

Main features in kindred novel

Family



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Unjust Power Derived From Prejudice

Today, there is a constant power struggle in government between parties. In our capitalist economy, the same struggle is seen between people. These power relations and hardships were also seen especially during the period of slavery. As Octavia Butler shows in her novel *Kindred*, Dana's interactions with characters of the antebellum south demonstrate how a preconception of superiority can lead to an abuse of power. This is seen through common patrollers of the neighborhood, and through the characters of Rufus and Margaret.

First, even typical patrollers of the area, who have never seen Dana before, exercise control over her without reason. This is seen on Dana's second visit to Rufus, in which she helps him extinguish a fire. After she is finished with her assistance, Dana must make an escape. Rufus tells her about Alice living in the forest, and Dana sets out to find her, assuming she will be free once she is off of the property. Unfortunately for Dana, she finds the same harshness as there was on the ranch. This is her first encounter with any patroller, and at first, Dana responds by acting defensively. Obviously this irritates the patroller, who believes he should be treated with utmost respect, especially from a black female. In response, he "slapped me stunningly with one hand while holding me with the other. 'You got no manners... I'll teach you some'" (Butler 41)! The patroller doesn't hesitate to hurt Dana after being offended by her. In reality, all she did was suggest he didn't have any authority over her. As part of his job, the patroller believes he has complete control over blacks. This notion of power enables him to act in a disregarding way towards Dana's safety. But when she turns the tables

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and tackles him, the patroller fights back, and threatens, “‘ You know you’re going to pay for that, don’t you’” (Butler 42)? His tone is almost as he is addressing a child, indicating a feeling of superiority. It is this feeling that gives the patroller the authority to act in the controlling way he does towards Dana.

Not only is this feeling demonstrated through an unnamed guard, but also through Rufus. Despite his relationship with Dana, Rufus exerts his power over her in unjust ways, thus losing her trust. Although he claims it is in her best interest, Rufus acts negligently towards Dana on multiple occasions. One of these occurrences was when the two fought over Rufus’ decision to sell the slave children. This was a decision of his justified because of his position of authority. Although it would be an illegal act today, nothing was prohibiting him from exercising his right to do that. When Dana tried to interfere with the transaction, Rufus took his authority too far. When Dana tries to convince him to abandon the sale, Rufus becomes aggressive. His right to exercise control over the slaves, a property of his, should not engage Dana, a free woman. But his idea of being all powerful is unfairly applied to her, and he abuses his power as head of the household. Dana recounts, “ He pushed me back towards the door and I struggled... it was like talking to a wall” (Butler 238). Rufus acts without regard for her, and then on top of that, is completely non-respondent to anything she says. Because of his sense of superiority, Dana suffers from a barrier to communication. Soon, though, this turns into a physical fight: “‘ Please, Rufe. Please don’t.’ He hit me. He hit me hard. It was a first, and so unexpected that I stumbled backwards and fell. And it was a mistake. It was the breaking of an unspoken agreement

between us and he knew it. I got up slowly, watching his anger and betrayal. 'Get in the house and stay there' he said." (Butler 239). Rufus had hit Dana, a betrayal showing his authority through physical dominance. He uses his perceived power in a negligent way, hurting Dana physically and mentally. His remark for Dana to go inside is again like scolding a child. The tone of this passage indicates how Rufus feels about Dana not concerned for her, and a controlling manner dominates his speech. After this incident, Dana realizes that she is unable to trust Rufus anymore because of the way he unjustly exerts his power.

This is not only seen through male characters, but also Margaret Weylin. Dana is put under Margaret's demanding and partisan jurisdiction as she subjects them to harsh standards. She has a preconceived idea about Dana to begin with because of her ethnicity and intelligence. Dana observes, "' I don't think Margaret likes educated slaves any better than her husband does'" (Butler 82). Margaret is uneasy about having an educated black woman around the house, and combined with the fact that Dana is in a relationship with a white man, she immediately looks down on her as inferior. While looking down on others is one thing, being physically abusive is another. Because Margaret feels a natural sense of supremacy, she won't hesitate to hurt others. Dana recounts this, saying, " I'd seen Margaret Weylin slap one of (the children) hard across the face. The child had done nothing more than toddle into her path. If she was willing to punish a child for her husband's sins, would she be any less willing to punish me if she knew I was where she wanted to be with Kevin" (Butler 85)? Margaret feels that she is above the slaves and uses this as means to justify taking out her

anger on them. Although legally she can do this, it is unjustified to treat a child this way as a result of her own struggles with her husband. It also foreshadows that she won't hesitate to act controlling of Dana, too.

Margaret's idea that she has power may be true legally, but it is clear she oversteps the boundaries of her position.

All in all, Dana was treated poorly by the majority of the people she met in the antebellum south. A guard on patrol in the neighborhood demonstrated unjust ways to control her, despite not meeting Dana before or even knowing who she was. Rufus also took advantage of his position and hurt Dana physically and mentally, without reason. His mother, Margaret, exerted similar methods of authoritatively taking advantage of her. Overall, Dana had experienced the unfortunate result of abuse by all of these people who had an unreasonable expectation of their power.