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Obstacles for the Diseased

In Octavia A. Butler's short story, "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987), she illustrates a world which people are diagnosed with the fictitious Duryea-Gode disease. Those afflicted with the illness self-mutilate at a certain point, believing that they are trapped within their own bodies. When this process, known as drifting, begins, the patients lose all rationality and communication capability. Others near the patients can also be fatally harmed without having the correct restraints or drugs. In the story, Lynn, the main protagonist, inherited DGD from her parents who are both DGD patients. When her father drifted, he killed both himself and her mother. Not knowing what to do, Lynn enrolls in college on a scholarship. During her experience in college, she and others with DGD continue to face systematic discrimination from those without the disease that makes them feel emotionally unstable and hopeless.

From the beginning, Lynn's condition causes her to be singled out by others students:

Biology school was a pain in the usual ways. I didn't eat in public anymore, didn't like the way people stared at my biscuits – cleverly dubbed "dog biscuits" in every school I'd ever attended. (38)

In her interior monologue, Lynn illustrates how she has been targeted by her peers just from eating in public. Since Lynn has faced this kind of prejudice as a child to adult “in every school [she has] ever attended”, this kind of behavior is publicly acceptable (38). The bullying she faces in college is nothing new. In this passage, other students call the food patients with DGD eat as “dog biscuits” (38). To prolong their life, those with DGD have to eat a special diet in the form of biscuits. These biscuits make it is easy for those without the disease to target people with DGD. This dog insult goes further than ostracizing the DGD patients. It degrades the patients to beasts. The other students do not consider Lynn and others as equal but as subhuman. The lack of interaction between Lynn and other students builds the sense of isolation. Lynn has to face the other students solely by herself without anyone to call as her friend.

Lynn sarcastically refers to the insults as clever. That shows the insults are unoriginal and ubiquitous in nature. Yet, they still do “pain” her (38). She cannot stand this discrimination. Lynn stops eating in public to avoid attention because people’s stares would remind her of her past humiliation. However, the passage does not suggest Lynn feel ashamed at that point in college. She is simply tired of dealing with the bigotry from her classmates. She voluntarily isolates herself because she knows revealing herself as having DGD will only bring trouble. The less amount of people who know about Lynn and her illness, the better it is for her. If they do not make fun of her, they will look at her or treat her differently. The other students harbor little sympathy and ridicule Lynn for the lifestyle she has because of her conditions.

Out in society, many DGD patients face even worse treatments. Alan, a DGD patient and fiancé of Lynn, decides to visit his mother, Naomi, at the Dilg retreat which is a DGD ward run by DGD patients. Beatrice, who is a doctor at the Dilg, describes the horrifying experience Naomi endured:

Eventually, they had to put Naomi in one of those state-approved, custodial-care places. You know the kind. For a while, it was all the government would pay for. Places like that... well, sometimes if patients were really troublesome – especially the ones who kept breaking free – they’d put them in a bare room and let them finish themselves. The only things those places took good care of were the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats. (56)

Despite being “state-approved”, the facilities treat the patients without any dignity or respect (56). Patients are forced into “bare room” until they eventually “finish themselves” (56).

Beatrice’s use of the euphuism and ellipses hints at horrendous procedures that she cannot bring to mention. It would be too disturbing for Lynn and Alan. In the passage, people supposedly taking care of the patients have no concern for their suffering. They only took “good care” of “the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats” (56). People in charge of the wards consider patients to be lower than pests. The end of a DGD patient’s life to those without the disease is no different than exterminating pests. These wards help facilitate that process in eliminating those with DGD. The government will only pay for these isolated rooms to get rid of the patients safely.

Naomi is fortunate to transfer to the Dilg before she can fatally self-mutilate. However, by that time she has already blinded herself and severely scarred her face. Both Lynn and Alan have already heard of these wards from Beatrice’s mention that they “know the kind” of horror inside these of the wards (56). The general public is most likely also aware of this. Yet, these state DGD wards are still open to exterminate more DGD patients and protect the people without the disease. There has been no backlash against the harsh containment of DGD patients. The public is actually content with these state DGD wards as a solution. Instead of trying other methods, people are fine with treating the ill without much regard for their lives or families.

Many DGD patients, such as Lynn and Alan, realize that they will probably pass away inside one of these oppressive state DGD wards.

DGD patients, ostracized and targeted by society, have almost no one to depend on. Lynn goes to college without much of a goal:

I can't say why I went to college – except that I had been going to school all my life and didn't know what else to do. I didn't go with any particular hope. Hell, I knew what I was in for eventually. I was just marking time. Whatever I did was just marking time. (37)

In this passage, Lynn sees no “particular hope” in her life (37). She has lost her parents and goes to college without any friend. She is not even sure why she is attending college. When thinking about it, she realizes she is only going to school because she has been “all [her] life and didn't know what else to do” (37). To Lynn, being alive is no better than being dead. No matter what she ends up doing, she knows the disease will kill her. Lynn cannot see past her bleak future. She does not know what other opportunities are worth pursuing when death may come to her at any time. She is convinced of her limited role in society because of this disease. Later in the story, Beatrice introduces Alan and Lynn to an effective way to control the disease indefinitely. However, they still struggle hard at first to believe that there is actually hope to survive against the disease.

College, instead of bettering Lynn's life, is there to keep her occupied. The repetition of “marking time” emphasizes this mentality (37). Lynn feels as if she can never achieve anything. She is alive just for counting down the time to her eventual demise. Lynn mentions “hell” to signify that there is no use in going to college (37). Another read of the sentence also shows that she thinks she “was in for it eventually”, believing that herself will end up in hell literally (37).

Her pessimism stems from seeing the corpses of her parents and what happens to the patients at the state run DGD ward. These experiences have scarred her at a young age with frightening emotions and visuals. If all her life leads up to is the terrifying stay at the state DGD ward, it will make no difference to die now than later. This suicidal attitude is also a reflection of society's lack of care for the patients. There is no mention of anyone supporting Lynn. Even though the patients face horrific deaths, there is little consultation the patients to go. Lynn has no one she can really rely upon. This oversight leaves vulnerable patients to fend for themselves which is ignorant and dangerous.

Being diagnosed with the DGD is not only damaging physically but socially as well. DGD patients are heavily discriminated against throughout this short story. Lynn has faced ridicule from her classmates. They degrade her to beast by insulting the food she eats. Lynn eats alone to escape this humiliation. Those with DGD are also put into state DGD wards. Patients are kept against their will and the condition are harsh. The treatment is compared to pest extermination. Finally, the patients with DGD feel hopeless. Lynn's attitude toward enrollment in college proves how meaningless some patients see their lives as. Little support exists for those fighting this disease. These examples establish the dismal relationship between society and DGD. Those with the illness are treated unfairly by healthy human beings. Society provides little incentives for the ill to go on with their lives, causing many to simply lose hope. Lynn and other DGD patients have to ultimately overcome these obstacles themselves.