Parable Of The Sower As An Example Of Environmental Justice Literature

To introduce a world where chaos upholds environmental and social disasters, Octavia Butler's novel Parable of the Sower introduces protagonist Lauren Olamina who is caught between the realities of her society and the impacts it has on the way she lives. Her neighborhood, as she describes it, is a walled community that protects its members from the "outside where things are so dangerous and crazy" (Butler 7). This fear among the community has also caused members to become more vigilant, because if they ever let their guard down, Lauren explains: "I think if there were only one of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes, whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder?" (Butler 10). The paranoia that Lauren exhibits have been built on experience and what she observes around the community. She writes, "My stepmother says she and my father stopped to help an injured woman once, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from a wall and almost killed them" (Butler 10). Furthermore, Lauren has been a witness to the evidence of violence in the faces of many desperate individuals in her community.

Butler's choice of character development within the protagonist is very appropriate because her youth provides fresh new perspectives than those of her father who have different memories of how the United States was and how not to question Lauren's wish to go back to "the good old days" (Butler 10). Therefore, Lauren is able to take in the world around her with a vision that questions everything around her and to not take anything for granted. Author Gregory Smithsimon points out that "race makes power visible by assigning it to physical bodies" (2018). Furthermore, being an African American girl, both her gender and race force her into enduring greater hardships than those a Caucasian male would encounter, so she is better equipped to relate to those who suffer. It is also important to realize that Lauren is not poor, but of middle-class status, which means she doesn't physically endure such hardships her society has to offer. Moreover, Lauren's society associates poverty with illiteracy (Butler 5), so she would not be able to tell her story through her journal entry if her voice was subdued or entirely lost. Also, if her lack of literacy prevented her from obtaining books, she would not have gained much knowledge in history, a knowledge that would have helped Lauren understand the origins of current issues and historical precedence of newly found injustices. Essentially, Butler uses Lauren's voice as a driving force for the novel; the novel's power stems from Lauren's rhetorical analysis of the dominant ideologies and the reality that results because of them and how they impact the world around her.

In the beginning, Butler establishes a weakness that is portrayed within the protagonist that gives her a sense of vulnerability within her community. Lauren states: "My mother was taking—abusing—a prescription drug when she got pregnant with me. The drug was Paracetco. As a result, I have hyper empathy syndrome" (Butler 76). This weakness causes Lauren to feel sensitive to the emotions of the people around her. Furthermore, it's noticed that hyper empathy is seen as a weakness in this world because individuals in this community need to feel their own suffering while focusing on competing for resources and status, they can't disregard themselves to engage in other people's feelings. This promises that the privilege of a few in the community is safe from any uprising of the unprivileged. This is why Lauren's unjust and unequal society sees individuals continuing to fight amongst themselves instead of recognizing

a possible change to the status quo. Her ability, in connection with her social status as a young female African American, allows Lauren to notice the society's downfall and to critique its causes or to explore solutions. She is able to cross into the subjective position of those she meets and is able to experience their reality as they experienced it. For instance, Lauren mentions when Bankole is talking about his brother-in-law's life and how hard it was for him to succeed. Bankole states: 'My brother-in-law had a hard time before people began to get used to him, and he moved up here before things got so bad. He knew plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, and motor vehicle mechanics. Of course, it didn't help that he was black. Being white might help you win people over faster than he did" (Butler 25). As seen with racial inequality of the nineteenth century, "race continued to determine access to jobs, education, equal opportunity, and any sense of a shared American nationalism" (Nieves 2018). Lauren's hyper empathy, however, approaches the situation differently where her weakness is actually shown to unite these feelings in a positive direction. She says: If we make a community and not have to hire out to strangers and trust them when they shouldn't be trusted, then we should do it. If you grew up where I did, you'd know we should" (Butler 25). This idea of race and inequality found within Butler's novel depicts situations of oppression, but a lot of it is also based on reality.

Like Butler, environmental justice critics understand that because racial minorities, women, and those struck with poverty cannot obtain political and economic power to influence the decisions of leaders, they are more exposed to suffer the impacts environmental disaster: "exposure to toxins in the workplace and in communities, cancer clusters, and the loss of communal outdoor spaces, not to mention possible starvation, homelessness, and even death as environmental conditions worsen" (Saxton & Ghenis). While Butler explores real-world problems, her analysis shows the relevance of the social injustices running wild in a time during environmental crises within Parable of the Sower. Leaders who are in power disregard those who are not in power, and they take resources for themselves that ensure their own survival. Furthermore, the novel can be read in order to expose and analyze these real-world problems while making its readers aware of the connections between the injustice portrayed within the novel and the injustice of the real world. Although Lauren faces many struggles within her community, she herself is aware of her class privilege. Her family appears relatively well off financially and are able to hide behind community walls, however, many individuals are not as fortunate to live in "neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash;" in "pitiful, unwalled residential areas [….in which] A lot of the houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children;" or even on the streets (Butler 9-10). One entry Lauren writes is: "they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs. They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves" (Butler 10-11). These individuals have put both Lauren and her family in danger directly with violence and indirectly with theft of resources. Her father mentions that he would be willing to shoot these people in order to protect his family, arguing that "if these people steal enough, they'll force us to spend more than we can afford on food—or go hungry. We live on the edge as it is" (Butler 71). However, Lauren appears to sympathize with their behavior by stating: "They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous" (Sower 10). Even though Lauren knows she will possibly have to shoot them for protection, she is still far more hesitant than her father, because after killing them, she would feel her victim's pain.

Lauren knows that her community has an advantage because of its middle-class status, but it is also because it is a mixed-race community where members often experience social and environmental crises unequally. However, in the beginning, this idea of inequality is not apparent because Lauren's community seems to work together in order to survive. Lauren writes, "The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind [….] Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games" (Butler 36). Nonetheless, her community is at risk of being pulled apart due to racial divides. Smithsimon states: "Putting whiteness under inspection shows how powerful race is, despite the instability of racial categories. For decades, 'whiteness' was an explicit standard for citizenship. (Blacks could technically be citizens but enjoyed none of the legal benefits" (2018). This idea becomes evident when Olivar, a corporate community hiring people for jobs and security, welcomes people to apply for residency. Olivar initially states that they would not make their selections based on race, but Lauren knows that as a young African American girl with a mixed-race family, she would not be welcome because of Olivar's newfound racism. Lauren has very little desire to move to Olivar because she knows its residents will eventually become victims of wage slavery. She knows that she is at risk in her own community, that moving to Olivar would put her at a much greater risk.

This worst-case scenario has already taken place in Butler's Parable of the Sower, and Lauren's rhetorical analysis reveals the relationships within the racial justice issues of our own world and the even more extreme racial justice issues of her own. Indeed, this dystopia presented in the novel is far from current trends, that it creates a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement. This notion is effective because Lauren shares her experiences through her journal, and as we read through, we become better acquainted with her and begin to care about what happens to her. Essentially, we are made to understand what she goes through and are told to sympathize with her experiences. However, we are not made to just empathize with her, but with those she experiences hyper empathy for. This way, Butler's Parable of the Sower is seen as a compelling work of environmental justice literature. Because it encourages readers to experience and understand the issues of those who suffer the burden of both social and environmental injustice.

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