

Audience  
relationships in the  
slave and neo-slave  
narrative: comparing  
texts by j...



One difference between the slave and neo-slave narrative is the relationship of the audience to the text's protagonist. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs cannot address her audience from equal grounds; because of her political motive, she speaks as a kind of solicitor who must reach across a barrier to convince the reader of her position. In contrast, Butler's text assumes the equality of the narrator and the audience; since Butler's world is fictional, the reader has no grounds to argue against the experiences that Lilith describes. In both cases, the narrator's purpose determines their relationship to the reader. Under the premise of the reader's trust, Butler draws her reader into fictional experiences where they can experience the protagonist's dilemmas first hand. Butler's method ultimately results in the expansion of the reader's view of the issues she describes. Jacobs, on the other hand, uses her separate position as a slave to convince the reader of her political stance.

Jacobs addresses a white, female audience with the intention of inspiring political action in favor of abolition. Butler, in contrast, does not claim to address a specific reader. The general demographic seems to be the progressive audience of her time period. Because of the progressive nature of Butler's audience, her considerations of morality actually attempt to reverse the conservative culture of her time. In contrast, Jacobs follows moral standards as defined by her readers and attempt to argue for the immorality of slavery over the course of her text.

The author's relationship to her audiences defines, to a large extent, the style of the text. Jacobs functions as a kind of solicitor advertising a political agenda. In the prologue of *Incidents*, she states: "... I do earnestly desire to

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arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is." (2) From this passage, the reader understands that Jacobs aims to communicate a factual depiction of slavery and potentially inspire political action in her readers. On the other hand, Butler's novel aims to communicate vicarious experiences to its reader. Beyond age and time period considerations, her audience remains undefined. The authors' contrasting descriptions of birth illustrate their varied modes of communication. While describing her own birth, Jacobs states: " I was born a slave" (1). She then goes on to describe the circumstances of her life. The " I" in this sentence excludes the reader from this statement. In contrast, Butler describes her protagonist's birth with " Alive!" This phrase does not assign a subject; furthermore, it engages the audience in the immediate moment of an experience. The reader and the protagonist are set on equal ground. Butler then describes Lilith's thoughts and observations; the reader feels and discovers the Awakening along with Lilith. In short, Jacobs's readers are spoken to as a separate audience, while Butler's readers are carried through situations and events, allowing them to form their own impressions.

Although Butler and Jacobs address similar issues, their different treatments of their audiences leads them to make distinct stylistic choices. Both novels contain instances of sexual violation, specifically, Nikanj's interactions with Lilith and Joe and Dr. Flint's violation of Jacobs. These scenes share similar structures: a slave-holder third party demands sex, eventually leading to the

mixed-race pregnancy of the affected slave. Although Jacob's pregnancy occurs as a result of self-initiated actions, one can argue that her pregnancy is no more consensual than Lilith's. Both protagonists lack the authority that a free woman might have; Jacobs argues that slavery lead her to make morally corrupt decisions, stating that a slave woman cannot be held to the same moral standards as her white reader.

Through the use of apostrophe, Jacobs protects her readers while also placing them on separate moral ground. Because of her political intention, Jacobs honors her audience's trust by surrounding expletive portions of her story with apostrophe. Jacobs uses the condition of slavery to her advantage. She states: " I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness." Jacobs shows that, while in slavery, her self-aware decisions lead to her moral destruction. This further appeals to her audience, who holds strong Christian standards around the topic of sex. Later in the passage, Jacobs furthers the blame she has placed on slavery alone: " I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair." (52) By blaming her moral corruption on slavery itself, Jacobs argues for abolition. Butler, on the other hand, intentionally places her readers in uncomfortable scenes without warning; the reader discovers Nikanj's intended interaction with Lilith and Joseph as the characters themselves are exposed to the experience. Instead

of commenting on the immorality of her character's actions, Butler uses Lilith and Jacob's thoughts to inspire empathy for their circumstance. This ultimately assists her in achieving her purpose of expanding the reader's experience of, and empathy for, the slave condition. Butler argues that Lilith and Jacob's response is inevitable, since the Oankali hold such sway over the humans that Joe and Lilith cannot be held accountable for their submission. Although Joe takes a stance against his interaction with Nikanj, he finds himself sexually involved with it anyhow. Because of the fluid, present-tense nature of the text, the reader comes to empathize with the characters as they surrender their will to their oppressor. This stands in contrast to Jacob's text, where the protagonist isolates her story to defend the reader from moral hazard and achieve a political purpose.

While both texts take different stylistic approaches, they address similar themes. Throughout time, humanness has been an inarguably sympathetic trait; its loss or attainment influences readers of any genre or time period. By playing on the reader's compassion for the human condition, both authors demonstrate the negative effects of slavery. Lilith begins her story in strong defense of her humanity; over the course of the novel, she sacrifices her biological humanness to the extent she believes doing so will help her and other humans attain freedom. The Oankali, as well, acknowledge the beauty of the human race. While describing the human condition, Nikanj states: "A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination." (109) However, their ironic treatment of humans — "loving" them while also causing their extinction — shows that they do not truly understand or value humanity in

its original form. By the end of the novel, Lilith's greatest loss is the non-humanness of her child. Jacobs, too, uses the concept of inherent humanness as a means to appeal to her readers. Jacobs strongly associates a loss of humanness with the slave condition. However, in her case, humanity is slowly gained over the course of the novel as she attains freedom. While describing a slave's interactions with the church, Jacobs states: "Moreover, it was the first time they had ever been addressed as human beings." (50) Throughout the narrative, Jacobs defines slavery as a threat to one's humanity. By the end of the novel, Jacobs "unveils her face" and becomes human. Both characters make journeys to and from humanness. Through the construction of their texts, each author associates humanness with freedom.

Both authors consider the reader's relationship to the narrator while making decision throughout their text. Butler, who aims to expand her reader's viewpoint, uses the scenarios in the text to inspire empathy for those in slavery. Because of the open intention of her narrative, she makes no attempt to defend her character's actions. Her modern reader benefits more so from the vicarious experiences created by the text. Jacobs, on the other hand, uses her former slavery and the moral preferences of the time to condemn the ownership of a human being. Both authors appeal to their readers humanity, a trait that lies inherent in the argument against slavery and therefore transcends time.