

LEARNING STRATEGIES:

Skimming/Scanning, Marking the Text, Think-Pair-Share, Oral Interpretation, Graphic Organizer, Drafting

Literary Terms

Dialect is the distinctive language, including the sounds, spelling, grammar, and diction, of a specific group or class of people at a certain time period.

My Notes

Learning Targets

- Explore how writers use dialogue and dialect to bring their stories to life.
- Identify how Hurston’s style distinguished her as a unique voice during the Harlem Renaissance.

Before Reading

1. Hurston is noted for her gifted storytelling and for honoring oral tradition, including **dialect**. An author’s use of dialect validates the oral traditions of a people, a time, and a place. Through their choice of dialect, authors create a representation of the spoken language, which helps record the history of language as it evolves over generations. Your reading of “Sweat” introduces you to Hurston’s entertaining use of the oral tradition.
2. Preview one of Hurston’s most famous short stories, “Sweat,” by scanning Chunk 1 and underlining unfamiliar words. Listen carefully as your teacher reads aloud the first section of “Sweat.” You will hear that Hurston reproduces the actual speech of the characters.
3. Next, work with a small group to formulate some “pronunciation rules” for pronouncing the words. Use the graphic organizer below to guide your work. Some examples have been provided for you.

Characters Say	We Say
dat, wid	that, with (“th” is often replaced by “d”)
skeer	scare (so “keer” must mean “care”)
ah	
fuh	

Language and Writer’s Craft: Levels of Diction

Hurston is also known for using different levels of diction, including dialect, in her writing. Review the levels of diction in the information below. Then find examples of each level that Hurston uses in Chunk 1 of “Sweat.” Mark the text by color-coding the examples.

High or formal diction usually contains language that creates an elevated tone. It is free of slang, idioms, colloquialisms, and contractions. It often contains polysyllabic words, sophisticated syntax, and elegant word choice.

Neutral diction uses ordinary language and vocabulary without elaborate words and may include contractions.

Informal or low diction is the language of everyday use. It is relaxed and conversational. It often includes common and simple words, idioms, slang, jargon, and contractions.

Dialect is a subgroup of a language with its own vocabulary and grammatical features. Writers often use regional dialects or dialects that reveal a person’s economic or social class.

During Reading

4. Your teacher will lead you in a guided reading of “Sweat.” As the text is read, use the Key Ideas and Details questions to guide your reading of each chunk. Annotate the chunk according to the directions given in the margin. Be prepared to use your annotations to support your ideas in a discussion.

Short Story**“Sweat”**

by Zora Neale Hurston

Chunk 1

1 It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a wash-woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

2 She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

3 Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders 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. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

4 She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

5 “Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes.”

6 “Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it.” He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. “If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you.”

Chunk 2

7 “You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'mgointuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness. 'Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip.”

8 “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.”

9 He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, *praying*, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

My Notes**KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS**

How does the opening scene of the story set the tone and conflict of this story?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Sykes seems to be spoiling for a fight. Why?

The Tradition of Dialect

My Notes

10 “Next time, Ah’m gointer kick ‘em outdoors,” he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

11 Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

12 “Ah aint for no fuss t’night, Sykes. Ah just come from taking sacrament at the church house.”

13 He snorted scornfully. “Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain’t nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath.”

14 He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

15 “Sykes, you quit grindin’ dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat’day if Ah don’t start on Sunday?”

16 “Ah don’t keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don’t gimme no lip neither, else Ah’ll throw ‘em out and put mah fist up side yo’ head to boot.”

17 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.

18 “Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!”

19 “What’s that got to do with me?” he asked brutally.

20 “What’s it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo’ belly with vittles more times than yo’ hands is filled it. *Mah* sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it.”

21 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.

22 “Naw you won’t,” she panted, “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’m toted out foot foremost.”

23 “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 whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!”

24 A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

25 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. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Describe the “new Delia” that puts Sykes into a state of awe. What is Hurston saying about this relationship?

The Tradition of Dialect

My Notes

on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds. Ah jus' wisht Ah'd a' caught 'im 'roun' dere! Ah'd a' made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road."

39 "Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees 'im grinnin' at every 'oman dat passes," Walter Thomas said. "But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil' 'oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind."

40 "There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear."

41 Clarke spoke for the first time. "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."

42 "We oughter take Sykes an' dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say 'Lawd a' mussy.' He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done taught 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live—an' we oughter kill 'im," Old Man Anderson advised.

43 A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

44 "Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an' slice it up for yo' customers. We'se all sufferin' wid de heat. De bear's done got *me!*"

45 "Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes' whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppizudicks," Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. "Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an' you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floridy favorite."

46 "A god, an' be dough. You all gimme twenty cents and slice way," Clarke retorted. "Ah needs a col' slice m'self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah'll lend y'll mah meat knife."

47 The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

48 Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

49 "Come on in, Joe, an' gimme a slab uh sow belly an' uh pound uh coffee—almost fuhgot 'twas Sat'day. Got to git on home." Most of the men left also.

50 Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

51 "Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two bottles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an' a block uh chewin' gum."

52 With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

53 The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast.

54 “Where did Sykes Jones git da ‘oman from nohow?” Lindsay asked.

55 “Ovah Apopka. Guess dey musta been cleanin’ out de town when she lef’. She don’t look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it.”

56 “Well, she sho’ kin squall,” Dave Carter contributed. “When she gits ready tuh laff, she jes’ opens huh mouf an’ latches it back tuh de las’ notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain’t got nothin’ on huh.”

Chunk 4

57 Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Della Lewis’—the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to “stomps.” He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

58 “Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ‘oman outa dere. Everything b’longs tuh me an’ you sho’ kin have it. Ah sho’ ‘bominates uh skinny ‘oman. Lawdy, you sho’ is got one portly shape on you! You kin git *anything* you wants. Dis is *mah* town an’ you sho’ kin have it.”

59 Delia’s work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia’s house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

60 Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

* * *

61 The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

62 Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

63 “Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin’!”

64 She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

65 “Sykes! Sykes, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake ‘way from heah! You *gottuh*. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!”

66 “Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin’ uh de kin’—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin’ but die. Taint no use uh you puttin’ on airs makin’ out lak you skeered uh dat snake—he’s gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn’t bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle ‘im. Nohow he wouldn’t risk breakin’ out his fangs ‘gin *yo*’ skinny laigs.”

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

How does Hurston use figurative language and imagery to convey the richness of the language of her characters?

The Tradition of Dialect

My Notes

67 “Naw, now Sykes, don’t keep dat thing ‘roun’ heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah’m even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill ‘im Sykes, please.”

68 “Doan ast me tuh do nothin’ fuh yuh. Goin’ roun’ trying’ tuh be so damn astorperious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo’ uh him dan you! Dat’s a nice snake an’ anybody doan lak ‘im kin jes’ hit de grit.”

69 The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

70 “How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Sykes?” Thomas asked.

71 “He’s full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how Ah eased up on ‘m. But Ah’m a snake charmer an’ knows how tuh handle ‘em. Shux, dat aint nothin’. Ah could ketch one eve’y day if Ah so wanted tuh.”

72 “Whut he needs is a heavy hick’ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat’s de bes ‘way tuh charm a rattlesnake.”

73 “Naw, Walt, y’all jes’ don’t understand dese diamon’ backs lak Ah do,” said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

Chunk 5

74 The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

75 That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

76 “Sykes, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake ‘way fum heah. You done starved me an’ Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin’ dat varmint heah.”

77 Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

78 “A whole lot Ah keer ‘bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin’ no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh ‘im tuh go. So fur as beatin’ is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay ‘roun’ *me*.”

79 Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. “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. Dat’s de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an’ moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge—so Ah don’t haftuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don’t wantuh see yuh ‘roun’ me a-tall. Lay ‘roun’ wid dat ‘oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan ‘way fum me an’ mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog.”

80 Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

81 “Well, Ah’m glad you does hate me. Ah’m sho’ tiahed uh you hangin’ ontuh me. Ah don’t want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo’ rawbony laigs an’ arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes’ lak de devvul’s doll-baby tuh *me*. You cain’t hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin’ *you* fuh years.”

The Tradition of Dialect

My Notes

- 92 There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck.
- 93 Finally, she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. 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.
- 94 “Well, Ah done de bes’ Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault.”
- 95 She went to sleep—a twitchy sleep—and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.
- 96 He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.
- 97 The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.
- 98 “Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot—everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.
- 99 Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha’s.
- 100 The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.
- 101 “Mah Gawd!” he chattered, “ef Ah could on’y strack uh light!”
- 102 The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.
- 103 “Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he’d be too sick”—Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes’ ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed.
- 104 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.
- 105 A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows upon the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four-o’clocks and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.
- 106 She lay there. “Delia, Delia!” She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Sentence Fragments

Hurston uses three sentence fragments in paragraph 105 to describe what Delia sees and hears. The first two fragments focus on the sounds and lack a verb. The third focuses on the movement and uses strong verbal phrases. These fragments are deliberate snippets of sounds, actions, and colors that pile up to create a vivid scene.

107 “Mah Gawd!” She heard him moan, “Mah Gawd fum Heben!” She heard him stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, “Delia, is dat you Ah heah?”

108 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 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.

After Reading

5. Hurston’s upbringing and love of reading made her well-versed in the Bible, and Biblical allusions are a hallmark of her writing style. What are some of the Biblical allusions you notice in “Sweat?” Use the chart below to identify and explain how the allusions create meaning in the text.

Biblical Allusions	Effect on the Text

6. Explain how Hurston uses the snake both literally and symbolically in the story. How is Sykes developed as a thoroughly villainous character?

My Notes

The Tradition of Dialect

My Notes

Response to Literature

The purpose of a response-to-literature essay is to demonstrate thoughtful understanding of a literary passage. The writer crafts an analysis of the text and the author's stylistic technique and supports it with textual evidence to convey meaning to the reader. The analysis includes the following:

- a well-crafted thesis statement
- body paragraphs that cite textual evidence to support the thesis
- effective transitions that connect ideas and move smoothly through the essay
- original commentary on the writer's response to the literature
- concluding statements that follow from the ideas introduced in the thesis and developed in the essay.

Check Your Understanding

Writing Prompt: To what extent is Hurston's story both a tribute to the lives of ordinary African American people and a story that does not represent the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. Choose a method of prewriting and then draft your analysis and response to this story. Be sure to:

- Include a thesis statement that gives direction to your essay.
- Address the literary elements that you have studied and explain how they enhance the meaning of the text.
- Cite textual evidence and give commentary to support your analysis.
- Use effective transitions.
- Provide a conclusion that follows from the ideas developed in the essay.

After you have completed your draft, pair with a writing partner. Exchange essays and read your partner's essay. Provide peer response by giving the following feedback:

- Underline the thesis statement. How does the thesis give direction to the essay?
- Underline the topic sentence in each body paragraph.
- If you find textual evidence not followed by documentation, suggest either a lead-in or a parenthetical method for citing source. Write these suggestions in the margins of the essay.
- Place a * for commentary sentences that precede or follow the textual evidence.
- If no commentary is evident, make a note in the margin indicating the need to add explanatory comments.
- Highlight the sentences that clearly connect, discuss, or explain how the literary elements add meaning to the text.