes's terror of rattlesnake, through at first has the potential to paralyze Delia due to her fright of snakes, can be overcome by Delia's growing "Fearlessness" and "Clarity" to observe the scary moment. Finally, Sykes's arrogance, self-confidence, and evil plan make him bitten by his poisonous rattlesnake previously set up to put Delia's to death. Delia's is free from her abusive husband at last. Her perseverance leads her to a free life

in the house she “sweats” so far to own and keep it.

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