Heroes & Villains: Re-reading the Master-Slave Narrative in the 21st Century

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Close Reading Analysis of *Kindred*: A deeper meaning

In *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler uses a common neo-slave narrative theme; afro futurism and fiction, to help readers understand how negative of a time slavery is in our nations short history, and also shows that slavery is a relevant part of many Americans past.

Through the use of intertextuality, analogies, and divulgence, Butler’s writing ties together reoccurring themes seen in popular slave narratives, and also builds a bridge that allows us to have a better understanding of the events that took place around 200 years ago by traveling back from modern day to the 1800’s to witness the speakers’ family tree unravel before her very eyes.

*Kindred* is a very popular neo-slave narrative about an African American women and her husband living in the mid 1970’s who is automatically teleported back into the slavery era whenever one of her ancestors, Rufus Weylin more specifically, is in a dangerous situation where he is facing death. This happens in total seven times, but after the first few Rufus and Dana realize what’s going on, they begin to develop a very close friendship. However, this all changes for the worse on the last trip, when Dana arrives to help Rufus as he’s contemplating committing suicide, he attempts to rape her and Dana is forced to act so she stabs him twice and kills him and never returned after that.

Octavia E. Butler makes it a point to include many examples of intertextuality, which is when two pieces of text have a similar relationship. For example; in *Kindred*, Dana teaches Nigel and Carrie how to read and write with the overall goal of them being educated so they can write their own free pass to safety in the north in hopes of a better life (Butler 104). This particular piece relates to Booker T. Washington since he started a school in Tuskegee for African

Americans in hopes they would learn from him and go on to live a better life (Biography.com).

Another example of Intertextuality in regards to *Kindred* is in Frederick Douglas’ book he talks about how he escaped slavery. Douglas is luckier than most slaves, at a young age he is shipped to a new family who never owned slaves and got along with his master’s wife and she liked him so she taught him the alphabet and smaller words (Wikipedia.com) Eventually his master found out what his wife is doing and ordered her to stop immediately because he believed that slaves shouldn’t know these things (Wikipedia.com). Douglas never received a formal education which is normal for slaves, so once the masters’ wife discontinued his tutoring he taught himself how to read and write by stealing bread from his plantation and giving it to poor white kids who know how to read (Wikipedia.com) One day he overhears his master, Mr. Hugh Auld, tell someone that certain passes exist that slaves can get that grants them freedom (Wikipedia.com). So Douglas used the reading and writing skills he knows and writes himself a pass to freedom (Wikipedia). In *Kindred* this reappears with Dana teaching Nigel and Carrie when Dana is trying to teach the two kids reading and writing skills so they can write their own pass to freedom (Wikipedia.com). However, in both stories their education and tutoring is halted by the master. Before Dana returns to the plantation when Rufus and Issac get in a fight, she does research and found out about how some slaves that could write ended up writing themselves a pass to freedom (Butler 83)

*Kindred* fits the criteria of a neo-slave narrative perfectly. Some of the main characteristics of a neo-slave narrative are that it’s a fictional piece and it’s based on slavery. Other popular books about slavery aren’t neo-slave narratives because they are reflections of an actual person’s life and experiences. One positive thing about writing a neo-slave narrative compared to a traditional biography is that in a neo-slave narrative the writer can use intertextuality to combine elements of other popular non-fictional slavery stories and biographies to tie many different important inspirational pieces that are seen as monumental moments during slavery into one piece. Another important part of this specific story being a neo-slave narrative is how Octavia Butler utilizes the fiction aspect by building a bridge between slavery in the 1800’s and life in the 1970’s to show some parallels and to remind us readers that this is a part of our past and problems from that time period are still evident and relevant today. For example, in *Kindred* when Dana goes back in time to help her ancestors survive she sees firsthand how her history is formed by seeing Rufus rape Alice and with Dana being from the 1970’s she’s able to see that her family tree is formed by a future slave master raping a slave. That part of slavery is very disturbing and most people don’t want to see this but in reality that’s the truth and that’s what happened and needs to be included because that is the truth, that’s what’s happening during that time period and the descendants of similar situations are living amongst us today and Octavia Butler does a very good job of showing how connected slavery is with our past. Another problem that exists today as a result of slave masters raping their slaves is a concept called “Tragic Mulatta.” Tragic Mulatta is defined as mixed-race person, who is assumed to be sad, or even suicidal, because they fail to completely fit in the "white world" or the "black world” since the product of a white slave master and a black slave is sometimes a mix that doesn’t completely fit with either races (ferris.edu).

Another plus to Octavia Butler using a neo-slave approach is since she uses fiction she can make it easy to include parallels that appear between life back then and life now since Dana travels back and forth in time. For example, when Kevin and Dana meet they are both working at a casual labor agency (Butler 52). They show up, make minimum wage doing whatever jobs people needed done that day and then go home. Since they only make minimum wage they have to work very long hours just to make ends meet and have to come back every day since they made such little. Dana says that the normal workers call it a, “slave market” (Butler 52). Dana then says it is the opposite of slavery but when she first meets Kevin at this job he tries talking to her and tells her to take a break so they can talk and Dana says that, “did you see that agency guy they sent home yesterday? He took one too many breaths” (Butler 53). This is a parallel to when Dana gets caught disobeying her boss (Mr. Weylin) when she’s attempting to teach Nigel how to spell instead of doing chores in the cookhouse. In Dana’s case with Nigel, she ends up getting whipped very badly for it, while around 100 years later when slavery is illegal and times are much safer and less harsh, the person Dana works with at this place she refers to as a “slave market” gets sent home for not being on task and doing what he’s supposed to be doing. The punishment with being sent home is not getting paid since you’re not working, and when living off of minimum wage, every dollar counts.

*Kindred* does a very good job of using divulgence to portray a message that doesn’t appear on the surface when reading this piece. Octavia Butler said in an interview with Randall Kenan that, “*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery” (grin.com). She also says that she was inspired to write the novel because of an ignorant student who couldn’t understand slave behavior given their circumstances and challenges (grin.com). On the outside this piece appears to be a brilliantly written neo-slave narrative that further educates anyone who reads it about life back then. After reading this interview, it makes sense, Octavia Butler wants to show young African Americans why the slaves didn’t simply rebel and try to take over the land since they had the numbers. She shows this by focusing in on: disciplinary action such as whippings that happened for rebelling or not obeying, or how many people are always out at night which made it very hard to hide if escaping, or if someone decides to escape how often that ends up with them being found and brought back and punished horribly, or how you can’t always trust the slaves, or by going into great detail about all the gore and how bad some of these punishments truly are. She portrays the fear that the slaves had in regards to their masters much like how in “A Bug’s Life” the ants greatly outnumber the grasshoppers but the ants still work for the grasshoppers because the ants don’t know any better and live in fear of the grasshoppers. For example, the one-time Dana gets whipped she describes how gruesome it is by saying things like, “I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing me and lecturing as he beat me. By then, I almost wanted to die” (Butler 107). Or “I vomited. And I vomited again because I couldn’t move my face away”

(Butler 107). She describes how gruesome and bad these events were to show young upset African Americans living in the 1960’s and 1970’s that they shouldn’t be mad because if they retaliated the punishments were worse than almost anything imaginable. After digging deep and examining this book piece by piece I think it does an amazing job of showing readers life during slavery through intertextuality, analogies, and divulgence and makes you think about the effects of slavery that we may still be feeling today.

Works Cited

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