

Self Destruction in Kindred

Self mutilation and self destruction serve many roles in Octavia Butler's Kindred. They show the ties that Rufus, Dana, and Alice all have to one another. Although Butler uses three different characters who experience self destruction and mutilation in different ways with a different meaning for each character, this theme of destruction contains an overarching message for the audience and society as a whole. As a human species, we are all related, with an average 0.03% difference in genetic makeup between the most seemingly different individuals (Kottak 1997). Thus, when human beings hurt each other, they are hurting themselves much like Dana is physically and emotionally hurt when she hurts her ancestor, Rufus. Butler uses physical destruction to represent the physical and emotional destruction of racism on society as a whole, not just the minority victims.

The theme of loss is introduced when the novel begins with Dana losing her arm. By killing Rufus, her ancestor, Dana has lost him as well as her connection to him. By losing her connection to her ancestor, she is also losing her control over history. She cannot return to the past anymore because Rufus is not there to call her. Therefore, she loses the ability exert her modern influence on the past. She is given this control by Rufus whenever he is in danger- she is entrusted with the responsibility to save his life whenever he is in trouble. The destruction of this tie to her relative as well as control over her past takes a physical manifestation in the loss of her arm. When she loses him, she also loses a part of herself. "I moved my head, tried to look at the empty place... the stump" (Butler 10). Here Dana describes her loss as an empty place, something physically missing from her. When she struggles to free her arm from the wall, it

reminisces how she struggled to free herself from Rufus- his control over her while she was in the past as well as her obligation to keep returning to the past to help him. Her arm was stuck into the wall, much the same way she was stuck with trying to help Rufus. The theme of loss plays an important role in the novel. When Dana kills Rufus, this represents the ultimate loss of control. She cannot control him physically, and has lost the ability to reason with him and persuade him to do what is right. She also cannot control herself, unable to stop herself from killing her ancestor.

In addition to a physical self-destruction, Dana emotionally self-destructs when she is in the past. She in a sense becomes a victim of the times, letting the racist attitudes of the past affect her. “What had I done wrong? Why was I still slave to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me. Why had I taken yet another beating” (Butler 177). In this passage, Dana doesn’t understand the changes on her values and motivations for decision making. Her values are from a different time, and do not coincide with the values of those in the past that she is visiting; they do not fit in there because they are molded by the society she came from. Likewise, the Weylins’ values are molded by the society they came from. As a result of her spending so much time in the past, and trying to behave in a socially accepted manner to avoid beatings, she accepts things that she would not have accepted while she was back at home, such as taking the beating in the passage described above. “Once he had told Rufus in my presence, ‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself! A nigger can read better than you!’” (Butler 102). She learns not to respond to derogatory remarks about her color, intelligence, or place at the plantation to save herself from beatings, as well as to maintain the confidence of the Weylins, who she needs to protect her.

As Rufus's guardian, Dana is responsible for the well-being of the Weylin's only son and protects from fatal harm while she is there. Even though this is true, Dana still feels poorly treated by the Weylin family. In spite of the abuse she feels like she is taking, she still has compassion for Rufus. She becomes a victim of her concern for him, and is very naive when it comes to assessing his character and predicting his actions. "I would have all I could do to look after myself. But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves for years to come" (Butler 68). Here, Dana thinks that she can change Rufus's world view to that of a modern day man. She is blinded by the fact that this man is her ancestor, when in truth he would not hesitate to hurt her as evidenced by the passage where Dana and Kevin try to leave the Weylin plantation.

"You're not leaving!" he shouted. He sort of crouched around the gun, clearly on the verge of firing. "Damn you, you're not leaving me!" He was going to shoot. I had pushed him too far. I was Alice all over again, rejecting him. Terrified in spite of myself, I dove past the mare's head, not caring how I fell as long as I put something between myself and the rifle (Butler 188).

Here Dana has pushed him too far. It is shown that Dana does not have as much control over Rufus as she thought she did prior to this incident. Although she was terrified that Rufus would shoot her or Kevin, she put herself in danger to exert some control over Rufus by defying what he wanted. This form of self destruction served as resistance to Rufus's control over her as well as the mindset of white superiority in 1819.

Rufus' own self-destructive behavior signifies his dependence on Dana. She comes to save him every time he is hurt; she represents security for him. Every time he feels insecure, he has her to call on. Despite his careless behavior, including setting his

bedroom drapes on fire and falling from a tree, he can always count on Dana to save him if he is in danger. A white man's dependence on a black woman is an unusual theme to take place in 1819.

The boy was literally growing up as I watched- growing up because I watched and because I helped to keep him safe. 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. I would have all I could do to look after myself. But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves for years to come (Butler 68).

Here, Butler shows the reader that although Dana's travel through time helps her ancestor, it is at great risk to herself. Dana recognizes that this is because she is black, and blacks were treated as "subhuman" during this time. Because she is black, Rufus feels as if he should be the one helping her, not the other way around. He resents her because this difference in status is accompanied by a power differential. Dana saves Rufus's life, teaches him how to read, and serves as his protector. He takes his anger out on her when his father dies, even though he knows it was not her fault and that she tried to save him.

"Dana?"
 "What?"
 "I know you tried to help Daddy. I know."
 "Then why did you send me to the field? Why did I have to go through all that, Rufe?"
 He shrugged, winced, rubbed his shoulders. He still had plenty of sore muscles, apparently. "I guess I just had to make somebody pay"
 (Butler 216).

However, by punishing Dana he is punishing himself as well through her. The relationship between Dana and Rufus is like a tug of war; what Rufus takes away from

Dana he takes for himself. However, whenever he hurts Dana he later suffers himself when the rope is pulled the other way and Dana benefits.

Rufus tries to control Dana through his punishment, which he thinks he should be able to do to a black woman in 1819, but ultimately fails. While he may gain short term victories, he loses everything in the end. This represents his loss of self-control. Since Dana is his ancestor, she is merely an extension of him. He cannot control her any more than he can control his temper, his emotions, or his tendency to get himself into much more trouble than he can handle. It is obvious that Dana cannot control Rufus as a black woman who is assumed to be his slave, but Rufus cannot have complete control over Dana either. Rufus's lack of control over Dana is subtle in the beginning of the novel, but becomes more apparent as the novel goes on. The ultimate loss of control comes when he attempts to rape Dana. He believes that he is entitled to whatever he wants, including Dana. However, Rufus's attempt at the ultimate betrayal of Dana's trust shows just how much of an equal and opposite relationship the two characters have. When Rufus betrays Dana, she wins the battle for the moment by killing her ancestor. However, since they depend so much on each other for their own existence, when Dana loses Rufus, she also loses a part of herself. This takes a physical manifestation in the loss of her arm. The closeness between these two characters takes on a sexual meaning for Rufus. Although he technically owns Dana in the past, he cannot make her love him, any more than he can make Alice love him.

Even though he claims to love Alice, Rufus insists on controlling every aspect of her life, and Alice resents him for this. Rufus's desperation for Alice to accept him is taken too far when he pretends to sell their children. By doing this he pushes her too far.

This is similar to the incident where Rufus threatened to shoot Dana and Kevin when she tried to leave. Here Dana pushed Rufus too far, where Rufus pushes Alice too far when he convinces her that he sold their children. Here the theme of self destruction is evident. Each of these three characters represents parts of a whole- a family. By hurting one member, everyone suffers, in essence hurting oneself by hurting one part of the whole. Alice's suicide plays a dual role. It represents self-destruction, as she physically destroys herself, and forces her children to grow up without a mother (although she thinks this has already happened). In addition, it serves as an extreme form of resistance to Rufus's control over her. Her death is severe punishment for Rufus, and further confirmation that he would never have Alice, much in the same way that he could not have Dana.

The dynamic relationship between Dana, Rufus, and Alice represents different extensions of the same whole. They are all essential for each others' survival, and show dependence on one another. When the relationship between any of the three characters is harmed, one or all of the characters are often physically hurt. This takes the form of both self mutilation and self destruction. One character can most painfully hurt the others by hurting himself/herself. This is shown by Alice's suicide, as well as when Dana kills Rufus. Both of these examples also show the complete loss of self control. Each character knows that he/she will also hurt himself/herself, either physically, emotionally, or both, by hurting one of the others that they are so closely related to. The struggle for control over oneself, others, and history are prevalent themes in the novel. Butler uses destruction to represent the detrimental effects of racism, both physical and emotional, on everyone involved.

Works Cited

Butler, Octavia. Kindred. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

Kottak, Conrad. Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity. New York:
McGraw-Hill, 2002.