

# The symbolism of water in parable of the sower



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Water is the most abundant source of life on this planet. Not only did the first living beings emerge from its depths, but it also possesses the ability to keep every living thing alive. Powerful as it is, water takes on whole new meanings in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In this novel, the journal entries of Lauren Olamina tell her story as she, literally and figuratively, navigates the world around her. The dystopian America Lauren lives in is practically void of a reliable source of water, especially in Lauren's case as she lives in southern California, an area known for its long periods of drought. These circumstances highlight the symbolism of water in the novel. In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, water represents wealth, life, and safety.

There are many instances in this novel where water is a symbol for wealth. The setting of this story is one where a majority of the population is extremely impoverished. Due to this and the inflation of the failing economy, water has become an expensive necessity, and clean water a luxury. According to Lauren, "water now costs several times as much as gasoline" and "is as good as money" (Butler 18, 201). Only those who have money are able to drink water, and that water is not guaranteed to be safe unless it is from a commercial water station. As a consequence of this, people that have the ability to afford water are considered wealthy, and usually despised. Lauren explains that "[y]ou're supposed to be dirty now. If you're clean, you make a target of yourself" (18). To the poor and thirsty people around Lauren, if one has the option of cleaning themselves with water, they are trying to show off how much better and wealthier they are than the people around them.

Water is also a symbol for life. Heavy themes such as poverty, racism, and violence are all prevalent during this novel. However, there are certain times when lightheartedness and general liveliness can seep into the story, usually attached to scenes concerning water. For instance, when it begins to rain, after raining for six years, Lauren describes how she feels when the rain hits her skin: " It was so wonderful. How can [Cory] not understand that? It was so incredible and wonderful" (48). Lauren is characterized as a serious and intelligent girl, yet in this moment, seeing the water outside her house, she becomes a new person. Disregarding the consequences and disobeying her stepmother, Lauren stands outside until she is soaked in dirty rain water. These actions are not indicative of someone who is trying their best to be seen as an adult and to survive in a dangerous world, they are the actions of a teenager who wants to enjoy her life. A similar event occurs later in the novel when Lauren, Harry, and Zahra are at a beach. They are completely surrounded by potentially dangerous strangers in unknown territory, but this is the first time any of them had seen the ocean, so again Lauren disregards the consequences of her actions and actually lives her life. Her and Zahra, neither knowing how to swim, walk into the ocean and " threw water on each other...let the waves knock [them] around, and laughed like crazy people," Lauren even claims it was the " best time [she's] had since [they] left home" (206). Both these scenes are instances where characters that are usually burdened by countless tragedies and traumas are able to enjoy their life, surrounded by water.

In the novel, water additionally represents safety for the characters. Until the end of the story, the characters are never in a place completely void of

danger. However, there are certain points where the characters are in places of temporary tranquility, places that are associated with water. The first place is the ocean. When the group arrives there, Lauren describes the scene:

...the narrow strip of sand was crowded with people, though they managed to stay out of each other's way. They had spread themselves out and seemed far more tolerant of one another than they had during our night in the hills. I didn't hear any shooting or fighting. There were no dogs, no obvious thefts, no rape. Perhaps the sea the cool breeze lulled them. (205)

This scene is a deep contrast to the night the group experienced on the hills, where there was shootings throughout the night and fighting constantly. But, at the ocean, there is an odd sense of understanding among the various groups, as if no one wants to disturb the peace the water created.

Consequently, the characters feel safe here, safe enough for them to play in the ocean and enjoy themselves. The other place the characters experiences some safety was at the lake. Once they arrived at the lake, Lauren remarked that none of the people living there shot at them or bothered them at all as they made their way to a campsite (259). Additionally, the group was able to find a remote campsite where they could relax safely. Lauren even had the opportunity to spend all day “ talking, writing, reading, and making love to Bankole” (268). Both the time spent at the ocean and the time spent at the lake are indicative about how being surrounded by water calms even the most barbaric people, creating a safer environment.

The symbol of water in Parable of the Sower represents a variety of positive and life-sustaining factors. Because of its high price, those that can afford the basic necessity of water are seen as wealthy. Moreover, the tranquility created by water allows for the characters to relax safely and enjoy themselves. Not only is water essential to survive, but to these characters, water is essential for doing anything more than surviving. Throughout the story, the water presents the characters with outlets to escape the severity of the world around them and just live.