

# Let the Timid Speak: The Woman/Nature Metaphor in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat"

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat" (1926) from an ecofeminist perspective. When it comes to the role of nature in Hurston's writing, ecocritical as well as feminist discussions often romanticize the role of nature in the lives of Hurston's characters. Hurston's short story "Sweat," however, has generally been overlooked by ecocritics and ecofeminists, despite the fact that the story's female protagonist Delia is repeatedly linked with nature or animals in the text. The aim of this paper is thus to examine the manner in which the main character Delia as well as her abusive husband Sykes are associated with nature, including animals, in order to critically assess the abuse Delia is subjected to. Particular attention is then devoted to three main parts of the story: Delia's connection to her pony, the village men's conversations and their subsequent comparison of Delia to sugar cane as well as Hurston's reenactment of the fall from the Garden of Eden. Throughout the analysis, the focus is on the presence of dehumanization related to animalization or naturalization as well as on Hurston's depiction of the dualistic character of the metaphors woman/nature and woman/animal along with the impact such associations have on Hurston's characters.*

## KEYWORDS

ecofeminism, Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat," dehumanization, animalization

## Introduction

The Florida native Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) has often been linked to the celebration of the Southern landscape and African American culture of the Deep South.<sup>1</sup> Often mentioned as a writer associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's masterful use of nature writing<sup>2</sup> has only recently been properly recognized by critics,<sup>3</sup> despite the fact that her devotion to nature and Florida's topography is apparent in her novels as well as in her anthropological work and personal correspondence. For instance, Hurston describes Florida as a "place of ravishing beauty"<sup>4</sup> and she situates nature as central in the lives of her fictional characters as well as in her other personal projects.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, her sympathetic approach to issues of social and environmental justice among Black communities living in the postbellum South make Hurston a relevant writer even today, especially in terms of certain socio-political and environmental issues of the 21st century. As a result, Hurston's novels, primarily her acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), are now widely discussed among feminist literary critics as well as ecocritics, despite the fact that

1 Julia S. Charles, "Fraternal Fractures: Marriage, Masculinity, and Malicious Menfolk in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' and 'Magnolia Flower.'" *Women's Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 48.

2 By this I mean Hurston's incorporation of nature, animals, and the environment into her writing.

3 Rachel Stein, *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 146-147.

4 Quoted in James Padilioni, Jr, "A Flowering of Memory," *Environment and Society* 13, no. 1 (2022): 11-26.

5 Read more about Hurston's spiritual, cultural and personal connection to nature and Florida's landscape in Padilioni, "A Flowering of Memory," 11-26.

her work as well as her impact on literature had generally been overlooked in academia for most of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

However, in examining the role of nature in Hurston's writing, ecocritical as well as ecofeminist discussions in relation to Hurston often romanticize the role of nature in the lives of Hurston's characters and in her nature writing as a whole.<sup>7</sup> In consequence, these critics fail to address the possible negative impacts of the characters' connection to nature or animals. In addition, while Hurston's short story "Sweat" (1926) has been described as one of her best and most popular short stories, the work has remained largely overlooked by ecofeminists as well as ecocritics, frequently earning only a single mention in texts otherwise devoted to and evaluating Hurston's nature writing.

In attempting to redress some of these issues, this article examines Hurston's short story "Sweat" from an ecofeminist perspective with the aim of evaluating ways in which the main character Delia – and to a certain extent also her husband Sykes – are linked with nature, including animals, in order to critically assess what role woman/nature and woman/animal metaphors play in terms of the abuse that Delia is subjected to. I argue that in Hurston's nature writing, and specifically in this short story, Hurston uses nature and animals not only to depict the dualistic character of the woman/nature and the woman/animal connection, but above all to emphasize how detrimental such a connection to nature or animals can be in terms of patriarchal abuse.

In order to evaluate this connection and properly address its potentially dehumanizing aspects, the literary analysis focuses primarily on the specific parts of the novel in which Hurston draws the strongest connection to nature and animals, such as Delia's connection to her pony, sugar cane, her garden, and the rattlesnake. In addition, I address her husband's association with the rattlesnake and his own relationship with nature, as well as the short story's connections to Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her anthropological research. The study is anchored in the methodology of ecofeminist literary criticism, a discipline which combines both ecocritical and feminist perspectives. This approach enables to assess the dualistic character of the relationship between women and nature, as well as the consequences of this duality with regard to the process of naturalization and animalization of women.<sup>8</sup> While naturalization can be defined as "a rhetorical process in which nature imagery is used to present social and cultural structures as if they were part of nature,"<sup>9</sup> animalization refers to a process in which animal imagery is used in characterizing or otherwise portraying women or men, usually with the aim of dehumanizing their bodies or behavior (dehumanizing animality). African American and Indigenous Peoples

6 Hurston was re-discovered by critics following the publication of Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" in 1975.

7 See for instance Victoria Aquilone, "Ecological Landmarks in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: An Ecofeminist Reading," *Concept*, 40 (2017): 1-24, and Inés Casas Maroto, "'So This Was a Marriage!': Intersections of Natural Imagery and the Semiotics of Space in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Journal of English Studies*, 11 (2013): 69.

8 Sylvia Mayer, "Literary Studies, Ecofeminism and Environmentalist Knowledge Production in the Humanities," in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 112.

9 Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (London: Routledge, 2020), 117.

have historically been viewed in this way in Western cultures based on their perceived closeness to nature.<sup>10,11</sup>

## The Harmful Impact of the Woman/Nature Metaphor

Hurston's short story "Sweat" was first published in the magazine *Fire!!* in November 1926. Often thought of as a predecessor or a complementary piece to her acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "Sweat" tells the story of a Black woman, Delia Jones, and her abusive husband Sykes. As is the case with many other stories by Hurston, "Sweat" is situated in a relatively small city in Florida. Although Delia lives in a house with a garden, her living conditions can be only described as humble. Working as a washerwoman for white people, Delia has to work all week, from Sunday to Saturday, in order to deliver the clean clothes on time. The title of the story along with Delia's outcry "[w]ork and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!" during an argument with her husband can be seen to refer to the amount of work she has been subjected to for fifteen years in terms of what she is forced to sacrifice every day in order to earn a living.<sup>12</sup> What is more, Delia's husband Sykes is not only mentally and physically abusive towards her, but he is also jobless and thus financially fully dependent on Delia. Instead of helping his wife get through her weekly workload, the story opens with Sykes missing. His absence clearly upsets Delia, most probably because he has taken her pony away.

The connection between Delia and her pony is a vital part of the story, serving as one of the first indications Hurston provides regarding Delia's connection to nature and animals. Delia's pony her own domesticated animal, one that she cannot live without, as she uses it for her work. Upon Sykes' return to their house, an argument ensues between the two of them regarding Sykes' use of the pony, during which Delia even proclaims to him that she is the one "feeds dat pony."<sup>13</sup> In this, Delia emphasizes the fact that this animal, like her husband, is dependent on her, and it is primarily she who cares for it. Moreover, as Sykes returns home with Delia's pony and scares Delia by tossing a bullwhip on her shoulders (trying to mimic a snake), Delia becomes upset that Sykes has also used this same bullwhip on her pony, asserting that "[the pony] aint fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip."<sup>14</sup> In the following section of the story, most likely in reaction to Delia's defense of herself as well as of her pony, Sykes verbally insults Delia and uses the bullwhip to threaten her with physical violence:

"You sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!" he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house." He picked up the whip and glared down at her.<sup>15</sup>

10 Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008), 3.

11 Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought," *Societies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 1-11.

12 Zora Neale Hurston, *Sweat* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 6.

13 Hurston, *Sweat*, 4.

14 Hurston, *Sweat*, 4.

15 Hurston, *Sweat*, 4.

Sykes follows this with more threats of physical violence, even saying that he will “put [his] fist up side yo’ head to boot.”<sup>16</sup> The above extract specifically connects Delia with her pony, as Sykes abuses them both in the same manner, even using the same bullwhip. At the same time, both Delia and her pony are described by Hurston as “little,”<sup>17</sup> indicating not only their physical appearance, but also the fact that they are both dominated by Sykes and his bullwhip.

While Scott Hicks argues in his article “Zora Neale Hurston: Environmentalist in Southern Literature” (2010) that Hurston “engage[s] all life forms seriously, respectfully and equitably,”<sup>18</sup> my reading of Hurston’s “Sweat” from an ecofeminist perspective reveals that in this case, Hurston also draws on the connection between women and animals to portray the existing hierarchies between men and women as well as between human and nonhuman life forms, including domesticated animals. Delia and her pony seem to be connected to each other through Delia’s ownership of the pony and the fact that they are dependent on each other. Nevertheless, while Delia’s pony is fully domesticated and taken care of, it is still owned by a person, used extensively for work and apparently abused (by Delia’s husband); as a consequence, despite the care the pony receives from Delia, the animal cannot be perceived as equal to its owner. This is an important point for the analysis, as it further amplifies the manner in which Delia is connected to her pony. While it is possible to identify Delia’s relationship towards her pony as representative of an “ethic of care,” as Carolina Núñez-Puente puts it, the failure to mention the pony’s unequal position even in relation to Delia would mean completely disregarding Hurston’s attempt at mirroring the relationship between Delia and Sykes with the relationship between the owner and her pony.<sup>19</sup>

The abuse which Sykes inflicts on both Delia and her pony can be then identified as the source of the patriarchal power that prevents Delia from fully practicing a better ethic of care, instead placing her in a hierarchal system, in which she is dominated by Sykes. As an abuser and someone who does not maintain a good relationship with the people in the village nor with nature (as demonstrated by his abuse of Delia’s pony and his neglect of Delia’s garden), Sykes establishes himself in a position of dominance over both women and animals, thus becoming the primary source of violent patriarchal control and abuse in the story. Through Sykes’ treatment of Delia and her pony as well as the hierarchical system that undergirds this treatment, it is possible to reveal how the subordination of women overlaps with the subordination of domesticated animals, as has been proposed above.

Nevertheless, “Sweat” is not the only text by Hurston in which she depicts a connection between Black women and animals in order to portray a putative hierarchy proceeding from animals to Black women, Black men and white people. In her acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston expands on this theme when the main character Janie, at the time only a young girl, is lectured by her grandmother Nanny about the hierarchy that Black women are

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16 Hurston, *Sweat*, 5.

17 Hurston, *Sweat*, 5.

18 Scott Hicks, “Zora Neale Hurston: Environmentalist in Southern Literature,” in *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (California: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 122.

19 Carolina Núñez-Puente, “Reading (from) the Afro-Caribbean in Hurston’s ‘Sweat’: an Ecowomanist Voyage,” in *Estudios De Género: Visiones Transatlánticas = Gender Studies: Transatlantic Visions*, ed. Giménez-Rico and Durán Isabel (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2016), 117.

born into. Nanny even describes how “[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.” Janie is later pushed into a marriage in which she ends up working as a slave behind a mule.<sup>20</sup> Although it can be argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more explicit in its depiction of domesticated animalization and its subsequent connection to natural trauma,<sup>21</sup> it can be seen that in “Sweat,” a story published 10 years before the novel, Hurston was already exploring this theme.

The connection between domesticated animalization and Hurston’s work should not be overlooked, especially with regard to ecocritical and ecofeminist literary criticism. Authors such as Paul Outka, Karla Rohová and Glenda B. Weathers have described this connection in their analyses of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, linking the presence of animalization with the legacy of slavery in the Deep South as well as with the traumatic animalization of Black people in the antebellum South.<sup>22,23,24</sup> For ecofeminists, the process of animalization or naturalization and subsequent dehumanization “[refers] to that indistinct zone of the inhuman where life is rendered brute”<sup>25</sup> and “function[s] to not only oppress other humans, but also maintain the unfortunate assumption that to be Not-Man is to be innately inferior and unworthy of moral consideration.”<sup>26</sup> Delia’s connection to her pony, amplified through the abuse they both have to endure, manifests the dehumanizing nature of animalization. Furthermore, it illustrates how the process of naturalization and animalization easily turns Delia into a “nonhuman other” – or, as termed by Marek S. Muller, “Not-Man.” As a result, animalization only reinforces Delia’s inferior position, not only in terms of her relationship with Sykes, but also in terms of her life as a working Black woman from the Deep South.

## Nature Lashing: When Naturalization Becomes Vocalized

According to Rita D. Hooks, the “power struggle which exists between a man and a woman in Hurston’s community is always expressed in terms of language, always marked by a tongue lashing.”<sup>27</sup> This is well demonstrated in the part of the story which follows in which the naturalization of women becomes vocalized. Often overlooked by critics, including ecocritics and ecofeminists, the interluding scene in which the village men are sitting on the store porch and watching Delia as

20 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 14-15.

21 For more detailed literary analysis of the dehumanization in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* see my article “When Nature Triggers Trauma: Environmental Racism and Ecofeminism in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.”

22 Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008), 171-200.

23 Karla Rohová, “When Nature Triggers Trauma: Environmental Racism and Ecofeminism in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 13, no. 1 (2021): 31-50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15452/ojeop.2021.13.0003>.

24 Glenda B. Weathers, “Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison,” *African American Review* 39, nos. 1-2 (2005): 201-212.

25 Kalpana Seshadri, *Humanimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 21.

26 Marek S. Muller, *Impersonating Animals: Rhetoric, Ecofeminism, and Animal Rights Law* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), 8.

27 Hooks, Rita Daly. “Conjured into Being: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” Thesis, Libraries of Florida, 1990.

she delivers washed clothes on her pony further magnifies Delia's connection to nature. During the men's dialogue on the store porch (in a scene that is also typical of other stories by Hurston), Delia is linked to nature through a comparison made by a local man, Joe Clarke:

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. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits 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 treat 'urn jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws '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.<sup>28</sup>

Here Joe Clarke narrates a woman's life through her connection to sugar cane, commenting that women begin their married life "round, juicy an' sweet" like sugar cane before their husbands squeeze every drop of attractiveness and life from them. Once the physical and mental abuse becomes too much for these women, their husbands throw them away, like they would after chewing on a stalk of sugar cane until all the sweetness was gone. Women, and Delia in particular, are then treated by their husbands as if they were a discarded cane-chew, while the men fail to understand that they themselves are responsible for the long-term abuse.

By using this comparison to describe Delia's life as well as the lives of other women, Joe Clarke expresses his view that women, in this conversation linked to nature through sugar cane, are most valued when they are still in an untouched state, but are discarded once nothing more can be extracted from them. Although Clarke and other village men mean to criticize Sykes for his treatment of Delia, and in this sense they do support Delia, the link between women and their lives to nature is reified, thus the naturalization and dehumanization of women's bodies is perpetuated. What is more, Delia is compared to the plants grown on plantations in the South, thus it is also possible to argue that through the metaphor of sugar cane the process of dehumanizing naturalization is also connected to the legacy of Black chattel slavery in Florida. As in the case of the introductory scene, here Hurston reverses the trope of romanticizing the woman-nature connection, and instead uses this linkage to portray an unjust hierarchy in which "[t]hose deemed closer to 'nature'—by virtue of gender, race, species, etc.—are justified as inferior."<sup>29</sup>

Moves such as these should not be surprising, as Hurston references slavery throughout the entire story. As Suzanne D. Green argues, Hurston presents "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."<sup>30</sup> Both Suzanne D. Green and Catherine Carter point out allusions to slavery in the introductory scene as Sykes returns from his journey with Delia's pony and threatens her with violence using a whip.<sup>31,32</sup> Nonetheless, while Green, for instance, argues that in this story Hurston

28 Hurston, *Sweat*, 9.

29 Muller, *Impersonating Animals: Rhetoric, Ecofeminism, and Animal Rights Law*, 8.

30 Suzanne D. Green, "Fear, Freedom, and the Perils of Ethnicity: Otherness in Kate Chopin's 'Beyond the Bayou' and Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat,'" *Southern Studies* 5, nos.3-4 (1994): 106.

31 Green, "Fear, Freedom, and the Perils of Ethnicity: Otherness in Kate Chopin's 'Beyond the Bayou' and Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat,'" 106.

32 Catherine Carter, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" *Mississippi Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 607.

“views [the male dominance of women] as a larger issue” than “ethnic issue[s],”<sup>33</sup> Sykes’ treatment of Delia and her pony, as well as the village men’s conversation – both scenes dehumanizing Delia either through animalization or naturalization – give clear indications that the violence Delia is subjected to, and which according to Carter “positions Sykes as would-be owner and Delia as slave,”<sup>34</sup> is not isolated from the “ethnic issue,” nor can it be isolated from environmental issues. On the contrary, race plays an important factor here, not only due to the implications of the master-slave narrative, but also because of the central role that nature and animals play in Sykes’ abuse of Delia as well as how the village men’s dialogue references nature in connection to Delia.

It is equally important to recognize Joe Clarke’s speeches as futile in terms of fighting misogyny, let alone in terms of breaking the cycle of dehumanization. Clarke seems to attempt to sympathize with abused women like Delia by sharing his criticism of men like Delia’s husband; while Clarke expresses his disagreement with the way Black women are treated by men like Sykes, however, neither he nor his friends try to intervene to help Delia, or at least to prevent Sykes from abusing her. As Catherine Carter notes in her article “The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston’s ‘Sweat’” (2014), “[t]he 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.”<sup>35</sup> The contrast in the way the village men sympathize with Delia and the implied apathy in their lack of action is indicated right at the outset of their conversation on the porch. Hurston tactfully introduces the village men as they “chewed cane listlessly.”<sup>36</sup> The act of gnawing on cane, which Joe Clarke himself uses as a metaphor in describing the abuse Black women are subjected to, can be interpreted as linking the village men to the same patriarchal power as the one that Sykes represents. This is demonstrated in the village men’s discussion about Sykes’ mistress Bertha; another of the men, Elijah Moseley, expresses his bewilderment over Sykes’ choice to have a sexual relationship with Bertha: “How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he’s layin’ ‘round wid, gits me.”<sup>37</sup> Elijah Moseley and the other village men then criticize Bertha, not for her moral failings (such as having a relationship with a married man and spending Delia’s hard-earned money), but rather for her darkness and body type. Their “listless” behavior is then emphasized by Jim Merchant’s story about his wife’s refusal of Sykes’ gift:

“Did Ah tell yuh ‘bout him come sidlin’ roun’ *mah* wife—bringin’ her a basket uh peecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yeah, mah wife! She tol’ him tuh take ‘em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an’ soapsuds.”<sup>38</sup>

As demonstrated by the proclamation by Merchant’s wife, the women of the town do not boycott Sykes merely out of female solidarity; they also recognize Delia’s hard work and the fact that

33 Green, “Fear, Freedom, and the Perils of Ethnicity: Otherness in Kate Chopin’s ‘Beyond the Bayou’ and Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Sweat,’” 106.

34 Carter, “The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston’s ‘Sweat,’” 607.

35 Carter, “The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston’s ‘Sweat,’” 614.

36 Hurston, *Sweat*, 8.

37 Hurston, *Sweat*, 8.

38 Hurston, *Sweat*, 8.

she is both the nurturer of her household as well as its financial provider. Everything that Sykes takes out of their household is connected to Delia's work, which is why Merchant's wife proclaims that "everything on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds." Unlike the village men, who only recognize Delia's struggles based on the deterioration of her youth and in the process naturalize her, the wives in the village do not participate in their discussion, and instead they boycott Sykes' attempts at the further exploitation of Delia's hard work. Though it seems that the wives are unable to stop the abuse, they are not complicit in the system of patriarchal oppression, nor do they contribute to the "fraternal crises [that] precipitate brutality against women."<sup>39</sup>

## The Lost Garden

Sykes' choice of a gift – a basket of pecans from the garden – can be read as an indication in an early Hurston work of a connection to the Garden of Eden. Here this linkage also develops a connection of Sykes to the ancient serpent Nachash.<sup>40</sup> It is the final part of the story, however, that sees the reenactment and ultimately a transformation of the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Several critics, such as Fred Fetrow, go as far as to describe "Sweat" as "Hurston's retelling of the Paradise Lost myth," recognizing the change of power dynamics that is reflected in the exchange of roles between Adam and Eve. Here, in Hurston's version, Delia is the well-mannered and faithful Christian who attends the church on Sundays and works hard to provide for herself, her husband and her pony. What is more, Delia maintains her own garden and a Chinaberry tree, which is first mentioned at the beginning of the story as the garden is described as "[Delia's] little home. She had built it for her old age, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely."<sup>41</sup> Delia's connection to her spirituality and her hard-working nature (also manifested in her caretaking abilities which are "in accordance with the ecological rhythm of life"),<sup>42</sup> contrast with Sykes' immoral and destructive actions. Adding to the disparity, Sykes does not hold back when he taunts Delia for her faith in God and her dedication to the Sunday services at the church; he thus also mocks Christianity and faith in God as such.

After it becomes apparent that Sykes means to cause harm to Delia in every possible way, the situation deteriorates further when Sykes reaches a peak of evil. In an attempt to torment and then hopefully murder Delia, Sykes brings home a rattlesnake. His plan is to get rid of his wife and move his mistress Bertha into Delia's home. Because Delia is terrified of snakes, as has been demonstrated at the beginning of the story when Sykes scares her using a bullwhip, she is unable to remove the rattlesnake on her own, and she does not make any attempt to do so. Sykes, the one who brought the rattlesnake home, is the first to interact with it (as well as mimicking a snake in

39 Charles, Julia S. "Fraternal Fractures: Marriage, Masculinity, and Malicious Menfolk in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' and 'Magnolia Flower,'" 49.

40 The interpretation of the serpent in Genesis 3 as a literal snake is reified in many forms of Christianity. Nevertheless, many other interpretations of the serpent's animal form and related meanings have been identified, for example differences in interpretation in the Torah and the Bible. See, for instance, John Day, "From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11" (LHBOTS 592; London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 35-37.

41 Hurston, *Sweat*, 7.

42 Núñez-Puente, "Reading (from) the Afro-Caribbean in Hurston's 'Sweat': an Ecowomanist Voyage," 118.



the story's opening scene). In his intention to use the animal to murder Delia, he can be linked to the biblical serpent Nachash, and thus also to the story of mankind's expulsion from the Garden. Delia, however, does not necessarily represent Eve's counterpart, Adam. Although her dedication to being "a black female Christ figure"<sup>43</sup> is evident from the text, highlighting just how different Delia is from Sykes in matters of faith, Núñez-Puente argues that, instead of becoming "the resigned Eve," Delia "is turning into Lilith, the first woman, the one who refused to follow Adam's orders and said 'No.'"<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, as Carter points out, "'Sweat' is not *Their Eyes Were Watching God*."<sup>45</sup> For the majority of her marriage, perhaps even her life, Delia has been a passive participant in her own abuse story, to the point that the village men naturalize her body and as a result rob her of what freedom remains for her. This passivity, though understandable given the choices an abused Black woman like Delia would have had at that time, underlines the horrors of a life spent locked in a relationship whose dynamics mimic the situation between a master and a slave. This is also an evident consequence of sexist-naturist language, as is demonstrated in the above analysis of the village men's conversation, a scene in which Delia becomes an absent referent who cannot react to their words. In this manner, Delia contrasts with Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a woman striving for independence, who always finds the will and the strength to break the cycle of dehumanizing animalization,<sup>46</sup> even if she has to kill the love of her life in the process.

Despite this striking passivity, Hurston does not leave Delia without hope. This is apparent in Delia's quest for peace and her determination to manifest hope as well as an ultimate punishment for Sykes. Even before Sykes brings home a rattlesnake, with the aim of tormenting and killing Delia, she finds a way to protect her mental and spiritual wellbeing:

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. *Amen*. She went to sleep.<sup>47</sup>

What is significant about this prayer, apart from Delia predicting the fate of her husband (and possibly manifesting it), is the mention of the "spiritual earthworks" used "against her husband." The physical construction of her garden, which can be understood as Delia's physical "earthworks," and her building of spiritual earthworks, are practices that are often evaluated and even celebrated by ecofeminists, including artists and critics. Gloria Feman Orenstein describes the importance of these practices in her article "The Greening of Gaia: Ecofeminist Artists Revisit the Garden" (2003):

43 Carter, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" 615.

44 Núñez-Puente, "Reading (from) the Afro-Caribbean in Hurston's 'Sweat': an Ecowomanist Voyage," 119.

45 Carter, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" 618.

46 Rohová, "When Nature Triggers Trauma: Environmental Racism and Ecofeminism in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 31-50.

47 Hurston, *Sweat*, 7.

When ecology, ethics, and community are integrated via the healing hands of visionary ecofeminist artists, the earth herself, reveals the aesthetic dimension as one of her many gifts, often blurring the distinction between the non-human world and humanity, so intimately are we intertwined with each other's life and fate.<sup>48</sup>

For Delia, building her garden together with her spiritual earthworks means creating a distance between her husband and herself in order to protect her own peace and safety. In addition, this signifies that Delia, though animalized and naturalized by the patriarchal voices in her town as well as in her own household, is not the one who is disturbing the balance in nature. In contrast to this imbalance and in an attempt to rectify it, Delia instead wishes to assist in “blurring the distinction between the non-human world and humanity.”<sup>49</sup> Her proclamation regarding her husband's fate, however, underlines the contrast between her dedication to restoring the balance in nature and Sykes' patriarchal attempts at disrupting it.

In the final part of the story, Hurston prepares a chilling punishment for Sykes. After Sykes' attempt to kill Delia fails because Delia spends the night hiding in the barn, he is bitten by the same rattlesnake that he wanted to use to murder his own wife. When Sykes is bitten in the neck, Hurston describes his cry for help as reminiscent of “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,”<sup>50</sup> and then only as a “series of animal screams.”<sup>51</sup> In his final moments, therefore, Sykes is alive, deprived of his human voice (which he used to abuse Delia). He is compared to an animal – albeit a different one than the rattlesnake he was linked to at the beginning of the story. In contrast to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston here uses the animal<sup>52</sup> – the rattlesnake – to get rid of Sykes and end Delia's dehumanizing animalization and naturalization. In this scene, Sykes is not only Delia's husband, receiving punishment for the years of abuse he has inflicted on his wife, but he is also a representation of the patriarchal voice and power that both Sykes and the village men misuse. The animalization of Sykes successfully “reverses the human/animal hierarchy,”<sup>53</sup> but above all it reverses the power dynamics between the patriarchal forces which dehumanize Delia and disturb the balance between human and nonhuman nature.

As Delia hears her husband's screams, which later turn into screams for help, and realizes what is happening, she has to “[stretch] herself on the cool earth to recover.”<sup>54</sup> This connects her not only spiritually, but also physically connected to the Earth. In the final scene, this connection is further deepened when Delia runs away into her garden and decides not to help her husband:

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached 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. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to

48 Gloria Feman Orenstein, “The Greening of Gaia: Ecofeminist Artists Revisit the Garden,” *Ethics & the Environment* 8, no. 1 (2003): 105.

49 Orenstein, “The Greening of Gaia: Ecofeminist Artists Revisit the Garden,” 105.

50 Hurston, *Sweat*, 16.

51 Hurston, *Sweat*, 16.

52 Although in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Tea Cake is also bitten by an animal, it is Janie who kills him.

53 Núñez-Puente, “Reading (from) the Afro-Caribbean in Hurston's ‘Sweat’: an Ecowomanist Voyage,” 121.

54 Hurston, *Sweat*, 16.

see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. 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.<sup>55</sup>

Although the actual killing is done by the snake, Delia finalizes the breaking of the cycle of dehumanizing animality and naturalization when she witnesses her husband dying and, without uttering a word, returns to wait under the Chinaberry tree in her garden. It is Delia's passivity, which had caged her in the relationship in the first place, that finally saves her life when she decides to let her husband "see the lamp." As Julia S. Charles comments, "Delia disrupts Sykes's abuse with prayer first, and then by deciding to stand still."<sup>56</sup>

It is impossible to know if Sykes is punished for his attempt to murder Delia, or if his overall abusive and immoral behavior finally reaches a point that triggers divine retribution. What is clear is that Sykes' attempts at dominating nature (specifically animals) as well as Delia (along with other women) are rewarded with his own death. Unlike Delia, whose spiritual earthworks ensure her safe return to her cherished garden, her "little home,"<sup>57</sup> Sykes never reaches this peaceful paradise.

Despite Delia's evident fear of the snake, which seems to indicate her distance from the animal, it is the "evil snake" which finally frees Delia of her torturer and becomes the remedy for both her and her garden. It is therefore questionable whether the snake, though initially linked to Sykes and the bullwhip he used to abuse Delia and her pony, is a source of evil at all. Núñez-Puente points out that while the snake, initially connected to Sykes, "represents the devil and sin" in Christian religions, "in Africa and the Caribbean the snake is a pro-female animal"<sup>58</sup> and symbolizes rebirth. Such a reading of snake symbolism would be fitting for Delia's story, though it must be noted that critics such as Cheryl Wall and Catherine Carter do not see Sykes' death or Delia's decision to not help him as signs of a happy ending, let alone of Delia's rebirth.<sup>59,60</sup> However, as has been shown in this article, for Hurston animals and nature are not meaningless participants. On the contrary, Hurston's own anthropological work, as well as her passionate devotion to Hoodoo (which included undertaking Hoodoo rituals as well as learning Hoodoo botany), proves that the nonhuman world is as significant in her writing as the human world.<sup>61</sup> Hurston herself writes that "snakes guard [. . .] herbs and roots"<sup>62</sup> as she describes the care and precision, both spiritual and physical, that are necessary for this gathering activity. Taking Hurston's own life and research into consideration, it would be inaccurate to think of the snake in "Sweat" as the traditional serpent from the Garden of Eden; instead, much like in Hoodoo botany, the snake guards the balance in Delia's garden, which was disrupted by Sykes.

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55 Hurston, *Sweat*, 17.

56 Charles, "Fraternal Fractures: Marriage, Masculinity, and Malicious Menfolk in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' and 'Magnolia Flower,'" 48.

57 Hurston, *Sweat*, 7.

58 Núñez-Puente, "Reading (from) the Afro-Caribbean in Hurston's 'Sweat': an Ecowomanist Voyage," 122.

59 Cheryl A. Wall, "Introduction," in *Sweat*, by Zora Neale Hurston (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 3-20.

60 Carter, "The God in the Snake, the Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" 618.

61 Padilioni, "A Flowering of Memory," 17-18.

62 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 223.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the ways in which women are linked to nature and/or animals in Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat" and to evaluate woman/nature and woman/animal metaphors in the work from an ecofeminist perspective. Despite having to face patriarchal domination and bear the consequences of unjust hierarchies, the main protagonist Delia perseveres and even finds a way to nourish the living world around her. Unlike Sykes, who disturbs the balance in nature by trying to dominate it and who is eventually punished for doing so, Delia offers an alternative approach of care and spiritual connection with nature (her garden). Therefore, Delia bridges the human and nonhuman worlds into one in which it is possible to summon the restoration of balance with a single prayer.

On the other hand, while Hurston uses these aspects of the woman/nature and woman/animal metaphors in "Sweat" to depict Delia's commitment to care and to the Earth (in stark contrast to her husband's abusive and exploitative behavior), Delia's connection to her pony and nature as well as the vocal naturalization of Delia through the comparison to sugar cane illustrates how easily the woman/nature and woman/animal metaphors can slip into degrading animality or dehumanizing naturalization.

Therefore, although Hurston uses both naturalization and animalization to demonstrate Delia's journey towards regaining her human voice, this paper has also considered the certain harmful impacts of the woman/nature connection as it also acknowledges the story's contrasting depiction of this connection and the female protagonist as compared to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As has been shown in this article, Hurston clearly and intentionally includes the dehumanizing effects of both naturalization and animalization in her story, and by doing so also portrays the existing hierarchies between men and women as well as between the human and nonhuman worlds. Taken in this perspective, it is not possible to define the woman/nature metaphor as having an entirely positive impact on the female protagonist, let alone to romanticize her connection to nature. In "Sweat," the positive impacts of this connection are significantly disrupted by the dehumanization that Delia is subjected to in the story and that Hurston then aptly uses to reverse the hierarchy between Sykes and Delia – that is, to take Sykes' human voice away through the process of animalization and to allow Delia to regain her own voice (and hopefully also her independence) by disrupting the patriarchal domination her husband represents.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This text is a result of the project SGS01/FF/2022 "Harlem Renaissance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" supported by the internal grant scheme of the University of Ostrava.

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