Bloodchild Study Guide

Bloodchild by Octavia E. Butler

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Contents

Bloodchild Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Detailed Summary & Analysis....7

Characters....14

Themes....16

Style....18

Historical Context....20

Critical Overview....22

Criticism....24

Critical Essay #1....25

Critical Essay #2....28

Critical Essay #3....30

Topics for Further Study....32

Compare and Contrast....33

What Do I Read Next?....34

Further Study....35

Bibliography....36

Copyright Information....37

Introduction

Octavia Butler, science fiction's most notable and influential African-American woman writer, first published "Bloodchild" in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1984. The story was well received and won two of science fiction's most prestigious awards, the Hugo and the Nebula. Butler, who is known primarily as a novelist, did not publish the story in book form until 1995, when she collected five of her short stories and two essays in *Bloodchild and Other Stories.* By this point, Butler had gained a much broader critical and popular reputation, and the collection was praised highly in distinguished mainstream forums such as the *New York Times* and *Booklist.* That same year, Butler was awarded the celebrated MacArthur Fellowship—commonly known as the "genius" award—for the body of her work.

Butler has described "Bloodchild" as a story about male pregnancy. Set on a foreign planet inhabited by giant, powerful, and intelligent insect-like beings, "Bloodchild" is the story of a young human male coming of age and coming to terms with his role as the carrier of an alien species' eggs. He witnesses the violent "delivery" of alien grubs from the abdomen of another man and is forced to question the relationship he has long taken for granted with the species whose planet he shares. Butler is acclaimed for her fully realized characters and her sensitivity toward the psychological dilemmas created by her imaginative science fiction scenarios. In the disconcerting world of "Bloodchild," Butler raises provocative questions about sex roles, self sacrifice, and the interdependence between different species.

Author Biography

Octavia Butler was born in Pasadena, California, on June 22, 1947, the only child of Laurice and Octavia Butler. Her father died when she was a baby, and she was raised by her mother and grandmother. Butler was a shy and solitary child who took refuge in reading. Her mother, a maid with a limited education, instilled in Butler a love of books and learning. From the age of ten, Butler knew that she wanted to be a writer. Despite the fact that she was unaware of the work of any black authors, she was determined to publish and began submitting stories to magazines in her teens. Her teachers gave her little encouragement, expressing no interest in Butler's science fiction themes.

Butler attended Pasadena City College and California State College in Los Angeles, after which she took several office, factory, and warehouse jobs. She continued to write and submit stories, which continued to be rejected by publishers. An important turn in Butler's career as a writer came when she attended the Clarion Science Fiction workshop in 1970. The workshop resulted in the publication of her first short story, "Crossover," in a Clarion anthology. She did not publish any more of her work until she sold her first novel, *Patternmaster,* the first installment in her Patternist series, to Doubleday in 1976.

Over the next decade, Butler came out with four more Patternist novels, as well as a time travel novel about slavery, *Kindred,* which was published in 1979. Her next project was the Xenogenesis series, which includes the novels *Dawn, Adulthood Rites,* and *Imago.* Butler rose to prominence in the science fiction world during a time when women were just starting to assert a voice in the genre. She gained a particularly strong following of black women, among whom she was the only prominent sci-fi writer. But an increasingly wider audience soon came to enjoy and appreciate her work. After the publication of two more sci-fi novels and a collection of short stories, *Bloodchild and Other Stories,* she was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship (1995). Her most recent novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), are part of her Earthseed series, which deals with a young woman's attempt to found a new religion in the twenty-first century.

Despite her growing fame, Butler has remained in her adult life the loner she was as a child. In a personal statement printed in *Women of Wonder,* Butler describes herself as "comfortably asocial . . . a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, an African-American, a former Baptist, and an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive."

Plot Summary

The protagonist of "Bloodchild," Gan, is a Terran—a human—living on an alien planet among its powerful insect-like hosts, the Tlic, some time in the future. The story opens on Gan's "last day of childhood." The events that unfold describe a rite of passage that takes place in a society where these two different species must depend on one another in order to survive. Gan's family has a special relationship with a particular Tlic named T'Gatoi. T'Gatoi has been a friend of Gan's mother, Lien, since childhood. When, generations earlier, Terrans arrived on the Tlic planet, the Tlic species was dying out. The Tlic needed Terrans in order to reproduce, using the Terrans' bodies to incubate their eggs. Despite the fact that the Tlic are more powerful physically and politically, they remain dependent on Terrans for the survival of their species. According to the arrangement between the Tlic and the Terrans, Lien would have to provide one of her children for Tlic reproduction. Gan's older sister Xuan Hoa had wanted to be chosen to play this special role, but T'Gatoi instead chose Gan and nurtured him from his first days.

The action begins with T'Gatoi bringing the family sterile Tlic eggs, which act on humans like both a drug and a medicine. The Tlic eggs make Terrans feel drunk and also prolong their lives. There is some tension between T'Gatoi and Gan's mother, Lien. Lien initially refuses to partake of the egg, but she eventually succumbs to T'Gatoi's wishes, sipping the egg and allowing T'Gatoi to embrace her. Gan does not understand why she does not want the egg. T'Gatoi comments that there was not enough egg left for Lien and so she stings her in order to sedate her. The sting loosens Lien's inhibitions and she refers to the fact that Gan is still hers, saying, "Nothing can buy him from me."

Suddenly T'Gatoi jumps up and goes outside, sensing something wrong. Gan follows and sees her bringing back a man named Bram Lomas who is N'Tlic, meaning that he is about to "give birth" to his Tlic's eggs as they hatch into flesh-consuming grubs. It is an emergency because his Tlic, T'Khotgif Teh, is sick and therefore unable to help with the "delivery," putting the man in great pain and grave danger. T'Gatoi tries to send Gan to call for help, but he sends his older brother Qui instead, saying that he is willing to stay and help perform the procedure. T'Gatoi instructs him to go and slaughter a large animal. He does not know how to do this with a knife so he goes and retrieves a hidden rifle (Terrans are not allowed to own guns) and kills an achti, a local animal, then hides the rifle again.

Gan hesitates before returning to T'Gatoi with the carcass. He has seen diagrams of what a birth entails but now he is frightened. When T'Gatoi calls for him he enters the room and sees that Lomas is unconscious. Gan's mother steps into the room and offers to help, but Gan tells her not to worry and promises not to shame her. Lomas begins to regain consciousness and begs T'Gatoi to sting and sedate him again, but she cannot do this without risking the offspring. She ties him down and begins the "delivery," cutting into his abdomen, retrieving the grubs, and placing them in the carcass of the animal Gan has slaughtered. At this stage the grubs eat any flesh except their mother's, so they must be extracted before they eat their way out of their host's flesh and kill him. Though

Gan had known this, he is repulsed and alarmed when T'Gatoi licks Lomas's blood and appears indifferent to his agony. T'Gatoi suddenly seems alien to him.

T'Gatoi excuses Gan to go outside and vomit when Lomas loses consciousness. Gan sees the doctor arrive along with Qui and T'Khotgif Teh, whose eggs can save Lomas. He reports to her that her young are alive and she asks after Lomas, which Gan appreciates. After she rushes in, Qui stays behind and asks Gan about what he has just witnessed. Qui has always been suspicious of the Tlic and hostile toward T'Gatoi. Qui tells his brother that he once saw a Tlic kill a man who was N'Tlic. He maintains that Terrans are merely "host animals" for the Tlic, but Gan insists that "it's more than that." In part because he now understands Qui's point of view, Gan becomes furious. Qui asks if he has been implanted yet and Gan responds by hitting him. They fight and Qui wins.

Gan returns to the house, loads the rifle, and waits for T'Gatoi. She enters and reports that Lomas and the offspring will live, but that T'Khotgif will die of her disease. She asks if Gan means to shoot her and he does not answer, but asks, "What are we to you?" and moves the gun to his own throat. She responds that the answer to this question is up to him and asks if she should go to his sister, Xuan Hoa, for implantation. He at first agrees but then changes his mind. T'Gatoi tells him that she must implant an egg that night. They go into Gan's bedroom and she gives him her narcotic sting before painlessly implanting an egg. In her embrace, Gan admits that he had been afraid but that he had not wanted to give her up. He says he would not have killed her, though he'd almost killed himself. T'Gatoi reassures him that he will live and that she will stay with him and take care of him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

In *Bloodchild*, humans called Terrans have escaped their home planet and reside among a group of aliens called the Tlic. The Tlic use humans as vessels in which they grow their offspring. They accomplish this by implanting the Terrans with eggs that develop into parasite-like worms in human flesh.

Gan, the narrator and protagonist in the story, is a boy who has been chosen to be a "host." Gan was selected by T'Gatoi, a female Tlic who is friends with Gan's mother, Lien. The story takes place on the night that Gan is to be implanted with his first egg. Gan has not been told that he is going to be implanted on this night.

T'Gatoi and Lien had practically grown up together. They met when Lien was a child and T'Gatoi entered adolescence; they matured at the same rate and became close friends. In fact, T'Gatoi introduced Lien to her future husband.

When Lien got married T'Gatoi went into the family business, which was politics. As time went by, the two friends saw less of each other, but Lien promised one of her children to T'Gatoi. Lien would have to give one away anyway, because one human from each family belongs to the Tlic; Lien felt that she would rather give one of her children to T'Gatoi than to a stranger.

As the years passed, T'Gatoi increased her political influence. She was in charge of the Preserve by the time she came back to collect a child from Lien. During this time, Hoa had been born. Hoa liked T'Gatoi and wanted to be chosen. However, Lien was pregnant with Gan and T'Gatoi liked the idea of choosing an infant so she could be part of every stage of the child's development. So within three minutes of his birth, Gan was caged inside T'Gatoi's limbs. Only a few days later, Gan received his first sterile egg to drink.

Sterile eggs are used for healing, to reduce pain, and to lengthen human life. When Terrans drink the liquid from sterile eggs, they enter into a dreamy, almost drugged state. Gan adapted to the situation early and so was not afraid. Gan's brother, on the other hand, distrusted the Tlic. Nevertheless, he always demanded his share of egg.

Lien's children were raised to respect and obey T'Gatoi. T'Gatoi doesn't demand to be honored; in fact, she sees the Terran house as her second home. Often she would call Gan over to keep her warm because she liked humans' body heat. She would wrap Gan up in her numerous limbs and complain that he was dangerously skinny.

Among her people, however, T'Gatoi was hounded. Many wanted more Terrans made available to them. That was because possession of Terrans had become a status symbol for the Tlic. Terrans were sold to the rich and powerful, often in exchange for

political support. The Tlic didn't understand, or didn't care, that Terrans were under protection in the Preserve. T'Gatoi would not permit the breakup of Terran families.

In preparation for Gan's implantation, T'Gatoi first gives him a sterile egg and offers an additional egg to be shared among his mother, brother and sisters. Lien refuses to drink from the sterile egg; she always refused the eggs, saying that they were for her children.

Gan wonders why his mother denies herself this simple pleasure. When his father was alive, he never refused an egg; he lived twice as long as he should have. He married Lien and had four children near the end of his life. Gan's mother seems content to age naturally. Gan also doesn't understand why his mother turns away every time T'Gatoi goes near him.

Gan is sitting with T'Gatoi. She tells him to move and asks Lien to take his place and warm her. Lien hesitates at first but then lies down beside T'Gatoi. The alien holds her loosely but securely. Gan always found this comfortable, but aside from him and his oldest sister, everyone else disliked it; it made them feel caged.

Then T'Gatoi's tail moves and stings Lien, drawing a single drop of blood. Lien cries out in surprise; the sting did not actually hurt. As Lien becomes drowsy, she asks why T'Gatoi did that. The alien responds that she did it so that Lien wouldn't suffer anymore. Stings have a pacifying effect like that of sterile eggs. Before Lien falls asleep, she says that nothing can take Gan away from her. T'Gatoi then asks Xuan Hoa, Gan's oldest sister, to remove her mother's shoes so she can sleep. Hoa does this and then sits down beside Gan (the two siblings have always been close).

Suddenly T'Gatoi hears noise at the door and knows that something is wrong. She wakes the sleeping Lien, disentangles herself from her, and moves toward the door at full speed. She is three times a big as humans with a long spine and four sets of limb bones per segment. When she moves she looks boneless and aquatic. Gan and Hoa follow T'Gatoi to the door.

At the door is a man in a great deal of pain. He is an N'Tlic, a Terran host who is carrying the Tlic parasites. T'Gatoi carries the man inside and removes his clothes. Gan wants to help, but T'Gatoi says he won't want to see this. The man's name is Bram Lomas. His Tlic is T'Khotgif.

Gan's brother Qui runs to get help. Gan's youngest sister moves nearer to Lomas, but Lien pulls her daughter back. T'Gatoi tells Gan to go out and slaughter an achti (a Terran animal) that is at least half his size. When he tries to argue with her, she knocks him across the room with her tail.

Although Lien kept Terran animals for their fur, Gan has never killed one. He goes into the kitchen to look for a knife; instead, he finds his father's rifle. Guns are illegal in the Preserve because Terrans once used them to shoot Tlic and N'Tlic before the joining of the families had begun.

Gan goes out behind the house to the cages and shoots the biggest achti he can find. He takes the dead animal into the kitchen and skins it. He is afraid to go back into the other room where Lomas is lying. Gan has seen pictures and diagrams; he knows what is going to happen but he is still scared. Then T'Gatoi calls Gan back into the room, where Lomas is slipping in and out of consciousness. T'Gatoi has sent Gan's mother and sisters out of the room. Gan takes the achti to T'Gatoi.

T'Gatoi cuts the achti open and tells Gan to hold Lomas' shoulders down. Lien comes back into the room and says that she will hold down one side of the man and Gan can hold the other side. Gan says that he will do it himself and tells his mother that she doesn't have to watch. Lien exits the room.

Lomas groans. T'Gatoi tells him that she has stung him as much as she can for now, but promises to sting him again later so he can sleep. Lomas pleads for T'Gatoi to wait, but she says that there is no more time. She says that, when T'Khotgif arrives, Lomas will be given an egg to ease his pain and help him heal.

T'Gatoi ties Lomas' hands together with his pants and gives him his shirt to bite down on. Then she cuts open his belly. Lomas convulses and cries out in pain. As T'Gatoi licks away his blood, his blood vessels contract from the chemicals in her saliva and his bleeding slows down. Gan feels sick as he watches this; he feels like he is helping T'Gatoi torture the man.

Then T'Gatoi locates the first Tlic grub in Lomas' insides; it is covered with his blood. It had eaten out of its own egg case but had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, a grub will eat any flesh except its mother's. If the grubs are left in the human too long, they continue to excrete the poison that had already made Lomas sick. There is only a short period of time between the release of the poison and when the grubs begin to eat their host.

T'Gatoi picks up the grub and examines it as Lomas falls unconscious again. The grub is limbless and boneless, fifteen centimeters long and two centimeters wide. It looks like a large worm. T'Gatoi places the grub into the belly of the achti, where it quickly burrows into the animal and begins to feed off it. Soon she finds two more grubs, one of which is a smaller and more vigorous male. The male tries to bite T'Gatoi before she places it and its sister into the achti. As T'Gatoi continues to find grubs. she remarks to Gan that he may need to slaughter another animal.

Gan has always been told that this process is a kind of birth, that it is a good and necessary thing that the Tlic and Terrans do together. When T'Gatoi finds a grub that is still eating its egg case, she bites away the case and licks the blood off the grub. Gan wonders if she likes the taste of human blood.

T'Gatoi sees that Gan is going to be sick so she sends him outside. Gan does get sick and afterwards, he begins to cry; but he doesn't know why he is crying. Every time he closes his eyes, all he can see are the worms crawling in human flesh.

Finally a car drives up with Lomas's Tlic, a Terran doctor, and Gan's brother Qui inside. The doctor gets out and runs into the house without talking to Gan. The Tlic driver is small, indicating that she was probably born from an animal, which the Tlic used to bear their young before the Terrans arrived. Gan tells the driver that six or seven grubs have been born and that Lomas is still alive.

Qui tells Gan that Lomas' Tlic has been ill. Gan doesn't want to go back inside and gives Qui a look. Qui says it is one of T'Gatoi's looks; he reminds Gan that he is not T'Gatoi; he is just her property. Gan tells Qui that he now realizes how T'Gatoi plans to use him.

Gan and Qui had been close when they were younger, but things changed when Qui reached adolescence. Qui started to avoid T'Gatoi and began running away (even though he still always insisted on his share of egg); but there *was* no "away;" no escape. So Qui started to look out for Gan in a way that made Gan hate him; but Qui knew that, as long as Gan was okay, Qui would never have to step up as the N'Tlic.

Instead of going inside, the two brothers walk toward the field in the back of the house. Qui asks Gan how the "birth" was and Gan tells him what happened. Qui then says that Lomas' situation is not that bad, that he has seen much worse.

Qui proceeds to tell his brother what he saw when he was little. One day he was on his way home when he saw a man who was N'Tlic with one of the Tlic. Qui hid from the strangers and watched what happened next. The grubs had begun to eat the man. He was in so much pain that he begged the Tlic to kill him; so she did, by cutting his throat with her claw. The grubs ate their way out of the man and then burrowed back in again, still eating. Qui's description makes Gan think of Lomas' flesh again. Qui tells him that he started to run away after that because he knew that T'Gatoi would take him if anything happened to Gan.

Gan says that they wouldn't take Qui, they would take Hoa, their sister, because she wants to be a host. Qui tells Gan that they don't take women. Gan explains what T'Gatoi once told him. The Tlic prefer women hosts because they have more body fat, but they leave them to bear their own children and continue the Terran race. Qui replies that the women are left alone in order to produce the next generation of host animals for the Tlic.

Gan says it's more than that and that what happened to Lomas was not meant to happen that way. Qui says it *is* that way; Gan was just not supposed to see it. The N'Tlic is meant to be unconscious when he is cut open; and if just one grub is missed and not removed, then the Terran dies.

Gan starts to walk away. Qui apologizes and says that it probably won't happen that way with him because T'Gatoi likes him and will be careful. Qui then asks Gan if he has been implanted yet because he is now the right age. At that, Gan hits his brother and then Qui knocks Gan out. When Gan regains consciousness, he walks back into the house.

Gan finds that his family is sleeping. From the kitchen he can hear voices in the other room. He can't make out what the Tlic are saying and he doesn't want to know. Gan sits down at the table. He thinks about his father, who had been cut open and sewn up three times. T'Gatoi was born from his father. Gan takes out his father's rifle again and loads it.

Then T'Gatoi enters the kitchen. She tells Gan that he shouldn't have seen what happened to Lomas. She says that T'Khotgif is dying and will not live to raise her children; instead, her sterile sister will raise them. (There is only one fertile female in each lot of Tlic to keep the family going.) T'Gatoi also tells Gan that Lomas will live and that no one will ask him to do that again. Gan replies that they are *never* asked, that *he* certainly wasn't asked.

T'Gatoi notices the swelling from the fight with Qui and asks Gan what's wrong with his face. Gan says that nothing is wrong. T'Gatoi asks if he used the rifle to shoot the achti; he replies that he did. T'Gatoi then asks Gan if he intends to shoot her but Gan doesn't answer. Gan asks T'Gatoi what Terran blood tastes like to her. Then he asks her what Terrans really are to the Tlic. T'Gatoi replies that he knows her best and that he must decide what he wants.

Gan tells T'Gatoi that he doesn't want to be a host animal. T'Gatoi says that that's not what he would be. She explains that, when the Terrans first arrived, the Tlic learned what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. Gan's Terran ancestors had fled from their world because other humans were trying to kill or enslave them. Gan's ancestors had survived because of the Tlic.

T'Gatoi asks Gan if he would really rather die than bear her children; she asks him if she should go to his sister Hoa. Gan says yes so T'Gatoi says that she will tell Hoa tonight. After thinking about it further, Gan tells T'Gatoi not to go to Hoa. He is not like his brother Qui; he cannot use his sister to save himself. So Gan tells T'Gatoi that he will carry the eggs. As he lowers his gun, T'Gatoi tries to take it from him, but Gan won't give it to her. He says that it might save his life one day. Gan tells T'Gatoi that if she wants to partner with him, then she has to accept the risk.

T'Gatoi tells Gan that she will implant the first egg in him tonight. Gan asks if Hoa would have been implanted that night. When T'Gatoi says yes, Gan is offended; he asks if T'Gatoi even cares whom she implanted. Now Gan understands why he was given his own egg to drink today and why his mother kept looking at him as if he was going away.

T'Gatoi then enters Gan's bedroom and Gan follows her. She lies down on the couch. (There would have been nowhere to lie in Hoa's room.) Gan is disturbed at the thought of T'Gatoi with Hoa. Gan undresses and lies down beside T'Gatoi. He knows what to do and what to expect. He has been told all his life. He feels a familiar pleasant sting that sedates him a little bit. Then Gan is punctured as T'Gatoi begins to implant the egg; T'Gatoi's muscles force the egg into Gan's body. Suddenly Gan feels angry; he moves and accidentally hurts T'Gatoi. Ashamed, he apologizes to her.

T'Gatoi tells Gan that she chose him long ago and thought that he had chosen her too; but she would have implanted Hoa if she had thought her children would be carried by someone who hates them. Gan says that he doesn't hate them; he's just scared. (Gan had decided to get implanted anyway to save Hoa, but also to keep T'Gatoi for himself.)

T'Gatoi then explains that Terrans never take well to seeing the births; she knows that Qui saw one and that is what made him so hostile. Gan says that they should see the births because Terrans only see them when something goes wrong. He thinks that the births of T'Gatoi's offspring should be the first public ones. T'Gatoi disagrees but Gan thinks that she may change her mind later.

The egg that was implanted in Gan begins to release a fluid like the ones in the sterile eggs. Gan now remembers his fearful feelings and can talk about them. He tells T'Gatoi that he wouldn't have shot her. She asks if he would have shot himself; he says he could have, that he would have found the "away" for which Qui was looking. He wonders if his brother understands this.

T'Gatoi assures Gan that she is young and healthy and will not leave him the way that Lomas was left. At the end T'Gatoi promises Gan, "N'Tlic, I'll take care of you."

Analysis

Bloodchild by Octavia E. Butler tells the story of humans who are used as hosts to give birth to parasitic alien children. Gan, the story's protagonist, is a boy who has been chosen as a host to an alien birth. Humans are kept in a place of captivity called the Preserve. This allows the alien species, called the Tlic, to have humans on hand in order to continue their race.

Before the arrival of humans on their planet, the Tlic implanted their eggs in animals. This process resulted in fewer births and smaller, less healthy offspring. Humans carry the parasites well. T'Gatoi is the Tlic who possesses ownership of Gan. She has raised him from infancy, hoping to draw him to her and ease his transition to becoming an N'Tlic, or surrogate. The newly born Tlic are parasitic grubs that will poison and eat their hosts if not quickly removed from the humans' bodies.

Gan is an adolescent male who struggles with the realization that his sole purpose is to have babies. This is a symbolically ironic commentary on the part of the author. For centuries this was women's primary role, but in Butler's story it is generally men who are chosen as carriers. However, women are no less oppressed in this story; their purpose is still to carry human babies to ensure the birth of the next generation of hosts.

Butler foreshadows the notion of oppression early on in the story when she describes the way Gan and Lien are held in T'Gatoi's grip because the alien likes human body heat. When the characters are woven inside the alien's limbs, the narrator describes this as being "caged." Similarly, there is a reference to how the first humans were caged together; this story is contrasted with the supposed new freedom of the Preserve.

However, the narrator comments that either inside or outside the Preserve, there is no escape, or rather no "away," for the humans. For example, Gan's brother Qui does not accept the Tlic. While he opposes the birthing rituals and is fearful of them, there is no escaping the Tlic. This indicates that while the Preserve is safer than the world outside, it is a cage in itself. The humans suffer a different kind of oppression.

Most humans, called Terrans in the story, have come to accept their fate. They arrived on the planet to escape their own kind; in the world from which they came, their fellow Terrans tried to kill or enslave them. This notion serves as a symbol of the history of mankind; humans have killed and oppressed each other throughout history. As for those who oppose the system, such as Gan's brother Qui, their only escape is to sedate themselves with substances. Gan says that Qui never turns down his share of egg; the sterile eggs work like a drug on humans. Qui's insistence on getting his share parallels the notion of using drugs and alcohol as a source of escape.

It is perhaps the first line of this story that best addresses the underlying theme of the narrative. Gan describes the night over which the story is told as his "last night of childhood." His move into adulthood occurs not only because he is implanted this night, or because he witnesses the horrors of birth that have been kept from him before.

Throughout the story, Gan faces definitive choices. Gan stands up for himself, telling T'Gatoi that if he is to help her, he must be allowed to keep his gun. Through his courage, Gan manages to gain some power, even within an oppressive situation. Gan's major decision comes at the end of the story, when he is given the option to back out of becoming an N'Tlic. Ultimately he decides to be implanted because he wants to save his sister.

It is this act of self-sacrifice, not generally something associated with childhood, that marks Gan's transition to adulthood.

Characters

Gan

Gan, a young human male, is the protagonist of "Bloodchild." The story centers on Gan's growing knowledge and feelings of ambivalence regarding his special relationship with the insect-like extraterrestrial T'Gatoi, a member of the Tlic species. Gan and T'Gatoi live in a state of mutual dependence, according to which humans are guests on the Tlic planet and subject to the their greater power, and the Tlic are in turn dependent on humans to propagate their species through incubating Tlic eggs in their bodies. Gan has been chosen by T'Gatoi for this special responsibility and has been raised by her with this duty in mind.

"Bloodchild" is Gan's coming of age story. The action takes place on the night of his "impregnation" by T'Gatoi, signaling his passage to adulthood, his acceptance of responsibility, and his sacrifices for both his family and for T'Gatoi herself. On this night Gan witnesses an emergency "birth" procedure T'Gatoi performs on another Tlic's human host. He experiences a crisis when he confronts the procedure's violence and comprehends the implications of accepting an alien being into his body.

Lien

Lien is Gan's mother. She too is ambivalent about Gan's relationship to T'Gatoi. Lien has been close to T'Gatoi since her childhood and has accepted her into her family as part of a newer, less exploitative arrangement for the Tlic using human hosts for reproduction. Lien has taught her children to honor and respect T'Gatoi, but as the story opens she resists T'Gatoi's offers of restorative Tlic egg and challenges her with the comment that Gan is still hers, saying, "Nothing can buy him from me."

Bram Lomas

Bram Lomas is a human on whom T'Gatoi performs an emergency "delivery" of Tlic grubs. Lomas's Tlic, T'Khotgif, is too sick to participate in the birth, subjecting Lomas to extreme pain and danger. Gan witnesses the procedure and, as a result, sees T'Gatoi in a new light.

Qui

Qui is Gan's older brother. He is a rebel against the system that requires humans to carry Tlic eggs. He had attempted to run away from the Preserve where humans live before he realized that it was impossible to escape from the Tlic's dominance on their own planet. After Gan witnesses Lomas's suffering, Qui tells him that he too has seen

an emergency birth - one that ended with the human's death. He maintains that humans are like animals to the Tlic and that T'Gatoi sees Gan as her property.

T'Gatoi

T'Gatoi is a Tlic who has had a close, ongoing relationship with Gan's family for two generations. Gan's father incubated T'Gatoi in his body and T'Gatoi later introduced him to Lien, who he married. She chose Gan at birth to live with her and to eventually carry her eggs. T'Gatoi believes in the system of familial relations between humans and Tlic. She appears unmoved when she must perform the violent procedure on Bram Lomas, which disgusts and frightens Gan, but she is emotionally invested in Gan and eventually regains his consent.

Ch'Khotgif Teh

See T'Khotgif Teh

T'Khotgif Teh

T'Khotgif Teh is a Tlic who has impregnated Bram Lomas with her eggs. She is old and ill so she is not there to protect Lomas with her sting during the painful removal of her grubs from his body. The fact that she asks after Lomas's well being after learning of the successful delivery of her grubs suggests that she has an emotional investment in him as well as a biological one. After she has produced offspring her name changes to Ch'Khotgif.

Xuan Hoa

Xuan Hoa is Gan's older sister. In contrast to Qui, she feels warmly toward T'Gatoi and she would be honored to carry her eggs. When Gan momentarily refuses to be impregnated, T'Gatoi suggests that she will turn to Xuan Hoa for the duty. Gan cannot tolerate the idea of Xuan Hoa as a host so he agrees to carry the eggs after all.

Themes

Coming of Age

"Bloodchild" opens with the line, "My last night of childhood began with a visit home." This clearly signals that it is a coming of age story, concerning the protagonist's loss of innocence and his accession to an adult role of knowledge and responsibility. In the science-fiction fantasy world that Butler has created, Gan's rite of passage entails witnessing flesh-eating grubs hatch from a man's abdomen and then agreeing to be implanted with the eggs of a powerful, insect-like alien. Bizarre as these events may seem, the story's plot shares many elements that are common to coming of age stories.

At the beginning of the story Gan is innocent, not understanding his mother's or Qui's hostility toward T'Gatoi. At the end of the story, he is in a position of knowledge, agreeing to be implanted with T'Gatoi's eggs despite his new understanding of the fearsome risks involved. Gan undergoes a physical transformation that is also an emotional and social one. His implantation with T'Gatoi's eggs can be understood as a kind of loss of virginity. He agrees to the implantation for complicated reasons that suggest his new maturity. While T'Gatoi initially has a somewhat maternal relationship to Gan, this relationship changes when he challenges her with the gun, asserting his new status as her equal. When he chooses—despite his fear and disgust—to accept T'Gatoi's eggs, he not only protects his innocent sister from what he knows to be a terrifying experience, but he also assumes responsibility for maintaining the tenuous social order established between the human and Tlic species.

Morals and Morality

In her afterword to "Bloodchild" Butler asks, "Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a livable space on a world not our own?" In the story she explores one such possibility, according to which a human society agrees to join into familial relations with an alien species and to offer some of their own members to carry alien eggs. Some complex moral questions are creatively posited by this situation—for instance, is it acceptable for one species to require another to help it survive and is such a relationship necessarily exploitative, or might it be possible for interdependence between two completely different kinds of beings to be mutually beneficial? Qui sees the relationship as exploitative, arguing that humans are nothing but host animals to the Tlic, and Gan struggles with this perspective. However, the story concludes with a strange kind of love scene in which T'Gatoi shows how much Gan means to her. Butler suggests that the power relations between humans and Tlic are complex, encompassing both fear and love.

Sex Roles

Butler is known as a feminist writer and many of her novels and stories have strong female protagonists who challenge traditional gender roles. In "Bloodchild," T'Gatoi does serve as a strong and powerful female character, but the story's innovative exploration of sex roles goes even further. Rather than just presenting female characters in traditionally male roles, she creates drama by placing a male protagonist in what would normally be considered a quintessentially female dilemma. Gan is challenged with a sacrifice and a responsibility that is usually consigned to women: pregnancy. The story is not merely a reversal of masculine and feminine roles, however. T'Gatoi is powerful but is also both nurturing and dependent. And Gan's struggle requires traditionally masculine traits of courage and self-assertion as well as feminine ones of selflessness and empathy. In a sense, in the world of "Bloodchild," to allow oneself to be impregnated is to become a man.

Difference

The word *alien* signifies not only fantastic extra-terrestrials, but also anything that is extremely strange, foreign, or different from oneself. In "Bloodchild," Butler has imaginatively created a society in which two species that are alien to each other live as intimates and depend upon one another for their very survival. At the beginning of the story Gan sees T'Gatoi as a member of his family. He finds it normal to lounge in the embrace of a giant insect and to get drunk on her species' eggs. The conflict of the story arises when Gan witnesses an emergency "delivery" of Tlic grubs from the abdomen of a human man. The process disgusts him in part because it highlights the differences between the two species. Gan can no longer see T'Gatoi as familiar and trusted after he witnesses her licking the man's blood and pulling the flesh eating grubs from his body. However, by the end of the story, Gan's relationship with T'Gatoi is reestablished on a more mature and equal level. He confronts his fear and accepts physical intimacy with her both out of duty to his family and in the interest of harmony between the two societies.

Style

The Science Fiction Genre

The particular stylistic features that shape "Bloodchild" must be understood in terms of the story's genre. A genre is a category of art or literature distinguished by distinctive style, form, and content. As early as the second sentence of "Bloodchild"□"T'Gatoi's sister had given us two sterile eggs"□most readers will recognize that it belongs to the genre of science fiction. Science fiction explores the implications of future scientific and technological advances for individuals and society as extrapolated from the current states of science and society. Science fiction represents fantastic material in a realistic manner, treating highly imaginative situations as hypothetically possible. Qualities that mark the story as science fiction include, most obviously, the fact that it is set in the future and involves an encounter with an alien race. However, Butler's emphasis on character and her development of the plot around psychological conflict are characteristics not typical of the genre, which often relies on conventions associated with the genre, such as space travel and high technology, as the driving force behind the narrative.

Setting

In keeping with the science fiction genre, the story's setting is detailed, dramatic, and fantastic. "Bloodchild" is set at an indeterminate point in the future, some generations after a colony of humans—known as Terrans—has fled oppression on earth and landed on a planet inhabited by powerful insect-like beings called Tlic. The Tlic control the planet, which is after all theirs, but they make special provisions for Terrans because the Tlic species is dependent on them for survival. Before the Terrans arrived, the Tlic were dying out. The animals they used to incubate their eggs had started to kill them. By taking on this role as incubators, Terrans saved the Tlic from extinction.

Terrans live in an area set aside for their use called the Preserve. It is theirs to live on and farm, but they are subject to Tlic government, including rules such as the prohibition of weapons. Before the Preserve was created, Terrans were exploited indiscriminately for their reproductive powers, so the Preserve offers a modicum of security to Terrans. Despite separate living arrangements, Tlic and Terran societies are closely intertwined. Tlic join with Terran families and choose one member to carry and incubate their eggs. This role is seen as both a sacrifice and an honor as it keeps the tenuous balance of power between the two species. These egg carriers live outside of the Preserve with their Tlic partners.

Point of View

"Bloodchild" is narrated in the first person by Gan, the Terran protagonist. Because it is described from his perspective, the situation, which seems bizarre to the reader, is

treated as normal. Details of the setting and situation are revealed only as the action of the story unfolds, partly through Gan's narration of unfolding events and partly through the speech of other characters. Despite the fact that the story tells of a highly volatile personal situation, Gan's narration is rather matter-of-fact. As indicated by the first line of the story, "My last night of childhood began with a visit home," Gan narrates the story with the advantage of retrospective knowledge. He tells his story with the with the distance and coolness acquired by experience.

Symbolism

Some critics see science fiction in general and Butler's science fiction in particular as metaphoric explorations of contemporary social issues. In this way, all of the main features of the story can be understood as symbolic of present cultural tensions. For example, the relationship between the Tlic and Terrans may be interpreted as symbolic of the struggles between human groups who see each other as essentially different, yet who are forced to live together, such as racial groups in the United States and many other places in the world. This interpretation might be supported by the fact that many of Butler's other works take up racial themes more explicitly. On a more specific level, Tlic eggs are symbolic of the contradictory nature of Terran-Tlic relations. Sterile eggs are a source of pleasure and health for Terrans, signifying the Tlic's benevolent and nurturing qualities as well as the Tlic's vulnerability to extinction. But when these eggs are fertile —necessary for the Tlic's own pleasure and health—they become an object of fear and disgust for Terrans, and soon hatch into violently self-preserving grubs.

Historical Context

Environmental Awareness

"The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived," T'Gatoi reminds Gan during the story's climactic scene. This suggests an environmental context for the psychological drama at the center of the story. Butler does not detail the reasons why the earlier host animals began killing Tlic eggs, but it is implicit that the tensions of plot have come about because the Tlic planet's ecosystem - that is, its ecological community and physical environment considered as a unit - is no longer in balance. "Bloodchild" explores the troubled interdependence between Tlic and human species during what might be understood as an environmental crisis on the Tlic planet. This reflects a sense of environmental crisis here on earth at the time that Butler wrote the story, when there was growing awareness of damage to the earth's ecosystem. Starting with the energy crisis of the mid-1970s, the direct consequences of human exploitation of the earth's resources increasingly occupied public consciousness. In 1979 the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant had a near meltdown, contaminating the immediate area with radioactive waste. In 1984 a large hole in the earth's protective ozone layer was discovered over Antarctica, caused by decades of pollution. In the 1980s many communities began recycling programs and there were visible protests of the development of rain forests and other wilderness areas, reflecting awareness of the relationship between the actions of individuals and the life of the planet.

Multiculturalism

Many of Butler's other works deal explicitly with racial oppression. In "Bloodchild" Butler refers to this issue only obliquely, when T'Gatoi reminds Gan that "your ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them - they survived because of us." However, the story may be seen as a metaphor for the conflicted relations between racial and ethnic groups who live in the same society and share common interests, yet who see each other as irreconcilably different. This was the racial climate of 1980s Los Angeles where Butler lived and wrote. In this way, "Bloodchild" may be interpreted as a parable about the sacrifices and satisfactions of living in a multicultural society. Multiculturalism - the recognition and appreciation of cultural differences that exist within a larger society - became a catchword in the 1980s. Many workplaces and schools incorporated the value of multiculturalism into their training and curricula.

Feminism

Butler has described "Bloodchild" as a story about male pregnancy. Gan's nurturing role as an egg carrier is also a fearsome one - something Gan realizes fully only when he

witnesses the bloody delivery of grubs from Bram Lomas's body. Butler challenges common ways of thinking about the meaning of pregnancy by placing a male character in this position. The inversion of sex roles that the story dramatizes may be understood as a feminist project. Butler redefines pregnancy as brave and heroic, qualities conventionally considered masculine. Such challenges to conventional thinking make sense in terms of the cultural climate in which Butler wrote. Despite the fact that the 1980s were not a moment of historical feminist solidarity, it was a time when women reaped some of the benefits of the legal and social progress of the feminist movement of the 1970s. It was also a time of backlash against feminism by men and women alike. In the 1980s the men's movement was born, which was intended to awaken "feminized" men to the masculine and powerful heroes inside of them. Butler, who describes herself as a feminist, may be responding to them with this story of heroic male pregnancy.

Surrogate Parenthood

At the center of "Bloodchild" is the drama of Gan's uncertainty over whether his role as an incubator to T'Gatoi's eggs is a matter of honor and sacrifice, or of power and exploitation. Surrogate parenthood - in which a woman agrees to be artificially inseminated and to carry a baby in exchange for monetary compensation - was one among a host of new options in the 1980s opening up to couples unable to conceive. One high profile court case in the 1980s revealed the complicated emotional and social issues surrounding surrogacy. A surrogate mother named Marybeth Whitehead broke her contract and decided to keep the child she had conceived and carried for another couple. Public opinion was sharply divided over whether the birth mother's connection to her offspring was more important than the father's. Feminists supported Whitehead, interpreting the contract as a form of exploitation of a working-class woman's body by a more powerful middle-class man. The father initially won custody of the child but this decision was overturned by a state Supreme Court. While in "Bloodchild" humans have no interest in parenting Tlic offspring, similar issues of power and exploitation are at the forefront.

Critical Overview

In 1982, early in Butler's career, black feminist scholar Francis Foster Smith summed up her critical reputation in *Extrapolation:* "Reviewers consider her a speculative fiction writer who is adequate, potentially outstanding, but at present neither particularly innovative nor interesting. However, Octavia Butler is not just another woman science fiction writer. Her major characters are black women, and through her characters and through the structure of her imagined social order, Butler consciously explores the impact of race and sex upon future society." Since then, Butler has apparently lived up to her potential. In 1995, the year that *Bloodchild and Other Stories* appeared, Butler won a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. Popularly known as the "genius" award, MacArthur Fellowships are awarded to artists and thinkers in all mediums who push the boundaries of their fields.

Butler is known primarily as a novelist and her formidable critical reputation has been won on the strength of her Patternist and Xenogenesis series books. ("The truth is, I hate short story writing," she admits in the introduction to *Bloodchild and Other Stories.*) But "Bloodchild" is Butler's most prize-winning piece of writing. When the story first appeared in 1984, it won science fiction's two most prestigious awards, the Hugo and the Nebula, signaling Butler's ascension in the male-dominated world of science fiction. It was also recognized for awards by two science fiction magazines, *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle Reader.* When *Bloodchild and Other Stories* was published more than a decade later, Butler had gained the attention of the mainstream literary establishment. The collection was widely and favorably reviewed, was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book, and was placed on the Teenager List by the New York Public Library.

Butler has often been lauded for creating strong but believable female characters. Academic critics have embraced her, especially those interested in race and gender. Despite the fact that "Bloodchild" focuses on a male protagonist and a male rite of passage, the story is similar to her novels in its focus on gender relations and themes of interdependence and empathy. Writing in *Ms.,* novelist Sherley Anne Williams describes the themes of "Bloodchild" in feminist terms: "The story explores the paradoxes of power and inequality, and starkly portrays the experience of a class who, like women throughout history, are valued for their reproductive activities." In her afterword to the story, Butler expresses surprise that some scholars have interpreted "Bloodchild" as being about slavery. Butler herself characterizes it as "a love story between two very different beings," "a coming of age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest or his life," and "a pregnant man story."

Butler's following among sci-fi fans has broadened to include readers who would not normally be interested in fantasy novels. Reviews in mainstream publications have exposed an increasingly wider audience to her work and there is some critical consensus that Butler's fiction transcends the genre of science fiction. In fact, since Butler has gained such prestige, criticisms of Butler tend come from within the sci-fi community from critics who see Butler's science fiction as too "soft"—that is, too

focused on delineating characters and exploring psychological and cultural issues to the exclusion of scientific plausibility and rigor. This is an accusation leveled against many of the female sci-fi writers who became visible in Butler's generation. However, the mainstream press has praised her writing for these same "soft" qualities. For example, in the *Literary Review,* Burton Raffel describes being compelled by the "rich dramatic textures, the profound psychological insights and the strong, challenging ideational matrices of virtually all of her books." "Bloodchild," like her strongest novels, has been highly praised as a serious literary study of character and of ideas. "Butler's imagination is strong—and so is her awareness of how to work real issues subtly into the text of her fiction.... Although the book is small in size, its ideas and aims are splendidly large," Janet St. John writes in her *Booklist* review of *Bloodchild and Other Stories.* Gerald Jonas of the *New York Times Book Review* praises the collection for "never ask[ing] easy questions or settl[ing] for easy answers" and for its power to "jar us into a new appreciation of familiar truths."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses some of the different models of dependence and exploitation in "Bloodchild" discussed by Butler in her afterword to the story.

"I tried to write a story about paying the rent - a story about an isolated colony of human beings in an inhabited, extrasolar world," Butler explains in her afterword to "Bloodchild." "Sooner or later, the humans would have to make some kind of accommodation with their um . . . their hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation." In "Bloodchild," Butler has created a compelling imaginative world where adolescent boys give over their bodies to carry the eggs of insect-like natives of a distant planet - this is the "unusual accommodation" to which Butler refers. Readers of the story, as well as characters within it, try to sort out the meaning of this extreme measure. In this essay I will look at several analogies for the arrangement between Terrans and Tlic, working toward an understanding of the story's unsettling psychological drama.

Perhaps because several of Butler's novels, *Kindred* and *Wild Seed,* deal explicitly with the historical institution of slavery, some people have interpreted "Bloodchild" as a parable about slavery, wherein the accommodation the Terrans make is to be the Tlics' slaves. Upon reading the story, one can see why slavery might come to mind, for Terrans like Gan must allow the more powerful Tlics to use their bodies, and Terran sacrifice leads to Tlic gain. Gan's brother, Qui, can be seen as the voice of this interpretation within the story. Despite the fact that he has not been chosen to incubate Tlic eggs himself, he deplores the social and biological arrangement between the Terrans and the Tlic. Qui tries to run away from the area of the Tlic planet set aside for Terrans, the Preserve, until he realizes, in Gan's words, that "there was no 'away'." The only place away from the Preserve is the Tlic society outside - which is, in Qui's eyes, the territory of his exploiters. Personally he feels trapped and, as a member of the human race, he feels exploited and dehumanized by the use of his kind for Tlic reproduction. Terrans, he argues, are nothing but animals to the Tlic.

However, the slavery interpretation is one to which Butler herself has objected. And upon careful thought, it does not really hold up. After all, Qui's experience with the Tlic is limited. It is the protagonist Gan who has been chosen to live outside of the Preserve with the Tlic T'Gatoi and to one day incubate her young, and it is he who dramatizes most fully the complexity of the humans' unusual accommodation. Gan sees T'Gatoi as a family member rather than a master. While Gan's experiences over the course of the story's actions cause him to question his role as an incubator, his initial bond to T'Gatoi survives the trauma and is transformed. With full knowledge and new maturity he consents to the implantation. If he were merely a slave, to be used as an animal, his consent would be irrelevant.

So if "Bloodchild" is not a story about slavery, how can we understand the strange power dynamic between the two species? Butler offers a series of clues. In her

afterword, she describes "Bloodchild" as "a love story between two very different beings," "a coming of age story" and a "pregnant man story." She then goes on to spend most of the short essay describing the habits of botflies. Botflies are parasites - animals that live on the body of another animal, called a host, from which they obtain the nutrients they needs to live. Botflies lay their eggs in the wounds left by other insect bites. When the eggs hatch and become maggots, these live on the flesh until they mature and are able to fly away. Once occupied by the botfly, a human host would be ill advised to squeeze the maggot out, for the maggot is so firmly attached to the flesh of its host that if it is removed, part of it stays behind and rots, leading to infection. Butler had spent time in Peru, where botflies are common, and the concept for "Bloodchild" grew out of her intolerable fear of them. The Tlic are botflies writ large.

Butler's afterword is fascinating, but also confusing. If "Bloodchild" is a love story, how can this be understood in relation to its inspiration - the disgusting habits of a reviled parasite? T'Gatoi and Gan do - as would characters in a conventional love story - love each other, face a crisis in their relationship, and transcend their difficulties, culminating in Gan's impregnation. However, the love Gan and T'Gatoi share is neither romantic nor sexual. T'Gatoi begins this "love story" as a mother, telling Lien to eat her eggs and chiding Gan that he is too skinny. However, there is a strange doubleness to these nurturing nudges - she wants Lien to eat the egg so that she will give up Gan with less protest, and she wants Gan to fatten up so that he can nourish her eggs on his blood. In a way she seems caring and giving; in another she seems menacing and self-serving. Here, the unsettling figure of the parasite comes to mind. Mothers nourish their families and parasites steal nourishment from their hosts. T'Gatoi does both.

T'Gatoi's need for human hosts can be defined as repulsive and exploitative only if she is conceptualized as different, alien. After all, babies occupy and are nourished by the bodies of their mothers (who are by definition of the same species) in a way that is analogous to how parasites occupy and are nourished by the bodies of their hosts (which are by definition of a different species). T'Gatoi occupies a paradoxical position as completely familiar and, at once, completely foreign. Butler's descriptions of T'Gatoi may evoke fear or disgust in the reader, who recognizes her as a giant insect, while they show that Gan sees her as simply part of the family. "One of my earliest memories is of my mother stretched alongside T'Gatoi, talking of things I could not understand, picking me up from the floor and laughing as she sat me on one of T'Gatoi's segments." T'Gatoi is characterized as something with *segments* - that is, totally inhuman - and, at once, to Gan, as a trusted aunt. While T'Gatoi's many-legged embraces are a testimony to her familiarity, her delivery of grubs renders her alien and thus fearsome. Gan's view of T'Gatoi changes when he witnesses Bram Lomas's alien "labor." The birth process is terrifying. Gan watches as T'Gatoi cuts into Lomas's flesh. He is horrified when he sees her bite the egg case in his abdomen and lick the dripping blood as she removes the grubs, fat and red with human blood. "The whole procedure was wrong, alien. I wouldn't have thought anything about her could seem alien to me." He fears her because he suddenly sees her as different from him.

Clearly the biological metaphor of parasitism, like the sociological metaphor of slavery, is too simple. Both slavery and parasitism are too one-way to describe the bonds and

dependencies between T'Gatoi and Gan. Returning to Butler's afterword, it is important to note that she does not say that "Bloodchild" is a story *about* parasitism, but rather writing the story was a way to ease her fear of them. "When I have to deal with something that disturbs me as much as the botfly did, I write about it. I sort out my problems by writing about them." "Bloodchild" may then be understood best as a love story, a coming of age story, a male pregnancy story, and a story about overcoming the fear of difference.

The story is resolved when Gan accepts the role of human host out of loyalty to his sister and also out of love for T'Gatoi. He recognizes her as an alien species, capable of cutting into a man's abdomen and licking his blood, but he also recognizes her as a part of a new improvised, adaptive kind of family that the two species have made together. Gan's father incubated T'Gatoi in his body and T'Gatoi in turn helped to raise Gan and to strengthen him with her eggs. Gan accepts her egg into his body as a continuation of this cycle. He makes this decision with a full knowledge of how she is different from him, and with a new mature love that accommodates this difference. Different beings need not have different interests. At the story's conclusion, two vastly different beings have seen their differences and have chosen each other anyway.

There is good reason make such a choice, Butler implies. In the climactic scene when Gan confronts T'Gatoi and threatens to kill himself rather than incubate her eggs, saying "I don't want to be a host animal," T'Gatoi reminds him that the relationship between their two species is mutually beneficial - *symbiotic* rather than parasitic. Terrans have saved the Tlic from extinction, she acknowledges, but the Tlic have also saved Terrans by sharing their planet with them. "[Y]our ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them - they survived because of us," Butler writes, referring to the divisive kinds of fear of difference that exist within human society. By asking him to incubate her eggs T'Gatoi is asking him to be a host, but by acknowledging Terrans as people and sharing their planet with them, the Tlic have already acted as hosts themselves. The word *host* has a social definition as well as a biological one. A host is an organism that harbors and nourishes a parasite, but it is also a person who entertains and provides for his or her guests. In "Bloodchild" Butler creates a world where the biological and social go hand in hand.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "An Unusual Accommodation" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Helford examines "Bloodchild" in terms of Butler's treatment of issues of gender, race, and species. Emphasis on the metaphoric impregnation of human males in "Bloodchild" makes the process of *gynesis* central to the story. In a 1986 article on Butler in *Ms.* magazine, Sherley Anne Williams reports that Butler "gleefully" describes "Bloodchild" as her "pregnant man story." Williams interprets the story as an exploration of "the paradoxes of power and inequality," as Butler portrays "the experience of a class who, like women throughout most of history, are valued chiefly for their reproductive capacities." I'd add that this "class" must be examined through issues of race and species as well as gender; however, Williams describes well the imaginative feminist space which makes the story so compelling a site for the study of *gynesis* in popular culture. Although human women tend to have more body fat - thus reducing their risk of damage or death at the bloodsucking mouths of the Tlic larvae - we learn that only men are "implanted." Human women are left to bear human children, especially sons for future Tlic usage and, at least superficially, human family bonding and happiness. Without such bonding, both species fear humans would become little more than pets or breeding stock.

One of the primary ways in which "Bloodchild" encourages a view of the Tlic power structure as a metaphor for human gender relations under patriarchy is through its depiction of men suffering the pains of childbearing (and when "birth" means removing grubs from around your internal organs, the pain can be intense). Even more powerful, however, is the suggestive complication of traditional gender roles during intercourse. Consider a description near the end of the story, as the young human male Gan recounts being drugged and "implanted" with T'Gatoi's eggs:

. . . I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of the ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine.

The image of the female penetrating the male and impregnating him clearly complicates the traditional gendering of sexual imagery. The undulating body of T'Gatoi, forcing the egg into Gan's body, recalls human intercourse from both female and male positions: T'Gatoi's action embodies both possession of the female egg and male penetration and ejaculation. To this is added a representation of acquaintance rape in Gan's passivity, despite his agreement to be implanted. This example of popular cultural *gynesis* invites consideration of the gender complexity of the "pregnant man" and the "impregnating woman."

My argument that representation can destabilize the re-encoding process, thereby providing readers with images (if not language) to reject limiting and misleading categories of identification, necessitates more intensive examination of these figures. For the metaphoric sex scene in "Bloodchild," the question of destabilization vs. replication becomes whether the "pregnant man" and "impregnating woman" enable

readers to reach beyond shock value to consider the scene a complication rather than a simple reversal of traditional gender types.

The image can be read as destabilizing primarily because neither character is clearly identifiable in terms of gender. When we look closely at the figure of the alien T'Gatoi, we see more than a reversal of gender roles. The Tlic's insect-like reproductive cycle (which I will also discuss in terms of species) complicates the gender absolutes of human culture. Tlic eggs are fertilized by the shortlived male of the species, then implanted by the female in a host body, in the kind of reversed sexual act described above. The female raises the infants when they are old enough to exist outside the host. Thus, T'Gatoi can be seen metaphorically to fill all biological and social parenting roles - leaving the Tlic male a less clearly identifiable role - or to problematize the ease with which we ascribe gender roles in terms of parenting at all.

This destabilization of *gynesis* is limited, however, by an emphasis typical in Butler's fiction: Biological roles necessarily lead to the construction of social roles. T'Gatoi is both the government official in charge of the Preserve (filing a dominant and more traditionally "masculine" role, in terms of metaphoric reference to human culture) and caretaker of the humans against other Tlic who wish to return humans to the status of domesticated animals (the role of caretaker illustrating a more traditionally "feminine" role). It may seem merely logical to assign T'Gatoi both "masculine" and "feminine" social roles and personality traits to echo the gender implications of her reproductive functions. However, the emphasis on this parallel within the story evokes a problematic biological essentialism, for the problematization of gender roles seen in the complexity of the reproductive cycle becomes reduced to a simpler and more limiting role reversal when paired with biological determinism. That is, the depiction of reproduction we see in the scene between T'Gatoi and Gan cannot help us to destabilize the construction of gender if social roles reinforce a view of (biological) sex as determinant of subjectivity. Female Tlic dominate in this alien culture; males fill a passive, primarily reproductive function. Through this reversal of traditional human gender roles under Western patriarchy, we see a biologically determined matriarchy whose hierarchical nature limits its effectiveness as a creative textual response to patriarchy. Ultimately, destabilizing social roles would be more effective if biology were not destiny in Tlic culture, regardless of whether it resulted in a patriarchy or a matriarchy.

Source: Elyce Rae Helford, "'Would You Really Rather Die Than Bear My Young?': The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's 'Bloodchild'," in *African American Review,* Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer, 1994, pp. 259-71.

Critical Essay #3

In the afterword to her story "Bloodchild," Butler discusses the source of her inspiration for the story and provides some valuable insight into its meaning.

It amazes me that some people have seen "Bloodchild" as a story of slavery. It isn't. It's a number of other things, though. On one level, it's a love story between two very different beings. On another, it's a coming-of-age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life.

On a third level, "Bloodchild" is my pregnant man story. I've always wanted to explore what it might be like for a man to be put in the most unlikely of all positions. Could I write a story in which a man chose to become pregnant *not* through some sort of misplaced competitiveness to prove that a man could do anything a woman could do, not because he was forced to, not even out of curiosity? I wanted to see whether I could write a dramatic story of a man becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties.

Also, "Bloodchild" was my effort to ease an old fear of mine. I was going to travel to the Peruvian Amazon to do research for my Xenogenesis books (*Dawn, Adulthood Rites,* and *Imago*), and I worried about my possible reactions to some of the insect life of the area. In particular, I worried about the botfly—an insect with, what seemed to me then, horror-movie habits. There was no shortage of botflies in the part of Peru that I intended to visit.

The botfly lays its eggs in wounds left by the bites of other insects. I found the idea of a maggot living and growing under my skin, eating my flesh as it grew, to be so intolerable, so terrifying that I didn't know how I could stand it if it happened to me. To make matters worse, all that I heard and read advised botfly victims not to try to get rid of their maggot passengers until they got back home to the United States and were able to go to a doctor—or until the fly finished the larval part of its growth cycle, crawled out of its host, and flew away.

The problem was to do what would seem to be the normal thing, to squeeze out the maggot and throw it away, was to invite infection. The maggot becomes literally attached to its host and leaves part of itself behind, broken off, if it's squeezed or cut out. Of course, the part left behind dies and rots, causing infection. Lovely.

When I have to deal with something that disturbs me as much as the botfly did, I write about it. I sort out my problems by writing about them. In a high school classroom on November 22, 1963, I remember grabbing a notebook and beginning to write my response to news of John Kennedy's assassination. Whether I write journal pages, an essay, a short story, or weave my problems into a novel, I find the writing helps me get through the trouble and get on with my life. Writing "Bloodchild" didn't make me like botflies, but for a while, it made them seem more interesting than horrifying.

There's one more thing I tried to do in "Bloodchild." I tried to write a story about paying the rent—a story about an isolated colony of human beings on an inhabited, extrasolar world. At best, they would be a lifetime away from reinforcements. It wouldn't be the British Empire in space, and it wouldn't be *Star Trek.* Sooner or later, the humans would have to make some kind of accommodation with their um . . . their hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation. Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a livable space on a world not our own?

Source: Octavia Butler, Afterword to "Bloodchild" in *Bloodchild and Other Stories,* Four Walls Eight Windows, 1985, pp. 30-32.

Topics for Further Study

Do you think that the Tlic's use of humans to incubate their eggs is moral? Find evidence from the story to support or criticize the morality of the arrangement described in "Bloodchild."

"Bloodchild" offers readers an imaginative scenario of male pregnancy set on another planet in the future. Here on earth, reproductive technology is advancing by leaps and bounds. Imagine that scientific advances made male pregnancy possible. How do you think that this would affect interactions between men and women? How would this change society? Do you think the changes would be positive or negative?

Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein* can be interpreted, like "Bloodchild," as being a story about reproduction gone awry. Compare themes of responsibility, sacrifice, fear and monstrosity in the two works.

Until the 1970s, when women writers rose to prominence, science fiction was dominated by men. Do some research about one or more of the writers who might have influenced or inspired Butler. What concerns does their writing share? Does their gender make a difference?

The United States continues to spend enormous amounts of money on its space program. Do some research about the experiments that are being performed by NASA and about its research objectives. How and when will this research render results that might affect the lives of common citizens? Specifically, are space colonies possible and are they desirable?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: A chemical test to determine whether life exists on Mars renders inconclusive results.

1990s: A meteorite from Mars is found in Antarctica that has structural features indicating the existence of microbes, providing evidence of life on Mars.

1980s: Developments in space technology make it possible for astronauts to spend more time in space. In 1982 the Soviets set an endurance record of 211 days in space. In 1984 the first untethered space walks are performed using rocket packs.

1990s: The Soviet Mir space station, where astronauts test long term effects of living in space, experiences technological problems and is phased out. A new space station is an international endeavor.

1980s: After the first "test-tube" baby, Louise Brown, was born in England in 1978, clinics are established worldwide for in vitro fertilization as a solution to infertility. Only about 200 test-tube babies have been born. The first successful embryo transfer and the first successful fetal surgery are performed.

1990s: Infertility is on the rise worldwide. An estimated 4.9 million married couples in the Unites States want to be parents but are unable to conceive. There are over 300 in vitro fertilization clinics in the country. They perform more than forty thousand procedures each year.

1980s: Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* becomes one of the most popular films in history. It portrays the special relationship between a sweet, gentle alien and a young boy.

1990s: *The X-Files,* a tongue in cheek thriller about a government plot to cover up evidence of an alien invasion, attains cult status. The TV show gains widespread popularity and is made into a major motion picture.

What Do I Read Next?

Dawn (1987), the first book of Octavia Butler's acclaimed Xenogenesis trilogy, takes place after a war on Earth has decimated the human race, making it necessary to engage in gene-swapping with an extraterrestrial race. The story centers on a heroic black woman and her biracial, half-alien offspring.

Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years (1995), edited by Pamela Sargent, offers a comprehensive collection of stories by the major women science fiction writers of the 1980s and 1990s.

Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex (1996), edited by Ellen Datlow, is a fascinating collection of science fiction short stories that take up the theme of sexual relations and relationships between humans and other species.

The Handmaid's Tale (1986), by acclaimed novelist Margaret Atwood, tells a gripping story of surrogate reproduction in a dystopian future where class and gender divisions are exaggerated rather than minimized.

Woman on the Edge of Time (1979), is a utopian sci-fi novel by Marge Piercy, who is known better as a poet and literary novelist. Piercy imagines a future where sex roles are fluid and where differences in gender and sexuality are divorced from power and exploitation, as well as from sexual reproduction.

Frankenstein (1818), by Mary Shelley, a classic novel that may be seen as a precursor to modern science fiction, was a bestseller in its own time. Shelley tells of Dr. Frankenstein's overreaching scientific imagination and of the monster he creates and then abandons.

Further Study

Donawerth, Jane. *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction,* Syracuse University Press, 1997.

An inquiry into female science fiction writers and the characters they create, focusing on utopian explorations of sex roles, the figure of the beautiful alien monster-woman, and stories written by women but narrated by male characters.

Lublin, Nancy. *Pandora's Box: Feminism Confronts Reproductive Technology,* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

A sophisticated approach to the cultural and political dilemmas raised by the host of new reproductive technologies of the last decades, including surrogate parents, infertility treatments, and fetal surgery. Readers interested in the relationship between technology, reproduction, and sex roles will find challenging food for thought.

McCafferty, Larry, editor. *Across the Wounded Galaxies,* University of Illinois Press, 1990.

A collection of in-depth interviews with many of the major figures in the science fiction world, along with informative introductions. An interview with Butler is included.

Sheehan, William. *Worlds in the Sky: Planetary Discovery from the Earliest Times through Voyager and Magellan,* University of Arizona Press, 1992.

A lively study combining science history with anecdotes about human's long fascination with the real and hypothesized worlds in outer space.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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