

Themes

Some of the key themes we might consider discussing in this first contact novel:

- The issue of sexual difference in *Dawn*
- Genetic determinism and biological essentialism
- The contrast between human beings and Oankali
- The case of Lilith: the significance of her being African-American, the role of slave narratives in the story, the parallels to the African diaspora
- Questions of how to respond to difference

The character of Lilith

What do we know about Lilith? What is her significance? Some of the points to consider:

- We learn that she is approximately 26. She was married but her husband and son died in an automobile accident. Her son was Ayre and there is the suggestion that he had brown skin, suggesting that Lilith is herself African-American. Later we learn that she has probably aged two years aboard the ship, making her 28 (24). Later Lilith recalls the auto accident and the death of her husband, who was Nigerian (79-80). We are told that she is dark, as Paul Titus (89).
- What is the significance of Lilith being African-American? Importantly, we have to consider Lilith's choices through the lens of African-American feminist thought. Consider the usual choices available to black slave women: submit to rape by white masters or be killed. The choices open to black women historically have been extremely limited. For Lilith, descended from generations of African-American women who have taught their daughters about survival as they have been taught, the drive to survive is deeply embedded in her material identity. Lilith's position complicates any simple rejection or acceptance of the Oankali trade and demonstrates that neither choice can ever be a free or easy one.
- Lilith's cancer (20). It's interesting to note that Lilith's cancer connects her to her maternal line: mother, aunts, grandmother. We might wonder about the significance of cancer as a metaphor: cancer is an illness to human beings but it fascinates the Oankali and will provide them with abilities to shape shift. Cancer also is a metaphor for how biology can go wrong, as in the human contradiction. It is a metaphor for how the body has a potential that may or may not be realized. This is similar to Wilson's discussion of learning rules and genetic potential.
- Lilith has a strong desire to live (24). Why is this significant? Jdahya offers to help Lilith die and she refuses (44).
- We know as well that the Oankali have altered Lilith on a cellular or genetic basis. They cured her of cancer, they give her special abilities and strengths, they strengthened her abilities to learn and remember.
- We might wonder: Does Lilith lose her humanity?

The character of Lilith

We should consider how Lilith is viewed by the various groups in *Dawn*. She is looked upon with hatred by the resisters who view her as a traitor to the human race. Does she

ever accept what the Oankali have wrought? Lilith comes to accept the aliens for what they are but never fully comes to accept their plans for the human race. Does Lilith lose her humanity? Perhaps one effect of surviving the diaspora is profound isolation: she is cut off from herself and from the rest of her kind, humanity. She is left in a difficult position in that the human beings do not see her as human any longer and she is clearly not Oankali. Ultimately, she is not allowed to identify with either group.

In becoming a cyborg able to survive the brave new world of Xenogenesis, Lilith pays a high price; she must betray her gender, her race, and her species. Making meaningful and potent connections with the truly different, Butler seems to say, will not be easy but may be necessary.

Importantly, we have to consider Lilith's choices through the lens of African-American feminist thought. Consider the usual choices available to black slave women: submit to rape by white masters or be killed. The choices open to black women historically have been extremely limited. For Lilith, descended from generations of African-American women who have taught their daughters about survival as they have been taught, the drive to survive is deeply embedded in her material identity. Lilith's position complicates any simple rejection or acceptance of the Oankali trade and demonstrates that neither choice can ever be a free or easy one.

Lilith's pregnancy

At the end of *Dawn*, the fragile surfaces that exclude the alien and identify Lilith as human have been violated. Her pregnancy is a literal absorption of the other into the self, so that the child she will give birth to will be both flesh of her flesh and an alien corruption of her humanity. Lilith's pregnancy constitutes a permanent erasure of the boundary between humanity and the alien. Lilith's response to her pregnancy echoes the ambivalent feelings of those women slaves whose pregnancies were the result of forced matings or rape, and whose children represented an increase in the white man's property.

Dawn's xenogenesis promises a species diversification that will construct humane beings, related to humanity, but no longer human. Lilith's body is figured as the symbol of this transformation which represents the interface between the two species, the place in which the designations of human and alien, kin and other will fuse.

The myth of Lilith

Lilith was Adam's rebellious first wife: an unnatural mother whose gender, sexuality, and humanity are challenged not confirmed by her children. The myth of Lilith comes from a rabbinic midrash, a kind of literature devoted to biblical interpretation. Lilith's tale results from the ancient rabbis' attempts to explain the discrepancies between Genesis chapter one and Genesis chapter two and the two creation myths. According to Jewish law, the first woman was named Lilith. She was created with Adam, and considered herself his equal. Adam disagreed. Lilith, valuing independence above male companionship, flew away from Adam and Eden. Legend tells us that she subsequently joined forces with Satan and gave birth to armies of devil children. Her punishment for abandoning her first mate is that one hundred of her children will die each day. Jewish tradition characterizes

Lilith as a devil, one eager to attack small children and pregnant women. She is depicted as an enemy of men as well. She is a succubus responsible for men's nocturnal emissions, stealing their seed in order to populate the world with demons. Lilith's crimes embody several crucial male fears, including impotence, loss of a female companion, loss of the patriarchal line.

Butler's Lilith resembles the legendary she-devil with amazing precision. She resists tyranny, is independent, bold and curious. She has special powers. Her first confrontation with a male human in the novel finds her in danger of beings raped. This new Lilith, like her predecessor, is also the incubator for a type of devil's spawn. We also learn that this Lilith, like her mythic ancestor, is sentenced to perpetual exile from her home. Lilith appears suspicious to other characters throughout the novel. She is powerful, sexual, but also maternal. Her brood consists not only of her children but of the adult humans she awakens.

Parallels to slavery

A persistent theme of xenogenesis is that of slavery. There are clear parallels, for instance, to the Middle Passage, which transported Africans from their indigenous conceptions of time into Western Christian history. The humans' journey traces the movement of the Middle Passage and reflects the cultural trauma of the transition from human to slave. The cultural unmaking with *Dawn* does not, as slavery did, deny subjectivity to render people as property, but works to transform human identity within the xenogenesis. Butler's narrative retraces the passage of the historical diaspora to describe humanity's deconstruction as a progressive stage in the creation of a hybrid species to whom the brutality and racism that supported historical slavery will be utterly alien.

Lilith's awakening evokes the dehumanization of slave conditions—she is naked, has to beg for clothing and is denied reading materials and other access to her own culture and history. Connections with human culture are severed. Like the slaves who bore their masters' children, Lilith obtains privileges of enhanced health and security for herself and her future children, who will be genetically half Oankali. The Oankalu lecture her about the superiority of their egalitarian, nonviolent lifestyle, as opposed to the hierarchical, violent tendencies of humans—just as Americans told their African slaves they were fortunate to be rescued from barbarism by their democratic masters. Human beings from the outset are in a degraded position and become breeding stock for the Oankali.

The Oankali

The Oankali do not kill or destroy life and are physically passive. But they are also highly coercive and, from one perspective, catastrophic to other life forms. Clearly they are willing to eradicate another species. The Oankali view life at its most basic level. They do not view the extinction of the human species negatively because they have taken what is best in human genetic structure and combined it with theirs to maximize and perpetuate what is good in human genes. The good aspects of the human species will live on in perpetuity and no real destruction of life forms has taken place. They have just been absorbed into something new.

Humans, by contrast, destroy life and each other. This is clear from the opening of the book where the planet has been plunged into a nuclear winter and most of humanity has been extinguished.

The Oankali have a special reverence for anything living. Their commitment to gene-trading leads them to build, almost exclusively, their technology from living materials. Thus they enjoy a symbiotic relationship with their ship and the other living machines and technology on board.

The Oankali as imperialistic colonizers of the remaining remnants of humanity. The Oankali don't seem to be acting out of altruism. Rather, they rescue humans and restore Earth only so that they can trade with the humans. Genetic trading is a biological necessity for them and are seemingly not capable of backing out of this genetic trade with the humans. They are natural genetic engineers who achieve health, knowledge, and sexual pleasure through their manipulation of DNA.

They are also somewhat imperialistic in that they are convinced that without Oankali genes, humanity will once again destroy itself.

Jdahya: "We're not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies." (41) The aliens trace their lineage back to a tiny virus-like organelle. They evolved through the organelle's invasion, acquisition, duplication and symbiosis with other life forms. The aliens are driven by the organelle to evolve, to hybridize with other species and thus continually to transform themselves and the species with which they interbreed.

Among the Oankali, true consensus, non-hierarchical communitarianism, and truthful communication can be found. Adults communicate non-verbally by way of their tentacles, a mode of communication which does not allow for deceit or ambiguity; and they achieve consensus by totally coalescing with one another, after which they resume their separate individualities.

Human beings

We need to consider how humanity is presented in the novel. One aspect of Butler's characterization of human beings is that males are presented as more dangerous and prone to violence than females. The human male is the embodiment of the so-called human contradiction that leads to self-destruction. Butler presents men as having an urge to dominate and a tendency to violate, not as a matter of upbringing but because of an implied genetic trait. They are supposed to bear more of the human contradiction in them.

In the course of the trilogy, the survivors of nuclear apocalypse amply manifest a lengthy and all too familiar catalog of human vice—egotism, leader worship, ideological and

religious dogmatism, sexual assault, multifarious forms of scapegoating—all of which involve the exclusion and subordination of an outside in relation to a privileged inside.

In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin comes to understand the humans' need to reproduce on their own without Oankali interference or genes. His time with the resisters shows him the profound differences between the perceptions of the Oankali and the human. We might wonder to what degree the Oankali really do understand humanity? They claim to by virtue of having an intimate knowledge of our biology. But, in fact, we see them making regular mistakes in their estimation of human psychology. They make many mistakes in predicting human behavior. The Oankali cannot get beyond their reading of human genetics and their certainty in this reading of human flesh.

The Oankali claim to understand the nature of humanity through their intimate knowledge of living human flesh, but they nevertheless repeatedly misinterpret or wrongly predict human behavior. Their biological certainty does not solve the mystery of human nature but rather focuses the problems of definition onto the body, which is the positioned as the primary signifier of human identity.

It is interesting to note that most of the humans rescued have been rescued mainly from the Southern Hemisphere, recreating a human community in which the white Euro-American peoples are no longer dominant. Butler's male and female human protagonists are black, Chinese, Hispanic, and white.

Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally violent and therefore flawed. The origin of violence lies in the human genetic structure, which is responsible for the contradictory impulses towards intelligence and hierarchy. These two conflicting impulses inevitably propel humans to wage war. Connected to this trait is an inability to tolerate differences, usually physical differences of race and gender. For Butler, there is a pervasive human need to alienate from oneself those who appear to be different—to create Others. She foregrounds how we seize upon biological differences between the two species to reassert notions of inferiority and discrimination.

How to define humanity

Another interesting theme that is raised by *Xenogenesis* is how we define humanity? At the heart of the novel is an anxiety over what it means to be human. Is the category "human" a biological, psychological, cultural, or historical identity? When does an individual cease to be human and what do they become? These questions invoke an exploration not only of what lies outside the human (the animal, the machine, the alien) but also of how the identity human can be universalized when it is also criss-crossed by differences of race, gender, sex, sexuality, class, age, nationality, ethnicity, culture, language and so on. This is connected to the issue of biological essentialism in that it asks to what extent humanity is defined by its genes or its biology. If we agree with sociobiologists and the new myth of the gene that biology is destiny, then we are our genes and humanity is defined by its genes. From this perspective, the gene trade of the Oankali seems like the destruction of humanity.

Differences between human beings and Oankali

Another important theme to consider is the contrast between the human beings and the Oankali. What are some of the important similarities and differences we ought to consider?

- How each species responds to difference
- Their differences regarding sexuality
- The presence in human beings of the “human contradiction”
- The Oankali are presented as not hierarchical (“We all decide” (42).)
- The passivity and acquisitiveness of the Oankali: Jdahya: “We’re not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies.” (41)
- Forms of communication: consider the way in which the Oankali can communicate directly. Among the Oankali, true consensus, non-hierarchical communitarianism, and truthful communication can be found. Adults communicate non-verbally by way of their tentacles, a mode of communication which does not allow for deceit for ambiguity; and they achieve consensus by totally coalescing with one another, after which they resume their separate individualities.
- Their different approaches to technology: biological versus industrial/mechanical
- Difference of dealing with the individual versus dealing with the genes
- Are both genetically driven?

Biological essentialism

We need to consider to what extent *Dawn* incorporates essentialist notions of biology. Holden argues that the Oankali enforce their point of view with essentialist definitions. Again and again, they point to the genetic flaw in humanity in order to justify their colonization and virtual erasure of the species. The Oankali are not capable of perceiving humans as anything other than this flaw. To be human, then, means to be predisposed to ultimate self-destruction. For the Oankali, humans, outside of the gene trade, will always be defined by their biology.

In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler established direct links between biology and behavior, as sociobiologists do, from which there is no way out (apart from the direct intervention of alien genetic engineers). First, our hierarchical tendencies combined with intelligence mean that we are going to self-destruct no matter how hard we try to prevent it. Second, men are inherently violent, so there is no point looking for excuses in their upbringing or in social problems.

The issue of the body

The human characters of *Dawn* define their humanity in terms of a genetic integrity, but for them the body does not in and of itself denote humanity. They position the body as the lesser term within a mind-body split, which demands that bodily impulses be regulated by social values. In *Dawn*, the newly awakened humans draw upon the

redundant ideologies of 20th c America to reconstruct themselves as human in the face of the alien. The Oankali, however, do not recognize such Cartesian dualism. In *Xenogenesis*, the body remains a contested signifier: it represents both a genetic and a cultural text that resists monological interpretation. As living texts the humans are not only read by the Oankali, they are also re-written.

Sexuality

In *Dawn* the struggle for a distinct species identity focuses upon the role and nature of sexuality. The humans insist, at times violently, upon heterosexuality (and the relation between sexual pleasure and reproduction) as a defining characteristic of their nature as a two-sexed species. In contrast, the Oankali sexuality involves three or five partners and is focused upon pleasure not reproduction.

Among the humans, deviation from the heterosexual norm is synonymous with the non-human. The spectre of homosexuality haunts the inter-species group matings and is constructed as potentially more threatening to human nature than the aliens themselves. When sexual differences between the humans are stripped of cultural, geographical or historical specificity aboard the alien ship they are in-vested as signifiers of the truly human.

Is there a role for non-procreative forms of sexuality in *Xenogenesis*, such as gay or lesbian relationships?

The Oankali have transformed humans to the extent that two of the most intimate acts, sexual intercourse and procreation, cannot be completed without their intervention.

The control of all sexual activity is especially horrific for men. According to several male characters, the ooloi take men as though they were women. This forms a major part of men's fear of the Oankali. *Dawn* (203): Peter began to think we had been humiliated and enslaved. "His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away." For men, a symbiotic relationship with the Oankali means loss of independence and their privileged position of dominance, not only in sexual activities but in other social roles too.

Perhaps the most unsettling about the Oankali is the fact that they come in three distinct sexes: male, female, and a third sex neither male nor female nor the bisexual synthesis of masculine and feminine in a single being. They thus trouble what is arguably the source of all dualistic thought: the apparent sexual dimorphism that serves as the basis for every hierarchized binarism. The ooloi employ their third arm to gratify its sexual partners by tapping directly into the pleasure centers of the brain. Such pleasure is not localized in a particular bodily region. Undoing the privileging of genital over other erogenous zones, alien sex is polymorphously perverse. Erotic intensity is evenly dispersed over across the surface of the body. Finally, in alien sex, the nervous systems of all the partners are connected, so that each experiences not only its own but the other's pleasure as well. In this manner, the aliens abolish the dualism of self and other.

The human contradiction

The Oankali are fascinated and horrified by what they see as a deadly contradiction in human genetic structure, the combination of intelligence with hierarchal tendencies.

The issue of difference

Another theme that needs to be explored are the ways in which human beings and Oankali react to difference. The Oankali are fascinated both by the human contradiction and by cancer, which they believe will eventually teach them how to regenerate lost limbs and develop controlled malleability. The Oankali are attracted to difference and need to include it within themselves. Unlike humans who fear difference, Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. From the human perspective, the Oankali are monstrous.

Is one message of *Dawn* that we need to embrace difference? Slonczewski argues that from the Oankali embrace of human cancer genes, Butler draws a broader message, that we humans need to embrace otherness in ethnicities and cultures foreign to our own, even if at first they seem to violate our own values.

The ooloi

We might think about the implications of the ooloi, as the third gender of the Oankali. What was Butler trying to say by re-imagining the sexual relations among the Oankali? The ooloi is a necessary intermediary between the male and female Oankali during intercourse and for procreation. What is the significance of three genders? Perhaps it upsets the binary gender system that governs much of human existence.

Are the ooloi the dominant gender? Do they have a hierarchical arrangement? It does seem that the ooloi are the dominant group. We should consider, for instance, Nikanj's insistence that he knows what Lilith wants, even if she consciously isn't able to recognize her desires fully. To what extent does he manipulate her? Holden argues that the Oankali are not hierarchical and that decisions are made by consensus of the adults. They do not understand competition or war.

The human choice

Individual humans must make a choice between two unattractive alternatives. They can either fight the Oankali and be made sterile and become extinct or cross-breed with them and still become extinct but allow the human gene to perpetuate itself through half-Oankali, half-human constructs.