

The Strength of Women

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Historically, women have always been deemed lower class citizens. Throughout the ages, women have had to fight for liberty, equality, and justice. Among the races of women, black women have had the most difficult struggle, from slavery to present time. Black women have always had to be strong and independent. Black women have had to precariously live through racism and sexism without complaint. Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and Ernest Gaines' "The Sky is Gray" are works that not only share similar language and writing styles, but also contain two black female characters who have different personalities, situations, and one common element that binds them: strength.

"Sweat" and "The Sky is Gray" are both works that are set in similar time periods, written in the same dialect, but are told in different narration. "Sweat" is being told in third person narration and "The Sky is Gray" is told in first person narration by James, the son of the black female character. The writing in "Sweat" is raw, black dialect: "Dat niggah wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough" (Hurston 1663). Hurston does an excellent job of engaging the reader with the dialect of the story. If you are a black person, this story reads fairly easy because the dialect is recognizable. If you are of another race, this story may be fairly difficult to read. In "The Sky is Gray," Gaines' writing is black dialect, but not as raw as Hurston's. "The Sky is Gray," is a clearer, easier read. "I make 'tend I ain't 'cause I'm the oldest, and I got to set a good sample for the rest" (Gaines 2675). Gaines has the ability to make the reader feel and understand everything the narrator is going

through. Both stories contain situations that are commonplace in black society, past and present. Hurston and Gaines give examples of adultery, physical and mental abuse, poverty, single parent families, racism and limited education.

"Sweats" main character is a black woman named Delia who is dealing with a number of emotional issues. Delia is a hard-working, honest woman. Delia was once a beautiful woman who was filled with love for her husband, Sykes. "She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating" (Hurston 1659). Delia has dealt with an abusive, adulterous husband for fifteen years. Sykes has taken Delia's sense of self worth and self-esteem away. The only thing that she has is her laundry work, which she does for white people and her regular attendance at church, which is her faith. The author describes how Delia's blood, sweat and tears keep this woman, whose marriage has crumbled around her, strong. Delia expresses her emotions freely to her husband, hoping for change. This woman endures heartache everyday at home, but continues to work hard because her husband is not a dependable source of income. Delia states that her 'tub of suds' have kept Sykes' stomach full and the house paid for (Hurston 1658).

Octavia is the black female character in "The Sky is Gray", who seems very harsh in the story, but the realization of her situation softens her character. Octavia is the mother of James, the main character and narrator of the story. Octavia was married, but World War II took her husband away. Octavia had the love of her husband when he was present, unlike Delia. Octavia is not a happy woman. "We used to be happy. But they took him in the Army. Now nobody happy no more...I be glad when Daddy comes home," (Gaines 2689). Octavia has to be father and mother to her sons. She works hard at sharecropping and does not complain. Octavia is mentally and physically drained, but does not show it. This boy sees the strength of his mother

and wants to make everything right for her. James states that his mother is always thinking about home, whether there is enough wood, or if the hog is going to get out (Gaines 2674). Octavia constantly tells her sons that crying and being scared is weakness (Gaines 2675) and because her sons are male and black, there is no room for either.

Both Delia and Octavia have several things in common. These women are fiercely independent. Delia, for example, is characterized as such by Joe Lindsay, who states that hot or cold, rain or shine; Delia gets the laundry to her customers on time (Hurston 1659). She knows she has no choice. Octavia states to Auntie, "I do the best I can," (Gaines 2676) in a discussion about having enough money to buy salt meat for white beans, transportation and the price of the dentist for James. She also has no choice. She is the sole provider for her household, as is Delia. Hurston makes the reader feel sorry for Delia, the good woman who is subjected to an evil husband. Hurston also makes the reader angry with Delia for staying in an abusive relationship that has changed her mentally and physically. Several characters, Walter and Elijah state that Delia was once a pretty woman and too much abuse will ruin any woman (Hurston 1660). Hurston rectifies the situation at the end of the story by killing Sykes with the snake that he used to torment Delia. The reader is happy that Sykes is removed from Delia's life by his own handiwork. It does leave the reader to assume that Delia would not have left Sykes of her own accord if Sykes was not killed, and that in itself is tragic.

In "The Sky is Gray," Gaines portrays Octavia as a hard, callous woman with little regard for emotion. Octavia's son James, the narrator, did not want to burden his mother with his painful tooth because he stated that she had enough to worry about. He felt that telling his mother about his tooth would anger her. "Auntie wanted to tell Mama, but I told her Uh-huh. 'Cause I knowed we didn't have any money, and it just was go'n make her mad again" (Gaines 2675). The reader

is in contempt of the way she treats James at first, but realizes that she is only trying to teach him how to be an independent and responsible man. James states that his mother made him kill redbirds, something he didn't want to do. James then realizes why Octavia made him kill the redbirds as Monsieur Bayonne and Auntie talked to him (2678). At the end of this story, the reader understands Octavia and respects her. These women are both examples of the strength of black women, under different circumstances.

In conclusion, "Sweat" and "The Sky is Gray," both do an excellent job of focusing on the lives of common black people. Both Hurston and Gaines wrote about the experiences of black women. The language used in both stories is very expressive to the reader. Many people, black or white, know women like Delia and Octavia. Delia and Octavia have many similarities and differences, but they are the same in the area of strength. They both deal with poverty, oppression, racism, and sexism with such courage that the depth of the impact of these stories cannot be denied. Delia displays how her faith gives her the strength to endure the tribulations of her life. Octavia displays the strength of a mother who loves her family and does not want her children to feel sorry for her. She only wants them to be independent and strong. Hurston and Gaines express through their writing that the minority can be a majority in the area of courage and strength through the characters of Delia and Octavia.

Works Cited

- Gaines, Ernest. "The Sky Is Gray." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. Vol. 2, 4th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. 2674-2694.
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