# **Unpacking Figurative Language in “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston**

Each of the following quotes contains a simile or metaphor. Select any five and explain what is being compared (the abstract concept as well as the physical thing that it is being compared to) and what meaning is created by that comparison. Highlight the 5 quotes that you select. And then type your analysis/explanation below it.

1. “Delia’s habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf.“
2. “She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart.”
3. “After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her.”
4. “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 treats ’em 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.”
5. “She don’t look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it.”
6. “The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth.”
7. “One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes.”
8. “Ah done took an’ took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck.”
9. “Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog.”
10. “Yo’ ole black hide don’t look lak nothin’ tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo’ big ole yeahs flappin’ on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings.”

**Biblical Allusions**

Hurston uses several Biblical allusions throughout the story. The chart below lists five examples. The first is completed as an example response. From the remaining four, select two to analyze. First, research the allusion, that is, what it is referring to. Then, find the quote in the story, and reread the context. Spend a few minutes discussing what is added to the story by that allusion. What can make these allusions trickier than those in other texts is that Hurston often turns the original meaning on its head, so really think about how Hurston is using the allusion for her purposes.

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| **“Blessed are the Meek”** | In the Bible, during his famous sermon on the mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” The general idea here is that people who don’t ask for a lot will get a lot in the end. In the story, Delia is described as shedding her meekness and finally standing up to Sykes: “Delia’s habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf.” Whether or not Delia finally obtains her “earth,” which for her is her lovely house, because of her meekness is debatable. On the one hand, Delia is meek and she does end up inheriting the earth in the end, in the form of her home. On the other hand, it is not exactly her meekness that helps her to get what she wants. She is described as shedding it as if a scarf is blown from her neck, and it is at this point that she stands up to Sykes and refuses to let him beat her anymore. Yet another point could be made that because she essentially secures his death by her lack of action, it is her silence and meekness that ultimately wins her freedom from his abuse. Ultimately, as in the other biblical allusions, this one serves to heighten Delia’s story as well as to question some of the sentiments of the Christian tradition. |
| **“Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap”** |  |
| **the River Jordan** |  |
| **Gethsemane** |  |
| **“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food”** |  |