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In Appreciation of Female Strength:

The White Male Hero Versus The Black Female Hero in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

Octavia Butler was raised by a single African American mother and born into a poor family. Her mother worked a demeaning job as a housemaid for white employers which Butler despised (Crossley 269-270). Since childhood Butler learned to escape her unfortunate reality through literature. In her adult life this translated into an interest in science fiction and fantasy. Butler eventually decided to pursue her dream of becoming a writer and enrolled in a workshop "for novice science fiction writers" (Crossley 269). Due to Butler's unfavorable upbringing, she focused many of her writings on issues of race and sex. Her novel *Kindred*, for instance, probes these issues through the use of time travel. As DeWitt Kilgore explains when reviewing Butler's work: "[r]eaders for whom science fiction is an adventure in which the white male hero saves humanity will find in Butler a challenge to generic conventions."

Butler does indeed challenge the stereotypical white male hero in *Kindred*. Kevin Franklin is the most heroic male character, yet we can see that he does not quite match up to the black female hero, Dana. They are both transported from twentieth century Los Angeles to nineteenth century Maryland where they must endure the caste system of the Antebellum South. Although Dana is transported back and forth on several occasions for a total of one year, Kevin

is forced to stay in the nineteenth century for a total of five years. Butler purposefully kept Kevin alone in the past to delve into the distraught journey of a modern, liberal white man trapped in the Antebellum South and the challenges he must face to prove his beliefs. Butler also attempts to discredit the myth that bravest soul is always the stereotypical white male hero, while proving that the true hero may very well be the underestimated woman or minority.

During the first half of *Kindred*, Kevin is portrayed as the naive, yet loving and supportive husband. He was born into privilege due to his race and sex. Even as Kevin is transported into the Antebellum South, he does not face the hardships that Dana faces. He is able to sleep in the guest bedroom with his “servant,” Dana, there to make his bed and supply his needs. Although he is on the plantation, he has not experienced and grown into the hardship as Dana has. Yet just as Dana overcomes adversity, so must Kevin. As Jane Davis explains on her review of *Kindred*, “[t]he growth of Kevin’s character is shown in a later conversation with Dana in which he tells her of his risking his safety to help slaves escape after he is separated from Dana and is left behind in the past.” Kevin definitely grew into a heroic character. No longer was Kevin a simple bystander. Instead, he chose to be an active participant in the cause against slavery. He becomes cold and hard. He has a scar across his forehead to prove his new rough demeanor.

Dana respects the decisions Kevin made while stuck in the past and their bond is deeper than ever. However, they still have challenges to face. As they discuss how Dana will handle Rufus, Dana states, “[Rufus] has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying” (Butler 246). Later Kevin asks, “Have you decided what you’re going to do about Rufus?” (Butler 246). The conversation between them makes it clear

that Dana is more courageous than Kevin. While he cannot even utter the word "kill," Dana has to carry out the act. This is significant because in the beginning of *Kindred* Kevin seems like the strong supporting man. He sweeps her off to get married, buys them a home, and is the main breadwinner. Yet, towards the end of the novel his relationship with Dana changes as she takes the lead. She tries to make life easier for him. She is forced to make life-changing decisions on her own. She even saves him from being trapped forever in the past. Ultimately, she bravely decides to kill Rufus and without Kevin to help.

Butler succeeds at expanding our minds on issues she finds most important through *Kindred*. Our traditional notion of heroism is challenged by a strong, black female hero who must endure deadly conditions without the white male to rescue her. In a sense, she must rescue *him* from his own naiveté. Dana is our beacon of strength: quite an unusual situation in science fiction. Butler also succeeds at confronting issues of racism in the twentieth century by probing Kevin and his belief system. In the end we are left with two fantastic characters that transcend stereotypes and leave us feeling hopeful for humanity.

(Word count 763 without header and Works Cited)

Works Cited

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