

Depiction of empathy in parable of the sower

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Empathy: A quality or a fault?

Empathy is a quality that most human beings consider a weakness rather than a strength. In a world where everyone is concerned with his or her own well being, it seems that being understanding other's feelings is an unnecessary virtue to have. In Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower, Lauren is born with a disease called hyper-empathy. Her hyper-empathy enables her to feel other people's pleasure and pain. While living in a dystopian society where survival is the primary concern, her hyper empathy is like a double edged-sword. Though she can empathize with other's struggles, this often weakens her physically and emotionally, thus putting her life at greater risk and danger. However, throughout the book, it is demonstrated that being hyper empathetic can actually be useful. Lauren's disorder highlights the significance of being empathetic in a world where individuals are distraught and living in terrible conditions. Throughout the novel Parable of the Sower, Butler suggests empathy can be a positive trait to have and perhaps human beings should learn to be more empathetic as it can effectively end conflict and unite people.

Lauren's hyper- empathy syndrome serves to demonstrate that empathy can create bonds between different individuals. When she is on the run with Harry and Zahra, they are mainly worried about themselves and trust no one. Lauren is smart enough to know when to help others and when not to. Although Harry and Zahra are less likely to help others, Lauren's syndrome of hyper empathy makes her prone to help people who are in need. In one instance, Harry, Zahra, and Lauren come across a couple with a baby. After

much deliberation, Lauren asks the man of the family if they want to join them, but he questions her. She replies, “ Why not. We’re natural allies—the mixed couple and the mixed group. Come join us if you want to. Five is better than two” (208). She notices that the couple is all alone and could use help and company. Travis is suspicious of her motives, and later on realizes that she has him and his family’s best interest at heart. Lauren senses that the couple—Natividad and Travis— is not skilled in living on their own, so she wants to help them. She also sees that they have a child, which makes them more vulnerable to being attacked. Knowing that she is equipped to help them, Lauren decides to provide them with protection. If Lauren was selfish and did not feel bad for the couple, she would have left them and they most likely would have died. Interestingly enough, Lauren is the only one who feels bad about leaving the couple by themselves. This illustrates the benefit of being empathetic. Empathy allows for bonds to be created that normally would not occur. The chance of a couple with a child pairing up with a teenager and a married couple is not a common alliance. Butler uses Lauren’s character to prove that empathy is necessary to the survival of others. Lauren’s responsiveness to other’s feelings creates bonds that last until the very end. Being cognizant of other’s feelings creates a bond that strengthens a group of people. They can rely on each other to survive in times of despair. They are able to relate with one another’s struggles and can easily help each other. Empathy is powerful enough to strengthen relationships between people and saves lives of many, which proves that empathy is a great virtue to have.

As mentioned previously, empathy holds the power to solidify relationships. When people are in a secure group where they feel their feelings and needs are considered, they are more likely to stay together and trust one another. Other individuals see Lauren's selflessness when she endangers her own life to save another. Although Lauren can still feel physical pain, she learns to control it when she saves Travis and Natividad's baby from being eaten by a dog. In that instant, she kills without hesitation, " I stopped, slipped the safety, and as the third dog went in toward the baby, I shot it" (209). Although she knew that shooting the dog would cause her pain as well, her desire to save a helpless creature was greater than saving herself from pain. Since she is aware that pain weakens her, she disregards it for a moment and thinks about the safety of the child. After shooting the dog, she instantly feels pain, but is willing to sacrifice her well being for another individual. If more people were like Lauren, less people would be hurt, dead, or in terrible circumstances. It is evident that Lauren's exaggerated case of empathy has saved lives. If she had left Natividad, Travis, and Dominic all alone, they would have ended up dead, which shows how her act of empathy is a positive thing. The other characters learn from Lauren, that through understanding each other's suffering and longings, they can help each other overcome any obstacle. Characters who are apathetic in the novel tend to end up alone and are in greater danger. As seen in the book, Lauren is constantly in danger, but manages to survive even with her hyper empathy syndrome. She is a role model whether or not other characters realize it because she displays courage even though she feels everyone else's fear and pain in the story.

Octavia Butler uses Lauren's hyper empathy to make a social commentary about our cruel, selfish nature. After Lauren's brother Keith is killed, she questions the moral compass of other people, " If hyper empathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture?" (115). As Lauren says, if people were more empathetic, less people would be suffering or dying. It is important to note that Keith was tortured to death, which demonstrates the lack of mercy people have on a human life, especially the life of a child. If the people responsible for Keith's death had felt the physical pain that Keith felt when he was tortured, they probably would not have killed him. Butler tries to convey that if people were like Lauren, they would be less likely to inflict pain and suffering upon other people since they would be able to feel the pain they give unto others. In reality, we do not feel other's physical pain, but the exaggerated example illustrates how apathetic individuals can be in a world where everyone is trying to survive on their own. Perhaps Butler also includes this example in her story to imply that if we continue to be apathetic and our world does turn upside down, we may end up miserable, alone, and helpless.

. Lauren's hyper empathy plays an important role in determining the ending of the story. Due to her extreme empathy, she creates a community of people who are brought together. Someone with her disorder would most likely feel hopeless and powerless, but Lauren is different. She realizes that her hyper empathy may actually serve as a positive contribution to her community, " I've never thought of my problem as something that might do

some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people" (115). Although she feels a great amount of suffering, she is still hopeful that her community can change for the better. She sees that people can change if they were more like her. She also realizes that her hyper empathy enables her to bring people together, which is key to everyone's survival. In the beginning of the story Lauren is afflicted because she sees her hyper empathy as something negative, but with the help of her extreme empathy, she is able to lead Harry, Zahra, Travis, Natividad, and many others to survival. This allows her to embrace her hyper empathy as she sees the strength it gives her to continue to fight for her and other people's survival. Empathy is powerful because it allows for greater things to happen. It can be best described as a domino effect. Empathy creates bonds, which creates trust among everyone, which enhances the probability of everyone in Lauren's group to survive.

Instead of feeling like Lauren has to carry a burden, she is empowered and finds strength in her disorder. Her ability to feel other people's pain fuels her desire to see change in her world. Due to her strong empathy, she creates the religion of Earthseed to bring about change. Instead of becoming hopeless, she seeks the opportunity to share her beliefs and thoughts to change people for the better. Although it terrifies her at first, she feels that Earthseed needs to be shared with others, " It won't let me go. Maybe... Maybe it's like my sharing: One more weirdness; one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion that I'm stuck with. (26). She compares Earthseed to her hyper empathy to show that perhaps her beliefs are crazy, but they keep recurring and are becoming real, just like her hyper empathy syndrome. She

understands that people may think she is crazy, but perhaps it is her crazy thoughts that are actually worth listening to. Earthseed is a positive outcome of her hyper empathy syndrome. She believes she can create change, unlike other people. Many of the people around her stay complacent to the problems going on. Ironically enough, even her father, who is supposed to be a kind, loving, priest, does not show empathy for other people. Lauren is the opposite of many other characters who only care about themselves. Butler does this to show how our world does not encourage us to be compassionate towards other people. She uses Lauren's character to make a statement: we need more empathy because it can bring people together and can end or lessen problems in our world.

Lauren's empathy for the characters in the story has the ability to encourage others to show empathy as well. In one instance, a family is attacked and killed. Thankfully the baby survives, but he does not stop crying since he misses his mother. Since Natividad has her own child, she can imagine how panicked the child feels without his mother. Knowing how anxious the child is, she shows empathy for him, " At that moment, Natividad took the new child, and in spite of his age, gave him one breast and Dominic the other. (252). This gesture is a sign of empathy shown by Natividad. She understands how important it is to help creatures that cannot take care of themselves. Since Lauren rescued her child once, Natividad emulates Lauren by taking the child under her wing and protecting him. Natividad is a mother herself, so she feels sorry for the child who is now motherless. If people were more empathetic, everyone would be working together in order to survive. The mentality of " every man for himself" is not effective as it creates

divisions and competition to survive. Lauren and her disorder are proof that empathy is not only a good trait to have, but is key to survival when there are problems.

Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* highlights the drawbacks and advantages empathy has on human beings. When individual lives are at risk, it seems that having empathy does not necessarily help one's survival. When it comes down to life and death, humans are primarily concerned with their own lives and their loved ones. However, in the novel, Lauren—along with other sharers—seem to survive just fine with their hyper empathy syndrome. Octavia Butler does this on purpose to show the readers that perhaps empathy can bring people together, which can ultimately lead to ending conflict. In the novel, being empathetic seems to be more of a positive trait, especially with Lauren as the greatest source of empathy. She embodies empathy as a quality that sets her apart from other characters in the story. Ultimately, Lauren feels that her hyper empathy syndrome is not a disease she has to live with, but a virtue that gives her hope, and power to survive a dystopian world.