

Bloodchild



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OCTAVIA BUTLER

Octavia Butler was the only child in a modest African-American family. Her mother was a housemaid and her father a shoeshine man, though he died when she was 7. As a child, Butler suffered from dyslexia and a crippling level of social anxiety, making her childhood both lonely and fraught with teasing. To compensate, Butler spent much of her free time in a local public library reading novels and magazines, and it was during this time that she fell in love with writing and storytelling. She started writing her own stories and convinced her mother to buy her a typewriter at the age of 10. During her college years, Butler continued to write prolifically but saw little success, working a variety of side jobs to keep herself afloat while maintaining a rigorous writing schedule. Her stories during this period were written in the mode of prominent science fiction at the time, with classic white male characters and simple premises. With the development of the Black Power Movement in the 1960 and 1970s as well as the national discussions about race and hierarchy at the time, Butler began writing more diverse characters and using her stories to critique existing power structures in gender, class, and ethnicity from her viewpoint of a black woman. Distinguishing herself with her perspective, Butler began selling short stories and novels, and by the late 1970s was able to support herself with writing full-time. In 1984 Butler she won her first Hugo Award for her short story "Speech Sounds." The next year, "Bloodchild" won another Hugo. Over the next five years she wrote her popular *Xenogenesis* trilogy of novels, which she researched in the Amazon jungle. In the 1990s, following the publication of [Parable of the Sower](#) and *Parable of the Talents*, she was awarded almost \$300,000 by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the first science fiction author ever to receive the honor. In 2005, she was awarded a place in Chicago State University's International Black Writers Hall of Fame. Butler died suddenly of a stroke the following year at the young age of 58.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Born in 1947, Butler came of age in the Civil Rights era and the rise of the Black Power movement, both of which had a significant effect on her writing. The work of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and many other Civil Rights icons brought discussions of race, power, and hierarchy to the forefront of the nation's attention and weighed heavily on Butler's mind. As she came into her own as a writer and learned to capitalize on her unique perspective as a black woman, Butler's stories

frequently became commentaries on hierarchy amidst different races and genders, featuring minorities and women in critical, powerful roles as a way to push back against common repression. The narrative of the Black Power movement specifically influenced her writing: while in college, a classmate of Butler spoke critically of their black ancestors' many years of subservience to white majority government and social expectations, seeing it as cowardice. Butler found that she disagreed, arguing that subservience was often an act of survival, and that the sacrifices that subservience demanded, for the sake of protecting the people around oneself, could be seen as a quiet act of bravery and selflessness. This idea of quiet heroism and relinquishing of power for the sake of others became a mainstay in Butler's stories, and features prominently in "Bloodchild."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although as a child Butler was introduced to classic science fiction through the stories of John Brunner, Zenna Henderson, and Theodore Sturgeon, she soon broke ranks with this manner of science fiction and distinguished herself by situating female characters and people of color as protagonists. Butler is often regarded as the mother of Afro-futurism, a movement that merges futurism and a celebration of technology with African traditions, envisioning what technologically-advanced future African societies might look like. Many writers and creators have followed in Butler's footsteps, particularly black female authors. Nnedi Okorafor, author of the *Binti* series; N.K. Jemisin, author of fantasy novels such as *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Fifth Season*; and Nisi Shawl, author of the award-winning *Filter House*, all cite Butler as a powerful influence on their own successful work. Butler's outsized influence in the birth of Afro-futurism has had an effect on mainstream commercial media as well. Marvel's *Black Panther* comics and blockbuster film strongly stand in the genre of Afro-futurism, as does Jay-Z's "Family Feud" video.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Bloodchild
- **When Written:** 1984
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** June 1984
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story, science fiction
- **Setting:** An unnamed alien world, in a protected territory called the Preserve
- **Climax:** Gan and T'Gatoi's conversation in the kitchen,

wherein Gan decides to shoulder the weight of his responsibility to bear T'Gatoi's eggs

- **Antagonist:** T'Gatoi
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Pregnant Men. Octavia Butler expressed that she had always wanted to write a story about a man voluntarily undergoing pregnancy, not as a statement of equality, but as an act of compassion and sacrifice. “Bloodchild” gave her the opportunity to do so.

Botflies. The idea of the parasitic Tlic was initially born out of her fear of the South American botfly. As Butler was preparing to travel to the Amazon rainforest for research, she read about, and was horrified by, the existence of a parasitic fly that lays eggs in human skin. The safest thing to do is to let the larva grow until it falls out on its own, meaning the host will have to carry it for weeks.



PLOT SUMMARY

On an unnamed alien planet, a group of humans (referred to as Terrans) live in a protected community called the Preserve, along with a segment of the ruling alien race, the Tlic. The Tlic, who are large, intelligent, centipede-like beings, are parasitic and need host animals for their eggs. Since the Terrans are ideal hosts, the Tlic of the Preserve have formed an arrangement with them: the Tlic offer protection and the Terrans offer one male from each family to serve as a host to Tlic eggs. The Tlic and Terrans have formed an interdependent relationship around this arrangement, and live peaceably amongst each other.

An adolescent Terran named Gan, who is mated to a female Tlic named T'Gatoi and will soon be implanted with her eggs, is visiting his family at their home. Gan and his family are drinking sterile Tlic **eggs**, which for Terrans have a narcotic, pleasant effect, while T'Gatoi sits with them and talks. Gan's mother, Lien, initially refuses to drink the egg until T'Gatoi pressures her to, chiding her for suffering needlessly and allowing old age to take her earlier than it has to, since the eggs also have a life-prolonging effect on Terrans. Gan's father frequently drank eggs and lived to twice his natural lifespan, bearing three clutches of Tlic eggs and siring four Terran children.

While they are sitting, Gan reflects about how T'Gatoi, as ruler of the Preserve, protects all of the Terrans from the masses of Tlic, and how they are all indebted to her. Indeed, Gan was promised to T'Gatoi out of the gratitude of his mother before he was even born.

T'Gatoi senses that something is wrong and rushes outside, finding Bram Lomas, a Terran who has also been impregnated

by a Tlic and whose eggs are ready to hatch. He is in great pain and great danger—if the eggs are not removed before the gestating Tlic eat through their egg shells, they will begin to eat their Terran host from the inside out. T'Gatoi orders Gan to go call for help, but he argues that he should stay to help her; instead, Qui, his older brother should call for help. T'Gatoi relents and sends Gan to go slaughter an animal for the Tlic hatchlings to eat once they are removed from Bram Lomas's body.

As Gan does so, he realizes that he is afraid to participate in the process that is about to happen, but events are by this point moving to rapidly for him to back out. He returns to T'Gatoi with the dead animal to find that she has stripped Bram Lomas's clothing off and is securing his legs. Bram Lomas is still awake, unable to be fully sedated without killing the eggs that are living inside of him. Although Bram Lomas's Tlic mate should have performed the procedure, she is nowhere in sight, so T'Gatoi is forced to do it herself.

Using one of her claws, she cuts open Bram Lomas's belly and begins retrieving the Tlic grubs out of him. Bram Lomas is screaming in pain, and though Gan understands that what is happening is unavoidable, he feels as if he is helping T'Gatoi to torture the man. T'Gatoi is unbothered by Bram Lomas's pain and wholly focused on the job of retrieving eggs from his body, licking the blood off of them as she works. Seeing that Gan is horrified and sickened, however, she sends him outside to vomit and catch his breath,

Gan does so and begins to wander off, not sure of where he is going. He happens upon Qui, who has sent word to Bram Lomas's Tlic mate. Qui starts pressing Gan for details of what happened, but Gan is mostly unforthcoming. Qui reveals that he too saw a birthing process when he was young, but the one that he witnessed was far more disturbing: an impregnated man was also ready for his eggs to hatch, and though his Tlic mate was there with him, there was no secondary host animal for the Tlic grubs to eat once they were removed from the Terran host, meaning that they would die. Rather than saving the Terran but risking her young, the Tlic refused to open the man up and instead let her offspring eat him alive. Eventually, the Terran begged the Tlic to kill him by slitting his throat. The Tlic grubs then ate their way out of his corpse.

Gan is horrified by this story and by the birth that he just saw, plagued by visions of Tlic grubs engorged with blood climbing through human flesh. His former trust and affection for T'Gatoi turns to revulsion and fear. Though he tries to leave, Qui will not leave him alone. Qui himself hates the Tlic, having tried to run away until he realized there was nowhere to go. Qui also knows that so long as Gan is safe, he himself will never have to be a host.

After a brief fight with Qui, Gan returns to the house, arriving late in the night. The house is mostly empty, and he goes into the kitchen alone and removes his father's contraband **rifle**

from its hiding place. Though he had intended to clean it, he loads it with ammunition instead. T'Gatoi finds him in the kitchen with the rifle. She knows that he is upset, admitting that that is not how the birthing process was supposed to go and that Gan should never have had to see such a thing. T'Gatoi sees the rifle, and though she thinks that perhaps Gan means to kill her with it, he puts the gun to his own head. He bemoans the fact that he was never given a choice in the matter of bearing T'Gatoi's eggs and that he does not want to be just her host animal. The act of suicide seems to him the only way to make a choice for himself. He demands that T'Gatoi ask him not to follow through.

T'Gatoi offers to impregnate Gan's sister, Xuan Hoa, instead. Xuan Hoa likes T'Gatoi and would be willing. Gan initially accepts the offer, but quickly realizes that he is only using Xuan Hoa, whom he truly loves, as a shield in the same way that Qui uses him. As T'Gatoi is leaving to go to Xuan Hoa, Gan stops her and insists that she impregnate him as had always been planned. T'Gatoi wants to confiscate the rifle, since it is illegal and poses a threat to her future children, but Gan demands that she leave it in the house, even though that makes her afraid. Gan insists that T'Gatoi accept the same risk that he is accepting, and that she treat him as a partner and an adult, rather than as a subject or as property. T'Gatoi eventually consents, relinquishing control and accepting the risks to show that she is willing to trust Gan.

They both go to Gan's room. He undresses and lies with her, and she implants an egg in his abdomen. As they are lying there together, Gan admits that he did not truly hate T'Gatoi, but he was afraid of her and what she would do to him. He also admits that he was afraid of losing her or letting her go to someone else; he wanted her for himself. T'Gatoi is pleased with this and promises that she will never leave him alone the way that Bram Lomas was left alone. She will protect him.

T'Gatoi's offspring. Though he has technical knowledge of how the birthing process occurs, he has never actually seen it and doesn't fully understand the mortal risk to his own safety that it poses. When Gan witnesses the traumatic and gruesome birth involving Bram Lomas, it fills him with revulsion and dread. It is not until Gan considers his feelings in the context of all of the people around him that he is able to face his fear and bear the weight of his responsibility. Upholding his duty is critical not only to honoring T'Gatoi, but also to protecting his family, maintaining peace in the Preserve, and contributing to society. When Gan understands this, he comes of age and leaves his childhood behind.

T'Gatoi – T'Gatoi is a Tlic female and Gan's lifelong mate. She is also a powerful politician and the ruler of the Preserve with authority to distribute or protect Terran families as she sees fit. T'Gatoi chose Gan as her mate and the host of her future children while he was still in Lien's womb and held him within minutes of his birth. She has cared and provided for Gan his entire life and has been very affectionate towards him while waiting for him to reach the age at which his body is ready to host her parasitic offspring. T'Gatoi's character is defined by her power. She controls her own political faction, having risen to the position of ruling the Preserve and the Terrans who live in it. She is also physically powerful, especially compared to her human counterpart. Although T'Gatoi truly seems affectionate toward Gan and Lien, she tends to exercise that power within her relationships as well, resulting in resentment from Lien and eventually fear from Gan. T'Gatoi was once close friends with Lien, though after she entered into politics they grew apart. T'Gatoi still cares for Lien and her family, watching over them, but never hesitating to exercise her control over them as well.

Lien – Lien is Gan's mother, a Terran. Though Lien was once happy and close friends with T'Gatoi, she now bitterly resents the Tlic leader for taking Gan from her. Lien chooses to defy T'Gatoi and all that she represents by rejecting the pleasant narcotic and life-prolonging effect of the **sterile eggs**, and instead choosing to suffer and let old age set in rapidly. This suffering is a point of pride for her and has stunted her ability to emotionally support or even show love to Gan, instead keeping her emotionally distant and cold.

Qui – Qui is Gan's older brother, a Terran. As a young child Qui witnessed a botched birthing in which a Tlic allowed her offspring to eat a Terran alive. This made Qui hate the Tlic and view them as monsters. For several years he tried running away until he realized there was nowhere else to go. Now, Qui tries to make himself as small as possible, shielding himself from the Tlic with Gan, and jealously seeking escape from reality through the narcotic of the **sterile eggs**.

Xuan Hoa – Xuan Hoa is Gan's sister and favorite sibling, a Terran. She also loves T'Gatoi and had hoped to be picked to be the host to her children, despite the fact that women are not often chosen to host. Had Gan decided that he could not bear



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gan – Gan is the protagonist and narrator of the story. He is a Terran teenager who lives in the protected shelter of the Preserve and is the mate of the Tlic female, T'Gatoi. Gan has been promised to T'Gatoi from birth to be the host for her parasitic eggs when she is ready to have children as a part of the social contract that maintains peace in the Preserve. He was held by T'Gatoi within minutes of emerging from his mother Lien's womb, was at least partially raised by her, and was educated on the process that he would have to undergo as soon as he was old enough to understand. Because of this, Gan feels great affection and trust for T'Gatoi. At the start of the story, however, Gan has not yet truly reckoned with the sacrifices that will be demanded of him as the bearer of

T'Gatoi's offspring, Xuan Hoa would have done it in his stead.

Bram Lomas – Bram Lomas is a Terran and the carrier of T'Khotgif Teh's eggs. Since she is not present when the eggs are hatching inside of his body, T'Gatoi is forced to cut Lomas open while he is awake in front of Gan. This process horrifies Gan as it grants him newfound awareness of what is expected of him as a Tlic mate.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gan's Father – Gan's father is deceased by the start of the story. Through the narcotic **sterile eggs**, he lived a life that was twice as long as natural, hosted three clutches of Tlic eggs, and sired four Terran children.

T'Khotgif Teh – A Tlic and Bram Lomas's mate.

TERMS

Terran – The name used to describe humans who live in the Preserve.

Tlic – An intelligent race of large, centipede-like aliens with many clawed legs and a venomous stinger on their tail. Tlic are parasitic and need a host animal to gestate their eggs in until they are ready to hatch.

The Preserve – A Tlic-governed and protected territory where Terrans are able to live safely amidst a particular Tlic political faction without being preyed upon by the greater Tlic population.

N'Tlic – The name used to describe Terrans who have been impregnated with eggs by a Tlic mate.

mate's eggs within his body, he is given a fuller understanding of the mortal risk and gruesome nature of the task after accidentally witnessing a birth gone wrong. His childhood security is replaced by fear, and for the first time he is forced to come to terms with his own role in society and what will be required of him for the sake of others. Through Gan's struggle, Butler suggest that an individual comes of age when they shoulder the weight of their responsibilities, and the sacrifices entailed, for the sake of the people around them.

Gan's childhood is defined by the fact that although he had technical knowledge of his role in society, he lacked the experience to fully understand the importance of his task—or how much it would cost him. Gan notably describes the events that take place in the evening of the story as his “last night of childhood.” When he is still experiencing that childhood, Gan is affectionate toward and trusting of his Tlic mate, T'Gatoi, reflecting his innocence. At this point, Gan has enjoyed the privileges of his position as T'Gatoi's mate (extra provisions, protection, and being excused from taking up his family's trade) without assessing the actual cost to his own body. Still a child, he has not yet questioned why he benefits from such unequal treatment. Gan is aware that his feelings toward T'Gatoi differ greatly from those of his mother Lien, who resents T'Gatoi, yet Gan has not seriously questioned why this is. In his childishness, he has only recognized the effect that his mother's attitude has on him: Lien is emotionally distant and resents the affection between T'Gatoi and himself. Butler uses these details to cast childhood as a naïve and self-absorbed state in which Gan has not yet considered the world around himself.

Gan's childhood effectively ends upon seeing the gruesome reality of Tlic birth—and, by extension, the reality of the world he lives in. Such knowledge in itself is not enough to truly come of age, though, as is evidenced by Gan's initial refusal to accept the responsibilities of his future. Gan witnesses the traumatic birthing of Bram Lomas, a Terran who is mated to a Tlic partner in the same way that Gan is, which shatters his childhood security. Upon seeing her tear open Lomas, T'Gatoi goes from the most familiar person in his life to a creature that is alien and frightening.

With his newfound knowledge of what will be done to his body and his own powerlessness to stop it, Gan's brief flirtation with suicide is his first reach for the personal agency that comes with adulthood. In his eyes, dying by his own hand is better than dying in the birthing process, for at least it will have been his own decision. Yet Gan is aware that if he were to somehow leave or be relieved of the responsibility to bear Tlic eggs, the responsibility would be passed on to either his brother, Qui, or his sister, Xuan Hoa. Fleeing from social responsibility would only shift his own burden onto someone else, and Gan's impulse to flee thus reflects that despite no longer being ignorant of the world around him, he has not yet truly matured.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COMING OF AGE

Set on an alien planet inhabited by a species called the Tlic, “Bloodchild” tells the story of Gan, an adolescent human facing a decision about which adult responsibilities he can bear. Humans (called “Terrans” in the story) have long lived among the Tlic, but their relationship is fraught: the Tlic protect the Terrans and permit them to live on the Preserve, a Terran habitat protected from the greater Tlic population, but, in exchange, the Tlic impregnate some Terrans with parasitic Tlic eggs that feed on their blood. Although Gan always knew that he would have to host his Tlic

Gan truly enters adulthood when, realizing that dodging his own responsibility will hurt those he loves, he accepts the burden of carrying T'Gatoi's eggs. This reflects the story's assertion that coming of age entails both an acceptance of personal responsibility and a willingness to put others' wellbeing first. As such, Qui works as a foil to Gan. Qui witnesses an even more gruesome Tlic birth as a child and initially tries to run from reality. When he realizes there is nowhere to go, since leaving the Preserve means certain death, he makes medicates his fears with the narcotic effect of drinking **sterile Tlic eggs**. Qui, in contrast to Gan's shouldering of responsibility, prolongs his own childhood by shielding himself with Gan, knowing that so long as Gan is safe and healthy, Qui will never be forced to carry Tlic eggs.

By contrast, when Gan realizes that if he does not willingly bear T'Gatoi's parasitic children, Xuan Hoa—whom he loves—will have to, he understands that she will then have to face the same fear and risk. If Gan were to pass that on to sister, not only would he be hurting her, but he would be shielding himself with her in the same way that Qui selfishly shields himself with Gan. By accepting the sacrifice of his personal freedom and the risks involved, Gan is protecting his family members and preserving the social contract that keeps the Terran population safe on the Preserve. By looking beyond himself, then, Gan has become a man. Butler thus argues that to come of age—to truly grow up—one must take ownership of the wellbeing of the people around them, even when that comes at the cost of personal freedom or safety.



GENDER AND POWER

Through the relationship between Gan and T'Gatoi, Butler uses an unfamiliar environment to critique familiar gender roles and the balance of power within stereotypical relationships. Gan, although male, is a representation of motherhood and traditionally feminine role (in human terms). By effectively gender-swapping these roles, Butler lifts them away from the reader's preconceptions about men and women so that these roles can be considered in their own right. Butler uses this conceit to highlight the restrictive and harmful nature of traditional gender dynamics, in particular the ways in which rigid adherence to masculinity robs others of agency and power.

T'Gatoi, though female, reflects traditional masculinity. She is physically dominant, being ten feet in length and far more powerful than Gan. T'Gatoi never makes requests, but only gives commands, even when she is in Gan's family's home. When she brings **sterile eggs** for the family to drink, for instance, she dictates who gets how much. T'Gatoi is also socially dominant: she is a successful politician and the ruler of the Preserve, using this power to protect the Terrans from the "hordes" of desperate Tlic that would consume them. This reflects the dominance and responsibility that men have long

held in patriarchal societies.

By contrast, it's clear that Gan—occupying a traditionally female role—is not equal to T'Gatoi in their relationship. Gan has been chosen from birth to carry T'Gatoi's children in his body, without ever having any say in the matter, as a part of a social contract between the Terran and the Tlic. His singular function in life is to help T'Gatoi have children. This parallels the arranged marriages of certain human societies wherein young women were promised as future brides at a very young age. It is further significant that the children Gan must bear are literally parasitic, just as an unwanted pregnancy may seem like a parasitic attachment, a foreign organism draining a woman's strength and well-being. Until Gan comes of age, he has also been entirely submissive to T'Gatoi, doing whatever she asks and accepting whatever physical affection she gives. Even when T'Gatoi strikes him, knocking him across the room, Gan blames himself for not heeding her warning to obey her rather than blaming T'Gatoi for hurting him. It is also stated multiple times that Gan is T'Gatoi's property. This again parallels the traditional subservience of women within patriarchal relationships.

T'Gatoi's unmatched power and strength are critical for the protection of Gan's family from the world, but cause inequity in her relationship with Gan. Butler uses their unbalanced relationship to critique the way that rigid masculinity often stunts relationships. Because T'Gatoi needs this power in the outside world to protect Gan and his family, she has not learned to show weakness or allow herself to be vulnerable within the relationship. This makes Gan feel powerless and drives him to suppress his own fears of her and what she will do to him in the birth process until it hardens into hatred. Gan even considers murdering T'Gatoi and killing himself, simply as an act of self-assertion. Butler here criticizes the exercise of traditional masculine power, which the story suggests creates a deeply unhealthy dynamic wherein men cannot admit vulnerability and women cannot exercise their own agency.

Only by embracing vulnerability is T'Gatoi able to make space for Gan to confront his fears and take agency in their relationship. Butler is firmly arguing that is in the best interest of *both* men and women for men to let go of their power and for women to assert their autonomy. Although T'Gatoi chose Gan from birth, Gan is not able to truly choose T'Gatoi until Gan forces her to accept the risk of allowing Gan to have agency. This manifests specifically in his demand that T'Gatoi allow the family to keep their **illegal rifle**, despite the fact that that means her children will be around a potential weapon in the future. By allowing for that uncertainty, T'Gatoi joins Gan in feeling the fear of not being in control. He tells her, "Leave it here ... Accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner." Gan's newfound ability to choose T'Gatoi for himself, rather than being forced to submit, gives him a personal stake in the relationship and the wellbeing of their future Tlic

children. Not only is he willing to be with T'Gatoi, but he *wants* to be with her. He wants to honor her by caring for her young. Butler suggests that not only is a balance of power within the relationship more ethical, but it is also far more fruitful. When both parties accept the risk of dealing with a true *partner*—rather than a subordinate—they allow for the creation of genuine trust.

Significantly, Butler's critique of gender roles does not aim to abolish them entirely. Indeed, by setting Gan and T'Gatoi's relationship against a hostile environment, the author shows the clear need for traditionally masculine power in some circumstances, such as T'Gatoi's use of political dominance to protect Gan's family and the other Terrans in the Preserve from the Tlic masses who are desperate for hosts. Even so, Butler strongly argues for equity within a relationship. This redistribution of power will be better both for each individual's development as well as their strength as a unit.



INTERDEPENDENCE

In contrast to the modern western world that prizes individual autonomy, Butler places her characters in a choice-limiting society, forcing them

to depend upon each other and accept the needs of others in their lives. The Terrans, being physically inferior to the Tlic, offer a member of each human family as a host to the Tlic's parasitic offspring. The Tlic offer to protect the Terrans in exchange for being able to dependably and safely birth their young. Although for the Terrans the arrangement is less than ideal, it is the cost of survival on an unforgiving planet, and some Terrans are even able to see the beauty of their mutual benefit. Butler uses this relationship between two starkly different groups to show the value of different parties being willing to forego their independence to preserve societal harmony, juxtaposing that against the selfishness of individuals who refuse to contribute to society or appreciate the contributions of others.

The Terrans and the Tlic form a social contract that allows both races to survive. Butler asserts that there is a shared social responsibility between the two groups. Although the present situation is imperfect, both Terrans and Tlic have achieved stability in the face of death: Tlic, being parasites, need hosts for their eggs to gestate. Prior to the Terrans' arrival, the animals they previously used as hosts were becoming unable to keep Tlic young alive, and the Tlic were in danger of dying out as a species. Likewise, the Terrans fled from their homeworld, where they were being killed and enslaved by other humans. After the Terrans arrived but before the Preserve was established by T'Gatoi's political faction, the Tlic had been caging and breeding Terrans like livestock. The integration of Terran and Tlic families now maintains peace on the Preserve. Where once Terrans and Tlic had been killing each other, now everyone has a vested interest in preventing violence; any

collateral damage would hurt both Terrans and Tlic. The two groups thus share the responsibility of supporting each other's wellbeing and are forced to set aside their own anger, aggression, and fear of that which is "other" within their society. In doing this, they also offer each other better odds of survival and a better, though definitely not perfect, life.

The nature of life on the Preserve means that an individual can thrive when they are willing to live within the interdependent system, submitting to the greater needs of society along with accepting its offerings. This is clearly demonstrated by the members of Gan's family. Gan and Xuan Hoa both show affection for T'Gatoi and acceptance of their situation in the Preserve. Although Gan's affection threatens to turn into hatred and cynicism on the night of Bram Lomas's birthing, by leaning into his social responsibility and looking beyond himself, Gan is ultimately able to see the beauty in the relationship between Tlic and Terrans. He comes to appreciate the mutual benefit and the fact that the arrangement is able to exist at all.

Qui and Lien, by contrast, refuse to submit to the needs of their society and thus cannot see anything positive in their interdependent relationship with the Tlic. They both choose to suffer rather than embrace their situation. Qui, though he hates and fears the Tlic, is greedy for **their sterile eggs** as a means to escape his situation, enjoying the fruits of others' societal contributions. Lien, unable to accept that she must let Gan belong to T'Gatoi for the benefit of everyone, rejects even the eggs and chooses to suffer as much as possible; she will neither give nor take, refusing to contribute or to accept the gifts of others. Rather than appreciating the union of two families, Lien hurts herself and the people around her, becoming a cold and distant mother to her children.

Butler seems to portray Gan's father as the ideal responder to an interdependent reality and a role model for Gan to live up to. He is the successful bearer of three clutches of Tlic eggs as well the father of four Terran children, making him incredibly fruitful in a world that strongly values reproduction. This fruitfulness is due to the fact that Gan's father accepted every egg offered to him by the Tlic, prolonging his life to twice its natural length. This suggests that the key to thriving in an interdependent world is to contribute to and make sacrifices for the good of the community, and to accept what is given by others in return. By embracing this economy, a harmonious society can be created and new life formed.

Butler has created a complicated reality between the Terrans and the Tlic, one that is both touching and frightening. Rather than elevating independence and personal autonomy as many science fiction writers do, Butler recognizes the complex interdependence of relationships. "Bloodchild" praises the capacity of individuals to accept life on its own terms and lean into the reality that all lives are interconnected. When individuals sacrifice for others and accept sacrifices in return, they are able to create unions that once seemed impossible.



PASSIVE RESISTANCE, SUFFERING, AND OPPRESSION

Lien is defined by suffering, “caged” within the confines of her family’s situation and the knowledge that her own son has been taken from her and belongs to T’Gatoi. Since she is unable to resist through violence without endangering Gan, Lien resists by unnecessarily suffering in the face of T’Gatoi’s efforts to pacify her pain, chiefly through **the narcotic sterile eggs**. Lien’s struggle against T’Gatoi is also a struggle against the society she lives in. In this relationship, T’Gatoi embodies the state in its capacity to protect and pacify; Lien represents the citizen under the weight of society who refuses to be pacified by the stronger agent and voluntarily suffers, but whose suffering harms others as well. Butler thus complicates narratives of martyrdom by showing both the power and futility of passive resistance. Using the relationship between Lien and T’Gatoi and the pain that Lien’s suffering brings her family, Butler offers a warning against “heroic” individual resistance—against a person, state, or circumstance of life—undertaken for selfish motives.

Butler presents the Tlic as a governing authority that is both protective and oppressive. Lien tells Gan at various points in his life that he must respect and honor T’Gatoi and that he must take care of her, since she is all that stands between their Terran family and the “hordes” of Tlic outside of the Preserve desperate for viable hosts. Although Lien and T’Gatoi were childhood friends, as T’Gatoi’s political power increased, they grew apart and the dynamic changed from true friends to ruler and subject. T’Gatoi eventually returned to claim Gan as the reward for her hard work. Though Lien could not refuse, she began to resent T’Gatoi, feeling that she was trying to buy her son with protection and eggs. T’Gatoi often, while laying with Lien, wraps her many legs around Lien’s body. Although Gan enjoys the feeling of security this entails, Lien believes it feels like a cage. T’Gatoi knows this and does it anyway, exercising her authority by literally caging her subject. The nature of T’Gatoi and the Tlic’s authority seemingly robs Lien of any control over her own wellbeing or future. Any individual in such a situation must choose whether to be broken by such a system or to rebel, fighting for the right to have control over their life. Lien chooses to fight.

On top of offering protection, the Tlic use pacification as a means of control. Butler uses Lien to show that when pacification replaces violence as an oppressive tactic, the chief resistance becomes voluntary suffering. Death becomes its own assertion of freedom and independence. The Tlic offer the narcotic and life-prolonging eggs as incentive for good behavior, offering Terrans a drugged escape from the grim realities that come with life in the Preserve, along with the sedating venomous sting of their tails. When Lien refuses an egg, T’Gatoi stings her with her tail to force her to relax, never

asking permission or consent. The pacification is literally forced upon her.

Although Lien used to accept eggs, with the realization that Gan belonged less and less to her each day Lien chose to refuse the eggs and feel every minute of her suffering. Unable to protest verbally or violently for the danger it posed to Gan, Lien chose to impose her own suffering and refuse relief. In hurting herself, she also hurts T’Gatoi, who cares for Lien even while she tries to control her. Her resistance to T’Gatoi is also resistance to the social contract that they all must abide by that took her son from her. Lien’s refusal of the life-prolonging eggs is rushing herself towards the martyrdom of an earlier-than-necessary grave. In a society that exerts control by keeping its subjects safe and healthy, bribing them with long life, Lien declares her ability to choose for herself by allowing old age to destroy her. Her self-destructive refusal of the eggs bears parallels to prisoners who undertake hunger strikes in protest of prison abuses, or self-immolating monks who took their own lives to protest oppressive regimes.

Yet contrary to the popular concept of a heroic martyr, Lien’s idealistic suffering also wounds the people she loves. Gan’s resultant complicated and painful relationship with his mother calls into question whether such idealism is worthwhile. Though it was not always this way, Lien’s current relationship with Gan is cold and distant. Gan’s only comfort was to know that somewhere beneath the “duty and pride and pain” his mother still loved him. When Lien is under the sedate narcotic influence of T’Gatoi’s sting and the eggs, Gan fantasizes about showing affection to his mother, in the hope that she would receive it and tell him that she loved him. However, he knows this would become a humiliation for her, so he chooses to let her keep her pride and remain distant. When Gan is struggling with coming of age, he does not go to his mother for support since she has not been emotionally supportive for years and is resentful of T’Gatoi as it is. Rather, he wishes his father were still alive to comfort him.

Although Lien’s voluntary suffering could be seen as heroic, it ultimately comes off as selfish for the unnecessary suffering it imposes on Gan and his family. Rather than a supportive parent, Gan is left with a prideful shell of a mother who can offer no emotional support at all and who, by dying, will voluntarily remove herself from his life. Butler draws on the familiar themes of an individual resisting a repressive power at the cost of great personal suffering. However, Butler is much more critical of the idea of martyrdom, using Lien to show its cost within an interdependent world. When everyone around an individual has chosen to live within an oppressive—or constrictive—environment, such idealistic resistance often brings pain to everyone. “Bloodchild” is a story about individuals who learn to live within difficult circumstances, and Lien’s “heroic” suffering ultimately undermines their efforts to take life on its own terms and take responsibility for the

interdependent relationships around them.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE STERILE EGGS

The sterile eggs function to demonstrate how well the different members of Gan's family have integrated and participated in the combined Terran-Tlic society. Unlike the fertile eggs that are implanted into hosts, sterile Tlic eggs are offered to Terrans to drink, often as an incentive, and contain several potent properties. For Terrans, not only are they an effective narcotic that induces a dream-like state, they also increase vitality and vigor, extending a Terran's lifespan well beyond its natural length if consumed often enough. As such, the sterile eggs are representative of all of the benefits that the Terrans receive for their part of the interdependent agreement between themselves and the Tlic. Although the Terrans also receive protection, general provision, and a territory to live in, the eggs are their primary reward for sacrificing their bodies as hosts.

Gan's father, a model citizen who hosted Tlic young three different times, ate his share of eggs and was blessed with a fruitful life that was twice as long as it naturally ought to have been. By contrast, Lien's outright refusal of the eggs is representative of her refusal to participate in society or even the life of her family at all. In her defiance of T'Gatoi and the whole arrangement between the two species, Lien will neither contribute to their interdependent community nor will she accept its benefits, choosing instead to live miserably and die relatively young. Qui demands his share of whatever eggs may come into the host—desirous of their narcotic properties that allow him to temporarily escape from his wretched, hateful life—but since he is not a host and unwilling to labor for the sake of the community, the only eggs that he will ever have access to are his share of whatever is gifted to the family. Qui's desire for eggs underscores the fact that, though they do physically aid the humans who drink them, the eggs' narcotic properties also essentially make them a pacifying device to maintain Tlic authority and the tenuous peace between the different species.



THE RIFLE

The contraband rifle that Gan's father has hidden—a leftover from the time when Tlic and Terrans were actively fighting—represents the quest for individual agency—one's capacity, used or not, to make their own decisions, act in meaningful ways, and have some amount

of control over their future. Although Gan, in his coming of age, eventually gives up his right to live fully independently (that is, to live without regard for the needs of others or his obligation to society), the rifle becomes an important object in his relationship with T'Gatoi as a way to negotiate for his own agency and force her to see him as a *partner* rather than a *subject*.

Gan first uses the rifle to kill an animal that he would not otherwise have been able to kill, since he has not been trained as butcher like the rest of his family. Gan convinces T'Gatoi to let him help her with Bram Lomas in place of Qui, but immediately realizes that Qui, with his size and strength, would have been better suited to the task of killing a large animal. In giving him the means to kill an animal, the rifle offers Gan a degree of power otherwise inaccessible, neatly foreshadowing his confrontation with T'Gatoi.

Later, while they are in the kitchen, Gan briefly entertains the thought of using the rifle to kill T'Gatoi. T'Gatoi is physically superior to such a degree that without the rifle, killing her would be an impossibility. Once again, then, the rifle increases Gan's personal agency. When Gan turns the rifle on himself and considers suicide, he is similarly reacting to his own utter powerlessness against his role in society and the mortal danger that he will face by bearing Tlic young. Feeling that he has no ability to choose the life he wants for himself, suicide becomes an assertion of his autonomy. After deciding not to use the rifle to kill himself, he nevertheless forces T'Gatoi to let it remain in the house, despite the fact that it is illegal and frightens her to do so, saying "Leave it here! If we're not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner." The rifle forces T'Gatoi to accept him as a partner, a being with the potentially dangerous capacity to act and make decisions for himself. Notably, it was Gan's father, though cast as a model citizen of the Preserve, who hid the rifle in first place. Even this paragon of interdependent cooperation with the Tlic felt the need to maintain his own agency by hiding weapons, further suggesting the importance of personal freedom.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Seven Stories Press edition of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* published in 2005.

Bloodchild Quotes

☞ I lay against T'Gatoi's long, velvet underside, sipping from my egg now and then, wondering why my mother denied herself such a harmless pleasure. Less of her hair would be gray if she indulged now and then. The eggs prolonged life, prolonged vigor. My father, who had never refused one in his life, had lived more than twice as long as he should have. And toward the end of his life, when he should have been slowing down, he had married my mother and fathered four children.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), T'Gatoi, Gan's Father, Lien

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Gan makes this observation at the beginning of the story, as he is lying with T'Gatoi and wondering why his mother will not drink the eggs with the rest of the family. This brief exposition sets up the function of the eggs in this society. They are both a narcotic substance, providing pleasure and relief, and a life-prolonging medicine. Butler interestingly ties both escapism and the fostering of life to the same symbol; not only do the eggs prolong life, but they restore vigor. This complicates the notion that the Tlic oppress the Terrans by drugging them, instead asserting that the Terrans do, in fact, receive tangible benefits from their interdependent society.

Both Lien and Gan's father's character is also tied to their response to the eggs. Lien, in her refusal to partake, subjects herself to unnecessary suffering and seems to embrace old age as a self-imposed martyrdom. Contrarily, Gan's father embraced the eggs and their effects, which allowed him not only to lead a long life but also to create many more lives: three broods of Tlic eggs and four Terran children.

☞ Unwillingly obedient, my mother took it from me and put it to her mouth. There were only a few drops left in the now-shrunken, elastic shell, but she squeezed them out, swallowed, them, and after a few moments some of the lines of tension began to smooth from her face.

"It's good," she whispered. "Sometimes I forget how good it is."
"You should take more," T'Gatoi said. "Why are you in such a hurry to be old?"

Related Characters: Gan, T'Gatoi, Lien (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

When T'Gatoi pressures Lien to drink some egg, she eventually capitulates. Her reaction reveals that Lien has not always been a self-inflicted sufferer. She was once like Gan's father: living within the arrangement of the Terrans and Tlics and reaping what benefits were available to her.

T'Gatoi wishes that Lien would not suffer, not only because it is unnecessary and pains T'Gatoi to see it, but also because she will die earlier than is necessary and remove herself from the lives of her family. It is worth noting that T'Gatoi already has Gan, meaning that she already has received her part of the bargain. Thus, her concern for Lien and desire to see her live long and healthy seems rooted in concern for Lien as a person and a friend, rather than from the benefits that T'Gatoi reaps from her.

☞ T'Gatoi was hounded on the outside. Her people wanted more of us made available. Only she and her political faction stood between us 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. Or they did understand, but in their desperation, they did not care. She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support. Thus, we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), T'Gatoi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This exposition is the first and most obvious admission of the bizarre and complex nature of the interdependent relationship between Tlic and Terran. T'Gatoi uses her formidable power as a leader to protect and preserve the Terran population from members of her own race, feeling both a personal and utilitarian bond with the Terrans. At the same time, when she needs to, she handles the Terrans like property to buy, sell, or make bribes with.

Butler herself has rejected parallels to slavery within the story. A more apt parallel to the position of the Terrans in relation to the Tlic would be the young brides subject to arranged marriages in agrarian societies. While they still maintain their own personhood, their greater fate is largely outside of their control as they are pawned and married off to seal trade negotiations, settle treaties, and unite political families. Establishing this reality makes T'Gatoi's ultimate acceptance of Gan as a genuine *partner* more powerful.

☛ She lay down now against T'Gatoi, and the whole left row of T'Gatoi's limbs closed around her, holding her loosely, but securely. I had always found it comfortable to lie that way, but except for my older sister, no one else in the family liked it. They said it made them feel caged.

T'Gatoi meant to cage my mother.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), Xuan Hoa, T'Gatoi, Lien

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

T'Gatoi often lays down with members of the family, who never try to resist her, to absorb some of their body heat for herself, a markedly utilitarian use of cuddling. Gan, who was raised from birth with T'Gatoi and in the knowledge that he belonged to her, finds security in the cage of T'Gatoi's legs. Her embrace, for him, is a shelter that provides for his needs and protects him. However, for most of the family, it is a prison, a gentle but firm reminder that the Terrans are not the ones in power in the Preserve. In their relationship with the Tlic, the Terrans do not have control over their own destiny. It is important to T'Gatoi to subtly exert her power and control over Gan's family, supporting her characterization as a primarily masculine character and one who is thus unwilling to admit vulnerability or weakness.

☛ "I could not watch you sitting and suffering any longer." My mother managed to move her shoulders in a small shrug. "Tomorrow," she said.

"Yes. Tomorrow you will resume your suffering—if you must. But just now, just for now, lie here and warm me and let me ease your way a little."

Related Characters: T'Gatoi (speaker), Gan, Lien

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

T'Gatoi has forced Lien to lie with her, although Lien clearly does want to. As she does, T'Gatoi also stings Lien with narcotic venom, putting Lien into a drowsy, drugged state. It is important to once again recognize that T'Gatoi forces the narcotic pacification on Lien, who would have refused it if given the chance, choosing instead to keep a clear mind and to suffer as much as possible. The fact that T'Gatoi would rather take away Lien's suffering, and by extension Lien's personal agency and willpower, rather than respect her choice to suffer—even if doing so causes T'Gatoi discomfort—reinforces the imbalance of power between T'Gatoi and Gan's family, and how little remorse T'Gatoi feels or shows for that power imbalance.

☛ I would like to have touched my mother, shared that moment with her. She would take my hand if I touched her now. Freed by the egg and the sting, she would smile and perhaps say things long held in. But tomorrow, she would remember all this as a humiliation. I did not want to be part of a remembered humiliation. Best just be still and know she loved me under all the duty and pride and pain.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), Lien

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Gan, seeing his mother in her loosened state induced by T'Gatoi, fantasizes about showing her affection, knowing that with her guard dropped, she would return his affection. This scene is the primary indicator of Lien's pride as the motive behind her willful suffering. Lien's ego has become so entwined with her defiance through suffering towards T'Gatoi that she is unable to show any loving care to the members of her family. Her own pride has apparently become more important to her than showing love to her son. This further explains Gan's affection for T'Gatoi. Gan, whose father is deceased, is bereft of a mother as well,

leaving him only with T'Gatoi, who is both parent and lover. This makes Gan's later fear of T'Gatoi all the more confusing and painful for him.

☞ Years passed. T'Gatoi traveled and increased her influence. The Preserve was hers by the time she came back to my mother to collect what she probably saw as her just reward for her hard work.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), Lien, T'Gatoi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Gan's narration is providing the context of how the Preserve came to exist and how he came to belong to T'Gatoi. Although Gan and T'Gatoi's relationship does develop into one of affection, and by the end of the story is nearly a relationship between equals, it starts out as a clear case of ownership. T'Gatoi protects the Terrans and the Preserve, but she also effectively *owns* them, as Gan notes while describing her authority: "The Preserve was hers..."

T'Gatoi's authority over the Preserve at large works as a parallel to her ownership of Gan, which T'Gatoi initially sees essentially as wages for protecting the Terrans. Yet if a person is earned or treated as a reward, they cannot possibly be viewed as anything other than property. The functional but imbalanced power dynamic between Gan and T'Gatoi is a microcosm of the interdependent but imbalanced relationship between the Terrans and Tlic on the Preserve. In either case, Terrans do receive benefits from their situation but clearly lack a full sense of personal agency.

☞ T'Gatoi whipped her three meters of body off her couch, toward the door, and out at full speed. She had bones—ribs, a long spine, a skull, four sets of limb bones per segment. But when she moved that way, twisting, hurling herself into controlled falls, landing running, she seemed not only boneless, but aquatic—something swimming through the air as though it were water. I loved watching her move.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), T'Gatoi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Gan is admiring the body of T'Gatoi, even as she races out of the house to tend to an emergency. This is the fullest description given of any Tlic in the story, but more importantly it Gan's most affectionate description of T'Gatoi. His admiration of her physique, though entirely different from his own, is almost sexual, again demonstrating the true affection that he feels for T'Gatoi.

It is significant that in this instance, Gan admires her physique and the degree to which she is different than him. T'Gatoi is about to cut open Bram Lomas and retrieve the Tlic eggs from his body cavity, an experience that so horrifies Gan that he will soon regard her as alien and terrifying. Her utter foreignness morphs from a point of attraction to a point of horror.

☞ "I want no argument from you this time, Gan," she said.

I straightened. "What shall I do?"

"Go out and slaughter an animal that is at least half your size."

"Slaughter? But I've never—"

She knocked me across the room. Her tail was an efficient weapon whether she exposed the sting or not. I got up, feeling stupid for having ignored her warning, and went into the kitchen.

Related Characters: T'Gatoi, Gan (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the emergency birthing of Bram Lomas, Gan convinces T'Gatoi that he should stay and help her, even though he does not know what is coming. When Gan does not immediately obey T'Gatoi, she strikes him hard enough to knock him off his feet. While it could be argued that T'Gatoi was simply reacting out of the severity of the moment, the speed with which she strikes Gan for speaking his mind, as well as the fact that he blames himself for being stupid enough to disobey her, builds into the characterization of Gan as a stereotypical representation of the female gender and T'Gatoi as the representation of the male gender within their relationship. There is an obvious hierarchy of power and responsibility between them, so

much so that rather than seeing T’Gatoi’s violence as abuse, Gan rationalizes it on her behalf and accepts the blame, much in the same way that an abused woman may come to rationalize her partner’s own violence towards her as a way of coping with the ugliness and inequity of the situation at hand.

☛ I had been told all my life that this was a good and necessary thing the Tlic and Terran did together—a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse. And I wasn’t ready to see it. Maybe I never would be.

Related Characters: Gan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

Gan’s childhood has been marked by a certain level of naiveté regarding what he would actually undergo as the host to T’Gatoi’s eggs. Although he had a technical knowledge of the birthing process, he had never witnessed it or even truly considered the mortal risk that it posed to his own body.

Seeing the grotesque nature of being cut open and having Tlic grubs fished out of one’s own body marks a transition out of childhood naiveté for Gan. T’Gatoi, whom he had always felt affection for and trusted, becomes an alien, predatory creature for the first time in his eyes. Life on the preserve and the social contract that he has always been a part of go from seeming pleasant and ideal to feeling like a horrifying cage. Although, by this point, Gan has yet to truly come of age by shouldering the weight of his responsibility, he has left his happy, idealized youth behind.

☛ “I saw them eat a man.” He paused. “It was when I was little. I had been to the Hartmund house and I was on my way home. Halfway here, I saw a man and a Tlic, and the man was N’Tlic. The ground was hilly. I was able to hide from them and watch. The Tlic wouldn’t open the man because she had nothing to feed the grubs. The man couldn’t go any further and there were no houses around. He was in so much pain, he told her to kill him. He begged her to kill him. Finally, she did. She cut his throat. One swipe of one claw. I saw the grubs eat their way out, then burrow in again, still eating.”

Related Characters: Qui (speaker), Gan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Qui reveals to Gan that when he was a child, he witnessed a birthing process gone wrong as well. Gan, having just watched T’Gatoi cut Bram Lomas open, pull eggs out of his body, and lick his blood, finds the information almost too much to handle.

This revelation is particularly disturbing for the fact that the Tlic could have spared the Terran’s life and the horrific suffering of being eaten alive from the inside out if she had been willing to let her eggs die. Rather, with no host available to use as alternative food, she prioritizes the lives of her Tlic young and allows them to consume the man. In this relationship, this particular Tlic is cast as ruthlessly utilitarian, horrifically even. Yet in the parallel between Tlic and Terran as gendered roles within a relationship, the scenario bears semblance to traumatic childbirths and abortion. In such a case, many men may conceivably choose to let their partner die, prioritizing the life of their new offspring. The lack of agency given to women to make that choice for themselves throughout the course of history mirrors the Terran’s body and life being overtaken by parasites.

☛ I shook my head. “Don’t do it to her, Gatoi.” I was not Qui. It seemed I could become him, though, with no effort at all. I could make Xuan Hoa my shield. Would it be easier to know that red worms were growing in her flesh instead of mine?

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), Xuan Hoa, Qui, T’Gatoi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When T’Gatoi offers to impregnate Xuan Hoa, Gan initially accepts, reasoning that Xuan Hoa would be honored by the burden, rather than horrified as he was. However, when T’Gatoi announces that she will sleep with Xuan Hoa that night, the pronouncement sobers Gan enough to see that he is protecting himself by endangering his sister, the same awful way that Qui used Gan as a sort of shield.

This is the turning point in Gan’s coming of age, when he

realizes that despite how frightened he is, running away from his responsibility and obligation to society only pushes that burden onto someone else. Whatever harm may have befallen him would only be put on his sister instead, whom he loves and who played a major role in raising him.

“Leave it for the family. One of them might use it to save my life someday.”

She grasped the rifle barrel, but I wouldn't let go. I was pulled into a standing position over her.

“Leave it here!” I repeated. “If we're not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoï, in dealing with a partner.”

Related Characters: Gan (speaker), T'Gatoï

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After deciding not to kill T'Gatoï or himself with his family's contraband rifle, Gan still refuses to let her take it from him, despite the fact that it is illegal. The rifle becomes a representation of Gan's agency in the relationship; by forcing T'Gatoï to leave it, he is forcing her to respect his ability to act and decide things for himself, and she is accepting the risk of having a relationship with a partner rather than a subject.

The positioning of their bodies in the scene is significant as well. Initially, T'Gatoï is sitting upon a table, coiled, looking down on Gan, reflecting her position of power. When she grabs the rifle but Gan will not let go, he is pulled to a standing position, now towering over her. As he has asserted his own agency, he has also briefly tipped the

balance of power. Though he is not permanently so empowered, this brief change does introduce a new dynamic to the balance of power between them, letting them interact as partners rather than master and servant.

“I was afraid.”

Silence.

“I still am.” I could admit it to her here, now.

“But you came to me . . . to save Hoa.”

“Yes.” I leaned my forehead against her. She was cool velvet, deceptively soft.

“And to keep you for myself,” I said. It was so. I didn't understand it, but it was so.

Related Characters: T'Gatoï, Gan (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of their intercourse, as T'Gatoï is impregnating Gan, Gan admits that his fear was not only of the risk to his wellbeing and of T'Gatoï's alien-ness: he also feared losing her. The vulnerability that Gan has experienced through facing his fears, and the vulnerability that T'Gatoï has experienced through allowing the rifle to stay in the home and letting Gan keep his sense of agency, has given Gan the clarity to realize that what he truly feared was losing his mate.

Only upon coming of age and truly maturing into a man is Gan able to understand the depth of his attachment to and affection for T'Gatoï. Until this point, his trust in her and his need for her had never been challenged, not even by his own thoughts. He could not actively *choose* T'Gatoï until he was given a semblance of autonomy; having finally been granted this, he does indeed choose her.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BLOODCHILD

Gan, the narrator, begins by calling the evening of the story his “last night of childhood.” Gan and T’Gatoi are visiting his family’s home, bringing **two eggs** given by T’Gatoi’s sister for the family to drink. Gan’s siblings share one and Gan drinks the other whole egg himself, at T’Gatoi’s direction. Lien abstains from the egg.

Though Gan is unaware of how much his life will change, he notes later in the narration that he had an inkling he would be impregnated that same night from the fact that he was given a whole egg for himself. His life was about to change regardless, though he had no notion of the fear that he would have to face as part of it.



Gan lays with T’Gatoi, stretched out against her belly, watching his mother and wondering why she refused **eggs**. Her hair is graying, and old age is clearly setting in. Gan’s father drank every egg he was given and lived twice as long as a normal Terran lifespan.

Lien is immediately contrasted against Gan’s father in a negative light. If old age is a sign of good fortune or blessing, then Lien’s early aging implies the opposite.



Gan’s mother shows discomfort whenever T’Gatoi pulls Gan closer. Gan continues to wonder why Lien seems to disdain T’Gatoi now, even though she will never say it outright. Lien and T’Gatoi had been close once and Lien always instructed Gan to obey, honor, and respect T’Gatoi.

Lien is aware that she is about to lose Gan as he begins to undertake the responsibility of bearing Tlic children. He is going where she cannot follow him, as he later refers to it, and being led there by T’Gatoi. This fills Lien with enmity toward the Tlic who used to be her close friend.



Though when T’Gatoi usually lies with Gan she complains he is too skinny, this time she admires that he is gaining weight, admonishing him that it is dangerous to be too thin. While poking Gan with her legs to see his body fat, she begins to caress him instead. Lien is embittered by this and interjects that Gan is still too thin, rather abruptly.

T’Gatoi’s focus on Gan’s weight mirrors the concern of earthly family members that a young bride is too skinny to withstand bearing children. That she now finds Gan’s weight to be healthy implies that she feels he is ready to carry her young.



T’Gatoi tells Lien that she wants her to drink what is left of Gan’s **egg**. Lien resists at first, but eventually begrudgingly obeys and drinks, her face visibly relaxing as she does. T’Gatoi chides Lien for not drinking egg more often, saying that Lien refuses to take care of herself and is allowing old age to set in too soon.

T’Gatoi’s effort to control Lien through pacification and Lien’s silent resistance to it are in full force. Lien is determined to die precisely because T’Gatoi wants her to live. Lien has neglected to account for the negative impact her death would have on her family.



Gan reflects on T'Gatoi's struggle to keep the Terrans in the Preserve safe. The masses of Tlic outside all want access to the Terrans and do not understand why they are protected in the Preserve at all. T'Gatoi uses her political power to only distribute certain Terrans as needed to wealthy Tlic, or as favors or bribes. T'Gatoi also instituted the uniting of Tlic and Terran families and stopped the practice of separating Terran families from each other. T'Gatoi is all that stands between the protected Terrans and the desperate throngs of Tlic, and the whole family knows that they owe T'Gatoi everything.

T'Gatoi pushes Gan away from her and tells Lien to come lie with her. Lien does not want to, but eventually relents. T'Gatoi wraps her legs around Lien like a cage, as she often does, and stings her with her tail. The sting does not hurt, but has a sedative effect. Lien is angry and surprised when T'Gatoi stings her, but T'Gatoi insists that she needs to relax and get some sleep.

Under the effect of **egg** and sting, Lien protests that T'Gatoi will never take Gan from her, and could never buy him with eggs and long life. T'Gatoi humors her, knowing that she would never say these things if she were sober. Gan briefly fantasizes about holding Lien's hand and showing affection to her, knowing that in her loosened state she might return it. Aware that it would cause her shame in the morning, though, he opts not to.

T'Gatoi tells Xuan Hoa to take off Lien's shoes, saying that she will sting her again soon and let her sleep until the next day. Lien snidely says that she ought to have crushed T'Gatoi when she was small, calling back to the time when they were both children and close friends.

T'Gatoi had played a significant role in Lien's early life, even introducing her to her husband. T'Gatoi left, however, to become a politician, eventually taking control of the Preserve. Lien, knowing that she would have to give one child to a Tlic no matter what, promised T'Gatoi one of her children. Though Xuan Hoa wanted to be chosen, T'Gatoi opted for Gan while Lien was still pregnant with him. T'Gatoi finished her rise to power and returned to claim Gan. She was there when he was born, holding him within minutes and giving him **egg** within days. Because he has known T'Gatoi for all his days, Gan trusts her completely and is affectionate towards her.

T'Gatoi's power, though it is often used to exert unnecessary control over other characters, is vital to the survival of the Terrans. As T'Gatoi is effectively the ruler of the Preserve and Gan is her mate, Gan is akin to the young bride offered to the king of a foreign occupying force. His role is essential to the prosperity of great numbers of people, even if he has been given little choice in the matter.



T'Gatoi asserts her control very gently but very firmly, and assures that Lien understands she is being controlled by caging her with her legs. Lien, owing T'Gatoi as much as she does, has no choice but to obey and wage her resistance passively by suffering. T'Gatoi, by stinging Lien, takes even this away from her.



Lien, inebriated, speaks with honesty for the first and only time in the story. With her pride and resistance melted away, she is in a state to speak what she truly feels, whether it is resentment for T'Gatoi or affection for Gan. Childish though he is, Gan recognizes that to exploit her moment of honesty, even for something as innocent as receiving overdue affection, would wound her pride, which has become the most important thing in her life.



Lien's resentment of T'Gatoi runs deeper for the fact that they used to be close friends and much closer to equals. Now, with T'Gatoi's political power, the balance of power is extremely uneven.



T'Gatoi's relationship with Gan is unique in that T'Gatoi played a major role in raising Gan. The result of this is that Gan has been entrusted to T'Gatoi's protection for his entire life. His coming fear of T'Gatoi and what she will do to him is even deeper than just fear of a spouse. Gan is also forced to face the alienation of T'Gatoi as a mother figure, one who was even more prominent since Lien is so emotionally distant.



Gan surmises that had Qui been raised in such a way, perhaps he would not hate and fear the Tlic as much as he does. Even so, Qui makes sure that he gets his fair portion of every **egg** that is made available.

Qui witnessed a similarly traumatic experience to what Gan will soon witness, though he did not have the long-earned foundation of trust, since he was not raised by Tlic. Rather than face his fear as Gan ultimately manages to, Qui only ever runs from it.



With Lien falling asleep against her, T'Gatoi senses something is wrong and gets up and runs out the door Gan admires her body, so different from his own, as she rushes away. Gan follows her and holds the door as she carries an unconscious man inside, saying that the man is N'Tlic. T'Gatoi starts stripping the man's clothing off and orders Gan to run and call for help.

Once again, T'Gatoi is the first to rise to action and the one to whom the entire family defers. She orders, and they obey. Gan's notable admiration of T'Gatoi's body reflects his affection for her, yet it will soon turn to revulsion and fear once he witnesses the birthing process and realizes how different they really are.



Gan hesitates and then convinces her to send Qui instead, since Gan wants to stay and help T'Gatoi. T'Gatoi warns Gan that he should not see what is about to happen, as it will be painful and difficult. But since Qui is in no shape to help, she relents. The unconscious man's armband states that his name is Bram Lomas and he belongs to T'Khotgif Teh. T'Gatoi sends Quo to call for T'Khotgif, keeping Gan with herself. Meanwhile, Lomas has begun regaining consciousness.

There is a brief mention made of the armband that both Gan and Bram Lomas wear that identifies themselves and their Tlic mates. The tone used to refer to the armband evokes images of a prison camp where all inmates must wear identification, or even of dog collars. Pointedly, the Tlic wear no such armbands.



T'Gatoi finishes stripping the man and instructs Gan to go out to the pasture and slaughter a large animal and bring it back with him. When Gan hesitates, she strikes him with her tail hard enough to throw him off his feet. Gan gets up and goes to look for a weapon to kill an animal with.

Though they are in the midst of an urgent situation, it is noteworthy that Gan does not resent T'Gatoi for striking him, indicating a relationship that is, at best, unequal, and at worst, abusive.



Lien raises livestock for their fur, but Gan has no experience in killing them since he, as T'Gatoi's mate, has been excluded from learning the family business. Feeling unsure of himself, Gan fetches a hidden and contraband **rifle** from the kitchen with which to kill an animal. Gan knows that T'Gatoi would probably realize that the animal was killed with a firearm and confiscate the rifle. Guns had been outlawed after the Terrans and the Tlic had spent several years fighting and killing each other, before peace had been made by integrating families.

Butler subtly parallels the fact that Gan's family raises livestock for their furs with the fact that Gan has been raised by T'Gatoi for his body's ability to host her eggs. The animal he kills is, in effect, a sacrificial lamb, just as Bram Lomas currently is—giving his own mortal security to give birth to Tlic children—and as Gan soon will be.



Gan goes out and kills a large animal with the **rifle**, carrying it over his shoulder. He is about to bring it back to T'Gatoi when he hesitates, realizing that he is afraid to participate in what is about to happen. T'Gatoi calls for him and Gan is so ashamed that he forces himself to return.

Gan uses the rifle because, unlike the rest of his family, he lacks the capacity to kill the animal with a knife. The rifle is his way of exercising power. Though in this instance it is the power to kill, later on it will also represent his power to choose.



Lomas is unconscious again and Gan's family has left the room. Gan sets the animal down next to T'Gatoi and she uses one of her claws to slit its body open. She tells Gan that he will have to hold Lomas' shoulders. Gan begins to feel panicked at the thought of it, not wanting to be involved.

Lien returns and offers to help Gan hold Lomas down, but Gan convinces her to leave again, insisting that he can handle it himself. Lien caresses Gan's face, a rare expression of affection, and leaves the room once more. T'Gatoi is relieved, knowing that Lien would only suffer more if she had stayed and watched.

Lomas regains consciousness again. T'Gatoi warns him that she will not be able to sting him unconscious, so he will have to be awake for the procedure. After she is finished though, she will sting him to sleep. Lomas begs T'Gatoi to wait, but she cannot, knowing his life is in danger. She reassures him that T'Khotgif Teh will come with **eggs** to help him heal.

T'Gatoi uses her claw to locate where there is movement under the skin, warning Gan that she is about to begin. She uses her body to secure Lomas's legs and ties his hands with his own pants in order to help Gan hold him down. She rolls up Lomas's shirt and puts it in his mouth so that he'll have something to bite down on.

T'Gatoi cuts open Lomas with her claw. He screams in agony but she pays little attention, licking the blood away (her saliva helps slow the bleeding). Gan feels as if he is helping T'Gatoi to torture Lomas and knows that he will vomit soon.

T'Gatoi begins removing Tlic grubs from Lomas's body, the first one having eaten its way through the egg case already. If it had been left any longer, it would have started to eat the Terran's body, and the toxin released from the egg would have poisoned him to death. Lomas passes out. T'Gatoi places the grub in the body of the animal that Gan killed.

Gan's fear and T'Gatoi's alien-ness arise at the same time. Gan is discovering at the same instant the gruesome nature of birthing and the stark difference between himself and T'Gatoi.



In the midst of crisis and in the moment that Gan's childhood is shattered, Lien seeks to protect him. Realizing that this is the moment of Gan's transition into adulthood and host, Lien finally risks her pride to love Gan with one final gesture.



The fact that T'Khotgif is not there to help means that Lomas has to be awake while his body was sliced open and dug through. For Gan, who is watching, the common fear of abandonment is given a horrific affirmation; to be left alone means to undergo torturous pain.



While T'Gatoi is taking measures to help Lomas, such as giving him something to bite on, the image of her pinning Lomas to the ground as she cuts him open conjures images of a predator devouring its prey. To Gan, T'Gatoi is being transformed into something terrifying and predatory rather than protective.



T'Gatoi's notable indifference to Lomas's pain reinforces the divide between Terrans and Tlic. T'Gatoi is thinking only of retrieving the Tlic grubs. Gan is thinking only of Lomas's pain.



The toxins released by the hatching eggs induce a state not dissimilar to labor, where the human host experiences great pain and has limited time to get the babies out of their body. The fact that T'Gatoi simply removes the grubs from their host and places them in the carcass of a literal host animal also reinforces the association between Terrans and beasts of burden.



T'Gatoi continues picking grubs shaped like large worms, filled with blood, out of Lomas's body. They have been feeding on his blood vessels. T'Gatoi reacts with excitement upon finding a male and great satisfaction at the number of eggs that have grown to size, remarking that Terrans make ideal hosts. She seems unperturbed by Lomas's suffering or the procedure at hand.

Gan realizes that although he has known about the birth process his whole life, he was not prepared to actually see it and perhaps never would be. As he watches T'Gatoi lick the blood off of an egg case, he wonders if she remembers the taste from when she drank the blood of her Terran host. It makes her appear alien to Gan, which he would never have thought possible.

T'Gatoi happily pulls out a few more Tlic young, but knowing that Gan feels ill, sends him outside to vomit. He does so and finds that when he is finished he is crying uncontrollably. Whenever he closes his eyes he sees visions of red worms digging through bloody human flesh.

A car arrives at the house carrying Qui, a Terran doctor, and T'Khotgif Teh. Gan explains what has happened and that there were many healthy grubs extracted. The doctor dashes toward the house. T'Khotgif Teh emerges from the vehicle and immediately asks about Lomas, which Gan appreciates. She too runs toward the house. Qui tells Gan that T'Khotgif Teh is very ill, which is why she was not with Lomas when the eggs were ready to hatch.

Qui asks Gan what he saw and can smell the vomit in the air. He tells Gan that now he knows what will happen to his own body in the future. Gan tries to walk away from him, reflecting on how he and Qui used to be close friends, until Qui started trying to run away. Soon enough, Qui realized there was nowhere to run to, so he focused on getting whatever **eggs** he could to drink. He became over-protective of Gan in "a way that clearly said, as long as [Gan] was all right, [Qui] was safe from the Tlic."

Qui follows Gan, pressing him for details of what happened and what he saw. Gan will not offer anything and especially does not want to discuss it with Qui.

Once again, while Gan is looking on in horror, T'Gatoi is preoccupied with the birthing of healthy grubs, seemingly unaware of the toll being wrought upon the future bearer of her own children. In her excitement, she is forgetting to account for Gan's need for reassurance in the growing face of horror and fear.



Gan reaches the tipping point between childhood naiveté and adult recognition of the horrors of the world. This includes the realization that he and his Tlic mate are fundamentally different beings and in a different setting could have easily occupied the roles of predator and prey, rather than mates.



The weight of Gan's role in society, the mortal risk it poses to his body, and the threat to his own agency all bear down on him at once. These fears are amplified by the fact that Gan knows he will be impregnated soon, if not tonight.



Gan's admiration of T'Khotgif's concern for Bram Lomas despite all the horror he has just witnessed suggests he still has a great level of admiration for the Tlic, contrasting greatly with Qui's pure disdain for them. T'Khotgif also seems to show more concern for Lomas than T'Gatoi ever did, perhaps because she is his mate, or perhaps because she is less an individual of power than T'Gatoi and therefore is more empathetic.



Unlike Gan, Qui selfishly uses his brother as a shield between himself and the Tlic, proving that although he is older by several years, he is still far more a child than Gan is.



Gan does not yet know that Qui saw a similar thing as a child. Gan thus feels incredibly alone in his new realizations, which amplifies his fear.



Qui keeps following Gan and suddenly tells Gan that he has seen worse than Lomas's birthing. He tells Gan that he saw Tlic eat a man. Gan calls him a liar but Qui continues: when he was little, he was walking home when he saw a Tlic and an N'Tlic. The man needed the grubs taken out of his body, but the Tlic refused because there were no other animals for them to eat and they would die. The Tlic young were already eating the man alive from the inside when he finally convinced the Tlic to cut his throat, which she did, and then watched as her babies ate their way out of the man's carcass, then turned back and ate the rest of him.

Gan is shocked, but believes him. He understands that that is when Qui started trying to run away, before realizing that there is nowhere to run to; the Preserve is like a cage. Gan tries to reassure Qui that T'Gatoi would never touch him, but Qui insists that that is only true as long as Gan is alive. If something happened to Gan, Qui would be taken as a host.

Qui and Gan argue about whether or not the Tlic view the Terrans as mere host animals. Gan tries to defend the Tlic, but as he is arguing he realizes that he is not so sure. Gan realizes that Qui is gloating for the fact that he is safe from the Tlic and Gan is not.

Qui continues to follow Gan and harass him until Gan attacks him, realizing after the fact that he might have killed him if Qui were not so much bigger and stronger than he is. Qui, for his part, only hits Gan a couple of times to defend himself during the fight. Even so he knocks Gan out for a short while. When Gan wakes up, Qui is gone.

Gan walks back to the house. It is getting dark, but he can hear voices, both Tlic and Terran, in another room. Gan goes to the kitchen and sits at the table that his father made for Lien. It makes him miss his father and wish that he was there to give him advice, since his father had undergone the birthing process three different times, being cut open and sewn up each time.

Gan gets up and fetches the contraband **rifle** from its hiding place, thinking that he will clean it and load it, but instead, simply loads it with ammunition. T'Gatoi finds him and sits on the kitchen table, facing him. She is coiled up, looking downwards toward Gan.

What Qui saw is truly horrifying, not only for the fact that a man was eaten alive, but also because his Tlic mate let him suffer to such a degree rather than risk her children. However, there is a parallel that could be drawn to human pregnancies—often in the past, in high-risk pregnancies, the life of the child would be prioritized even at the cost of tremendous pain and even death for the mother. In such a case the human child could be seen as having a parasitic, consumptive effect on its mother.



Once again, Gan shows his character by empathizing with Qui, understanding why he has been running for so long and trying to reassure his brother that he is safe from the Tlic. Gan shows far more selflessness, a mark of his coming of age, than either Qui or Lien.



Gan begins feel similarly trapped. He cannot offer a serious rebuttal to Qui's argument and he cannot see any real avenue out of the quickly approaching reality that he will have to be a host to parasitic worms.



Gan's empathy for Qui turns to rage. Though it is directed at Qui, Gan is reacting to his own powerlessness, exerting his own willpower briefly by attacking his brother. He is punctuating a passive life with an aggressive action.



Once again, Gan's father is depicted as a model citizen and in many ways a model parent, contrasting greatly with Lien's general absence. Pointedly, Gan does not wish to speak to his mother during this time. She has not experienced what he will have to experience, and she has never been emotionally present enough to be of any support now.



Feeling powerless, Gan reaches for the single thing that has offered him any level of agency and power thus far and prepares to use it, even though he does not have a plan.



T'Gatoi expresses regret for the fact that Gan had to see Lomas's birthing, admitting that that was not how the process was supposed to happen. She also tells Gan that T'Khotgif Teh is very sick and will die soon, but her children will be cared for by her sister, as will Bram Lomas for the rest of his life. He will never have to host eggs again.

Gan looks into T'Gatoi's eyes, wondering how much of her he truly understands and how much he had only imagined that he understood. He accuses T'Gatoi of never having asked if he even wanted to be her mate and host her eggs. She does not reply to this.

T'Gatoi sees the **rifle** and knows that Gan used it to kill the animal. She asks if he now means to kill her with it as well.

Gan responds by asking T'Gatoi what she is, and what he is to her. She tells him that he knows her better than any living being, so he must decide what she is for himself.

Gan puts the barrel of the **rifle** underneath his own chin, saying that this will finally be his decision and demands that T'Gatoi ask him for the lives of her children, which he will someday bear.

Gan states that he does not want to be a host animal, even for T'Gatoi. She claims that they are far more than host animals, and reminds him that the Tlic gave the Terrans protection on the reservation even when the Terrans were still trying to kill the Tlic. The Terrans were fleeing their own people who had killed and enslaved them. The Tlic offered them a chance at survival.

T'Gatoi asks Gan if he would rather die than bear her children. When he does not answer, she offers to impregnate Xuan Hoa instead. Gan immediately tells her that he does want Xuan Hoa to be the host instead, and T'Gatoi announces that she will tell Xuan Hoa that evening or the next morning and sleep in her bedroom that night.

T'Gatoi, now removed from the excitement of the birthing process, can see that Gan is severely distressed. However, she has little in the way of comfort to offer Gan, and she has still positioned herself in a perspective of physical power, looking down upon her mate.



Gan's challenge to T'Gatoi, that he has never had any agency in their relationship, goes unanswered. They both know now that the power between them is so unbalanced as to create a master and subject, rather than partners.



T'Gatoi seems to naturally understand Gan's grasp for agency and autonomy, though she instantly regards it as a threat to her own being. Her self-conception is wrapped in power.



Significantly, T'Gatoi suggests a different form of agency to Gan—the power to define the world around him and decide what he believes T'Gatoi to be.



Gan reaches for agency in two ways: He demands that T'Gatoi ask him for something, reversing the power dynamics between them, and he asserts his right to a way out of the situation via suicide.



This history between the Tlic and Terrans complicates the matter even more. Though it is tempting to view the Tlic solely as oppressors (using Terrans as host animals), they also offered peace and shelter to the Terrans. Although there is a cost to living on the Preserve (which Butler describes in the Afterword as “paying the rent”), it is a better situation than what these humans formerly had.



Before Gan comes of age by taking on the full weight of responsibility, he very nearly commits the ultimate act of cowardice and shifts everything onto Xuan Hoa. Although Xuan Hoa did profess to want this responsibility, she has not seen what Gan has seen, and similarly does not understand the weight of it.



Gan is alarmed by the speed of it all, and realizes that he is using Xuan Hoa as a shield just like Qui uses him. Gan decides that he cannot become like Qui and subject his sister to the same risk and fear that is his own responsibility. Gan begs T'Gatoi not to impregnate Xuan Hoa.

It is poignant that Gan, the protagonist and most noble character of the story, is capable of becoming Qui, the most wretched character, within mere minutes. Butler strongly suggests that heroism and villainy, nobility and cowardice are separated only by degrees.



T'Gatoi responds angrily for the first time, claiming that these are “adult things” and insinuating that Gan is not ready to handle such serious matters. Gan persists and removes the **rifle** from his head, insisting T'Gatoi impregnate him as had always been the plan.

In removing the rifle from his head, Gan is also setting aside his demand for autonomy in that moment, his ability to act independently and without consideration for others. This is an act of maturity.



T'Gatoi reaches for the **rifle**, but Gan tells her that she must leave it. T'Gatoi persists, stating that it is forbidden, but Gan is insistent, telling her that if these are adult matters and the Terrans truly are more than host animals to the Tlic, she must accept the risk inherent in dealing with a partner. T'Gatoi makes an angry hiss, but relents. Gan realizes that she is, for the first time that he has been aware of, actually afraid. The gun will be in the same house that her children will often be in, and T'Gatoi is old enough to remember when Terrans killed Tlic with firearms.

Though Gan has set the rifle aside, by forcing T'Gatoi to leave the rifle rather than confiscate it, he is forcing her to allow him agency. The distinction is important—Gan is sacrificing his ability to be fully independent (autonomy) while asserting his ability to make his own choices within his relationship with T'Gatoi. Notably, Gan's agency scares T'Gatoi, as she is not used to sharing power or admitting vulnerability.



T'Gatoi announces to Gan that she will implant the first egg that same night. Gan is unsurprised, having already surmised that this would be the case. But by the urgency in T'Gatoi's voice, Gan realizes that she must lay an egg in someone tonight. If he had not consented, Xuan Hoa would've been impregnated immediately. Gan is hurt by this.

T'Gatoi's implication is that her body requires her to lay her first egg that very night, providing a tension between her biology and the needs of their relationship. Though Gan may wish for more time to reflect on all of these things, circumstance forces him to make his decision immediately.



T'Gatoi meets Gan in his bedroom and Gan undresses and lays with her. She gives him a small sting to take the edge off and then penetrates him with her ovipositor and begins undulating against his body to transfer the egg into his abdomen.

The process by which T'Gatoi impregnates Gan bears a strong resemblance to human sex, even to the degree that T'Gatoi, the masculine party, penetrates and impregnates Gan.



T'Gatoi has so far left Gan uncaged by her legs. When he accidentally hurts her by moving too suddenly, he expects her to entrap him, but she does not, leaving him free. This makes him feel ashamed, and he apologizes.

Despite Gan's expectations, T'Gatoi is offering him freedom, even at the risk of personal harm and pain. When Gan hurts her but she does not protect herself, he understands the vulnerability she is voluntarily taking on.



Gan asks T'Gatoi if she cares that it is him that she is impregnating, to which she responds that she had already chosen him long ago. This night is about Gan making his own choices. But she is fearful of giving her children to someone who hates them, so she would have impregnated Xuan Hoa if she had to.

Gan admits that it was not hate he felt, but fear. He is still afraid of what will happen to him and the risk involved, but he also realizes that he has been afraid of losing T'Gatoi and needs to keep her for himself. This pleases her.

T'Gatoi understands that seeing Lomas's birthing made Gan very afraid and she insists that Terrans should never see that. Gan disagrees, however, arguing that Terrans should see the birthing process from a young age, and should see it when it goes right. T'Gatoi insists that it is a private process and always has been, and they drop the argument.

The egg enters Gan's body along with enough of the narcotic fluid to relax him. In the induced state, he is able to think about the **rifle** and the birth, as well as of his feelings of despair, horror, and fear without reliving them, giving him some distance.

Gan insists that he could not have shot T'Gatoi. She is too important to him, too vital for the Terrans' protection, and she was even birthed out of his father's own body. When T'Gatoi asks if he could have shot himself, he admits that he very nearly did. Gan realizes that suicide is the only true "running away" that Qui has been searching for.

T'Gatoi reassures Gan that rather than dying, now he will live, and that she is healthy and strong and will always be there to take care of him.

Though Gan is the one who must choose to accept T'Gatoi and lean into the responsibility set before him, T'Gatoi is making choices of her own. She has chosen to allow Gan to have agency in the relationship and respect his will to choose.



As happens for many people, Gan's overwhelming fear was masked by a rage that threatened the person he loves. When this subsides, he is able to recognize his simple yet powerful fear for what it is.



Despite the progress that Gan and T'Gatoi have made in their relationship, the imbalance of power still persists in some regards. T'Gatoi, as a masculine figure, is still fearful of vulnerability and prefers the conservative tradition of hiding the birthing process for fear of what impact revealing it would have on future hosts.



Butler again seems to favor some level of escapism, specifically for helping cope with trauma and difficult life circumstances. In this case, the narcotic from T'Gatoi allows Gan to look at the events and his reactions more objectively.



Realizing that his hatred was actually fear of T'Gatoi and the burden of bearing her children, Gan could not have killed T'Gatoi out of fear. However, he certainly could have killed himself, not out of self-loathing but as a method of escaping his fears. Qui seems destined for this as well.



Much of Gan's fear is rooted in the possibility and consequence of abandonment—like that which Bram Lomas experienced, and which caused Lomas tremendous suffering. T'Gatoi, occupying the masculine role in the relationship, offers the perhaps false but nonetheless necessary reassurance that she will always be with Gan to protect and provide for him.





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