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Literary Foundations

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Feminist Disability Theory in Octavia Butler's

"The Evening and the Morning and the Night"

Introduction:

"Butler herself...repeatedly insisted in her writing, speeches, interviews, and personal papers that she and her work could not and should not be read primarily or exclusively through the lens of race" (Schalk 139). It is ironic that Sami Schalk writes this in the introduction to her essay about Octavia E. Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" because Schalk goes on to argue that Butler's short story is alluding to the struggles and discrimination people face when it comes to race and disabilities. This is not what Butler intended because she (as Schalk mentioned) did not want audiences to look at her work through the lens of race and racism. "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" is a story about a college student named Lynn who has a genetically-inherited disease called Duryea-Gode Disease (DGD) that causes people to tear themselves and each other apart. Lynn had inherited the disease from both of her parents and meets another college student named Alan who also inherited the disease from both of his parents. Lynn tries to resume normal life after the passing of her parents, but Alan takes her to visit his mom at a facility for people who suffer from DGD. There, they learn that Lynn and Beatrice (a woman who works at the facility) have a trait that allows them to release pheromones into the air that can calm down the aggressive traits of DGD. Since women are in the power

position, I believe that a better argument for the story is that Butler wrote “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” through the lens of feminist theory and feminist disability theory.

What is Feminist Theory?

Firstly, one cannot argue that Butler is using feminist theory in her story without defining it.

Feminist theory is, “...new ways of addressing issues affecting humanity, calling for the replacement of the presiding patriarchal order with a system that emphasizes equal rights, justice, and fairness” (Tong). Feminist theory, although an important aspect of this story, is not the only aspect that Butler touched upon. Therefore, to define feminist theory through the lens of disability, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states, “Feminist disability theory addresses such broad feminist concerns as the unity of the category woman, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of normalcy, multiculturalism, sexuality, the social construction of identity, and the commitment to integration”

(Garland-Thomson 4). Furthermore, Garland-Thomson asked readers to not look at feminist disability theory as a limitation to the ideas of feminist theory, rather a way to look more closely at the concept of intersectionality (Garland-Thomson 4). Garland-Thomson expanded upon four fundamental domains of feminist theory through the lens of disability.

- Representation
- The Body
- Identity
- Activism

In this essay, I will take a look at the representation and the body concepts through

Garland-Thomson’s reasoning and how they each apply to Butler’s “The Evening and the Morning and the Night.”

Representation:

Garland-Thomson argues that women in any form of a patriarchal society are inherently handicapped. “Even the general American public associates femininity with disability. A recent study on stereotyping showed that housewives, disabled people, blind people...and the elderly were all judged as being similarly incompetent. Such a study suggests that intensely normatively feminine positions-such as a housewife-are aligned with negative attitudes about people with disabilities (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2001)” (Garland-Thomson 7). In “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” Butler describes Lynn as being the “housemother” of the apartment she shares with other people who suffer from DGD.

Our only problem was housecleaning...I found myself going around reminding people to vacuum, clean the bathroom, mow the lawn...I figured they’d all hate me in no time, but I wasn’t going to be their maid, and I wasn’t going to live in filth. Nobody complained. Nobody even seemed annoyed...I got into the habit of running around in the evening reminding people. It didn’t bother me if it didn’t bother them (Butler 479).

Butler made Lynn into the housemother, but made her image untethered to the age-old stereotype of housewives being naggy or overbearing. Instead, Butler makes Lynn seem loving and justified, stating that she simply did not want to live in filth.

Butler continues to go against the negative stereotypes surrounding women and women with disabilities. “Female, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies” (Garland-Thomson 7); however, Butler describes Alan and Lynn’s father as bitter, angry, and resentful, harnessing more emotion than Lynn ever does throughout the entire story. Lynn’s father becomes completely uncontrollable in his final

moments. Alan becomes jealous when he finds out that only Lynn can help people suffering from DGD. Alan states, “It’s something *you* can do. Play queen bee in a retreat full of workers. I’ve never had any ambition to be a drone.” He despises the power Lynn has over him and feels insecure over the lack of power he has over himself, which is a fear that is often felt by women: a lack of power over one’s own body.

The Body:

Another topic that both Garland-Thomson and Butler touch upon is the intersection between feminism and disability when it comes to the physical body. Garland-Thomson mentions a crossroads between eradicating disability through forced sterilization and selective abortion (among other methods). However, the idea of being pro-choice when it comes to abortion is a radical libertarian feminist value: “Radical libertarian feminists hold that the patriarchal system that oppresses women must be completely eliminated and that women should be free to exercise total sexual and reproductive freedom” (Tong). Some disability activists agree that all women should have the right to an abortion while others agree that having a choice to abort a fetus with a known disability is a form of ableist genocide (Garland-Thomson 15). Butler questions both sides of this argument in “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” by including a section of dialogue between Alan and Lynn. Alan stated, “If the two of them had any sense, they would have had me aborted the minute my mother realized she was pregnant. But she wanted a kid no matter what. And she was Catholic.’ He shook his head. ‘Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us’” (Butler 480). Lynn goes on to say that she doesn’t want to have kids, but she doesn’t want someone else telling her what to do with her body. Through this discourse between these characters, Butler was trying to present the idea of thoughtful choice, meaning that people should have a say over their lives, but they will have to (in somewhat of a sense) have to carry

the burden of passing down all their negative traits to their child. Butler does not explicitly say that she is pro-choice or pro-choice when it comes to genetic disabilities. She is simply allowing the debate to be had and heard. However, Alan, who is the closest character that comes to being an antagonist, is the one arguing for sterilization and abortion, so one could assume that means that Butler was siding with Lynn and the idea that it is up to the individual when it comes to abortion. In thinking with the greater scheme of the text, if Lynn was never born, then she would not be able to help the people who suffer the most from DGD despite her prenatal prediction for inheriting DGD from both parents.

Lynn's father was the first one in Lynn's life to have the consequences of DGD hit him. "Dad had killed Mom then skinned her completely. At least, that's how I hope it happened. I mean I hope he killed her first. He broke some of her ribs, damaged her heart. Digging" (Butler 477). In this passage, Lynn describes her father as animalistic, especially when mentioning the digging. It paints an image in the reader's mind that is similar to a dog digging for a bone. Butler often describes people with DGD as animalistic. She describes Lynn's diet as eating "dog biscuits" (Butler 478). Butler wanted to have the dystopian society in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" reflect modern day depictions of women with disabilities. Oftentimes, people do see women with disabilities as subhuman and as pets to the able bodied people. Butler wanted to emphasize how wrong that is, and how we should treat others with respect.

The body aspect of the feminist disability theory also suggests that there will always be room for examination in the power balance between caretakers and care receivers (Garland-Thomson 16). Butler made this idea of power dynamics one of the main conflicts in the story. Alan did not

want to admit that the reason he was so against Lynn's gift was because he did not want to be in the care receiver position. One of the most significant lines in Butler's text that alludes to the theory is the line, "If the pheromone were something only men had, you would do it.' That silence again." (Butler 493). The silence acknowledges that Alan is conscious of his hypocrisy and his need to be dominating in every situation in his life, and it makes the text timeless in how it suggests that even in a dystopian society where women seem to have more power than men, women in the story will still feel guilty about taking that power away from them despite the power coming from a caretaking and loving position.

Conclusion:

Butler wrote "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" through the lens of feminist theory, and, even more so, feminist disability theory. It is important to recognize that Butler wrote this story through this lens because feminist disability theory is often overlooked and negated from literature. By writing a story through this lens, it provokes more attention to the imbalance between men and women and the imbalance between able bodied people and people with disabilities. Sami Schalk could have been on to something in regards to race playing a role in the meaning of text, but neglecting to see this text from the lens of a feminist perspective is failing to see Butler's view on how patriarchal America has failed those who want bodily autonomy, and her support for caretakers in the healthcare system.

Works Cited

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