

Women in Kindred Sympathetic

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Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* is a novel about slavery, historical memory, gender, family, and the ways power shapes apparently personal relationships. The women in the novel are especially important because they experience racial domination together with sexual violence, forced reproduction, family separation, domestic labor, and restrictions on movement. The original essay asks whether Carol, Dana, Sarah, Carrie, and Alice are sympathetic characters. That question remains the center of this expanded analysis. Sympathy does not require every woman to behave heroically or make choices available to a free person. Butler places the characters in unequal circumstances and asks readers to judge their actions within the limited possibilities created by slavery, racism, patriarchy, and fear. (Butler, 2003; Crossley, 2003; Mitchell, 2001)

The original essay describes some of the enslaved women as patient or submissive and later calls them weak because they do not openly fight for their rights. This judgment needs reconsideration. Enslaved people did resist, but resistance took many forms and carried severe risks. Open defiance could lead to whipping, sale, rape, separation from children, or death. Survival, concealment, negotiation, protection of family members, preservation of knowledge, emotional refusal, escape, and occasional confrontation could all express agency. A woman's inability to defeat a legal and violent system should not be confused with consent to that system. Butler makes her women sympathetic partly by showing how they attempt to preserve themselves and others when every available choice has been damaged by power.

Sarah: Endurance, Anger, and Maternal Protection

Sarah has endured extraordinary loss in the Weylin household. Her husband is dead, and Tom Weylin has sold three of her children. Her fourth child, Carrie, remains on the plantation partly because her deafness and inability to speak make Weylin consider her less valuable in the slave market. The original essay correctly emphasizes Sarah's hidden rage and her decision to endure in order to protect Carrie. Her outward obedience should not be interpreted as loyalty to the Weylins. It is a survival strategy formed after the family has already demonstrated that it can sell her children without regard for her grief.

Sarah's position as cook gives her limited authority within the household, but that authority does not make her free. She manages food and domestic routines and may speak sharply in certain situations, yet Tom and Rufus retain legal and physical power over her. Her labor supports the plantation that has destroyed her family. Butler uses this contradiction to show that competence and oppression can coexist. Sarah is essential to the household, but her usefulness does not protect her children or give her control over her own life.

The original essay finds it frustrating that Sarah remains subordinate after the Weylins sell her children. That frustration is part of Butler's intended effect, but it should be directed toward the institution rather than toward Sarah. She cannot recover her children by attacking Tom Weylin. Open rebellion would probably lead to her death or sale and leave Carrie without protection. Sarah therefore conceals part of her anger, bargains where possible, and remains close to the daughter she can still help. Her endurance is not passive acceptance; it is maternal resistance under conditions that make successful resistance almost impossible.

Sarah is also sympathetic because her anger never disappears completely. Dana recognizes that the apparently obedient cook possesses a history of grief and hostility hidden beneath the behavior required of her. Butler prevents readers from accepting the plantation stereotype of the contented domestic slave. Sarah cooks and serves because she is compelled to do so. Her emotional life exposes the violence that ordinary household routines attempt to conceal.

Carrie: Communication Beyond Speech

Carrie, Sarah's deaf daughter, is sometimes treated by other characters as though her inability to hear and speak makes her intellectually limited. Butler challenges that assumption. Carrie communicates through gesture, expression, touch, and a sign system understood by people close to her. She observes the behavior of the plantation community and forms judgments of her own. Her disability does not remove her agency; the greater limitation comes from a society that does not value or accommodate her form of communication.

The original essay identifies Carrie as strong because she supports Dana when other enslaved people question Dana's behavior. Dana's relative education, unusual speech, association with Rufus, and intermittent disappearance make her difficult for the plantation community to understand. Some people suspect that she is too close to the white family or receives privileges unavailable to them. Carrie recognizes Dana's vulnerability and provides reassurance. Her support is important because it comes from a person who herself is frequently underestimated.

Carrie also helps Dana understand that the plantation community does not necessarily view her as weak or ridiculous. Through gestures, she can challenge Dana's assumptions and communicate emotional truths that spoken dialogue has failed to express. Butler thereby gives a disabled Black woman interpretive authority. Carrie is not present only to create sympathy through impairment. She contributes knowledge and participates in the social life of the enslaved community.

Her continued presence with Sarah also reveals the cruelty of slavery's economic logic. Carrie is spared sale not because Weylin respects the mother-daughter bond, but because he assigns her a lower market value. A circumstance interpreted by Sarah as a terrible kind of blessing demonstrates how slavery corrupts ordinary gratitude. A mother is forced to feel relief that disability has made one child less desirable to buyers. Carrie's character therefore links disability, family love, and

commodification.

Alice Greenwood: Sexual Coercion and the Destruction of Choice

Alice Greenwood is one of the novel's most tragic and sympathetic characters. She begins as a free Black girl, but after helping her enslaved husband Isaac escape, she is captured, injured, enslaved, and sold to Rufus Weylin. Rufus has wanted Alice since childhood and interprets his desire as love, yet he refuses to respect her repeated rejection. He uses ownership, threats, violence, and Dana's mediation to force Alice into a sexual relationship. The original essay correctly identifies this relationship as rape. Alice's eventual compliance cannot create consent because Rufus controls her legal status, physical safety, and access to her children.

Rufus attempts to distinguish himself from a man who would simply assault a woman in the bushes. He tells himself that wanting affection makes his conduct different. Butler exposes the self-deception within this claim. Rufus wants Alice to choose him while maintaining conditions that make refusal dangerous or impossible. His desire for emotional acceptance does not reduce the violence; it deepens it because he demands that Alice help him imagine himself as loving. Dana becomes trapped in this system when she persuades Alice that submitting may be the only way to avoid worse punishment. Dana's role is morally painful, but it reflects the narrow choices available rather than approval of Rufus.

Alice gives birth to children fathered by Rufus, including Joe and Hagar. Hagar is especially important because she becomes Dana's ancestor. This genealogical connection places Dana in an unbearable position. She must keep Rufus alive long enough for Hagar to be born, even though Rufus's survival enables Alice's continued abuse. Butler uses this conflict to prevent a comforting version of family history. Dana's existence is connected to sexual coercion, and knowledge of that connection does not allow her to repair the past.

The original essay states that Alice kills herself after Rufus sells her children. More precisely, Rufus falsely tells Alice that he has sold them after she attempts to escape. He intends the lie as punishment and as a way to make her emotionally dependent on him. Alice believes her children are gone and dies by suicide. The deception demonstrates the destructive reach of ownership: Rufus knows that threatening the children gives him control over their mother. Her death should not be dismissed as weakness. It follows years of rape, enslavement, physical violence, forced separation, and the apparent loss of the people for whom she has continued living.

Alice also resists throughout the novel. She expresses hatred toward Rufus, attempts escape, protects her emotional distance, and refuses to transform coercion into romance. Her anger is a form of moral clarity. Rufus owns her legally, but he cannot persuade her that ownership is love. Even when she performs behavior necessary to survive, she preserves an internal judgment of him. Her tragedy lies

not in a lack of strength but in the power of a system designed to make strength insufficient.

Dana Franklin: Historical Witness and Compromised Agency

Dana is a Black writer living in 1976 who is repeatedly transported to early nineteenth-century Maryland whenever Rufus's life is in danger. Her modern knowledge does not protect her from the plantation's racial order. White characters quickly treat her as enslaved, and she learns that the ability to read, speak confidently, or understand history can increase danger. The original essay correctly states that Dana struggles to maintain freedom despite Rufus's pressure. Her struggle is both physical and psychological. She must survive without allowing the plantation to define her understanding of herself.

Dana's sympathy arises partly from the impossible compromises she makes. She saves Rufus because he is her ancestor and because Hagar must be born for Dana's family line to continue. She teaches enslaved children to read, provides medical care, helps people where she can, and attempts to reduce Rufus's cruelty. At the same time, her interventions can support the plantation's continued operation. She becomes an intermediary between Rufus and Alice, urging Alice to submit because refusal may bring even greater violence. Butler does not present Dana as morally pure. She is sympathetic because readers understand the coercive structure within which she chooses.

Dana initially believes her twentieth-century values will create a clear distance between herself and the past. Repeated exposure teaches her how quickly violence can normalize behavior. She begins responding to commands, calculating punishments, and accepting compromises she would once have considered impossible. This adaptation is necessary for survival, but it frightens her. Butler uses Dana's experience to challenge readers who imagine that they would simply resist heroically if placed under slavery. Knowledge of injustice does not remove the physical power of an unjust institution.

Dana nevertheless maintains important boundaries. She repeatedly confronts Rufus, rejects his attempts to control her emotionally, and finally kills him when he attempts to possess her sexually after Alice's death. At that moment, preserving her bodily autonomy becomes incompatible with preserving the ancestral chain. Dana acts, returns to 1976, and loses part of her arm in the process. The physical loss symbolizes the continuing hold of history. She escapes the plantation, but she cannot return untouched.

Dana and Alice as Doubles

Butler creates deliberate parallels between Dana and Alice. Rufus notices their resemblance, and both women become objects of his need for control. Dana possesses legal freedom in her own time, education, and a marriage to a white man based on mutual choice. Alice loses legal freedom and is

compelled into a relationship with Rufus. Their similarity prevents Dana from treating Alice's experience as remote. Alice represents both an ancestor and an alternative version of Dana under different historical conditions.

The relationship between the two women is not always harmonious. Alice resents Dana for helping Rufus reach her, while Dana sometimes judges Alice's anger or decisions. Their conflict reflects the pressure of the system that places one woman in the role of mediator for another's abuse. Sympathy requires readers to recognize both perspectives. Alice sees Dana as relatively protected and connected to Rufus. Dana knows that her protection is fragile and that refusal may lead to Alice's beating or death. Slavery damages solidarity by forcing people into roles that serve the owner's power.

Carol: The Limits of White Sympathy

Carol, Kevin Franklin's sister, appears less directly than the enslaved women but contributes to the novel's examination of white attitudes. The original essay describes her as a remarkable white woman because she had a Black female friend. That childhood relationship suggests that racial intimacy is possible, but it does not prove that Carol remains free from racism. Kevin's account indicates that family and social pressure affect her later views, especially after she marries a prejudiced man. Carol therefore represents the fragility of sympathy that is not supported by political or moral commitment.

Her character contrasts with Kevin, who marries Dana and travels with her into the past. Kevin opposes slavery, yet even he cannot experience the plantation as Dana does. His white appearance gives him freedom of movement and authority that he has not earned. Carol's more conventional accommodation to racial prejudice reveals how white people can abandon personal knowledge when social acceptance rewards conformity. A childhood friendship does not automatically overcome a racist culture.

Carol should therefore be treated as a qualified sympathetic character rather than placed on the same level as Sarah, Carrie, Alice, or Dana. Readers may understand the pressures influencing her, but understanding does not erase responsibility. Butler's treatment of white characters asks whether sympathy becomes meaningful action. Feeling affection for one Black person while accepting a wider racial hierarchy is not sufficient.

Motherhood and Family Separation

The women's stories are connected by the threat of family separation. Sarah loses three children through sale and protects Carrie as best she can. Alice's relationship with her children becomes the point through which Rufus controls and finally destroys her. Dana's investment in Hagar's birth connects her to generations she has never met. Slavery makes reproduction an economic resource for owners and turns maternal love into a vulnerability that can be exploited.

The original essay says that women voluntarily became slaves to sustain their livelihoods. The passage it cites from 1976 describes poor women seeking temporary work, not voluntary enslavement. Economic hardship can constrain modern choices, but it is not equivalent to chattel slavery. In the nineteenth-century plot, Sarah and Alice do not volunteer to become property. Their labor and relationships are controlled through law and violence. Butler does create parallels between economic vulnerability in the present and coercion in the past, but the differences must remain clear.

Sexual Violence and Gendered Power

Enslaved women face forms of violence shaped by both race and gender. Owners can compel domestic labor, sell children, and exercise sexual access without recognizing the woman's consent. Alice's abuse is the clearest example, but Dana also becomes vulnerable to sexual possession when Rufus reaches for her after Alice's death. The final confrontation reveals that Rufus's desire has never been separate from ownership. When Dana refuses to become Alice's replacement, he relies on the authority slavery grants him.

Butler does not portray sexual violence only as an individual moral failure. Rufus is responsible for his actions, yet the institution teaches him that Black women can be owned and used. His occasional affection and dependence do not challenge that belief. He repeatedly chooses power when love would require accepting refusal. The novel therefore exposes the incompatibility between ownership and mutual intimacy.

Are the Women Weak Because They Do Not Revolt Openly?

The original essay argues that the women may appear weak because they do not stand up for their rights or protect their children through direct confrontation. This standard assumes that they possess enforceable rights and realistic access to collective power. In the plantation system, Tom and Rufus Weylin control weapons, legal authority, money, movement, and punishment. An enslaved woman cannot simply demand a hearing or remove her children safely. Open action may bring immediate retaliation against the entire family.

Sarah's domestic endurance, Carrie's solidarity, Alice's hatred and escape attempts, and Dana's teaching and final resistance represent different forms of agency. None destroys slavery, but individual failure to destroy a national institution is not evidence of personal weakness. Butler encourages readers to notice small decisions because oppression often limits the scale on which resistance can operate.

Alice's suicide also should not be used as a simple measure of character. Suicide results from extreme psychological suffering and cannot be reduced to cowardice. Within the novel, Rufus intentionally

creates the belief that her children have been permanently taken. Her death reveals the destructive power of his manipulation. The ethical condemnation belongs primarily to the conditions and person that produced despair.

Sympathy Without Romanticizing Suffering

Calling the women sympathetic should not romanticize their suffering as noble or necessary. Sarah's endurance is admirable, but she should never have been required to endure the sale of her children. Alice's resistance is powerful, but no moral lesson can justify her rape. Dana gains historical understanding, but the trauma and loss of her arm are not educational gifts that compensate for violence. Sympathy should lead readers toward recognition of injustice rather than admiration of how much pain a woman can tolerate.

The women are also not identical. They disagree, misjudge one another, express anger, and make compromised decisions. Butler gives them these imperfections because enslaved and oppressed women should not need moral perfection to deserve concern. Their humanity includes resentment, fear, tenderness, calculation, exhaustion, and contradiction.

Conclusion

Carol, Dana, Sarah, Carrie, and Alice occupy different positions in *Kindred*, but each contributes to Butler's analysis of women, race, and power. Sarah hides rage and endures in order to remain with Carrie. Carrie communicates insight and solidarity despite a society that underestimates her disability. Alice resists sexual coercion and enslavement until Rufus's calculated lie about her children destroys the reason she has continued surviving. Dana attempts to preserve both her ancestry and her autonomy, learning that historical knowledge does not provide immunity from oppressive power. Carol demonstrates the limits of white sympathy when personal contact is not strong enough to overcome social prejudice.

The women are not sympathetic because they quietly accept mistreatment. They are sympathetic because Butler reveals the constrained choices beneath their actions. Survival may require outward compliance, and open revolt may expose loved ones to greater harm. Their stories show that agency under slavery cannot be measured by the standards available to a free person. *Kindred* ultimately asks readers to condemn the system that narrows women's choices rather than condemning the women for failing to escape it through individual courage alone.

Works Cited

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