

# Wild Seed Short Guide

## Wild Seed by Octavia E. Butler

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# Contents

<a href="#">Wild Seed Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>



# Characters

Wild Seed has two principal characters. Doro and Anyanwu are almost literally towering divinities moving among the less powerful people who also possess parapsychological powers, as well as among almost mentally drone-like ordinary humans. Doro is nearly 4000 years old, born in ancient Egyptian regions. As a boy of thirteen he entered "transition," the equivalent of adolescence in Butler's parapsychological people. In *Mind of My Mind* (1977), one of the four novels related to Wild Seed, an explanation of Doro's power and weakness is provided. He did not come through transition completely whole, although he possessed enormous psychic power. As a result he was doomed to exist only by wearing the bodies of living humans, who in effect died as soon as Doro possessed them. He had no body of his own. He could be male or female, baby, child, adult, or elderly. He could move through bodies swiftly, killing each in turn like a scythe cutting wheat. In addition, he could feel over great distances the presence of a human with psi powers — even if that person did not know his own power.

The powers of Doro are inevitably the scourge of many people who cross his path. He has killed so much that he is inured to the value of the life of ordinary humans. They are as flies are to humans. He values humans with psi powers in the measure that their power commands. In a way he is as ruthless as "nature red in tooth and claw." He is a Methuselah because of his great age. He is a Faustian protagonist because even as his brutality is unchecked as he pursues knowledge and power to build a species to keep him company, the reader is made to know that Doro's own doom, and even damnation, are eventually upon him.

## Social Concerns

In *Wild Seed* Butler presents an interpretation of the colonization of the Americas that indicts the nations and leaders that conducted it, for the obscenely inhumane institution of slavery they used to accomplish it. Simultaneously, the secretly yet increasingly powerfully present influence of the superspecies lead by Doro and Anyanwu warns that the human capitalist pirates of the eighteenth and nine teenth centuries will in turn be themselves the victims of more powerful pirates. Doro is parasitic upon the community of humanity. Anyanwu is symbiotic. She combines her life and destiny with those with whom she shares life.



## Techniques

As are virtually all of Butler's writing, *Wild Seed* is narrated in the first person. It goes on to spin its tale on an outline and scaffold of actual historical time and events spanning three centuries of the slave trade in Africa and the New World. Thus, the novel's three main sections are titled "Book I, Covenant 1690" (6 chapters), "Book II, Lot's Children 1741" (9 chapters), and "Book III, Canaan 1841" (14 chapters). Besides employing the most prestigious accounts of the history of the slave trade and the middle passage to the Americas, Butler has reported that to prepare herself to write the novel she read Iris Andreskis's *Old Wives Tales: Life Stories from Ibibioland* (1970), George Basden's *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life* (1966), and Sylvia Leith-Ross' *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (1965). These works account for part of the feel of authenticity in the characterization of Anyanwu. Another part of the authentic feel is supplied by the narrative voice itself created by Butler for *Wild Seed*. It assimilates an African language, Nigerian, syntax and diction in the production of a general American English discourse that adumbrates the cadence, structure, and relatively spare vocabulary of Ibo dialects. To do this she studied Robert G. Armstrong's *A Comparative Wordlist of Five Ibo Dialects* (1967). Further storytelling tactics of the novel include the employment of the mythic tropes of the vampire, the oracle, the soothsayer, the shaman, and the shape-changer, as well as minor deities, as Doro, Anyanwu, and the several psi-powered humans they have found or conceived and parented, toil in the fabulous turmoil of Butler's tale.

The heroic scale of the characters and actions requires ordeals that are more arduous and sensational than those of ordinary people. Butler masterfully maintains this degree of hyperbole and exaggeration — obligatory in fantastic and mythic narrative throughout the novel.



# Themes

Regardless of biology, race, caste, and the vicissitudes of fate, liberty of the individual person is the paramount existential need. Ironically, the key virtue needed to secure personal freedom is patience, or endurance, coupled with stamina, both physical and moral.

They are connected. Anyanwu's extraordinary physiology is the basis of her patience and moral independence.

Another theme is that fertility is important to the survival of species at the highest level of intellectual potential.

Superspecies must be able to breed or they are not significant in a biosphere.

Another theme is that religion is conservative and stabilizing, but that the evolution and progress of species requires that blasphemy and even obscenity be just as constantly present, because they are the agents of mutation and essential change which are inexorable in species and culture as the process that insures adaptation and survival. Anyanwu calls Doro an "obscenity"; that is he breaks all rules — sexual, racial and religious. He violates her, even though she herself is an extraordinary freak of the human species.

Another meaning of the story is touched if the relationship of Anyanwu and Doro in Wild Seed is seen as the Nazi/ Jewish Holocaust made personal.

Doro's enterprise is baldly and unapologetically eugenic. He seeks only the most powerful species, and only the most perfect specimens of that powerful species. He is a slaver of slavers.

He owns everyone, literally. He allows them to live only so long as they are useful to him. Most accept his tyranny willingly and slavishly. Some even love him. Anyanwu, however, capitulates in anger.

The story also implies that ultimate love is a paradox. It nourishes, as does Anyanwu who is wife, mother, healer, shaman, and scapegoat. It devours and kills, as does Doro who must do so to survive. Nevertheless, in the epic history of species there are no barriers to love. It transcends sex, race, culture, history, pain and pleasure, and, mysteriously, even death. In the maleness of Doro humanity is anciently ruthless, voracious, homicidal — herding and driving people. It makes life valuable by its threat. It is a warrior identity. In the femaleness of Anyanwu is nourishment, healing, and a shape-shifting talent for bonding with the new and strange and coming to love it. Finally, love is fecund, the gestator of life that will always be genetically new and different. Love between the conservative, murderous male and the daring, nourishing female is a compelling dialectic of the culture of species. The story calls to mind the major myths humans have cherished.



Wild Seed's story presents an idea that is present in virtually all of Butler's work. She is obsessed with history. The future and the present are connected to the past — unbreakably linked to the past. The heroically long lives of her characters symbolize this, to make the reader see how the past and present are connected. Inevitably Butler's stories, Wild Seed in a major way, confront the reader with the question of responsibility for the past — especially of the crimes that ancestors profited by and by whose criminal success the wealth we inherit in the present is made possible. Are we responsible? Are we guilty? Must we try to right past wrongs? Are we even able to if we try ? Can we know precisely what guilt we have incurred?



## Key Questions

Wild Seed can raise great interest in the history of slavery in Africa, as well as in the New World. It focuses upon the West African region, especially Nigeria. Butler's historical, sociological, and anthropological source studies focus upon the Nigerian area. Meanwhile, the relationship of Doro and Anyanwu is a compelling tension of preemptive male violence and megalomaniac will with the patient female nurturing, delaying of gratification, healing, organizing, and resignation in the face of inexorable force. Of course, Anyanwu, too, is a superspecies of woman unto herself and therefore has and uses power to pursue her ends which are to make the lives of her series of husbands and children as fulfilled as possible.

1. Does Butler's depiction of the history of slavery in Africa and the Middle Passage seem realistic?
2. How can the problem of Africans selling other Africans into slavery be examined?
3. Would the superpowers of Anyanwu allow her to fashion a better alleviation of the human suffering she encounters than Butler actually allows her to achieve?
4. Would the superpowers of Doro allow him to achieve his ends more efficiently than Butler allows him to?

In fact he could easily kill hundreds of thousands of people very swiftly. Why does Butler not have him do this?

5. Anyanwu is a shape-shifter. In fact she can become a male person, and does, and lives as one especially in the third part of the novel. What does her biologically male identity imply about the social meaning of gender?
6. Radically superior talent and life power are popular in power fantasy stories. How does Butler make it hard for the reader to take undiluted pleasure in identifying with Doro or Anyanwu — indeed take a power trip by fantasizing about being them?
7. What is there that is good about the substantially profane and even obscene character of Doro?
8. Loneliness is a principle experience of Doro and Anyanwu. Is it convincingly depicted?
9. Grief and loss and the burden of centuries of memory are strong experiences for Anyanwu. Are they convincingly represented in Butler's story?
10. The adolescence of a psi-human person is more dangerous and sensational than that of an ordinary human.

How can it be genuinely interesting to ordinary human readers?





11. Does Butler's universe in *Wild Seed* allow for the possibility of free will? Do the characters of the novel deserve the fates they meet?

## Literary Precedents

Wild Seed is founded on the existing histories of the West African slave trade, the Middle Passage, and slavery in the Americas. Relating to a second source for Wild Seed, Butler seems to perceive Judeo-Christian theology and morality with cool objectivity. There is no direct endorsement of it as such in any of her stories. Even so her stories are shot through with names, quotations, and allusions to the Bible — noting for example the section titles of Wild Seed mentioned above. Other literary precedents beyond Butler's other works in the Patternist series for which Wild Seed is a prequel, are in two categories. First are those that deal with parapsychological powers. They include Zenna Henderson's Pilgrimage (1961) and The People: No Different Flesh (1966) which treat Henderson's supercharacters as people in a state of cultural siege, having problems similar to humans of minority racial or ethnic identity. They also have ordeals of maturation in which they learn to master their powers. Butler has also named John Brunner's The Whole Man (1964) and Theodore Sturgeon's More Than Human (1953), both of which tell stories of psi superpeople, as inspirations to her in writing Wild Seed. Second are those that deal with characters so longlived that their stories cover centuries of history, in each age of which the characters must act out their identities in the culture of the time. Among such works are William Godwin's St. Leon (1799), John A. Williams' Captain Blackman (1972), Henry James's Sense of the Past (1917), Virginia Woolf's Orlando (1928), Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Hotel Transylvania (1978) and its sequels, and Ann Rice's Interview with the Vampire (1979) and its sequels.



## Related Titles

Four other novels by Butler are directly related to *Wild Seed*. They are her Patternmaster series, and include in the order of their publication *Patternmaster* (1976), which is set in the most distant future of Butler's history and depicts the maturation of the psipowered human species and its imminent ascendancy in controlling Earth.

The second is *Mind of My Mind* (1977), set in the late twentieth century and relating the end of the life of the seemingly unkillable Doro, and the end of Anyanwu as a major character, superseded by the emergence of Mary who becomes the first "patternmaster," a human of psi powers strong enough to create a psychic web that can hold all other psi-powered people in a very willing but also unescapable captivity.

The third is *Survivor* (1978), about a human colony on another planet, having left behind an Earth on which "Clayarks" and psi-powered people are present along with ordinary humans.

The latest published of the Patternist books is *Clay's Ark* (1984) which recounts the emergence of a species mutated from normal humans, which would for a time stand in direct conflict with psi-humans.

# Copyright Information

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