Kindred Study Guide

Kindred by Octavia E. Butler

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Introduction

Prior to the publication of her fourth novel, *Kindred,* Octavia Butler was primarily known only to fans of science fiction. While her first three novels—all part of the "Patternmaster" series— received favorable reviews, her work was marginalized as genre fiction. Since the 1979 publication of *Kindred,* however, Butler's work is known to a wider audience.

The novel focuses on many of the issues found in Butler's fiction: the abuse of power, the limits of traditional gender roles, and the repercussions of racial conflict. The science-fiction elements of the story are limited, however, to the unexplained mechanism that permits a twentieth-century African American woman to travel into the past. Each time Dana Franklin is drawn back into the early 1800s to save the life of her white ancestor, she learns more about the complex nature of slavery and the struggles of African Americans to survive it. The result is a powerful and accessible story that resembles a historical slave narrative—but one told from a modern perspective and in a modern voice.

Butler's exploration of this era has led many new readers to discover her work, from feminist critics to students of African American literature. These individuals have learned what fans of science fiction have long known: Butler crafts some of the most imaginative and thought-provoking fiction today. "In *Kindred,"* Robert Crossley wrote in his introduction to the novel, "Octavia Butler has designed her own underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader."

Author Biography

Butler was born in Pasadena, California, in 1947, and grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood. An only child, she was very young when her father died, and her mother worked as a maid to support the two of them. She was raised as a strict Baptist, a faith that forbade dancing or makeup. For solace and escape, she turned to reading. She became a fan of science fiction magazines; inspired by the possibilities of the genre, she was only twelve when she began writing the first version of what would eventually become her "Patternmaster" novels.

Butler received an associate's degree from Pasadena City College in 1968 and entered California State University in Los Angeles the following year. She left school, however, after discovering there was no creative writing major. She attended several workshops in the late 1960s, including the Writers Guild of America. There she met noted science-fiction writer Harlan Ellison, who became Butler's mentor and helped her gain admittance to the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop in 1970. The six-week course introduced her to several well-known writers.

She supported herself with the kinds of menial jobs that Dana Franklin describes in *Kindred.* In 1976 she published her first novel, *Patternmaster,* the first in a series of works describing a society whose members have developed telepathic powers over the course of centuries. Butler went on to publish five novels in this series.

While in the midst of exploring the "Patternmaster" universe, Butler began to write a novel examining the pain and fear African Americans had to live through in order to endure and succeed in American society. The resulting novel was *Kindred* (1979), a unique exploration of slavery as experienced through a modern woman's eyes.

Butler has been awarded several of science fiction's highest awards for her short fiction, including the Hugo and Nebula Awards. She continues to write science fiction, including the three-volume "Xenogenesis" series and two volumes in her "Earthseed" series. Her protagonists are usually women coming from a black or biracial background, which provides a different perspective to a field dominated by white males for many years.

Plot Summary

The River

On her twenty-sixth birthday, Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred,* is overcome by nausea and finds herself on the bank of a river. When she sees a young boy drowning in the river, she jumps in and saves him. She is shocked when the boy's father points a gun at her head; it is clear that he is suspicious of Dana, a young black woman. Suddenly, she finds herself back in her living room. Although she was by the river for minutes, she has been away from home for only a few seconds.

Traumatized by the event, she calms down and begins to recover her wits. Suddenly she finds herself next to the same boy, named Rufus, in a burning bedroom. As she saves him again, Dana realizes that Rufus is calling her when his life is in danger. She discovers that the year is 1815, and although he is a white, Southern slave-owner, he is the future father of the first woman listed in her family records□Hagar Weylin. The woman listed as Ha-gar's mother, Alice Greenwood, is a free black child and Rufus' friend. Dana realizes that she has just saved the life of her ancestor.

Dana decides to visit Alice, but ends up watching as patrollers drag Alice's father out and whip him. He is a slave, and has come to visit his family without permission. A patroller grabs Dana and tries to rape her. She hits him and returns to her life in 1976. When she shares her experiences with her husband, Kevin, he has a hard time believing her. He realizes that Dana can only come back to the present when her life is in danger.

The Fall

The next time that she begins to disappear, Kevin is pulled back in time too. They arrive in a clearing next to Rufus, now twelve years of age, who has a broken leg. Rufus' father, Tom Weylin, arrives. Kevin□a white man□invents a cover story to explain their presence, asserting that Dana is a literate slave whose job is to help him with his writing. Rufus insists on having Dana by his side in the sickroom, which leads to tension with his unstable mother, Margaret.

Dana makes friends with the other slaves and Tom hires Kevin to teach his son. They settle into a routine, until Dana becomes uncomfortable with how easy it is. She realizes that slavery is a mental degradation, not just a physical one. When Tom discovers her teaching slave children to read, he knocks her to the ground and beats her. Before Kevin can reach her, she is returned to 1976.

The Fight

After eight days Dana is dragged back to a clearing where Rufus is fighting for his life. He has attempted to rape Alice Greenwood, and her husband Isaac is beating him to death. When Dana intervenes, Isaac and Alice flee the scene. She and Rufus return to the house□a large, wealthy Maryland plantation□and she learns that Kevin has been gone for two years, and Margaret has left. Dana nurses Rufus back to health, and he mails a letter to Kevin for her.

Alice and Isaac are caught, and his ears are cut off before he is sold. Rufus buys Alice and brings her home near death. Dana nurses her back to health. There is still no word from Kevin, and Dana sends more letters. Rufus gives Dana a horrible ultimatum□either she makes Alice consent to having sex with him, or he will have her beaten into submission. Alice, weary and terrified, agrees.

Discovering that Rufus never sent any of her letters to Kevin, Dana escapes, but is caught and whipped. Tom sends for Kevin, and he arrives as Dana reaches her breaking point. Riding away, Rufus shoots at them, and they are dragged back to the present.

The Storm

Back in 1976, Kevin finds it impossible to adjust. Dana finds herself pulled back again. Rufus is very ill. Dana helps him recover, but is unable to help Tom when he collapses with a heart attack. Blaming her, Rufus sends her into the fields, and then pulls her back out to help his mother, now a laudanum addict.

Alice and Rufus have a child, Joe. She teaches Joe to read, and Rufus begins to love his son. Alice has a daughter, Hagar□Dana's ancestor. Dana agrees to help Alice escape as soon as Hagar is old enough. When Rufus sells a slave as a punishment for being too friendly with Dana she tries to stop him, but he punches her in the face. She slits her wrists and awakes in 1976.

The Rope

Fifteen days later, on the Fourth of July holiday, Dana is pulled back for the last time. She finds Rufus on the brink of suicide because Alice is dead. As a punishment for trying to run, Rufus moved their children to Baltimore, and told Alice that he'd sold them. Despairing, she took her own life.

After the funeral, tension mounts between Dana and Rufus, culminating in a confrontation in which he tries to rape her. She stabs him, and he dies clutching her. She is pulled back to the present with her arm crushed in the wall. Everything below her elbow□where Rufus grabbed her□is pulverized.

Epilogue

Dana recovers; she and Kevin discover that Weylin plantation was burnt to the ground the night Dana killed Rufus, and his death was attributed to the fire. The slaves were all sold. They realize that the murder was covered up, and accept that they will never know the rest.

Characters

Carrie

A mute slave, Carrie is a good friend to Dana. Most people believe that she is mentally impaired because of her handicap, but she is not. Carrie comforts Dana after Tom's death and explains that the slaves are better off under Rufus' ownership; if Rufus were dead, the slaves would be separated from their friends and families. She also comforts Dana when she is derided as being more white than black. Dana appreciates and values her friendship.

Jake Edwards

Jake Edwards is one of the overseers hired to manage the field hands. "It was amazing how much misery the man could cause doing the same job Luke had managed to do without hurting anybody," Dana observes. He forces Dana to do laundry by threatening her with a whipping.

Evan Fowler

Evan Fowler is the second overseer Dana encounters on the Weylin plantation. At first she believes that he is harmless, but his brutality proves that he is a cruel and unforgiving man.

Dana Franklin

An aspiring African-American writer, Dana Franklin is shocked when she is suddenly transported back into the past to save the life of her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin. Nothing in her life has prepared her for experiencing the South in the early nineteenth century. She witnesses the whipping of Alice Greenwood's father on her second visit, and the vivid sounds and smells make her realize that "I was probably less prepared for the reality [of violence] than the child crying not far from me."

As she later tells Kevin, "the more I think about it, the harder it is for me to believe I could survive even a few more trips to a place like that." She considers herself□a black woman□"the worst possible guardian" for Rufus, for "I would have all I could do to look after myself." She does not shrink from the task, however, because she knows her family's existence depends on her success. In addition, she thinks "I would ... maybe plant a few ideas in [Rufus'] mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come."

As her visits to the past become longer and more involved, Dana enjoys a privileged status in the Weylin household. She is disturbed by how easily she seems to acclimate

to her new role, but realizes that this is because most of the time she can act as an observer. As time goes on, however, she is drawn more deeply into the pain of slavery.

When Rufus convinces Dana to persuade Alice to sleep with him in order to avoid a beating, she wonders if she has become "submissive"□the "white nigger" Alice accuses her of being. Yet as Carrie reassures her, the black "doesn't come off."

Dana eventually comes to understand that she is like the other slaves. All of them "have to do things they don't like to stay alive and whole." In the end, however, Dana realizes that although it would be "so easy" to submit to Rufus' advances, "A slave was still a slave. Anything could be done to her." She is unable to submit, and kills Rufus. Although she returns to the present, she loses an arm on the journey: her escape, like everything else about her experience, has exacted a high cost.

Edana Franklin

See Dana Franklin

Kevin Franklin

Kevin is Dana's husband. He is an "unusual-looking white man, his face young, almost unlined, but his hair completely gray and his eyes so pale as to be almost colorless." His pale eyes make him "seem distant and angry whether he was or not," but he has a winning grin that "completely destroyed the effect of his eyes."

When Dana meets him at the temp agency, she enjoys his sense of humor, and recognizes that this fellow writer "was like me□a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying." After four months together Kevin proposes, and the two marry despite the objections of their families.

Kevin is a kind and thoughtful husband. After Dana's second trip into the past, although he has little understanding of what has happened to her, he prepares a survival kit and ties it to her waist while she is sleeping. When she begins to disappear a third time, he embraces her and is pulled back into the past as well. Although she knows she will be safer with him there, Dana fears what it will do to his mind: "I didn't want this place to touch him except through me."

There are signs that perhaps her fears are valid. Dana is upset by how easily they both seem to adjust to their new roles as slave and master, and how Kevin sometimes finds the idea of living in the past interesting. Kevin is not really suited to the past, as Sarah observes: "He'd get in trouble every now and then 'cause he couldn't tell the difference 'tween black and white." The five years he spends in the past scar him terribly.

When they finally return to the present, he seems colder, angrier, and more solitary. Nevertheless, while the long separations have not helped the couple's relationship, in some ways they have reinforced their sense of being kindred spirits. As Dana notes, "It

was easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences no one else would believe."

Alice Greenwood

Dana has already figured out that Alice Greenwood is her ancestor when she meets the child on her second trip to the past. Rufus considers Alice his friend, and notes that she is a free black, "born free like her mother." Alice obviously knows the pains of slavery, however, for her father is a slave on the Weylin plantation who is brutally whipped when he is discovered visiting his wife without a pass.

Dana does not meet her ancestor again until her fourth visit, when Isaac almost kills Rufus. Although Alice is furious over Rufus' attempt to rape her, she persuades Isaac not to kill him, knowing it would mean Isaac's death if he were captured. Instead she tries to escape with him.

Alice and Isaac are captured, however, and the penalty for helping him to escape is a beating, after which she is sold into slavery. Rufus buys her, paying twice the market price. Dana nurses her back to health and tells Alice the truth about what happened when she cannot remember it.

Alice and Dana become close friends. The two women look alike, and Rufus considers them two halves of one woman. Alice's "erratic" relationship with Dana is sister-like: "sometimes needing my friendship, trusting me with her dangerous longings for freedom; and sometimes hating me, blaming me for her trouble."

As the years pass, Alice becomes hard and bitter. She loses two of her first three children to illness, and the other slaves shun her because of her relationship with Rufus. After the birth of Hagar, Alice resolves to escape. Alice commits suicide after Rufus moves her children away.

Alice Jackson

See Alice Greenwood

Isaac Jackson

Isaac Jackson is Alice's husband. When he discovers Rufus trying to rape his wife, he beats him, which brings Dana into the past for the fourth time. After the incident, he and Alice attempt to escape. They are captured, however, and Isaac is sold after being beaten and mutilated.

Sam James

Sam James is a big, muscular slave who attempts to get Dana to dance with him at Christmas. She warns him not to speak to her after Rufus threatens to sell any slave she might want to "jump the broom" with. After Rufus allows Dana to teach some of the young slave children to read, Sam James asks her to teach his brother and sister as well. When Sam is sold three days later, Dana's anger with Rufus leads her to attempt suicide and return to the present.

Liza

Liza is a slave who is sent into the fields after Alice has healed enough from her beating to take her job. Her resentment of Alice□and by extension Dana, who healed Alice□leads her to betray Dana. Alice, Tess, and Carrie perceive this as a betrayal of the slave community, and beat her severely as a warning. "Now she's more scared of us than of Mister Tom," Alice says.

Luke

Luke is Nigel's father. Dana meets Luke after Rufus breaks his leg. He is the "driver" of the plantation, a type of black overseer whose job it is to manage the field hands. She learns later that Tom grew tired of his attitude and sold him.

Aunt Mary

Aunt Mary's job is to look after the children; unfortunately, she is senile. Yet people are more likely to rely on her knowledge of herbal medicine than on the white doctor.

Nigel

Nigel is a slave and Rufus' playmate. As an adult, he becomes a house slave□one with a privileged position. He grows into a big, handsome man like his father, with the same desire for freedom. After an attempt to run away, he is severely whipped.

Nigel has enough influence with Rufus to stand up to the overseer Jake Edwards. After he marries Carrie and starts a family with her, the Weylins feel assured that Nigel will not make another attempt to run away. He still dreams of freedom, however. As he tells Dana, "It's good to have children.... But it's so hard to see them be slaves."

Sarah

Sarah is the plantation cook. She is kind and patient with Dana and is fond of Rufus. Nevertheless, she resents him for selling away most of her children. She does not trust

whites, for she learned from her first master□the father of her first child□that even promises made in love are "just another lie."

Sarah is outspoken and opinionated. After Luke is sold, however, Sarah appears more cautious. "She had done the safe thing□accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid." Dana comes to appreciate the warnings and wisdom Sarah shares with her.

Tess

Tess is a young slave Dana meets on her fourth trip into the past. Dana helps Tess with her work because Tom injured her during a sexual experience. Tess loses her laundry job after Tom discards her, leaving her to the attentions of Jake Edwards. Edwards sends her to the fields so he can keep watch over her. Eventually she is sold. Her experiences exemplify the inhuman conditions slaves face. As Tess says, "You do everything they tell you ... and they still treat you like an old dog."

Doctor West

Doctor West is the Weylin family doctor. He is "pompous, condescending, and almost as ignorant medically as I was," as Dana describes him. His use of such methods as bleeding and purging, despite his good intentions, is harmful to his patients. Doctor West serves as another reminder to Dana that she is living in a very different age from her own.

Joe Weylin

Joe is the oldest surviving child of Alice Greenwood and Rufus Weylin. Initially a sickly child, he is also lively and bright. He is a good student and excels at his lessons. Rufus gradually comes to recognize his son, allowing him to call him "Daddy" after Alice's death.

Margaret Weylin

Margaret Weylin is the second wife of Tom Weylin. At first, she is ignorant and mean-spirited. Margaret hates Dana not only because she is an educated black but also because she is jealous that Dana has both Kevin's and Rufus' favor. Dana comes to understand that a great part of Margaret's problem is boredom□she has nothing to occupy her time, and so spends it supervising and criticizing people in order to prove her worth.

After giving birth to stillborn twin boys, Margaret has a mental breakdown and is sent to stay with her sister in Baltimore. Rufus brings her back to the plantation after his father's death and asks Dana to care for her. While Margaret still insists on having things a

certain way, she is calmer and introspective. Dana and Margaret eventually become friends.

Rufus Weylin

Dana finds Rufus a complex and contrary figure. He is an oddly appealing child, accepting of Dana and adventurous enough to help her escape on her second visit. Even as a boy, Rufus shows signs of a cold, possessive temper. When Margaret interrupts Dana, he berates her, just as his father Tom does: "His mouth was drawn into a thin straight line and his eyes were coldly hostile." As an adult, he tends to drink too much and will "pick a fight just out of meanness."

Rufus loves his childhood friend Alice, but it is a "destructive single-minded love" that is more about power than love. After she marries Isaac, Rufus attempts to rape her—an act that ironically leads to his purchase of Alice and the sale of her husband. He is "erratic, alternately generous and vicious," but Dana does not quite believe Sarah's warning that Rufus "says what will make you feel good—not what's true"; that is, until she discovers he has lied about sending her letters to Kevin. "I kept thinking I knew him, and he kept proving to me that I didn't."

Somehow Dana is able to forgive him for his possessiveness and cruelty. She recognizes that his behavior comes from pain, anger, or fear. His attempt to replace Alice with Dana, however, is the last straw for her. "I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover."

Tom Weylin

Initially, Dana finds Tom Weylin a brutal and fearsome figure. He beats his son, Rufus; moreover, when his son breaks his leg his only concern seems to be what it will cost him. He shows no hesitation in whipping slaves and has no qualms about separating slave families.

Tom sometimes demonstrates a sense of fairness and gratitude. He allows Dana to choose whether to stay on the plantation or search for Kevin after her fourth arrival. He gives Dana a whipping after she makes an escape attempt, but "he didn't hurt you nearly as much as he's hurt others," Rufus tells her. After he discovers that Rufus broke his promise to let Kevin know of Dana's arrival, he sends word himself.

"Daddy's the only man I know," says Rufus, "who cares as much about giving his word to a black as to a white." As Dana comes to understand, Tom Weylin "wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper."

Themes

Human Condition

As Dana soon discovers, the reality of slavery is even more disturbing than its portrayal in books, movies, and television programs. Before her journey into the past, Dana called the temp agency where she worked a "slave market," even though "the people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered."

This turns out to be an ironic contrast to life at the Weylin plantation, where a slave who visits his wife without his master's permission is brutally whipped. Perhaps a more painful realization for Dana is how this cruel treatment oppresses the mind. "Slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships," she notes, for all the slaves feel the same strange combination of fear, contempt, and affection toward Rufus that she does.

At first she has difficulty comprehending Sarah's patience with a master who has sold off three of her children. Likewise, she observes that Isaac Greenwood "was like Sarah, holding himself back, not killing in spite of anger I could only imagine. A lifetime of conditioning could be overcome, but not easily."

"After being beaten following her attempt to run away, however, Dana is tormented by doubts about her own resistance: "Why was I so frightened now□frightened sick at the thought that sooner or later, I would have to run again? ... I tried to get away from my thoughts, but they still came. *See how easily slaves are made?* they said."

In the end, however, Dana realizes that she cannot bring herself to accept slavery, even to a man who would not physically hurt her. "A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her," Dana thinks as she sinks the knife into Rufus' side.

Choices and Consequences

The whole reason behind Dana's travels into the past is survival. Dana finds herself driven to save Rufus not just to ensure his existence but also that of her whole family. Despite her modern education, Dana doubts that she has the strength and endurance that her ancestors had: "To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could," she tells Kevin.

On her second trip to the past, her squeamish-ness keeps her from defending herself from a patroller. The next time, however, she is ready to maim to escape: "I could do it now. I could do anything." Nevertheless, she finds it ironic that her job is to protect a white man: "I was the worst possible guardian for him□a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children."

Despite her doubts, she manages to save Rufus on several different occasions, and learns more about survival in the process. As she listens to the field hands talking in the cookhouse and observes the other house slaves, she gains information: "Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive."

The drive for survival is very strong, and for slaves this means making many painful choices. "Mama said she'd rather be dead than be a slave," Alice recalls, but Dana disagrees: "Better to stay alive.... At least while there's a chance to get free." Because she thinks she will have a better chance of survival if she befriends the Weylins, she accepts the role of slave during her stay on the plantation. As long as this is her choice and she still has some semblance of control over her life, she finds she can endure more than she ever anticipated.

Accepting this role, however, means that Dana must make some very painful choices. For instance, she agrees to convince Alice to sleep with Rufus willingly because she does not want to see her suffer another beating. She is a quiet and compliant worker, even though this makes the other slaves look at her suspiciously. As she explains to Sam, the field hands "aren't the only ones who have to do things they don't like to stay alive and whole." It is only when Rufus tries to take away the final bit of control she has□control over her body□that Dana kills him.

Appearances and Reality

The strange nature of their time travels causes Dana and Kevin to examine how much their perceptions truly reflect reality. When Dana returns from her first visit, Kevin has difficulty accepting her explanation of where she has been. Yet he has no alternate explanation for her sudden disappearance. "I know what I saw, and what I did□my facts," Dana tells him. "They're no crazier than yours."

After Dana's second trip, however, Kevin admits, "I wouldn't dare act as though I didn't believe. After all, when you vanish from here, you must go someplace." That he finally gets proof when he accompanies Dana on one of these trips does not lessen his point: to communicate with others, sometimes you must accept their perceptions of reality□no matter how strange□as valid.

While Dana and Kevin are living together in the past, they discover another aspect of the connection between appearances and reality: sometimes when you fake an appearance, it begins to feel like reality. At first, Dana is only "pretending" to play the part of a slave, one who sleeps with her master because she has no choice. Although she knows in her heart that she and Kevin are married equals, she nevertheless feels strange when she sneaks in his room: "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner."

Later she realizes that she cannot continue to be just a modern observer playing the "role" of slave. She becomes involved: she quietly teaches Nigel to read, befriends

Carrie and Alice, and plans her escape after being beaten. In the end she cannot fully accept the reality of life as a slave, however, and leaves the past by killing Rufus.

Difference

As a modern woman living in the past, Dana is different in experience and perspective from everyone around her. She is bound to feel alienated because she is so out of place. Ironically, however, it may be a shared sense of alienation that attracts her to others. When she wonders why she is drawn into the past to save Rufus, for instance, she thinks that their blood relationship does not quite explain it: "What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from being related."

Her relationship with Kevin is based on a similar sense of shared difference. When they first meet, Dana thinks he "was as lonely and out of place as I was." As she gets to know him, she understands that this loneliness makes him "like me□ a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying." On the plantation, Dana's closest friends are people who are similarly alienated from the slave community: Carrie because of her muteness, and Alice because of her role as Rufus' mistress.

Returning home does not cure Dana and Kevin of feeling out of place; it takes them a while to readjust to the twentieth century. Again, however, this alienation brings them together: "It was easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences no one else would believe."

Style

Narrator/Point of View

Kindred uses a first-person narrator, which means that Dana is telling her story from her own perspective. She relates her own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences. Other characters□such as Rufus, Alice, and Kevin□are known to the reader only through her perceptions of them.

An advantage of first-person narration is that the reader can really identify with Dana. In addition, much of the plot is comprised of Dana's attempts to understand the society and the people of the past. Her perspective is paramount; in fact, if the reader did not know her thoughts and feelings, it could be difficult to perceive this type of "action."

Another important advantage of a first-person narrator is that it makes the story resemble the historical slave narratives of the past. In creating her own version of the slave narrative, Dana is echoing and extending these historical stories.

Flashback

A flashback is a literary device used to relate events that occurred before the beginning of the story. After a brief prologue, the main action of the story begins with Dana's first journey back into the past. The first two chapters are used to reveal the basic plot of the novel: Dana is being called back in time to rescue her ancestor.

The third and fourth chapters, however, open with a flashback to Dana and Kevin's courtship. This helps flesh out Kevin's character, as well as Dana and Kevin's relationship. This added depth is essential for the reader to understand their devotion to each other. Butler could have presented this information chronologically by describing the courtship at the very beginning of the novel. By presenting it in flashbacks, Butler can focus the opening on Dana's adventure and is thus able to immediately draw the reader into the action of the book.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary device used to hint at future events before they actually happen. In *Kindred,* the prologue actually takes place after the main action of the story, and thus provides the reader with a glimpse of the result of Dana's travels. "I lost an arm on my last trip home," Dana recalls in the first sentence of the novel. Her conversation with Kevin also reveals that the truth of what has happened to her is unbelievable.

This prologue prepares reader for two things: first, that Dana is about to recount events that are strange and unexplainable; second, it alerts readers that Dana's experience will involve serious violence that will permanently scar her.

Denouement

Sometimes called falling action, the *denouement* refers to the resolution of a story's conflict. *(Denouement* is a French word which means "the unknotting.") The *denouement* follows the climax of the conflict and traditionally provides a resolution to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. This outcome does not always have to consist of a physical action; it can also involve a character's recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition.

The *denouement* of *Kindred* does not strictly fit this definition, however. There is a resolution, for Dana returns to the present after her fight with Rufus, ending the essential conflict of the novel. Yet many secondary questions are never resolved. How was Dana pulled into the past in the first place? Why and how did she lose an arm on her last trip? What happened to Rufus and Alice's children□were they sold or freed?

Dana's search for answers at the end of the novel yields nothing. Critic Robert Crossley has suggested that this open-ended *denouement* serves a specific purpose. "Leaving the novel's ending rough-edged and raw like Dana's wound," he wrote in the introduction to the novel, "Butler leaves the reader uneasy and disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than comforted by a tale that 'makes sense.'"

Science Fiction

While Butler maintained that *Kindred* is not really science fiction□there is no scientific explanation for Dana's voyages to the past□the time travel story is a staple of the genre. The first novel by English writer H. G. Wells, long considered one of the fathers of science fiction (along with Frenchman Jules Verne), was *The Time Machine* (1895).

Wells also used the device of time travel to dramatize human inequalities. Journeying into the distant future, Wells' traveler encounters two races, the Eloi and the Morlocks. The relationship between the pleasure-loving Eloi and the subterranean Morlocks serves as an ironic comment on the conflict between ruling and working classes of the late-nineteenth century's newly industrialized society.

In *Kindred* it is never explained *how* Dana is transported into the past, or why her arm should be severed upon her final return. While the novel contains elements of science fiction, it also works from the tradition of the slave narrative and the historical novel. As Crossley concluded, "Butler's novel is an experiment that resists easy classification by blurring the usual boundaries of genre."

Historical Context

The Missouri Compromise

The Missouri Compromise marked the first serious debate over the status of slavery in the growing United States, and provides an interesting look at how slavery was perceived at the time. In 1819 the territory of Missouri applied for admission to the Union. During the review process, Representative James Tallmadge of New York added an amendment that would outlaw slavery in Missouri. The House and Senate were divided over the amendment.

Eventually a compromise was reached: Missouri would be admitted as a slave state; Maine would be admitted as a free state; and slavery would be prohibited in the remaining portions of the Louisiana territory north of latitude 36 degrees 30 minutes north.

The debate over slavery was an important turning point in American history. Not because Northerners wanted to eliminate slavery□they were more concerned with limiting it than with eradicating it. Instead, it was the Southern attitude that showed a marked change from previous debates on the issue. In previous years, Southerners were defensive about the institution, and seemed only to tolerate it as a necessary evil.

However, during the debate over the Missouri Compromise, Southerners began to justify and even glorify slavery as a moral system. Attacks on it were considered attacks on the South itself. Attempts to limit slavery were similarly considered attacks on the sovereignty of Southern states.

The Missouri Compromise eased the tensions created by the slavery issue for several years, and set a precedent for further political settlements. Yet it wasn't long before the United States entered into a bloody Civil War.

Rebels and Abolitionists

Several highly publicized slave rebellions in the early nineteenth century reinforced the resolve of Southern slave owners to protect the institution of slavery. While there had been a few slave revolts in the 1700s, the largest occurred in the years just before the events of *Kindred.* In 1800, a revolt by more than one thousand slaves in Virginia was delayed by rainstorms; the leaders were captured before the revolt could be continued.

The largest U. S. slave rebellion occurred in 1811 in Louisiana, when some three to five hundred slaves marched from plantation to plantation gathering recruits and weapons. The rebellion ended when the slaves, led by freeman Charles Deslondes, encountered militia and U.S. military troops.

Another rebellion, which is mentioned in *Kindred* as one that frightened many slave owners, was the 1822 insurrection planned by Denmark Vesey. A former slave who bought his freedom with lottery winnings, Vesey and nine thousand recruits planned to invade Charleston, South Carolina. Vesey's plans were betrayed, however, and he was captured and hanged before his plans could be carried out.

In *Kindred,* Kevin Franklin mentions that he was suspected of helping slaves to escape. Both whites and free blacks were involved in the Underground Railroad in the 1810s and 1820s, helping slaves to escape north. Nevertheless, the abolitionist movement□the drive to eliminate slavery completely□did not really get off the ground until the 1830s.

Most historians date the beginning of abolitionism to 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his journal *The Liberator.* Before this time, most opponents of slavery proposed moderate solutions, such as compensating slave owners for emancipation or the emigration of free blacks to Africa. Garrison's journal, however, advocated immediate eradication of slavery everywhere in the United States. The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833, and was an important voice in the debates over slavery that led up to the Civil War.

Black Power and Black Pride

The "Black Power" movement of the late 1960s and 1970s grew out of the movement for civil rights. As efforts to integrate America were slow to progress, some African Americans came to believe that working within the white-dominated system was not an effective way to achieve their goals. Black Power advocates believed that blacks should celebrate their own heritage and culture. They should not depend on whites to help change the system, but should instead rely on their own communities for political and economic success.

Sometimes the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement was angry and polemic. For instance, many advocates believed that no whites were to be trusted. African Americans□often of older generations□who supported working within the system were often accused of being collaborators. It was this atmosphere of mistrust between different activist camps that was one of Butler's inspirations in writing *Kindred.*

There were groups within the Black Power movement, however, that were less radical and more willing to work within the system to affect political and social change. Their promotion of "Black Pride" led to an increased visibility of African American heritage and culture. In the 1970s African Americans had a growing influence on television, movies, and literature.

The most notable of these successes was the 1977 television miniseries *Roots.* Based on the novel by Alex Haley, this eight-part saga of one African American family captivated nearly 130 million viewers and spawned a new interest in genealogy (the

study of family history). Thousands of Americans were inspired to research their own family backgrounds□just as Dana Franklin had to do to survive in Butler's novel.

Critical Overview

Although Butler's *Kindred* was only her fourth novel, published a mere three years after her 1976 debut, it did not take long for critics to praise its unusual qualities. In an early review of the novel, Joanna Russ asserted in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* that *"Kindred* is more polished than [Butler's] earlier work but still has the author's stubborn, idiosyncratic gift for realism." In particular, Russ hailed how the author "makes new and eloquent use" of the time-travel idea, and pointed out her skilled characterizations and fast-paced style.

While *Fantasy Review* contributor John R. Pfeiffer deemed *Kindred* a novel "of such special excellence that critical appreciation of [it] will take several years to assemble," such in-depth analyses soon followed.

In 1982 Beverly Friend examined how the time-travel plot of the novel served to highlight important feminist issues. "No one would intellectually argue against the proposition that life is better today for both men and women," the critic wrote in *Extrapolation,* "but few realize what ... [this novel has] didactically presented: that contemporary woman is not educated to survive, that she is as helpless, perhaps even more helpless, than her predecessors."

Subsequent analyses of *Kindred* have explored how Dana's experiences as a twentieth-century writer and nineteenth-century slave have illuminated issues of sex, race, and history. Margaret Anne O'Connor, for instance, observed that it is not just the stark contrasts between Dana's two lives that are educational, but also the parallels: "Slowly [Dana and Kevin] also come to see the situations of virtual slavery in their own technological, twentieth-century culture," the author wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* "Drawing an analogy between power relationships of the early nineteenth century and the home, office, and bedroom of contemporary America, *Kindred* offers readers a chance to evaluate the racial and sexual dimensions of both cultures."

Dana's experiences also allow her insight into the power that has allowed black women supposedly powerless in a sexist and racist society to persevere. According to Thelma J. Shinn, Dana learns to survive the travails of slavery by learning from black female mentors such as Sarah, an archetypal figure Shinn called "the wise witch." As the critic stated in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition, "Kindred* shows that Butler's wise witches, her compassionate teachers armed with knives and cast-iron skillets, have survived and will survive, whether or not they are accepted by their society."

Not only does *Kindred* emphasize the power of those who are oppressed, it also reclaims history from the dominant culture, according to Adam McKible. In a 1994 *African American Review* article, the critic argued that *Kindred,* like other tales of African American women enduring slavery, forces the reader to reassess historical "truth" just by making a black woman the heroine. As a result, "the perspective of the black female

slave, who finds herself at the bottom of the hierarchies of race, class, and gender ... can in fact become a powerful site of rebellion and self-assertion."

In addition, McKible underscored the way in which names can similarly become symbols of resistance. *In Kindred,* not only does Alice name her children after biblical survivors of slavery, but the protagonist asserts control by choosing to call herself Dana rather than Edana. Thus names "are crystallizations□constant reminders□of resistance and the will to freedom," according to McKible.

The analysis that *Kindred* attracts, even twenty years after its publication, seems to justify Robert Crossley's belief that "if any contemporary writer is likely to redraw science fiction's cultural boundaries and to attract new black readers□and perhaps writers□to this most distinctive of twentieth-century genres, it is Octavia Butler. More consistently than any other black author, she has deployed the genre's conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them, stories that speak to issues, feelings, and historical truths arising out of Afro-American experience."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd is a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay, she perceives Kindred *as a dark allegory exploring the impossibility of racial and sexual equality in the United States.*

After she has returned from her first trip into the antebellum South, Dana says to her husband, "I don't have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don't feel safe anymore." The "thing that has happened to her" is history—as it is understood both literally and metaphorically.

On one level, *Kindred* is about literal history— early nineteenth-century life as seen by the protagonist through time travel. Dana is transported into this world by a violent process that has clear parallels to the seizure and transportation of slaves from Africa. The destabilizing experience of the past will cause her to lose an arm because of a problem with the physical act of time travel.

On a deeper level, the history that has "happened to her" is a metaphor; a figurative representation of the cultural meaning and construction of gender and race in her society. In this reading, Dana's time travel is symbolic of memory—a literalized version of one woman's reminder of the inequitable basis of the culture and marriage in which she considers herself an equal. In its metaphoric interpretation, the loss of her limb therefore signifies something much stronger and darker. It acts as a powerful comment on the sacrifices that black Americans, especially black female Americans, have to make in order to coexist in a hostile world.

Dana and her husband Kevin live in an intellectual world that enables them to avoid discussing race and class. Their relationship is based on the careful exclusion of voices that threaten to disrupt this veneer, exemplified by their marriage ceremony. Confronted by hostile and betrayed families, Dana and Kevin marry alone in Las Vegas. A coworker has left them a present when they return—"a blender." In these few sentences we can see a perfect encapsulation of the themes of repressed memory that run throughout Butler's novel.

Their decision to marry without the presence of their families stands for the cultural amnesia that is forced upon mixed race couples. Their literal ties to history—the older generations—must be cut off from the experience. At the same time, this rejection inevitably takes on a symbolic quality, forced by interpretations like that of Dana's uncle, who sees the marriage as a rejection of personal, social and racial identity.

Both excluded as well as voluntarily removed from her own cultural history, Dana gets married in Las Vegas. The choice of cities is significant. Las Vegas is the most modern of modern American cities, a place with no memories. Having married in a place without history, in a ceremony that excludes their familial roots, and in a relationship that optimistically ignores cultural history, Kevin and Dana return home.

Dana narrates without comment that they were greeted by a blender from her best friend and a check from the *Atlantic Monthly.* These objects suggest the uneasy balance of hope and pessimism that remains unresolved at the close of the novel. Dana has her check—her long awaited professional reward and acceptance. At the same time she has a blender—a physical symbol of her expected duties as a wife, as well as a slur on her racially "blended" marriage. She and Kevin settle into their marriage with history purged from everything but the bookshelves.

The trips to Maryland represent a forceful awakening for both of them, but especially for Dana. As she is drawn further and further into a life of slavery, the parallels between the 1800s and the 1970s provide a subtle reevaluation of her relationship to Kevin, irrevocably revealing the cultural history attached to the hierarchic relationship between men and women, and blacks and whites.

In order to make this possible, Butler first enacts a series of skillful defamiliarizations. For Dana as well as the reader, the historical and cultural concept of slavery must be stripped of its modern associations before it can be investigated more closely.

In the process of telling Dana's story, *Kindred* "unpacks" the metaphorization of enslavement in twentieth-century culture. The narrative records the ways in which slavery is used to stand in for any number of exploitative situations, such as the temporary agency, of which Dana says, "we regulars called it the Slave Market."

The narrator's description of her entrance into the Weylin compound marks an authorial attempt to defamiliarize the history of slavery, confounding Dana's expectations of the reality of slave life by shaking it out of its filmic and televisual representations. Dana and Kevin have a shelf-full of books on the subject and a close historical knowledge. Most importantly, they have absorbed the iconography of slavery—the visual and narrative conventions that are used to convey the American slavery story, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* to *Gone With The Wind, Mandingo,* and *Roots.* It is this iconography which must be undermined in order for serious critique to occur.

Roland Barthes's analysis of the Hollywood version of ancient Rome suggests that directors rely on three things to instantly create the illusion of classical life—the Caesar haircut, togas, and a pair of sandals. As he points out, during the heyday of these films, American audiences were happy to believe that any actor looked authentically Roman so long as this visual shorthand was in place.

Dana experiences a powerful lesson on the inadequacy of such shorthand. Traveling to the Weylin house, she is continually shocked by the reality of life in the antebellum South. She had expected horrors, and to a certain extent prepared for them as soon as she realized what was happening. Instead, she is shocked by the *lack* of horror—by the mundane, relatively benign situation that she thinks she sees around her. None of her visual expectations were correct. As she says:

I looked around for a white overseer and was surprised not to see one. The Weylin house surprised me too when I saw it in daylight. It wasn't white. It had no columns, no porch to speak of. I was almost disappointed.

Before Dana can learn the *true* nature of brutality she must unlearn what she thinks she knows about it. She must learn instead that the first and worst impact of enslavement is in the mind, and that it is this enslavement which makes the rest possible.

This in turn enables a major part of the problematizing impact that the past has on Dana and Kevin's present. If slavery is more than just chains and whippings, if it is greater than legal rights and physical emancipation, then the possibility must exist that Dana and Kevin are not entirely free from the legacy of mental enslavement□Kevin as master, Dana as chattel. The most terrifying thing for both of them is not the alienating unfamiliarity of the antebellum South, but its comfortable familiarity. As they are transported back to Maryland they are both horrified to realize that they are relieved. It feels like going home.

The familiarity of Maryland only compounds the suggestion that Dana is still trapped in mental slavery, a suggestion signaled throughout *Kindred* by the parallels between the heroine and the female slaves. Her apparent compliance with the Weylins causes the field workers to compare her to Sarah□ the "Mammy" of the novel□on a constant basis.

On a basic level, punishment and fear make her reconsider the distance that separates her from her 1800s counterparts. Perhaps most powerfully, the blood relationship that Dana has with Alice cements the metaphoric linkage between the two time periods, Alice becoming not so much Dana's forbear as she is her alternate self. Dana's trips to the past can thus be read as an interrogation of a symbolized version of her life. As Rufus Weylin says when he looks at the two women:

Behold the woman ... You really are only one woman. Did you know that?

The parallels between life in the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries are not confined to race. Gender distinctions figure as an even greater boundary□cutting across race lines and enabling comparisons between otherwise very disparate groups. Alice, it seems, is not so different from Margaret Weylin, who is herself trapped in a period and place when "women were considered as children."

Like the slave girl who betrays Dana's escape to Tom Weylin, Margaret is caught in a horrible trap forged of self-protection, love, dependency and powerlessness. Margaret viciously defends her roles of wife, mother, and mistress because they are the only careers available to her, just as the looming specter of being sent into the fields, or sold down the river, ensures that the house slaves are unwary and distrustful, their well-being dependent on the bad luck of others.

As Butler's novel makes clear, gender, race, and social class form an intertwined set of prescriptive circumstances that cannot be separated from each other, and the lessons that Dana learns are not confined to those of race. A series of encounters, leading on from Rufus' bewildered exclamation, "But you can't be married!" hammer the point

home. Sarah tries to understand Dana and Kevin's relationship to one another, and assumes it was like hers with her "husband"□an owner and lover who beat her. Margaret meets her outside Kevin's room and accuses her of being a whore. When Tom Weylin sees her, he winks in acknowledgment. This all just is business as usual.

Refusing to use slavery as a metaphor for marriage□a rhetorical technique common in some white feminist writing of the seventies□Butler illustrates the very real function of marriage as a constitutive part of the working dynamics of oppression. As all of the slaves and owners know, marriage ensures that a slave will not run away by promoting bonds of affection and family that ties them to the land. Having established this, the structure of the novel allows a metacommentary on the legacy of that race-gender/marriage-control dynamic in Kevin and Dan's marriage.

Kevin's cover story for the Weylins is that Dana is his slave□a literate black woman that works as his secretary. Too close to the truth of their situation, his story is symptomatic of his in-sensitivity to the injustices of American culture. A few pages later this is compounded when he expresses a wish to "go west" and Dana has to remind him about the existence of Native Americans.

Though the possible implications of his historical blindness and his cover story are clear, their meaning becomes shocking when Dana returns to 1976. As at the beginning of every section, their past is intercut with the immediate past of the narrator, foreshadowing and being commented upon the history sections. This time, the flashback is to Kevin's proposal. Without interpretive comment, Dana describes a relationship of need and economic necessity as well as love. She was broke and unemployed, and in this context Kevin offered to marry her. Putting the job and the marriage in one package, he concluded his proposal with the words, "I'd let you type all my manuscripts."

Dana's history is the forced remembering of the discriminatory thinking that lies behind Kevin's innocuous marriage proposal. History is the silence in Kevin and Dana's marriage□the power issues that they cannot talk about. They may love each other, but, as her amputated arm shows, if they fail to respect the reality of the power issues that divide them they run the risk of destroying themselves.

Source: Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Crossley examines Kindred *as a "new slave narrative, " a work that could no longer be written from personal experience and would instead require a narrative technique which allows a modern-day person to travel back in time, as Dana does in the novel. Crossley concludes that* Kindred, *"like all good works of fiction, ... lies like the truth."*

The American slave narrative is a literary form whose historical boundaries are firmly marked. While first-person narratives about oppression and exclusion will persist as long as racism persists, slave narratives ceased to be written when the last American citizen who had lived under institutionalized slavery died. The only way in which a new slave-memoir could be written is if someone were able to travel into the past, become a slave, and return to tell the story. Because the laws of physics, such as we know them, preclude traveling backwards in time, such a book would have to be a hybrid of autobiographical narrative and scientific fantasy. That is exactly the sort of book Octavia Butler imagined when she wrote *Kindred,* first published in 1979. Like all good works of fiction, it lies like the truth.

Kindred begins and ends in mystery. On June 9, 1976, her twenty-sixth birthday, Edana, a black woman moving with her white husband Kevin Franklin to a new house in a Los Angeles suburb, is overcome by nausea while unpacking cartons. Abruptly she finds herself kneeling on a riverbank; hearing a child's screams, she runs into the river to save him, applies artificial respiration, and as the boy begins breathing again she looks up into a rifle barrel. Again she sickens and is once more in her new house, but now she is soaked and covered in mud. This is the first several such episodes of varying duration which make up the bulk of the novel. Sometimes Dana (the shortened form of her name she prefers) is transported alone, sometimes with Kevin; but the dizzy spells that immediately precede her movements occur without warning and she can induce her return to Los Angeles only at the hazard of her life. To her horror Dana discovers during a second and longer episode of disorientation that she is moving not simply through space but through time as well□to antebellum Maryland, to the plantation of a slave owner who is her own distant (though not nearly distant enough) ancestor. These trips, like convulsive memories dislocating her in time, occupy only a few minutes or hours of her life in 1976, but her stay in the alternative time is stretched as she lives out an imposed remembrance of things past. Because of this dual time level a brief absence from Los Angeles may result in months spent on the Maryland plantation, observing and suffering the backbreaking field work, persistent verbal abuse, whippings, and other daily cruelties of enslavement. Eventually Dana realizes that Rufus Weylin, the child she first rescues from drowning, periodically "calls" her from the twentieth century whenever his life is in danger. As he grows older he becomes more repugnant and brutal, but she must try to keep him alive until he and a slave woman named Alice Greenwood conceive a child, to be named Hagar, who will initiate Dana's own family line. Only at Weylin's death does Dana return permanently to 1976.

But she returns mutilated. The narrative comes full circle to the book's strange and disturbing opening paragraph: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm." Although the novel illuminates the paradoxes of Dana's homecoming—the degree to which her comfortable house in 1976 and the Weylin plantation are both inescapably "home" to her—Butler is silent on the mechanics of time travel. We know that Dana's arm is amputated in the jaws of the past, that time is revealed to be damaging as well as healing, that historical understanding of human crimes is never easy and always achieved at the price of suffering, that Dana's murderous relative, like Hamlet's, is "more than kin and less than kind." The loss of her arm becomes in fact, as Ruth Salvaggio has suggested, "a kind of birthmark," the emblem of Dana's "disfigured heritage." The symbolic meanings *Kindred* yields are powerful and readily articulable. The *literal* truth is harder to state. In *The Time Machine* (1895) H. G. Wells had his traveler display the shiny vehicle on which he rode into the future to verify the strange truth of his journey; in *Kindred* the method of transport remains a fantastic given. An irresistible psychohistorical force, not a feat of engineering, motivates Butler's plot. *How* Dana travels in time and *how* she loses her arm are problems of physics irrelevant to Butler's aims. In that respect *Kindred* reads less like Wellsian science fiction than like that classic fable of alienation, Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* whose protagonist simply wakes up one morning as a giant beetle, a fantastic eruption into the normal world.

Perhaps Butler deliberately sacrificed the neat closure that a scientific—or even pseudo-scientific—explanation of telekinesis and chronoportation would have given her novel. Leaving the novel's ending rough-edged and raw like Dana's wound, Butler leaves the reader uneasy and disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than comforted by a tale that "makes sense." Certainly, Butler did not need to show off a technological marvel of the sort Wells provided to mark his traveler's path through time; the only time machine in *Kindred* is present by implication: it is the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death-ship of the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors, just her employment in 1976 through a temporary job agency—"we regulars called it a slave market," Dana says with grouchy irony—operates as a benign ghostly version of institutional slavery's auction block.

In many ways *Kindred* departs from Octavia Butler's characteristic kind of fiction. Most of her work, from her first novel *Patternmaster* (1975) through *Clay's Ark* (1984), has been situated in the future, often a damaged future, and has focused on power relationships between "normal" human beings *(Homo sapiens)* and human mutants, gifted with extraordinary mental power, who might generically be named *Homo superior.* More recently, in her prize-winning story "Bloodchild" (1984) and her novel *Dawn* (1987), Butler has shifted her attention to the intricate web of power and affection in the relationships between human beings and alien species. In all her science fiction she has produced fables that speak directly or indirectly to issues of cultural difference, whether sexual, racial, political, economic, or psychological. *Kindred* shares with Butler's other works an ideological interest in exploring relationships between the empowered and the powerless, but except for *Wild Seed* (1970), *Kindred* is her only novel situated in the past. And even *Wild Seed*—set in seventeenth-century Africa, colonial New England,

and antebellum Louisiana□is strongly mythical in flavor and is populated by some of the same long-lived, psychically advanced characters who appear in her futuristic novels. *Kindred* is technically a much sparer story; the psychic power that draws the central character back in time to the era of slavery remains in the novel's background, and the autobiographical voice of the modern descendant of, witness to, victim of American slavery is foregrounded. Moreover, apart from the single fantastic premise of instantaneous movement through time and space, *Kindred* is consistently realistic in presentation and depends on the author's reading of authentic slave narratives and her visits to the Talbot County, Maryland, sites of the novel. Butler herself, when interviewed by *Black Scholar,* denied that *Kindred* is science fiction since there is "absolutely no science in it."

The term "science fiction" is, however, notoriously resistant to definition and is popularly used to designate a wide range of imaginative literature inspired and patterned by the natural sciences (chemistry, physics, geology, astronomy, biology), by such social sciences as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and by pseudo-sciences like parapsychology and scientology. The proportion of science-fictional texts based on scrupulously applied scientific principles rather than on faulty science, pseudo-science, or wishful science is probably quite small. If, for instance, all the narratives and films premised on "starships" and the fantastic notion of faster-than-light travel were denied the title of "science fiction," the canon would shrink dramatically. By the most conservative of definitions□those which emphasize the natural sciences, rigorously applied to fictional invention□*Kindred* is not science fiction. Butler's own preferred designation of *Kindred* as "a grim fantasy" is a more precise indicator of its literary form and its emotional tenor. The exact generic label we assign *Kindred* may be, however, the least important thing about it. Like Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or Anna Ka-van's *Ice,* Butler's novel is an experiment that resists easy classification by blurring the usual boundaries of genre. Inevitably, readers will wonder what provoked the author to adapt the form of a fantastic travelogue to a restoration of the genre of slave-memoir.

When she enrolled in a summer workshop for novice science fiction writers in 1970 at the age of twenty-three, Octavia Estelle Butler took a decisive step toward satisfying an ambition she had cherished since she was twelve. An only child whose father died when she was a baby, Butler was aware very early of women struggling to survive. Her maternal grandmother had stories to tell about long hours of work in the cane fields of Louisiana while raising seven children. Her mother, Octavia M. Butler, had been working since the age of ten and spent all her adult life earning a living as a housemaid. As the author told Veronica Mixon in an interview just before *Kindred* appeared, the experiences of the women in her family influenced her youthful reading and her earliest efforts at writing: "Their lives seemed so terrible to me at times□so devoid of joy or reward. I needed my fantasies to shield me from their world." The powerful imaginative impulse that produced *Kindred* had its origin in the escapist fantasies of a child who needed to find or invent alternative realities. By temperament and by virtue of the strict Baptist upbringing her mother enforced, Butler was reclusive; imaginary worlds solaced her for the pinched rewards of the actual world, and books took the place of friends.

Kindred, however, is not an escapist fantasy. If as a girl Butler needed to distance herself from the grimness of her mother's life, she nevertheless always had her eyes open. What she saw as a child she later confronted and reshaped as a novelist. When her mother couldn't find or afford a babysitter, young Octavia was often taken along to work, as she told t he interviewer from *Black Scholar.* Even then she observed the long arm of slavery: the degree to which her mother operated in white society as an invisible woman and, worse, the degree to which she accepted and internalized her status. "I used to see her going in back doors, being talked about while she was standing right there and basically being treated like a non-person, something beneath notice.... And I could see her later as I grew up. I could see her absorbing more of what she was hearing from the whites than I think even she would have wanted to absorb." Some of these childhood memories infiltrated the fiction she produced in her maturity; certainly, they shaped her purpose in *Kindred* in imagining the privations of earlier generations of black Americans who were in danger of being forgotten by the black middle class as well as ignored by white Americans. Butler's effort to recover something of the experience of the nineteenth-century ancestors of those who, like herself, grew up in the heady days of the 1960s civil rights movement was a homage both to those women in her family who still struggled for an identity and to those more distant relations whose identities had been lost. "So many relatives that I had never known, would never know," the contemporary black woman from California muses sadly early on in *Kindred* as she thinks of the bare names inked in her family Bible.

Although Dana's experiences when she is hurled into the midst of slave society are full of terror and pain, they also illuminate her past and freshen her understanding of those generations forced to be nonpersons. One of the protagonist's□ and Butler's□achievements in traveling to the past is to *see* individual slaves as people rather than as encrusted literary or sociological types. Perhaps most impressive is Sarah the cook, the stereotypical "mammy" of books and films, whose apparent acceptance of humiliation, Dana comes to understand, masks a deep anger over the master's sale of nearly all her children: "She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom□the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter." Here we see literary fantasy in the service of the recovery of historical and psychological realities. As fictional memoir, *Kindred* is Butler's contribution to the literature of memory every bit as much as it is an exercise in the fantastic imagination.

The artfulness of *Kindred* is the product of a single-minded and largely isolated literary apprenticeship. In her younger years Butler's relatives paid little attention to what she read, as long as it wasn't obscene. Her teachers were baffled by and unreceptive to the science fiction stories she occasionally submitted in English classes. Her schoolmates simply thought her tastes in reading and writing strange, and increasingly Butler kept her literary interests to herself. In her adolescence she immersed herself in the science-fictional worlds of Theodore Sturgeon, Leigh Brackett, and Ray Bradbury, and the absence of black women writers from the genre did not deter her own ambitions: "Frankly, it never occurred to me that I needed someone who looked like me to show

me the way. I was ignorant and arrogant and persistent and the writing left me no choice at all."

In the 1940s and 1950s no black writers and almost no women were publishing science fiction.

Not surprisingly, few black readers—and, we can assume, very few black girls—found much to interest them in the science fiction of the period, geared as it was toward white adolescent boys. Some of it was provocatively racist, including Robert Heinlein's *The Sixth Column* (1949), whose heroic protagonist in a future race war was unsubtly named Whitey. The highest tribute paid to a character of color in such novels was for the author to have him sacrifice his life for his white comrades, as an Asian soldier named Franklin Roosevelt Matsui does in *The Sixth Column,* as does the one black character in Leigh Brackett's story "The Vanishing Venusians" (1944). Other books tried resolutely to be "colorblind," imagining a future in which race no longer was a factor; such novels often embodied the white liberal fantasy of a single black character functioning amiably in a predominantly white society. Jan Rodricks, the last survivor on earth in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), is a representative instance of the black character whose blackness supposedly doesn't matter; but the novel's one overt comment on race is a flippant allusion to a future reversal of South African apartheid in which whites are the victims of black discrimination—the stereotypical white conservative fantasy.

A diligent reader in the 1950s, searching for science fiction novels with something more than a patronizing image of black assimilation on white terms, could have turned up only a few texts in which black characters' blackness was acknowledged and allowed to shape the novel's thematic and ideological concerns. Perhaps the most interesting example is a chapter in a book that Butler read in her youth, Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950). Titled "Way in the Middle of the Air," the chapter describes a mass emigration of black Southerners to Mars in the year 2003. The Southern economy and the cultural assumptions of white supremacy are devastated when the entire black populace unites to ensure that all members of the community can pay their debts and arrive at the rocket base in time for the great exodus. Barefoot white boys report in astonishment this unanticipated strategy for a black utopia: "Them that has helps them that hasn't! And that way they *all* get free!" In a speech that ironically skewers the myth of progress in the history of black America, one petulant white man complains:

I can't figure why they left *now.* With things lookin' up. I mean, every day they got more rights. What they *want,* anyway? Here's the poll tax gone, and more and more states passin' anti-lynchin' bills, and all kinds of equal rights. What *more* they want? They make almost as good money as a white man, but there they go.

"Way in the Middle of the Air" may be the single most incisive episode of black and white relations in science fiction by a white author. But its very rarity demonstrates how alien the territory of American science fiction in its so-called golden age after the second world war was for black readers and for aspiring writers like Octavia Butler.

Butler's formative years and her early career coincide with the years when American science fiction took down the "males only" sign over the entrance. Major expansions and redefinitions of the genre have been accomplished by such writers as Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Pamela Sargent, Alice Sheldon (writing under the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr.,), Pamela Zoline, Marge Piercy, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Butler herself. The alien in many of the new fictions by women has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien, sometimes more specifically, the black woman, or the Chicana, or the housewife, or the lesbian, or the woman in poverty, or the unmarried woman. Sheldon's famous story "The Women Men Don't See" (1974), about a mother and daughter who embark on a ship with extraterrestrials rather than remain unnoticed and unvalued on earth, is a touchstone for the reconception of the old science-fictional motifs of estrangement and alienation. In a writers' forum Butler has commented on the paradoxical poverty of imagination in science-fictional representations of the human image: "Science fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist□extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, however, many of the same science fiction writers who started us thinking about the possibility of extraterrestrial life did nothing to make us think about here-at-home human variation." As American women writers have abandoned the character types that predominated in science fiction for a richer plurality of human images, they have collectively written a new chapter in the genre's history.

But the dramatic numbers of women writers subverting and transforming the conventions, stereotypes, and thematic issues of science fiction have not been matched by an influx of black writers of similar proportions. Samuel R. Delaney, the first and most prolific black American writer to publish science fiction, beginning in 1962 with *The Jewels of Aptor,* has specialized in stylish and complexly structured fictions more closely tied to European literary theory than to black experiences. Another of the handful of black North Americans writing in the allied genres of science fiction and heroic fantasy is Charles Saunders, a Pennsylvanian transplanted to Canada. Saunders's most distinctive literary innovation has been his effort to write fantasies set in Africa and based on historical research into precolonial cultures and myths. His hero Imaro appears in several novels and is meant to replace the Tarzan-image of the white noble savage with an authentic African hero; he has also produced some engaging short stories centered on a woman warrior of Dahomey named Dossouye. Most recently Jewelle Gomez has begun publishing a loosely connected set of fantasies about an escaped slave from 1850 who becomes a vampire and extends her life over the next several centuries; the character functions, according to Gomez, as "a super heroic black woman who interprets our lives through a phenomenal perspective."

In an essay called "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction," Saunders proposes that black writers of science fiction and fantasy remain few because the black readership has grown little since the 1950s. New readers of science fiction, he suggests, frequently come to the fiction by way of the nonprint media, and science fiction television and cinema remain overwhelmingly white and uninviting to young black audiences. Furthermore, black readers

who share the common demographic characteristics of white science fiction readers (i.e., young, educated, middle-class) tend to be more interested in political and sociological works along with the fiction of black writers like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. To them, science fiction and fantasy may well seem irrelevant to their main concerns.

Saunders concludes that, despite his own interests in African-based heroic fantasy, the prospects of black science fiction are dim. While welcoming the enlargement of the genre's racial horizons□and he singles out Butler's early fiction as the chief instance of a black presence in science fiction□he fears that a specifically black science fiction will share the fate of so-called blaxploita-tion movies of the 1970s and be justifiably shortlived.

Perhaps Saunders would have been more sanguine about the possibility of serious black science fiction if *Kindred* had been available when he wrote his essay. If any contemporary writer is likely to redraw science fiction's cultural boundaries and to attract new black readers□and perhaps writers□ to this most distinctive of twentieth-century genres, it is Octavia Butler. More consistently than any other black author, she has deployed the genre's conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them, stories that speak to issues, feelings, and historical truths arising out of Afro-American experience. In centering her fiction on women who lack power, suffer abuse, and are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary, Butler has not merely used science fiction as a "feminist didactic," in Beverly Friend's term, but she has generated her fiction out of a black feminist aesthetic. Her novels pointedly expose various chauvinisms (sexual, racial, and cultural), are enriched by a historical consciousness that shapes the depiction of enslavement both in the real past and in imaginary pasts and futures, and enact struggles for personal freedom and cultural pluralism.

At the same time, Butler has been eager to avoid turning her fiction into polemic. Science fiction is a richly metaphorical literature. Just as Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* invented a monstrous child born from a male scientist's imagination as a metaphor for the exclusion of women from acts of creation, and just as Welles's *Time Machine* used hairy subterranean Morlocks and effete above-ground Eloi as metaphors for the upstairs-downstairs class divisions of Victorian England, so Butler has specialized in metaphors that dramatize the tyranny of one species or race or gender over another. But her work does not read like fiction composed by agenda. White writers, she has pointed out, tend to include black characters in science fiction only to illustrate a problem or as signposts to advertise the author's distaste for racism; black people in most science fiction are represented as "other." All her fiction stands in quiet resistance to the notion that a black character in a science fiction novel is there *for a reason.* In a Butler novel the black protagonist is there, like the mountain, because she is there. Although she does not hesitate to harness the power of fiction as fable to create striking analogies to the oppressive realities of our own present world, Butler also peoples her imagined worlds with black characters as a matter of course. Events and lives are usually in crisis in her books, but she celebrates racial difference.

While Butler's frequent use of black women as protagonists has often been noticed, it is also important that there are always numbers of characters of color in her novels. There is enough of a critical mass of racial and sexual and cultural diversity in any Butler novel to make reading it different from the experience of reading the work of almost any other practicing science fiction writer. One of the exciting features of *Kindred* is that so much of the novel is attentive not to the *exceptional* situation of an isolated modern black woman in a white household under slavery but to her complex social and psychological relationships with the community of black slaves she joins. Despite the severe stresses under which they live, the slaves constitute a rich human society: Dana's proud and vulnerable ancestor Alice Greenwood; the mute housemaid Carrie; Sarah, the cook who nurses old grievances while kneading down the bread dough; young Nigel, whom Dana teaches to reach from a stolen primer; Sam James the field hand, who begs Dana to teach his brother and sister; Alice's husband Isaac, mutilated and sold to Mississippi after a failed escape attempt; even Liza the sewing woman, who betrays Dana to the master and is punished by the other slaves for her complicity with the white owners. Although the black community is persistently fractured by the sudden removal of its members through either the calculated strategy or the mere whim of their white controllers, that community always patches itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and common anger a common strength. It is the white characters in the novel who seem odd, isolated, pathetic, alien, problematic.

In some ways the most problematic white man in *Kindred* is not the Maryland slave owner but the liberated, modern Californian married to Dana. Kevin Franklin is a good man. He loves Dana, loathes the chattel system that governs every feature of antebellum life in Maryland, and works on the underground railroad during the period when he is trapped in the past. Yet he is by gender and race implicated in the supremacist culture.

Throughout the novel Butler ingeniously suggests parallels between Rufus Weylin and Kevin Franklin: their facial expressions, their language, even after a time their accents merge in Dana's mind so that at times she mistakes one for the other. One of the novel's subtlest touches is the chapter in which Dana is obliged to become Rufus Weylin's secretary and handle his correspondence and bills; in 1976 Kevin had, unsuccessfully but still revealingly, tried to get his wife to type his manuscripts and write his letters for him. When both Kevin and Dana are in nineteenth-century Maryland at the same time the only way they can spend a night together is for them to make a public pretense of being master and slave and seemingly to accept the ethos of black women as the sexual property of white men. But as Dana realizes, the more often one plays such a role, the nearer the pretending comes to reality: "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed." And, she fears, Kevin begins to fit into the white, male, Southern routines far too easily. Shuttling between the two white men in her life, she is aware not only of the blood link between herself and Rufus but of the double link of gender and race that unites Rufus and Kevin. The convergence of these two white men in Dana's life not only dramatizes the ease with which even a "progressive" white man falls into the cultural pattern of dominance, but suggests as well an uncanny synonymy of the words "husband" and "master."

The date of Dana's final return to Los Angeles is July 4, 1976, the bicentennial of the founding of the United States. Her fantastic journey becomes an occasion for meditating on American cultural history. What has been forgotten or trivialized or sentimentalized in the public celebrations of the past reemerges unvarnished in Dana's homecoming on the fourth of July. Dana comes back to southern California with a truer understanding of black history in America than the sanitized versions in the popular media had ever given her. Predictably, she scorns the image of the plantation derived from *Gone with the Wind,* but she also learns the inadequacy of even the best books as preparation for the first-hand experience of slavery. Dana's literacy, her education, and her historical knowledge sometimes lull her into a false sense of security. In one passage, she records her pleasure in the friendly atmosphere of the cookhouse where the slaves gather to eat and talk, usually free from white oversight. There she observes "a girl and boy, sitting on the floor eating with their fingers. I was glad to see them there because I'd read about kids their age being rounded up and fed from troughs like pigs. Not everywhere, apparently. At least, not here." Although she does not name her literary source, almost certainly Dana is recalling an episode from chapter 5 of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* (a work Butler read carefully as part of her research for *Kindred)* where Douglass describes feeding time at Colonel Lloyd's plantation:

Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush.* It was put into a large wooden tray or tough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons.

Mistakenly, because the food and the treatment of children is better than Douglass's *Narrative* seemed to promise, Dana behaves as if the cookhouse is a sanctuary. That error in judgment leads to her first vicious flogging when she is detected in the act of teaching slave children to read. After her second shipping by Rufus Weylin's father following her attempted flight from the plantation, she reflects angrily as another slave woman tries to salve her wounds, "Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape." Books had not taught her why so many slaves accepted their condition, nor had books defined the kind of bravery possible in the powerless and humiliating situation of being owned and in the face of the ruthless means by which owners protected their investments.

Films, Dana finds, are an even less reliable guide to the past. About the tendency of Hollywood production values to insulate viewers even from material filmed with purported historical or documentary intent, Dana is withering. She recalls witnessing the beating of a slave hunted out one night by white patrollers and how she crouched in the underbrush a few yards away from the man's young daughter. The slave' s crime was being found in bed with his own free-born wife without written permission from his owner:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his

screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn't they stop!

"Please, Master," the man begged. "For Godsake, Master, please __"

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me.

At such moments of first-person intensity, *Kindred* reveals its own literary kinship with the memoirs of ex-slaves published in the nineteenth century, for Butler's greatest achievement in the novel is her collapsing of the genres of the fantastic travelogue and the slave narrative. Her incorporation into *Kindred* both of narrative strategies of the classic memoirs of former slaves and of occasional deliberate verbal and situational echoes of those texts establishes a degree of authenticity and seriousness rarely attained by contemporary writers mining the conventions of the Wellsian time-travel story.

Reconstructing Womanhood, Hazel V. Carby's feminist revision of the traditions of American black women's writing, contrasts the image of the slave woman as victim in men's slave memoirs with a very different image that emerges in such autobiographies as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Lucy Delany's *From the Darkness Cometh Light,* and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave.* In such narratives, Carby argues, women define themselves as agents rather than as mere victims, and they record the brutality of their treatment by their owners in order to emphasize their resistance to victimization and their claim to freedom. Butler's fictive autobiographer Dana extends that ideology and aesthetic of the slave woman's memoir into the late twentieth century. Much of *Kindred* is a record of endurance, but there are also numerous acts of heroism and humanity, culminating in the act of manslaughter in self-defense which finally liberates Dana, at terrible cost, from her tyrannical ancestor.

As she discovers the terrible link to her own past which requires her to keep the oppressive slave master alive until her own family is inaugurated, Dana works out the ethic of compromise which Harriet Jacobs tolerated to safeguard her children and herself. Despite personal repugnance and culturally induced shame, Jacobs compromised the sexual standards imposed on nineteenth-century women in order to maintain a central core of integrity and freedom of will; she reluctantly practiced a situational ethics dictated by the extreme circumstances which constrained the ethical choices of black women under slavery. As several black feminist commentators on Jacobs's memoir have recently argued, the crucial sentence around which our understanding of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* must be fashioned is her retrospective revision of the ethical norms that govern a woman's choices and behaviors

under systematic oppression: "Still, in looking back, calmy, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others." Butler's Dana must move painfully toward a similar ethical relativism as she discovers that the moral choices of a late twentieth-century black feminist cannot be exercised with impunity in the world of the slave state. At earlier stages of her experience in Maryland, she tells her white husband, she is able to cling precariously to the ethical imperatives of her own world, though even then her perspective and choices are bound to be fundamentally different from his:

You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer.. I can understand that because most of the time, I'm still an observer. It's protection. It's nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then ... I can't maintain the distance. I'm drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don't know what to do.

The longer she remains in the nineteenth century, the thinner the protective cushioning becomes until Dana finds herself five years later (in Maryland time) divided against herself, torn between absolute standards and pragmatic choices. The Dana of 1976 California finds it unthinkable that she would assist in the sexual exploitation of another black woman by a white man, but the Dana of 1824 Maryland finds herself in a moral trap. Rufus Weylin asks her to persuade Alice Greenwood, her own great-great-grandmother, to go to bed with him without compulsion. Although she knows that her family tree is traceable to a child that Rufus will one day father on Alice, Dana initially finds Ru-fus's proposal that she act as pander repulsive, and she angrily rejects it. But when Rufus threatens Dana that he will beat Alice□perhaps even beat her to death□if she refuses his advances and if Dana does not try to change Alice's mind, she is caught in Harriet Jacobs's dilemma: "He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl□help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn't think much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself." The choice demanded by the situation will satisfy neither Dana's own internal standards nor the larger feminist principle of sisterhood; she suffers the same shame that Jacobs felt, but she also adopts the compromise.

In the end, what may be most powerful and valuable for readers of *Kindred* is the simple reminder that all that history is not so very long ago. In foreshortening the distance between now and then, Butler focuses our attention on the continuity between past and present; the fantasy of traveling backwards in time becomes a lesson in historical realities. We may also be reminded that historical progress is never a sure thing; in one of her brief respites in 1976 between bouts of enslavement in the nineteenth century, Dana reads the memoirs of Jewish survivors of the Nazi death camps: "Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred." The systematic horrors of American slavery, we must remember, provide a model for later programmed oppression and genocide. Like Dana and Kevin, the reader of *Kindred* may discover a closer kinship with the characters and events of the antebellum South than we often care to admit. And just as Dana feels compelled in the novel's epilogue to travel to contemporary Maryland and "touch solid

evidence that those people existed," readers of this fantastic invention may also find their understanding of history enriched and deepened. In *Kindred* Octavia Butler has designed her own underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader.

Source: Robert Crossley, Introduction to *Kindred,* Beacon Press, 1988, pp. ix-xxiii.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Friend asserts that Kindred *reveals weaknesses in modern women and inequities in their treatment that have not been eliminated despite the relatively better conditions of contemporary society.*

[Dana, the] heroine of *Kindred,* is ... at the mercy of an outside force. An unpublished writer, she is working at a mind-stultifying job with a temporary employment firm when she meets and marries co-worker and fellow author Kevin. They are just setting up housekeeping in a new residence when Dana is suddenly pulled back to the year 1815 to save a little boy, Rufus Weylin, from drowning. But this tale goes far beyond a mere recitation of twentieth-century woman facing nineteenth-century life, for while Kevin and Rufus are white, Dana is black. Even more important, Rufus, son of a tyrannical plantation owner and his hysterical, ill-natured wife, is also one of Dana's ancestors; and he has a link with her so powerful that it calls her back from the present to save him from intense moments of danger throughout his entire lifetime. Thus, a contemporary black woman comes to experience the life of a slave on a Maryland plantation, although she does return to the twentieth century sporadically and briefly throughout the novel at those moments of absolute terror when the belief in her own imminent death triggers an involuntary return.

All in all, she makes six trips into the past, called each time by Rufus's near encounter with death. Each return Dana makes to the present is triggered by the possibility of her own death. Once she returns during a hideous beating; another time she causes the return by desperately slitting her own wrists. Each visit to the plantation accounts for from a few minutes to several days in Dana's own time, but comprises months to years of the past. Thus, she follows Rufus from childhood to adulthood while she scarcely ages herself. Throughout, she feels a moral responsibility for Rufus: "Someday, he would be the slave-holder, responsible in his own right for what happened to the people who lived in those half-hidden cabins. The boy was literally growing up as I watched□growing up because I watched and because I helped to keep him safe." Dana goes on to question her role as the guardian for Rufus: "A black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children."

Dana's role in this society, as subhuman and perennial child, is reinforced in the third trip when Kevin, who has been embracing Dana, unwittingly transfers with her. In Rufus's world, they cannot admit to being man and wife and are forced to enact the role of master and slave. And Dana fears the corruptive potential of such a civilization, even on her husband, if he should be stranded there....

How does Dana keep it from marking her? She doesn't. It marks her, although she manages to hang onto her sanity through continual reexamination of her situation....

But living does not always look better. Dana's third trip ends with her being beaten so badly that she suddenly returns to the present without Kevin.

When she next visits the plantation (on the fourth trip), eight days have elapsed for her, and five years have gone by for Kevin. He has left the plantation, gone north, and Dana must now send for him and await his return. At one point, when the waiting becomes unbearable and she discovers that Rufus has never mailed her letters to Kevin, she attempts to run away. She is caught. Nothing in her twentieth-century education or experience had prepared her to succeed....

Perhaps the twentieth century does not help her because she does not utilize it effectively. Dana ... [is] able to carry material into the past. In fact, she has a bag tied to her, ready to go the moment she is transported. And what is in the bag? All the things she needs and misses from civilization: toothbrush, soap, comb, brush, knife, aspirin, Excedrin, sleeping pills, antiseptic, pen, paper and pencil, and spare clothing. Prior to one of the trips she also packs a history of slavery and maps of Maryland, but this outrages Rufus, who demands that she burn them.

And so Dana works and survives as a slave, learning all the skills necessary to survive as a house worker, but not showing sufficient stamina to succeed as a field hand. Her twentieth-century ability to read antagonizes Rufus's father, who fears education for his slaves, and causes danger to herself and others when she teaches the slave children to read. Her knowledge of history is no help and only stands her in good stead by preventing her from killing Rufus until he has raped her black great-grandmother, assuring the inception of Dana's family tree.

Finally, when Dana does act, there are repercussions. She murders Rufus (who well deserves it), but justice does not then triumph. His death causes the end of life on that plantation, and the slaves are then sold off. Dana does not get away unscathed, either, losing an arm in her final wrench from past to present.

No one would intellectually argue against the proposition that life is better today for both men and women, but few realize what ... [this novel has] didactically presented: that contemporary woman is not educated to survive, that she is as helpless, perhaps even more helpless, than her predecessors. Just as Philip Wylie pointed out in *The Disappearance,* a world of men might be strife-ridden, but it would go on; a world of women would grind to a halt, sans transportation (no pilots, bus drivers, train engineers), sans full grocery shelves (no farmers or truckers), sans adequate health care (no ambulance drivers, paramedics, few doctors). Men understand how the world is run; women do not. Victims then, victims now.

Source: Beverly Friend, "Time Travel as a Feminist Didactic in Works by Phyllis Eisenstein, Marlys Millhiser, and Octavia Butler," in *Extrapolation,* Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring, 1982, pp. 50-5.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short story in which you travel to the future. Describe this world. What has changed? Does racism still exist in this society?

Read an original slave narrative of the 1800s, such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) or Harriet Ja-cobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Use the details of slave life to write a mock diary entry describing a typical day in the life of a slave.

As an interracial couple, Kevin and Dana Franklin face legal obstacles to their marriage in the nineteenth century and social opposition in the twentieth. Do some research into interracial marriages: trace the history of miscegenation laws (laws regulating interracial relationships) and look up statistics. Are interracial marriages on the increase? Are they more or less likely to end in divorce? Write an essay discussing your findings.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 established a precedent for how the United States would deal with the issue of slavery. Research the history of laws and Supreme Court decisions concerning slavery between 1820 and 1860. Create a timeline tracing these developments, and accompany it with a map illustrating the addition of new slave and free states during the same period.

What Do I Read Next?

The five novels in Octavia Butler's "Pattern-master" series explore the history of the Patternists, human mutants with telepathic powers. In the first novel of the series, *Patternmaster* (1976), the Patternists battle the "Clayarks" and each other for control of the world.

Butler's "Xenogenesis" trilogy, like *Kindred,* is a complex exploration of the relationship between rulers and subjugated. After a nuclear holocaust, Earth's few surviving humans are offered rescue by a race of alien traders in exchange for their genetic material. The moral questions that are faced by both humans and first-and second-generation hybrids are related in *Dawn: Xenogenesis* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).

Butler's recent "Earthseed" series is set in a violent America of the early twenty-first century. Lauren Oya Olamina is a young African-American teen with the ability to feel other people's pain. She "discovers" her own religion, called Earthseed, and begins to gather followers. Lauren's story begins in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and continued in *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) is another tale of the psychological effects of slavery on a modern woman. Blues singer Ursa Corregidora comes from a line of women sexually abused by a Portuguese slaveholder named Corregidora the father of both Ursa's mother and grandmother. The novel relates her efforts to reconcile her heritage with her present life.

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) uses the device of time travel to provide a view of a utopian future. During her stay in a mental hospital, a woman makes periodic trips into the future, where she finds a cooperative society.

Slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) supplied Butler with essential background details for her novel.

Further Study

Frances M. Beal, "Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre: Interview with Octavia M. Butler," *in Black Scholar,* Vol. 17, March-April, 1986, p. 14.

An interview with Butler in which she discusses her childhood and other influences.

Teri Ann Doerksen, "Octavia E. Butler: Parables of Race and Difference," in *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic,* edited by Elisabeth Anne Leonard, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 21-34.

Views Butler's novels as works that "have the potential to lead the once typical white or male reader into some (perhaps uncomfortable) realizations about his or her own society."

Sandra Y. Govan, "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel," in *MELUS,* Vol. 13, Nos. 1-2, 1986, pp. 79-96.

Provides a stylistic examination of Butler's novel, praising innovative aspects of her work.

Patricia Maida, *"Kindred* and *DessaRose:* Two Novels That Reinvent Slavery," in *CEA Magazine,* Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991, pp. 43-52. Traces the portrayal of slavery in both novels.

Veronica Mixon, "Futurist Woman: Octavia Butler," in *Essence,* Vol. 15, April, 1979, pp. 12-13.

A biographical article on Butler containing an interview with the author.

Burton Raffel, "Genre to the Rear, Race and Gender to the Fore: The Novels of Octavia E. Butler," in *Literary Review,* Vol. 38, Spring, 1995, pp. 453-61. Provides a thematic overview of Butler's novels, in particular the treatment of race and gender issues.

Hoda M. Zaki, "Utopia, Dystopia and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler," in *Science Fiction Studies,* Vol. 17, No. 2, 1990, pp. 239-51. Surveys the major themes of Butler's science fiction.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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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