

Syllabus

English 423: Octavia Butler

Instructor: Professor Lysa Rivera, Lysa.Rivera@wwu.edu

For all but the first 10 years of my life, writing has been my way of journeying from incomprehension, confusion, and emotional upheaval to some sort of order, or at least to an orderly list of questions.

-- Octavia Butler, "The Monophobic Response"

This course examines the work of the late Octavia Butler (1947-2006). Apart from being the first black female writer to receive multiple awards and widespread recognition in the field of science fiction, Butler is the first science fiction writer (male or female, black or white) to receive the MacArthur "genius" award. Known for her unabashed interrogation of the dark side of American culture, Butler was not one to shy away from difficult subject matters. In over a dozen novels and short stories, she confronted topics ranging from racism, slavery, homophobia and incest, to genocide, religious hypocrisy, and of course total nuclear annihilation. Yet despite these dystopian tendencies, Butler's work consistently offers what critic Tom Moylan calls a "utopian horizon" that "shimmers just beyond its pages." This course aims to understand how Butler's work reconciles cynicism with hope as it imagines and critiques some of the most politically-charged issues of late twentieth-century American culture.

While a major goal of this course is to introduce you to an underrepresented American writer, who is herself working within an undervalued literary domain (SF), additional learning objectives have influenced the design of this course. One of the most important of these is the art of critical thinking, a skill whose utility extends far beyond the classroom. I define critical thinking as the ability to identify, understand, and solve problems by asking incisive questions and exercising purposeful and reflective reasoning to answer them. As critical thinkers, we will work together to locate and address critical problems and issues, not only in the texts we examine, but in the cultural texts that characterize contemporary U.S. society as well.

Required Texts:

- *Kindred* (1979)
- *Lilith's Brood* (1987 - 1989)
- *Parable of the Sower* (1993)
- *Parable of the Talents* (1998)
- *Fledgling* (2005)

Course Requirements:

Weekly Response Papers (30%): To meet the arranged "fifth hour" requirement for this course, students will maintain a reading and reflection journal. Your journal is a place for you to develop ideas, ask questions, try various forms of inquiry, and gather materials to consider and use in your formal essays. Use your informal writing to detangle the meaning of readings, to observe

and analyze the many “texts” around you and to develop your thoughts through your reading and in-class discussions. Responses are always due at the same day and time of each week: Fridays no later than 11:00AM. You are to post them to Canvas.

Leading Discussion (20%): Students will have an opportunity to facilitate discussion of the course reading material throughout the quarter. On these days students must come to class with a prepared list of questions (typed) that I will distribute to the rest of the class. I will distribute a sign up sheet for students to choose the days they will be discussion leaders.

In-Class Participation (10%): Students are expected to be active learners, which means speaking up in discussion, asking questions, responding to questions, and exhibiting consistent and genuine intellectual engagement from week one to final's week. If you feel uncomfortable talking in class, please let me know and I will help you through this handicap (and handicap it is in literature seminars). Please note that this category also encompasses any 'in-class' small group or free writing assignments.

Research Project (40%): Instead of a final exam, students will complete a 10-12 page research paper on one of Butler's texts. If you are working with a series (Xenogenesis or Parable) you may end up writing on more than one book. Papers are to present, sustain, and defend an argument and must rely on close textual analysis, a consideration of context, and the use of at least five secondary sources. Students will have an opportunity to draft and workshop their essays well before the final revision is due.