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Survival of the Fixed-est: Alien Invasion of Human Identity in Octavia Butler's Dawn

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Survival of the Fixed-est:

Alien Invasion of Human Identity in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

While many definitions for science fiction have been offered over the years since the genre's inception, Robert A. Heinlein's definition, with its easy-to-follow five-point format, remains one of the most specific and comprehensive. Heinlein argues that, in a science fiction story:

1. The conditions must be, in some respect, different from here-and-now, although the difference may lie only in an invention made in the course of the story.
2. The new conditions must be an essential part of the story.
3. The problem itself—the "plot"—must be a *human* problem.
4. The human problem must be one which is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions.
5. And lastly, no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. (17, emphasis in original)

Octavia Butler's *Dawn* fits Heinlein's definition of science fiction because it takes place in an apocalyptic future, the conditions of which are important to the story; it centers on the human problem of how to maintain a distinctly human identity in the face of genetic, social, sexual,

emotional, and psychological manipulation and domination by an alien race; and it avoids scientific implausibility by explaining its violations of usual facts.

Even before opening the book, the reader learns that its plot takes place in an apocalyptic future. The publisher's synopsis on the back cover of Butler's *Dawn* reads: "Lilith Iyapo is in the remote Andes, mourning the death of her husband and son, when nuclear war destroys the world. Centuries later, she revives, held captive aboard a starship." This statement succinctly summarizes the apocalyptic and futuristic elements of the story, though the plot elaborates on them and demonstrates their functions in the story. Humankind destroyed itself and its planet in a nuclear holocaust, leaving behind an uninhabitable world even for those who had survived the initial blast. The novel begins about 250 years after that disaster, after the world has had time to significantly heal (Butler 16). These aspects of the setting fit with Heinlein's definition, since they differ significantly from present reality.

Another "condition", to use Heinlein's term, that sets *Dawn*'s situation apart from that of the real world is the presence of invading aliens (17). While, in some sense, the aliens have already completed their invasion of earth, since they have gained uncontested access to the planet, have captured all the remaining humans on their ship, and determine whether and when those humans even experience consciousness, much less do anything else, the novel follows their invasion of Lilith in particular and of the human race in general. This point will appear in more detail later, but for now it suffices to observe that an alien invasion is still in progress throughout the novel, even if it does not occur in the traditional forms of starship battles or clandestine infiltration. Additionally, the alien presence modifies many crucial details of the story's action. For example, the story takes place entirely on the alien ship, human capabilities change after contact with the Oankali, people sleep for unnaturally long periods—centuries, in Lilith's case—

without aging, and diseases humans never learned to contain are now entirely cured. These details add vital nuancing to the book, separating its situation from that of the real world in accordance with Heinlein's definition of science fiction.

Moreover, these new conditions drive the story's various conflicts, making them essential to the story. Lilith spends the entire story on the aliens' ship, but it serves as a constant reminder that she is not at home where she is and as a continual stimulus for her desire to escape. She never stops searching for a way to escape the Oankali control, as the opening pages of the novel reveal that her first reaction to their questioning was resistance, and the final paragraphs of the novel reiterate her mantra, "*Learn and run!*" (Butler 247-48, emphasis in original). Lilith's desire for escape, both for herself and for the other humans, drives the main external conflict in the story, as she seeks to escape the trap in which she believes humanity to be enmeshed. Similarly, the aliens' peculiar—and, for humans, terrifying—appearance continually emphasizes the differences between the humans and the Oankali. By thus physically manifesting their alienness, the story focuses on Lilith's attempt to grapple with her feelings toward them and to decide what place, if any, they can and should have in one another's worlds. She must find a way to survive, and that requires retaining her identity, since without that it would not really be she, a human being, who survived. However, retaining her identity becomes increasingly difficult when she finds herself surrounded by beings who are alien in appearance, society, language, morality, and psychology. Thus, since the story's non-realistic details drive the story's central internal and external conflicts, *Dawn* appears to meet Heinlein's second criterion, which states that the elements not corresponding to reality must be essential to the story.

One could argue that the post-apocalyptic and alien invasion devices are unnecessary because the story could achieve a similar effect by using colonialist domination for a setting,

particularly since the story has such strong resonances with that historical reality, but that very familiarity would rob the book of much of its power. Various critics, including Goss and Riquelme, have noted that the *Xenogenesis* trilogy to which *Dawn* belongs “presents a situation that mimics on a global, species-wide scale the predicament of individual colonies emerging from European imperial control during the past century” (450). Thus, the story’s situation and basic conflicts reflect those of colonial and post-colonial reality. More specifically, Lilith’s “behavior resembles that of a colonial subject responding to the colonizing culture,” placing her firmly within the post-colonial metanarrative (Goss and Riquelme 450). However, colonialist themes and situations play a major role in many science fiction stories, so their presence in this one is not a reason to avoid defining the story as science fiction (Nanda 773). Moreover, Butler uses the non-realistic elements to extend the resonance of the story’s themes, applying the colonization to the “entire surviving human species” rather than only to “portions of it” (Goss and Riquelme 450). If Butler had set the novel in a more realistic, historically based post-colonial setting, readers would have related its themes and events more directly to their own and to their ancestors’ experiences of colonialism. By instead applying this threat to the whole human race, the novel makes its themes more generally applicable, including both historical colonizers and colonized in the groups threatened by colonization. Because of the science fiction elements’ amplification of *Dawn*’s themes, then, the novel meets Heinlein’s second criterion for science fiction stories despite its significant historical resonances.

The novel also follows the third portion of Heinlein’s definition, which states that its central problem must be a human one, because the book centers on humans. As the central character, Lilith focuses the reader’s attention primarily on humans’ existence, struggles, and perceived reality simply by playing the role of the protagonist and by being human. Furthermore,

she herself remains preoccupied with human challenges, desiring freedom and preservation for the human race even if she herself may not share it (Butler 247-48). She also appears to care more deeply and consistently for other humans than she does for the Oankali, as the story relates the emotions and relationships of all the humans, even those Lilith does not like, while it skims over those of the Oankali, relating only the emotions, relationships, and actions that directly affect Lilith and the other humans in her group. This prioritization of the human perspective and experience appears even more forcefully due to Lilith's first-person narration, which identifies the reader even more closely with her human-oriented point of view and thus further emphasizes the centrality of human problems to the novel.

More specifically, the book's central conflicts and struggles consist of maintaining a uniquely human identity despite alien domination, which fits Heinlein's specification that the human problem must be created or essentially affected by the story's non-realistic elements. This struggle to maintain human identity includes resisting genetic, sexual, social, emotional, and psychological manipulation by and mixing with the aliens. Before Lilith even awakens, the Oankali modify her physically by removing her cancer, and they later alter her strength and memory, enhancing both to protect her and to better fit her for accomplishing their goals. However, their goals are much more far-reaching and more problematic from the humans' perspective than such comparatively minor changes. The Oankali seek to combine their race with the human species through a "trade" of genetic material, resulting in offspring that share human and Oankali characteristics. Lilith fails to avoid this mixing of her children's genetic material because Nikanj impregnates her without her knowledge or consent, but she spends the entire novel seeking to avoid pregnancy for exactly that reason and returns to her goal, "*Learn and run!*" after finding out about her pregnancy (Butler 248). This instance illustrates both genetic

and sexual invasion and modification, which the humans struggle to avoid. Socially, the Oankali incorporate humans into their own families initially, isolating them from other humans until they form relationships with their Oankali hosts. As part of this re-socialization, the Oankali seek to modify the humans' emotions, drugging people whose fear would be inconvenient and inserting themselves in human relationships, even to the point of serving as a sexual middle-man, creating fantasies for both members of a couple and controlling whether and when the humans can experience physical pleasure or comfort from one another. These invasions of an independent human identity have psychological dimensions, as well, which Lilith's apparent manifestations of Stockholm Syndrome seem to reflect (Jülich and Oak 52). Thus, the novel utilizes human attempts to oppose Oankali physical, sexual, social, emotional, and psychological assaults as a central component of the book's central conflict, the struggle to maintain a distinctly human identity in the face of alien invasion.

Another facet of identity that humans fight to preserve from Oankali tampering consists of sources and systems of morality. While their moral systems overlap in some instances, some human and Oankali moral rules differ significantly. For example, Oankali are more dedicated to the conviction that lying is wrong than humans are, but they do not share the human value for consent, as they demonstrate by manipulating or forcing humans to do what they want despite human protests. This practice appears in their continual manipulations of Lilith, as when they give her only the option to die or the option to cooperate with and join them, and in their failure to acknowledge or respect Joseph's refusal of Nikanj's sexual offers. Similarly, Nikanj tells Lilith that she really wants a part-alien child, despite her statements otherwise and her "horror" at the revelation of her pregnancy, and that he is helping her to realize desires she "could never have said" (Butler 246). This action illustrates the Oankali tendency to ignore consent, a major

moral concern in the human system; to force humans into doing what the Oankali want; and to manipulate the humans into doubting the validity of their own statements and desires. Thus, the Oankali do not respect the human moral system but seek to change it to be more like their own.

This objective appears most clearly in the Oankali attempt to modify the humans' source of morality, which for humans is hierarchical while for Oankali is more societal and individual. The novel demonstrates the hierarchical nature of humans' moral practice in the scene where Lilith prevents men in the group from raping a woman. The conflict is essentially moral, as the men use moral language like "duty" and "right" about what they consider the woman's responsibility to be in a relationship whether she likes it or not (Butler 177). However, in physically defeating them and thus demonstrating her superior position to them in the group hierarchy, Lilith declares and enforces the group's prioritization of the moral imperative not to rape, a respect for consent, over the responsibility to perpetuate the race. In contrast, the Oankali seek to rid humans of their drive to construct and conform to hierarchies, urging humans to abandon their views of morality in favor of a view more in line with the aliens'.

This aim appears in the aliens' attempts to convince the humans to change the source of their moral system from human hierarchy to Oankali society. For example, in trying to convince Lilith that her pregnancy is a good thing, Nikanj tells her, "Our children will be better than either of us. . . . We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war" (Butler 247). In other words, he traces human moral failings to the hierarchical origins of those values, arguing that a hierarchical basis for morality is insufficient and harmful. He assumes it to be a "problem" rather than trying to understand why humans consider hierarchy to be a positive aspect of societal structure. In response, Lilith verbalizes how essential hierarchically constructed identity and morality are to

human nature, saying that without them the child “won’t be human” and that “that’s what matters” despite Nikanj’s disagreement (Butler 247). These encounters illustrate the human struggle to retain a distinct identity in the face of alien manipulation and domination, which answers to Heinlein’s requirement that a science fiction story must include its non-realistic elements—in this case, the aliens and their technology—as an essential component of its central problem.

Dawn also abides by Heinlein’s fifth and final criterion for science fiction stories, which requires that they maintain plausibility by explaining anything that violates the rules of observable reality, because it offers explanations for anything the aliens do that seems impossible based on people’s current physical and technological capabilities. For example, the novel explains Lilith’s 250-year nap by introducing a carnivorous plant that the Oankali genetically modified to preserve people while keeping them in comas. This explanation enables the reader to accept Lilith’s failure to age over all that time as well as her ability to survive at all. Similarly, the novel uses the Oolois’ extra arms as instruments of genetic modification, explaining both how they could have so much experience learning about other creatures’ genetic material and how they could modify Lilith so easily. The ship itself, as a living organism in a dormant rather than conscious state, could conceivably produce a forest in one room that mimics earth conditions. Explanations for such phenomena as these reinforce the story’s believability and place *Dawn* in the category of science fiction, according to Heinlein’s definition.

Dawn meets Heinlein’s five criteria for a science fiction story because it takes place in a post-apocalyptic, alien-invaded future; those elements are essential to the story’s central conflicts, which deal with distinctly human problems of identity and morality; and it maintains plausibility by offering explanations for anything improbable or unrealistic that occurs. These

aspects of the work not only categorize it as science fiction but also include its central concerns, highlighting its themes and the elements it uses to communicate them. Because of the effectiveness with which Heinlein's definition of science fiction brings out the major characteristics of the work, both *Dawn* and Heinlein's definition benefit by comparison with each other, since Heinlein's definition brings out *Dawn's* central ideas and in the process demonstrates its own worth as a standard for interpreting and judging literary works.

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