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From Fear to Responsibility: Gan’s Coming of Age in Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild*

Octavia Butler’s short story *Bloodchild* is set in a fictional world where a group of humans, known as the Terrans, live in a delicate interdependent relationship with centipede-like beings called the Tlics. The Tlics offer protection for the Terrans, whose survival on a hostile alien planet depends on this agreement, in exchange for the male human of a family to serve as the carrier of Tlic eggs. This exchange, which initially seems to promise safety, is far more complicated, as it involves the painful and dangerous process of carrying and birthing the Tlic’s young. In this story, Butler focuses on narrating the interactions between a female Tlic called T’Gatoi and her human host, Gan. Employing detailed descriptions of Gan’s thoughts and actions from his point of view, Butler successfully illustrates Gan’s evolving attitude toward T’Gatoi and his role as the carrier of eggs, capturing the complex emotional journey of a person’s coming-of-age experience.

Through narrating Gan’s reactions to the process of T’Gatoi helping Bram Lomas to extract the grubs, the author successfully illustrates Gan’s changed emotions in terms of being the host for T’Gatoi’s eggs. Before this event, Gan was comfortable being around T’Gatoi and accepted the fact that he would, in the future, be the host to T’Gatoi’s eggs. He recalled that he would assure people “when they ask whether I [Gan] was ever afraid of her” (Butler 4). However, witnessing how T’Gatoi extracted the eggs out of Bram Lomas changed this status quo. Gan recalled how he felt “as though [he] were helping her torture him, helping her consume him” and that he “knew [he] would vomit soon” (Butler 9). Even though Gan knew the process of giving birth was painful, he was still somehow shocked by this process, admitting that “this was something else, something worse. And I wasn’t ready to see it. Maybe I never would be” (Butler 10). When witnessing this event, it is possible that Gan was also imagining himself giving birth in the future and doubting if he was prepared to experience this process compared to before. The uneasiness portrayed by the author already suggests that Gan no longer felt comfortable about his role as the carrier of T’Gatoi’s eggs. By describing Gan’s first major change in emotions, Butler establishes the beginning of an adolescence’s coming of age when they absorb crucial knowledge of the world they did not know before.

Butler then depicts Gan’s denial of the information he received as he attempted to commit suicide, alluding to an adolescence’s immature reactions as they learn more about the reality of the world. After witnessing Lomas giving birth, Gan talked to his brother, Qui, who knew more about this process than he did. As his brother revealed more details about the birth process and dynamics between a Tlic, Gan became more frightened by the reality, and he used denial as a coping mechanism for all of the changes. For example, when Qui revealed a more disturbing birth process that he witnessed, Gan “turned to” Qui and yelled “You’re lying” (Butler 12). This response demonstrates Gan's deep fear and inability to fully accept the risks associated with his role. When he confronted T’Gatoi later, Gan said to her that he “don’t want to be a host animal” and responded with silence when T’Gatoi asked him if he would rather commit suicide (Butler 16). Gan’s actions here show his internal conflict between his growing understanding of the brutal truth and his desire to protect himself from that knowledge. Through narrating Gan’s response, Butler alludes to the struggles of adolescence, where individuals often go through stages of denial as they begin to comprehend the harsher realities of life.

Through depicting Gan’s thought process behind overcoming his fear and accepting his burden to be the host of T’Gatoi’s eggs, Butler successfully shows Gan’s coming of age. After realizing that Gan refused to be the carrier of her eggs, T’Gatoi told Gan that she would instead make his sister, Hoa, the new carrier. Even though he had just expressed that he would die rather than be the host, Gan stopped T’Gatoi and said “but she’s . . . my sister” (Butler 17). After a brief moment of hesitation, he decided that he would still be T’Gatoi’s host. Butler emphasizes Gan’s determination several times by repeatedly illustrating how Gan said the phrase “don’t do it to her” (Butler 17). Butler also portrays Gan as being angry and disturbed when he thought of how T’Gatoi would make Hoa the host if he refused (Butler 18). By choosing to bear the burden himself, rather than allow his sister to take his place, Gan demonstrates a shift from selfish fear to a more selfless acceptance of his role. Through all of these actions, Butler illustrates Gan as a character grappling with the painful responsibilities of adulthood, forced to make a choice between his own self-preservation and the well-being of those he loves. In this way, Butler successfully shows Gan’s coming of age, as he transitions from a state of denial and fear to one of acceptance and responsibility, marking his evolution into adulthood.

Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild* masterfully explores Gan’s emotional journey as he grapples with his role as the host for T’Gatoi’s eggs. Through a series of evolving reactions—from initial acceptance, to shock and denial, and ultimately, to self-sacrifice—Butler illustrates the complexities of coming of age. Gan’s transition from fear and confusion to a more mature acceptance of responsibility highlights the process of growing up. By confronting the harsh realities of his world, Gan moves from immaturity to a deeper understanding of his responsibility, marking his transformation into adulthood.

**Work Cited**

Butler, Octavia E. "Bloodchild." Bloodchild and Other Stories, 2nd ed., Seven Stories Press, 2005, pp. 1-24.