

Logan Jennings

Professor Joshua Masters

ENGL 1101

12/8/2023

The Absolute Necessities of Community and Virtuous Belief in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The world is bleak, cruel, and unforgiving, but only if you believe it so. In the theater of the human mind, it is quite easy to imagine the end of days. Grey looming clouds against the backdrop of a half-crumbled city, and alone sits the last good person in a lawless hellscape. But that is simply not how disasters occur in our real world. Looting and robbery certainly occur, but they are vastly overshadowed by the less newsworthy events of selfless communities banding together to help save people or clean debris. Hurricane Katrina, Fukushima Daiichi, and, most recently, the 7.8-magnitude earthquake in Turkey are all horrific events that ended local worlds. Too many people could not survive, but the survivors resorted to helping each other at any and every turn rather than stealing what little was left. In the face of sheer destruction, kindness overflowed, and a community was established almost instantly upon meeting other survivors, all working for a dream of a better tomorrow. So why, in many apocalyptic fictions, do we rely on the trend of an evil, sickly world filled with depraved people? Lazy writing is certainly an answer; however, I believe it is that most authors choose to make some of the central themes of such novels exactly what happens in reality. Instead of relying on the world or events as the source of the conflict, they use people. From there, we are more easily able to accept their reality of widespread distrust and apathy. Then, however slowly, bonds between characters form and

motivations or dreams are laid out, and then we have it—reality at last. It is with this in mind that we shall be covering two stories that I believe cover this process and its impact on the world exceptionally: The rise of a grand religion in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and the eternal misery of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Slowly and steadily is the game plan for the explanation of the first novel. Afterwards, *The Road* will be covered rather rapidly as its themes are more subdued and obscured. In every apocalyptic story, there must be a mass tragedy. We will start in a similar place. A tragedy in every regard, however, one more personal and survivable.

Following Lauren after the disappearance of her brother, Keith, she enters into an argument where her stepmother begins berating her father and his lack of success at finding her son. What she says is the kind of thing no child wants to hear. She picked her side and always had these feelings deep down, but finally she let them out into the open:

I mean, we were always Cory and Lauren. She never asked me to call her “mother,” and I never thought to do it. I always knew she was my stepmother. But still... I always loved her. It mystified me that Keith was her favorite, but it didn’t make me love her any less. I was her kid, but not her kid. Not quite. Not really. But I always thought she loved me. (Butler 75, 76)

Familial and, more importantly, parental impartiality is supposed to be the norm. The sudden, humbling realization that someone who was supposed to love you never actually did is crushing to anyone’s well-being. You may have suspected such a thing before, but to have reality suddenly drop into your lap is far worse. Afterwards, you are left feeling hollow and empty. Your safe haven is no longer there; the love is no longer there. Relationships damaged in such a way are almost always tainted forever. Those involved will bear scars for the rest of their lives, and they

are much more likely to never let such a thing happen to them again. The ever-present reminder does help with all the damage it does. “Loved” stands out as well; such a word cannot be used lightly as it has such heavy implications that most other simple past tenses cannot hope to contain. There lies a canyon between love and loved; there is no easy travel between the two words. Lauren understands this, perhaps not immediately, but she never really recovers from this grievous wound, and it’s likely that such a quick scene has its roots in the entire story from that point onward. Looking back, it is easy to see that this is the first real time that Lauren lost something or that she lost someone. It would not be the last time she experienced such a feeling, but later she finds herself in a similarly painful situation with one clear advantage.

Ever the lucky soul, Lauren is once again fresh off the heels of her latest tragedy. The destruction of her home and town, as well as the deaths of her family and most of the people she had grown up around her whole life, She wakes up the next morning after the attack and offers an oddly soothing thought upon witnessing the other survivors:

The pain of Harry’s headache and his bruised, beaten body are almost welcome to me. They’re distractions. Along with Zahra’s talking and crying for her dead daughter, they fill my mind.

Their misery eases my own, somehow. It gives me moments when I don’t think about my family. Everyone is dead. (Butler 127)

Amidst an abundance of suffering, Lauren finds comfort, not in the tragedy itself but in the distractions from her own misfortunes. Here she finds she is no longer alone in her agony as she was in the previous entry. She finds peace like many in real life do—through the comfort of interacting with people in the same situation as yourself. Sharing the misery of others puts her at ease with her own suffering. She is no longer alone. She can be hurt and be vulnerable to others

because she is able to share in her grief. It lies in a similar vein to support groups. Community is an incredibly useful thing to have in such a time where one's will to continue begins to run thin; misery loves company after all. In truth, it does not appear that she fully grasps the importance of this feeling. I specifically point to her use of the word "somehow" in the text. She feels the relief and knows it to be good, but she lacks understanding of this foreign emotion. It does not take long, however, as she goes on to kill a pair of dogs that begin to attack her group. Her hyper-empathy is an ever-present threat, so she decides the pain of killing the dogs is outweighed by the possible emotional pain of losing her new friends. Similar to drinking hard liquor to ease pain, most people find it hard to feel one source of pain much when a sharper sensation takes hold. It distracts the body and alleviates your momentary pain with something else. It still hurts, but at least it is different. Or, in this case and in the usual case of liquors, it provides a physical pain to dampen the blow of an emotional one. Pain is best handled when shared, not kept to oneself. Shared misery allows for near-instant connections to be formed with strangers. Later, those strangers may even go on to become friends, and then comes the time to share new ideas.

Humanity relies on the formation of small societal groups of people, which, in due time, will grow to become more vast in scale and carry more varied ideas and ideals than they once had. It stems from the innate desire for a connection with others. A binding thread that joins people together into a complex tapestry of connections. Some of the most fundamental bonds are those made with the intention of helping one another; a great example is religion. Most religions carry with them inherently bad or outdated musings, but they also carry ideals of kindness and following certain rules to better yourself and your community. It is by no mistake that the heroine of our story has also begun to have the same feelings about her new beliefs. She voices

her thoughts upon having found a beautiful way to see the world and wishes to share it with those she cares for:

I'd like to draw him into Earthseed. I'd like to draw them all in. They could be the beginning of an Earthseed community. I would love to teach Dominic Earthseed as he grows up. I would teach him and he would teach me. The questions little children ask drive you insane because they never stop. But they also make you think. (Butler 168)

The fundamental being of this religion, and most others, is the formation of a community of people who share their beliefs. Some of the most common beliefs in major world religions are some variation of mutual kindness and respect for members. This allows people who do adopt the beliefs to feel welcomed and as if they have magically attained a community of people who actively care for them. In time, messages and beliefs like these allow for slow but exponential growth in the religion's followers. A key part of increasing the community Lauren even hints at in her quote is wanting to "draw them all in." She sees the world with such vivid beauty and clarity that she wishes to share it with the ones she loves. Modern cults and MLM's have skewed the idea of drawing people in, into a more mischievous-sounding phrase; however, there is no malice or trickery in Lauren's words. She has found beauty and wants to help others find it as well. To give the lost a guiding light, to give the lonely or abandoned a new devoted family. Lauren began the story with her hyper-empathy being talked about as if it were a curse or disability. It is only now, however, that Lauren truly realizes the gift she has had: she can spread her love and help others feel what she feels. The *raison d'être* of the Earthseed religion is community, and for her community to rise and become something greater than just an idea, she will need to take her experiences in feeling others emotions and put them out into a realm where she can try to convince others that Earthseed is an ultimately good community for them to be a

part of. Someone still wants to help others rise above this barren, awful world and see the beauty that could be. “the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (Butler 61), which is a fitting motto for a world so worried about its place in the dirt.

For the cynics and nihilists in the crowd, you may be curious if this is not just mushy-mushy lovey-dovey stuff from an, I will attest, astounding author who wrote about a teenage black girl with empathy superpowers and who also has daddy issues. Maybe love and community are not real; this world is just cruel, sick, and evil. To that end, I point you to Cormac McCarthy, one of the most prolific authors of such horrors. Even more so in his novel *The Road*: a world where the constant threat of gruesome deaths and suffering awaits nearly every turn, a world where cannibals thrive. What would such a renowned author of such stories say about love and community? How about we start fairly early on with a quote from the first few pages of the book:

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay.

(McCarthy 12)

Death is a preferable alternative to loneliness in McCarthy’s world. Clean cut and, in true McCarthy style, no sugar to help the taste. The social nature of humans does not allow for long-term isolation without repercussions. Parents who lose a child or lovers who are separated by death—both examples leave the survivors to struggle with accepting and processing the new reality of their lives. Something that was there, that was always there, is gone, and it cannot

come back. Through that loneliness, most describe it as having lost their purpose or will. How could you possibly justify going back to a job you hate after you just lost the very thing you were working for? McCarthy says the same but much more simply and eloquently, “So I could be with you.” (McCarthy 12). If the man himself could not be with the boy, there was no longer a point in being. During later events, we receive context that may change how you view *The Road*. As the man and the boy happen to come across an old man on the road, they share a fire with him at the boy’s suggestion. The old man waxes poetic and philosophical for a moment and succinctly delivers the line, “Where men cant live gods fare no better” (McCarthy 117). Assumedly, the old man points this out as a sign of the times. There is no longer any reason to believe in a God in such a horrid world; prayers and pleas go unanswered. Even the way the old man links the survival of man to the survival of gods denotes that for a god to exist, there must be men who believe. McCarthy views gods and beliefs in his story differently than Butler does in hers. Where in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, a strongly held belief and religion can encourage change in the world through message and community, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* views gods as fragile and naive, equally susceptible to death as their followers, similar to the relationship of the boy and the man. The boy himself could easily be seen as the god of this story. Sheltered and cared for, protected at any cost. Not a god who protects others, but one that must be protected. The boy himself serves the same purpose as a ritualistic item. If he is lost or destroyed, there is no hope for the ones left behind. God's relationship to man is not one of a domineering, ultimately powerful lifeform. But of a scared, vulnerable child forever on the verge of death, passed from one guardian to the next. It is only until they have a community of people that they find their strength. *The Road* is a story about a man protecting God. Keeping him alive in a world that no longer believes he should exist. The fire of belief passes hands and brings light to every

interaction. Many times, the man decides to bestow kindness upon people when he openly doesn't wish to. All because the boy, God, asked him to. Mercy was pleaded upon by a fragile, naïve child. Not demanded by an all-knowing, all-powerful entity that determines your fate. God needs us to survive.

A story of hope and a story of horror, both sharing the same views. To some, this may seem like a strange connection, but it really is not. This is simply the way people are and the way we build our worlds. There is no humanity in a story of isolation; even the term humanity itself refers to the entire group. For a human to experience humanity, there must be a community, and for a community to exist, there must be strongly held virtuous beliefs. Stories we tell to younger generations of gods, fools, or heroes, all of which are made and spread with the intention of helping others. Some serve as warnings, others as calls to action. Yet they must all pander to common human desires. Whether it be the story of a child growing into a powerful yet kind religious leader who seeks the betterment of the world and its people, or the story of a scared man who simply wishes to keep his son alive in a world intent on destroying them. Both foster communities, big or small, in order to even have a plot or a reason to move forward. For this reason, they have hopes and dreams for the future. Kindness and empathy are the strongest values at play, as they should be. At the end of the world, cruelty and apathy never reigned supreme. It was always community and virtue that allowed for the lost to be found and for the cold to feel warmed in the glow of others. If you find yourself alone in a dark woods and fear you may not be alone, it is good to assume you are not, but it is wrong to assume you are the only one who is scared. Violence and apathy must come second; community and empathy are much better for survival at the end of days.

Works Cited

Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. Time Warner Book Group, 2000.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Vintage Books, 2006.