

# The concept of "home"



Home is oftentimes perceived as one of the places where a person feels safest and as one of the places where one likes being most. This seems to be very straightforward, but in her novel *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler complicates this concept of home by using the conflicting emotions of the characters Dana and Kevin to show how having sharper experiences somewhere affects their idea of what and where home is. Dana and Kevin are both taken from one time to another and in Dana's case, more than once, causing them to rethink their ideas of what/where home to them is. During their stays in the 19th century, they have many experiences that make them feel more connected to it and make them start to feel like it is their home.

Towards the beginning of the story, Dana is sure that the new apartment she shares with Kevin in 1976 is her home. After her second visit to Rufus, she still says, " God, I hurt, and I'm so tired. But it doesn't matter. I'm home" (44). She hasn't been in the 19th century for very long and has had only a few experiences there, most of them not very good. She also hasn't really had any connections with the people there besides realizing that a few of them were her ancestors, so she understandably views her 1976 apartment as her home. It's the time that she grew up in, and it's where Kevin and the things she likes/is most familiar with are, while 19th century Maryland is a time and place she's been in for less than a day.

As Dana starts making more trips back to the antebellum South, she has more experiences there and makes more connections with the people there. She becomes more used to everything there and how it works. When she thinks about it after a couple more visits and after getting Kevin back, she thinks that Rufus's time was a " sharper, stronger reality" (191), and that "

the work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse" (191). Dana has done and experienced so much there that it's become a place she's familiar enough with to think of as home. She remembers that "[she] could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that [she] had come home. And having to stop and correct [herself], remind [herself] that [she] was in an alien, dangerous place" (190). These thoughts show Dana's conflicting emotions regarding the plantation and what it was to her. Even though it was a place in which she had felt a lot of pain, she had also had good experiences there and made strong emotional connections with some of the people there. With this, Butler is trying to make the point that home might sometimes have painful or dangerous things along with the good things, but it will still be home if that's what one feels about it.

In *Kindred*, Butler complicates the concept of home by showing that home isn't always the place where one feels the safest, or the one where one always wants to be. Robert Crossley argues that Butler, with *Kindred*, offers a challenge to the expression "Home is where the heart is", along with other expressions, which essentially means that home is where someone always longs to be. He writes that "By the time Dana's time traveling finally stops and she is restored to her Los Angeles home in 1976, the meaning of a homecoming has become impossibly complicated. Her first act, once her arm is sufficiently healed, is to fly to present-day Maryland; both her California house and the Weylin plantation have become inescapably 'home' to her" (267). Dana feels like there are two places that are her home, but a person can't long to be in two places at the same time, so the expression "Home is

where the heart is" was challenged. Butler did this using Dana as an example and uses this to make the point that home isn't necessarily only one place.

Kevin's conflicting emotions regarding his and Dana's 1976 house and the Weylin plantation were also used by Butler to complicate the concept of "home". At first, he, like Dana, thought of their house in 1976 as their home. However, when he went to the antebellum South with Dana, he was left there for five years when Dana was transported back to the 20th century, having to live in the 19th century by himself until Dana came back. He said that he "' kept going farther and farther up the east coast'" (192), but that the only time he felt at home was when he "' went back to Maryland ... when [he] visited the Weylins to see whether [Dana] was there'" (192), and when he was back in the 20th century, he also said "' If I'm not home yet, maybe I don't have a home'" (190). These things he says show that even though he doesn't like the Weylin plantation, he still somehow thinks of it as home, because he has had experiences there with Dana that affected him a lot, and since he loves Dana, he'll think of a place as his home when she is/was there with him. This is also a point that Butler is trying to make: home is a place in which someone has shared many experiences (sometimes good, but other times not as good) with someone who he/she has a strong emotional connection with.

Butler uses the characters Dana and Kevin and their emotions regarding two different places they've stayed in to complicate the concept of "home," which is usually thought of as a place that someone feels safe in and one that a person would almost always want to be. She does this by having them

have stay and go through many experiences, both good and bad, in a foreign place and time. This makes them feel like the both of the times and places they stayed in are their homes, even though one of them has proved to be dangerous to them, especially to Dana. Butler has made all of her readers think about their ideas of home and what it is.

## **Works Cited**

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. 1979. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. Print.

Crossley, Robert. Critical Essay. *Kindred*. By Butler, Octavia E. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. 265-280. Print