



**THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF DISEASE  
IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S  
"THE EVENING AND THE MORNING AND THE NIGHT"**

OSUN Connected Learning Contest Winner

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Course: Ninth Grade Literature of the Americas**

New York City schools were shut down beginning Monday, March 16th, 2020. It took some time for our class to recover from the shock, but, eventually, we (including my co-teacher John Grauwiler) wanted to do some work that touched on the topic of disease. Around May 4th, we read and discussed Octavia E. Butler's short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night." The story concerns, among other things, the intersection between social life and biological health. It is about a group of people who have contracted a fictional illness called "Duryea-Gode Disease (DGD)" -- an inherited condition that can be compared to racism. There would appear to be a biological basis to DGD, but patients suffering from the disease also suffer social isolation and active shunning from the non-DGD segment of society. The story makes explicit that the rejection of patients with DGD affects their health for the worse. In other words, there is a social dimension to DGD, and the disease does not affect all members of the fictional world equally. As a result of our reading and discussion students were able to make connections between the fate of patients with DGD and the fate of patients with Covid. They could start to think in more complex ways about the difference between a biological agent -- such as a virus or parasite -- and a set of social conditions -- health care, education, housing, etc. -- which can affect, if not determine, health outcomes.

## **Ninth Grade Literature of the Americas**

Ninth Grade Literature of the Americas is designed to develop students' abilities in three main areas: 1) close reading; 2) persuasive writing; and 3) informed discussion. Many topics are sure to arise over the course of the year including the legacy and significance of slavery; the power of language; and relations between the wealthy and the poor. We will also explore the shifting nature of identity and ask what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a person, at different historical junctures.

### **Practical and pedagogical value**

**N.B.** Octavia E. Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" is an intense, disturbing, story that deals, among other things, with the intersection of race and public health. While it could be taught to 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, it is probably better suited for a college (Year I & II) audience.

"The Evening and the Morning and the Night" is an excellent vehicle for addressing the intersection of social life and public health. The story makes explicit ideas about how social connection undergirds both mental and physical well-being. This seems like a crucial topic to discuss when "remote learning" has been forced upon us, that is, students and educators need to discuss the importance of maintaining social ties as a key factor in staying healthy.

Students were able to download the Butler story as a pdf through Google Classroom. They commented on the story via Perusall (short marginal notes). Finally, we discussed the story for several days within a Zoom meeting.

### **The Assignment**

Not quite eighteen pages long, the story could be assigned to be read over a weekend, or perhaps in two nine page sections during a school week.

If uploaded as a pdf to Persusall, the instructor could ask students to choose 2-5 sentences or short passages and jot down a note as to their significance. Some guiding questions for this annotation could be:

- 1) What are the symptoms of Duryea-Gode disease?
- 2) How do patients with DGD attempt to hide their status?
- 3) Who is Lynn? Who is Alan? What is the significance of their relationship?
- 4) What is the Dilg?

- 5) What is the importance of art and of making art to patients with DGD?
- 6) Why does Alan resist working at Dilg? Why does Lynn have reservations about it?
- 7) What will the future hold for these two characters, for the Dilg, and for patients with DGD?
- 8) How could having DGD be compared to being a member of a racially oppressed group?

Once the story has been read and annotated by all, the instructor should hold a discussion that builds upon students' annotations. The instructor could ask students to come to class having prepared at least one additional question not listed above.

As the discussion proceeds, the instructor should try to connect the story's description of DGD to non-fictional forms of illness such as Covid or perhaps AIDS. How does one's social positioning in the fictional world, as well as in the real world, affect one's health?

Finally, the instructor could solicit longer forms of writing from students such as a 3-5 pp. essay. Here are some questions to help students develop a thesis:

- 1) How can "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" be understood as a story about race, that is, as an allegory of racial relations and of racial identity?
- 2) To what extent does DGD appear to be a disease with both a biological and a social basis? People with DGD are shunned. To what extent might that shunning – or social isolation – make worse the biological basis for the disease?
- 3) What gendered dynamics – relationships between men and women, if not non-binary people – do you note at play in the story? Here, it would be good to think about the character of Alan. How does he resist or consent to the wishes of Lynn and of Beatrice? What does his character seem to indicate about how gender manifests itself in the world Butler creates?