

# The Reaffirmation of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic in Butler's "Bloodchild"

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Science fiction allows writers to explore how either everyday issues or controversial issues play out in an entirely new environment. In her science fiction short story "Bloodchild," Octavia Butler explores issues about pregnancy, love, and power. Though Butler claims her "Bloodchild" is not *about* slavery, it does involve slavery, or at least a power struggle. It aligns with G. W. F. Hegel's theory of the Master-Slave dialectic from his work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which examines how a person becomes self-conscious through a power struggle that creates an unequal and eventually codependent relationship in which one consciousness working for another consciousness. The Master-Slave dialectic provides a lens for examining "Bloodchild." An examination of how this text aligns with Hegel's theory reveals that the additions of family ties and love for the master affect the dialectic, causing the main character to interrogate and eventually reaffirm the relationship and, therefore, strengthens the dialectic in his society.

## I. The Master-Slave Dialectic

G. W. F. Hegel developed the Master-Slave dialectic when trying to understand how someone acquires self-consciousness. Hegel says that the self-consciousness exists only when it recognizes itself with the help of a second self-consciousness. The second self-consciousness helps the first self-consciousness see itself when it supersedes the second. By superseding its second self, one also returns "*into itself*" (Hegel 541) because both selves then become equal and are once again their own. They must see each other and essentially mirror each other in movement to

recognize themselves, giving their action dual significance. They are both for themselves and for the other in that they facilitate the other's recognition of reciprocally recognizing each other. The first knows he exists because he sees someone similar to himself but "other" (541).

The self-consciousness recognizes itself as being for itself, but it sees the other self-conscious as a negative, useless object. Because they see each other as independent shapes and are not alert of the other's certainty, their own self-certainty is not stable. In order to attain the "pure abstraction of being-for-self" (543), the self-consciousness must show that it is not attached to a "specific *existence*" (543). It seeks the death of the other, which endangers its own life and shows that it values their existences equally (543). The struggle results in one feeling dependent on the other because it loses. The two consciousnesses recognize the importance of life to pure self-consciousness and create a master and slave relationship. The master sees himself as existing for himself but the slave as working for the master's independence. The master attains recognition, but it is unequal since the master makes the slave dependent on him.

The slave is the loser of the struggle who is now uncertain of his ability to live and work for himself instead of for his master (545). This is in part because his loss causes him to feel "unessential" (545). Though the slave actually can live for himself because he recognizes himself in his master who feels independent, he is unaware of this fact (545). The slave fears for his life, which shows he knows its importance, and he works, shaping the object and making it permanent. The bondsman uses his fear to be *for himself* and recognizes that the shape he formed before is his *pure being-for-self* (546). He subdues his fear and sees that he has a mind of his own but is not simply *for himself* but also exists for his master (547). The most significant aspects of the Master-Slave dialectic that structure "Bloodchild" are the struggle, the unequal

relationship, and the work the slave does for his master, which causes him to realize that he is significant.

## II. How Hegel Structures “Bloodchild”

Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic involves a struggle, which leads to the creation of a unique relationship with unequal powers: a master and a slave. In “Bloodchild,” The Terran, the humans, arrived on the Tlic’s planet and lost this struggle (Butler 25), becoming subdued by the Tlic. Both feared the other would kill them (25), but the Tlic gained the upper hand and became the masters, creating the unequal relationship. The Tlic are the masters and the Terran, or the humans, are the slaves.

The Tlic reinforced the division of master and slave by exerting their control of their home and by feeding them narcotic eggs. They first treated the humans as host animals. They kept males and females in the same pens and feed them only eggs, which seems to keep them in a drunk state, so that they would mate and produce more human hosts for grubs (9), taking away all forms of the Terran’s agency. The Tlic, however, eventually “saw them as people” (25), as the two consciousnesses recognize each other as similar to themselves, and “gave” them the Preserve (25), so they could live in a similar manner as they did on earth. However, they still give them eggs in order to control them, grooming them into becoming the perfect hosts for their grubs. In this sense, they allow the Terran to continue acting like humans—or to continue living under the illusion that they are acting like humans—instead of animals. Though they still act like humans, they are clearly seen as inferior, as they were given the Preserve only after treated as animals, as vessels only. Though the two groups now see each other as people, a firm hierarchy develops that says the Terran exist to work for the Tlic.

Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic also suggests that this unequal relationship turns into a form of codependency. Gan says that only T'Gatoi "and her political faction [stand] between [the Terran] and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve—why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them" (5). The Terran, the slaves, need the upper class political faction of the Tlic to serve as their protectors. Otherwise, as the passage suggests, they would essentially be prostitutes. Like Hegel says about the two consciences, the Terran recognize the value of their lives and recognize their need for protection, which is why they initially accept their subjugation.

If it were only the Terran who needed something, the Tlic would have the upper hand without question. The Tlic, however, do not want to possess the humans simply to quench a sexual desire; they are "desperate" (5) for the humans because the humans are "necessary" (5) for the Tlic to be "a healthy, thriving people" (25), which is why they take the risk of the Terran killing them while they are young (25). This shows their intense need for the Terran to work for them as well as their own type of subjugation. The Tlic demonstrate an urgent need for the use of the humans as vessels for their young. This means that in order for the Tlic to survive, or at least for them to live their fullest lives, they need the Terran to accept their position as slaves. The Terran's Hegelian work, meaning childbearing, helps the Tlic have their independence, but it does not truly allow the Terran to have theirs. Because both the Terran and the Tlic need each other in order to survive, they both hold a significant amount of power, and they have a codependent relationship. However, like in the Master-Slave dialectic, one still holds the majority of the power, and the other works for them, creating the world they need in order to carry on.

### III. Affects of Family and Love on the Dialectic

What Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic does not account for, however, is how the creation of an interspecies family and love affects the relationship between the master and the slave.

When Gan first introduces T'Gatoi, he shows how she is part of their family. He explains how it is an "honor" that she "had chosen to come into the family" (4) and that T'Gatoi considers their home her "second home" (4). In fact, she is so at home that whenever she visits, she crawls into her own "special couch" (4). This suggests that she is a part of their family. She feels this way because she and Lien, Gan's mother, grew up together and because since then, she has integrated herself into Lien's family.

Because they met when T'Gatoi was in a stage of "Tlic adolescence" (8) and when Lien, an only child, was growing up, they became like sisters, though with a large age difference. They played together and eventually talked about boys together, seeing as how T'Gatoi introduced Lien to Gan's father (4), who served as T'Gatoi's host (29). T'Gatoi, the older sister, still maintains control, sometimes causing Lien to be "unwillingly obedient" (4). They still mess with each other, such as when Lien jokes that she "should have stepped on [T'Gatoi] when [she was] small enough" (7) after T'Gatoi shows concern for her sleeping habits, and like an older sister would, tries to take care of her after wrapping her into her cage-like body. Though T'Gatoi is very much in control, they are able to joke with each other. Gan sees how they interact and though he knows that his mother sometimes resents T'Gatoi—she calls being caged in T'Gatoi's arms "humiliating" (7)—he still sees her as integral to his mother's childhood and as a part of his family.

Gan already sees T'Gatoi as a stand-in aunt, but how she treats him complicates their relationship. T'Gatoi asks Gan to lie against her to keep her warm. Like an aunt would, she

pokes him and complains that he is too skinny. Her poking, however, turns into “caresses” (4). Also, when T’Gatoi visits, she and Gan share a couch in his bedroom (27), which suggests that she shares a deeper level of intimacy with Gan than with any of the other members of his family. T’Gatoi and Gan’s interactions in the family room and their sleeping arrangement indicate a more sensual relationship than a typical aunt-nephew relationship should be.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel says that the slave begins to understand that he actually makes the master’s world possible through his work, which means that he understands that he is necessary for the master to survive. This suggests that the master is a dependent. Through his work, the slave is able to recognize himself even more clearly than he did after he lost the struggle to the master. In a way, this is similar to how Gan begins to understand how the Terran are essential to the Tlic and how the Tlic take advantage of the Terran, risking their lives for grubs (20). It is also similar to how he interrogates the system of oppression when he tells T’Gatoi, “No one ever asks [them]” if they would like to be hosts (23), a statement which shows that Gan now understands how little agency he and his people have in this society. When Gan asks her, “What are we to you?” (24), he wants to see if she will admit that the Tlic treat them like host animals or property, like slaves. When he feels that T’Gatoi avoids his question, he tells her no, threatening to dismantle the Master-Slave dialectic—at least between the two of them.

What changes Gan’s mind, then, is important. There are a few factors involved: (1.) he does not wish to endanger his sister, who would have been the replacement host, (2.) he does not wish to be afraid and wish for a way out like his brother, and (3.) he both loves and desires T’Gatoi. The third point stems from T’Gatoi being part of his family and from how she treats him. Gan can not imagine turning away someone who “had been taken from [his] father’s flesh”

(29). Gan sees that she has established ties to the members of his family, like her sisterly connection to his mother. He feels bound to T’Gatoi and fully accepts her as a family member.

Gan’s desire for T’Gatoi also affects his decision. He finds the idea of T’Gatoi implanting grubs in Hoa disturbing because it would happen on the floor instead of a couch (27), which is less violent and much more personal. The couch is a place that is clearly their own. After, Gan asks her, “Do you care that it’s me?” (28). His question suggests that he wants her to care. He desires a personal reason for the choice. Gan also admits that he chose to reaffirm the Master-Slave dialectic for a slightly selfish reason: to keep T’Gatoi for himself (28), revealing that he desires to possess her, taking their relationship to an even more sexual level. It also, however, suggests that he wishes to have an emotional bond with her that others cannot partake in. T’Gatoi’s “hum of contentment” (28) after he reveals this secret, suggests that her sentiments overlap with his. These emotional familial ties and sexual desires cause him to change his mind. By deciding to be a host for T’Gatoi’s children, Gan reaffirms the Master-Slave dialectic.

#### IV. Consequences of Reaffirmation

By reaffirming the Master-Slave dialectic, Gan strengthens it. He strengthens it when he says that the Terran should be “shown when [they are] young kids, and shown more than once” (28-29), which would allow the Tlic to even further manipulate the Terran by desensitizing them. The Terran would see it as a fact of life or as their calling, understanding that though it was painful, it is safe when done correctly and that the Tlic’s lives depend on it. Because the slave would see few of the negative side effects of the birthing process and would likely be fed only propaganda, desensitizing the Terran ultimately creates a wider gap between the master and the slave, giving the master more control over the slave’s actions.

Gan's reaffirmation and strengthening of the Master-Slave dialectic also suggests that this society does not need equality or balance but subjugation and cooperation by becoming like family members and/or loving the master in order for both species to survive. Loving T'Gatoi and desiring to possess her does give Gan a stronger position in their relationship, but he still does the work of childbearing, and she is still in control since her narcotic fluid from the egg now perpetually calms him (29). He believes that he will be able to take care of her by serving as the host for her children. However, the last line in the story belongs to T'Gatoi when she says, "I'll take care of you" (29). The Tlic are still the masters, but because the master and the slave love each other, they are able to cooperate.

The addition of emotional ties—familial and sexual love—in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic is what essentially causes the reaffirmation of the Hegelian system in Gan and T'Gatoi's society. By establishing herself in the family, T'Gatoi grew to love Gan, which caused Gan to grow to love her. In this society, it is this emotional tie that ultimately brings the slave to believe that his job is worth the risk because he cares for his master. The reaffirmation of the Master-Slave dialectic sets the groundwork for the creation of a strengthened system of subjugation where the slave is less sensitive to the possible pain of their work and where, if the master and slave develop a relationship similar to T'Gatoi and Gan, the slave has a stronger motivation to work for their master.

#### Works Cited

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