The Parable of the Sower: Crash Course Literature #406

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=6iVGuMyKFgA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/6iVGuMyKFgA

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature and I have some bad news.

Disease is devastating the planet. Soon the global food supply will be compromised, clean water will become scarce, violence will grow epidemic, dangerous new street drugs will circulate, the income gap will increase, corporate slavery will return, and a strongman president will be more interested in issuing tough-guy slogans than actually improving the lives of the people.

Of course none of that's happened yet. What's that? Oh, Stan informs me that some of it has happened.

But the only place it's all happening, so far, is in *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler's 1993 science fiction novel. It's just made up, thankfully. But jeez, I have never read a dystopia that feels more possible, or more terrifying.

And yet, it's also one of my favorite books, and a genuinely hopeful one. The kind of hard-won, uneasy hope that actually means something.

[Intro music]

===== A Brief Biography of Octavia Butler (1:00) =====

Let's start with a brief introduction to the author, Octavia Butler.

She was an African-American science fiction write who won the Hugo and the Nebula Awards and a MacArthur genius grant. She died in 2006 at the age of 58.

Growing up as a shy only child in Pasadena, California, Butler spent a lot of time reading at her local library and telling herself her own stories. And then, when she was nine, she saw a movie and thought, I could write a better story than that. So she did.

Her aunt told her that an African-American girl couldn't be a writer, but she kept going. And as a young adult, she would get up at two in the morning so that she'd have time to write before working jobs like dishwasher and potato chip inspector.

It wasn't until her early thirties that she was able to support herself entirely as a writer. Her works deal with race and class and power, and most of her books also include fantastical elements like time travel and alien life forms and telekinesis.

She described herself as, "As pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive."

===== A Brief Synopsis (2:01) =====

Parable of the Sower is a coming-of-age story - one of the best of the past several decades. It's also a story about being black in America, and a feminist story and a theological story and a dystopian story and in some ways maybe a bit of a utopian story.

It takes its name from a Bible parable in which Jesus describes someone who goes out to distribute seed. Some of the seed falls on the path and is eaten up by birds, some falls in a rocky place and can't grow, some falls near thorns so that's no good, but some it falls on fertile ground and grows beautifully.

So before we talk about genre and theme, let's look briefly at the story of *Parable of the Sower* in the Thought Bubble.

When the book begins, Lauren Oya Olamina is a fifteen-year-old girl growing up in a small community outside of Los Angeles, in 2024. She lives with her father, a professor and a Baptist minister, her stepmother, and her four half-brothers.

Climate change and disease outbreaks have increased social disorder so much that Lauren's community has built a wall all around it. And when people leave the community, they leave armed.

Both Lauren and her father become more and more worried about how long the community can survive, and they prepare stashes of money and supplies so that they can run away if they have to.

And Lauren also has other secrets. Because of drugs that her mother abused during pregnancy, Lauren has "hyperempathy" - she feels what other people feel, which makes it hard for her to hurt anyone.

Also, Lauren has begun to develop her own belief system, one that is different from her father's. It locates God in chaos and change and uncertainty.

Throughout the book, we read pieces of a new kind of scripture: "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change." Lauren comes to call this religion Earthseed and believes that its purpose is to prepare humankind to "take root among the stars."

Eventually, her walled community is overrun, and unlike most of her family and friends, she manages to escape, and then Lauren meets up with other survivors. For a time, she disguises herself as a man, and eventually begins walking north with a growing community - the first members of the Earthseed movement.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

===== *Parable* as Science-Fiction (3:59) =====

So, there's a lot of death in this book and, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrative voice is so strong that it all feels terrifyingly real. And yet, it *is* science fiction.

It's set in the future - albeit barely. And there's speculation from 1993 about how climate change and wealth inequality and walls will shape the world of the future.

Part of what makes *Parable of the Sower*, and its sequel *Parable of the Talents*, so powerful is how prophetic they seem. Another term for this kind of science fiction, which is set on earth and uses contemporary technology is "mundane science fiction," although, for the record, this is one of the less mundane books you'll ever read.

In 1993, Butler told an audience that she liked to think of science fiction in terms of categories established by the writer Robert A. Heinlein, "the what-if category, the if-only category, and the if-this-goes-on category." She described *Parable of the Sower* as "definitely an if-this-goes-on story. And if it's true, if it's anywhere near true, we're all in trouble."

===== An Open Letter (4:56) =====

Oh, it's time for the open letter?

An open letter to my future self.

But first let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh look!

It's the sky express rocketship that I'm going to use to travel around the solar system in the future.

Dear future me, *Parable of the Sower* is set in 2024. It's currently 2017, you're watching this in 2024 - how we doin'? Was Octavia Butler right that we were all in trouble? Because I'm concerned.

So it's seven years in the future, how are things going? I think you guys recently had an election, hopefully? Did climate change turn out to be a hoax? Are we still doing Crash Course? Did the *Looking for Alaska* movie ever get made? Does Diet Dr. Pepper turn out to be bad for me? Has Liverpool won the Champions League?

I have so many questions! But mostly, I just hope you're around to answer them.

Best wishes, current John.

===== *Parable* as a Bildungsroman (5:35) =====

So *Parable of the Sower* is obviously an exploration of if-this-goes-on, but it's also lots of other things. I want to look at two of the book's other genres - the book as a bildungsroman and also as a sacred text.

So you might remember that bildungsroman is a long and fun to say German word that means a novel of education, a story in which a young person grows up and becomes more or less independent.

As the beginning of the book, Lauren is a teenage girl who does what her family expects of her. She agrees to be baptized in a religion she doesn't believe, because her father wants her to, she helps out in the school her stepmother runs, teaching the set curriculum.

But as the book goes on, she starts thinking for herself more and more. She establishes her own belief system and begins to study how to survive in case her community breaks down. After talking things over with her father, she also starts conveying some of that information to the children at the school, even though survival skills are definitely not in the curriculum.

And then, when her neighborhood is overrun, Lauren learns her capacity for leadership. She protects others in her group even though her hyperempathy makes violent action nearly impossible. And she keeps them going until they find a safe place in Northern California. And we should mention here that Lauren's suffering and her escape, as well as her journey north, have led some critics to draw comparisons between Lauren's story and narratives of escape from slavery.

===== *Parable* as a Sacred Text () =====

And Lauren is an escapee and a leader, but she's also something else. In an interview, Butler explained that she wanted to tell the story of someone who, "sometime after her death - after people have had time to forget how human she was - might easily be considered a god."

Now Lauren is human, but she does have this god-like capacity for empathy, and *Parable of the Sower* is in many ways a sacred text. It's structured as a series of journal entries, but also features these passages from what Lauren calls "The Book of the Living," a devotional text that people in the future might read and interpret.

And we learn a lot about the belief system of Earthseed in these beautiful little passages from The Book of the Living. Earthseed is focused on the inevitability of change - several times, in fact, it says that God is change. Lauren says that she has based this religion on "everything I could read, hear, see.

And Butler seems to draw on elements of Buddhism, Taoism, matriarchal religions, even a little bit of the Yoruba religion. It's probably not coincidental that Lauren's middle name, Oya, is the name of the goddess of the Niger River. But Lauren doesn't really believe in goddesses, as she says, "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not supernatural authority figures."

And as a person, she isn't perfect or puritanical. She gets angry. She steals when she has to. She has sex when she wants to. "I mean to survive," she says. She also isn't always certain about the moral choices she's making, some of which are influenced by her hyperempathy, which she calls "a biological conscience."

But that's all part of what makes this portrait of a prophet so fascinating. Butler shows us how her actions and her beliefs might influence future generations. According to the verses Lauren writes, Earthseed understands that, quote:

"God is power -
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
And yet, God is pliable -
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is change."

Change is the one inevitability in *Parable of the Sower*, it's the only constant in Lauren's trauma-filled life. In an essay on the book, the professor Philip H. Jos writes that those who practice Earthseed must learn to respond positively to change.

He writes: "'God is Change' is an invitation to respond to fear with creativity, productivity, and compassion. [Practitioners must] fully acknowledge and accept suffering and struggle as an inevitable companion to love and happiness."

And I want to pause her and acknowledge that for a lot of hardcore fans, *Parable of the Sower* is a sacred text.

===== *Parable* as Dystopian (and Maybe Utopian?) (9:08) =====

Another way to look at *Parable of the Sower* is as a dystopian novel, exploring a world gone very, very wrong. And if we read the novel this way, Lauren and her community's journey toward a safer place can make the end of the book seem a little utopian, or at least as utopian as a book can be where political instability and environmental degradation mean that almost everyone dies horribly.

I'd argue though that Butler takes care not to make the Earthseed community, or its leader, seem ideal. She once said, "Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely."

For Lauren, and for Butler, the past, with legal racism and misogyny, wasn't ideal. And what's fascinating to me about *Parable of the Sower* is Lauren's struggle to imagine a better world that is not based on past models, that isn't trying to go back in time or return to some imaginary golden age.

The hope is less that Lauren's followers will create a utopia, on earth or elsewhere, and more that they'll learn new and better forms

of relating to each other and to the world around them, and that they will find something to unite them.

Instead of a search for a paradise where nothing ever changes, they have to learn to embrace change and use that change to move forward and seek life among the stars. Whereas so many utopian and dystopian novels seem to argue for dismantling technology, Lauren sees this interstellar travel as a goal that can unite humanity.

And as we come to the end of our miniseries on dystopias - although I suppose you could argue that *Macbeth* is fairly critical of traditional power structures - I think it's worth pausing to consider the if-this-goes-on-ness of *Parable of the Sower*.

What forces or goals can unite and pacify us?

We know how humans of the past have responded to resource pressures and deprivations - is there a way that we can somehow avoid their mistakes when responding to the pressures and deprivations of a changing climate? And can we reconcile ourselves to change, and live with it, as The Book of the Living calls us to do?

Parable of the Sower is so page-turningly, compulsively readable that it's easy to miss the moments where Lauren, and Butler, speak directly to use and to our times. So I want to leave you with a quote from one such moment in the novel.

Lauren writes, "Embrace diversity. Unite - or be divided, robbed, rules, killed by those who see you as prey."

Good advice. I'll see you next time.

===== Credits (11:26) =====

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Thanks to everyone who supports us on Patreon and thanks to all of you for watching. As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.