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# Time Travel as a Plot Device in *Kindred*, a Novel by Octavia Butler

## Time Travel as a Literary Device in *Kindred*

Time travel is a plot device almost as old as science fiction itself. It seems that as soon as we have permission to create whatever technology we want we are using it to explore and change the past and future. From Star Trek's "The City on the Edge of Forever" to Terminator 2: Judgement Day to even Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, the idea of time travel has captured the human imagination. Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* adds to the robust canon of time travelling in science fiction, but at the same time she brings a unique twist to the time-worn tradition when she completely ignores many of the typical sources of tension in these stories.

There are two main "types" of time travel: time travel with the intent to change the past or future and time travel with the intent to keep the past or future intact, and it is surprising how rare the former type is. Time travel with the intent to change the past or future is generally a staple of stories that lean more toward science fantasy than science fact. Doctor Who and Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban are two examples. The second type of time travel, time travel with the intent to preserve the past or future, is also the type most familiar to most people, with famous examples in both the Star Trek episode "The City on the Edge of Forever" and Terminator 2: Judgement Day. The main difference that separates these two types of time travel is mostly related to how they relate to the nature of time. Time travel to preserve the past or future views time as fragile, with any change being inherently negative due to changing the future that will be returned to. Time travel to change the past or future, on the other hand, views time as less fragile - and less linear - than the other kind. When the work portrays this type of time travel, the timeline is not destroyed when the timeline is tampered with, but rather the tampering is a fulfillment of something that has already happened. *Kindred* borrows elements from both of these types of time travel, with Dana struggling to change as little as possible of her family's history while at the same time being constantly forced to save Rufus from his own bad luck. At the same time, *Kindred* is purposefully vague as to whether or not Dana's actions truly affected the past. When Dana and Kevin return and do their research into Dana's family history at the end of the novel, what they find matches up with the events that they witnessed. At the same time, since they didn't think to do the same research beforehand, both we as an audience and Dana and Kevin themselves are unsure how much of what happened was due to their interference and how much was already set in stone generations beforehand.

What separates *Kindred* from these other time travel narratives? For one, the common idea of

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a timeline that cannot be tampered with is nonexistent. Butler's view of time travel more closely resembles Doctor Who's "big ball of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff" than "a strict progression of cause and effect" (Moffet s3e10). Dana's actions in the past seem to have little to no effect on the progression of time. Rufus is not made a better person by her actions, no matter how hard she tries to save him from the effects the time period inevitably has on his personality, nor is her existence affected when she kills him. In addition, Dana's actions in the past are significant in and of themselves. The common idea of nonintervention is gone, replaced by her conviction that "if I was to live, if others were to live, [Rufus] must live" (Butler 29). Instead of being an interloper, a woman from the future who has no business changing the past, Dana is an active, essential element to the way that the history of her family progresses, a fact which makes her failure to make Rufus a better person all the more heartbreaking for her.

The purpose of both these changes owe more to the story and themes than to any dissatisfaction with the common time travel narrative. Dana is not sent into the past to correct it, but rather so that she can "accept [Rufus] as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master" (Butler 260). The journey that Dana takes through the story is not through time, but through herself, going from someone who possesses a simple, uncomplicated, perhaps even romantic view of her family tree to a person who can see all the terrible things that are in her blood, so to speak. In the beginning, she sees Rufus as a potential hero of her past, even holding out hope that he and Alice would love each other because "there was history. [They] got together somehow" (Butler 38). But by the end that possibility has been corrupted by a horribly complicated human being who is more a product of his time than of Dana's futile attempts to be his salvation. There was history, yes, but it was darker than Dana had ever thought it could be. Rufus and Alice's relationship was less than consensual, and Dana is left with a deeper understanding of the dehumanizing force of living in the antebellum South than she could have ever imagined while reading names in a dusty family Bible.

In the end, what most separates *Kindred* from other works of science fiction that use time travel is that *Kindred* relies on time travel to craft its themes, while the other works primarily use time travel as a vehicle for their plots. Thus, *Kindred* is allowed to ignore the more time-bending, science-related elements of time travel, including the possibility of paradoxes, in favor of concentrating on the themes that arise from its use of an old device in a new context, creating an original, thought-provoking work of literature.

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