

PARABLE OF THE SOWER CHARACTERS

LAUREN OLAMINA

Character Analysis

Here she is: Lauren Olamina, one of Octavia Butler's best-loved fictional characters. What makes her so beloved? You know, besides the fact that she's a rockin' Black female teenager in 2024-2027 who invents her own religion and tries to save the world? Let's find out.

Lauren Olamina, Author

Okay, yes, the *actual* author of this novel is Octavia Butler—but Lauren Olamina is also an author. In fact, her verses from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* are the first thing we're introduced to in the novel. Lots of readers can identify with an author, since many readers probably scribble away in notebooks sometimes too. But what maybe makes Lauren an author to the max is that she follows up, in real life, on the insights she produces while writing.

Lauren describes her writing process like this: "I've never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation" (7.6). So she's uncovering the truth, and what else does a person do with the truth besides act on it? Well, so long as you're a very idealistic person, as Lauren is.

In fact, Lauren's basic insight is this: "God is Change" (11.Verse.6). If God is change, then participating in change and making it happen seems like something you just have to do.

Lauren's first attempts to spread her message, of course, aren't such a success. To Lauren, the truth she's learned is pretty self-evident, and so she expects her best friend Joanne, for example, to recognize this truth, too. Joanne's not as next-level as Lauren, so Joanne taps out of that conversation early, but hey, at least Lauren tried. And she does get better at what she does.

Lauren also finds herself writing "the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars" (7.Verse1.Line1-8)—and, by gosh, she intends to help humanity fulfill this far-fetched goal. Literally, she wants to help people move to other planets. No one tell Lauren her ideals are unrealistic, okay? Because she's totally aiming to bring them to fruition. As she herself says: "Belief / Initiates and guides action— / Or it does nothing" (5.Verse).

Our girl shows a few of the little signs that go along with someone being a writer. She has to make sure to buy pens and a notebook when she's shopping (15.89), she thinks she can make money by teaching reading and writing (11.49), and she sometimes feels compelled to put pen to paper (12.41 and 14.40).

But what about Lauren makes her take her own writing so seriously? Possibly it's just a choice: it's how she chooses to view the world. Or maybe it's...

Hyper-Hyper-Hyper empathy

Yep, Lauren's got a rare hyper empathy syndrome. It makes her a "sharer": someone who feels what other people—and to a lesser extent, animals—feel when they're in pleasure or pain. Basically, if someone around Lauren gets stabbed, she'll feel it. She's really in tune with whoever is around her—and that's a trait that helps make Lauren a compassionate person, someone who is concerned with improving outcomes for all, not just herself.

In a way, it's almost like hyper empathy is a metaphor for being somebody who is highly sensitive. As most authors, for instance, and they're likely to tell you they think they feel more deeply than others, and that's one reason they have the insight necessary to write.

Anyway, sometimes Lauren's on board with the "good" interpretation of her syndrome. For example, at one point in the novel, she thinks: "But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people" (10.136).

But other times, Lauren thinks hyper empathy syndrome is more trouble than it's worth. For instance, toward the end of the novel, she says this to Bankole: "Take my word for it. Bad, bad idea. Self-defence shouldn't have to be an agony or a killing or both. I can be crippled by the pain of a wounded person. I'm a very good shot because I've never felt that I could afford just to wound someone" (22.94).

Most of the time, Lauren just thinks of it as something that impacts which tactics she can put into play. Like, can she attack this guy trying to steal stuff from her, or will the pain she feels be too great? But we're still left wondering how much effect hyper empathy actually has on Lauren. Is it a constraint? Is it a gift? Or is it both? Octavia Butler won't give us any easy answers on this one.

Lauren, Meet Other People

Lauren Olamina is all about community. That's not surprising, given that she's got hyper empathy syndrome and has a religion she wants to save the world with. The fate of other people is important to her, right? But how does she get interested in community building, specifically?

Well, Lauren grows up in the fictional California town of Robledo, with her reverend father basically serving as the community's leader. She disagrees with her dad and how he doesn't want everyone to open their eyes fully to the widespread and increasing danger all around them. Lauren also can't bring herself to believe in her dad's Baptist God (2.1). But at least she does learn his lesson that hey, human beings are social, and that means we need to work together to survive.

When Lauren's father disappears, it has a big impact on her life. The dude just vanishes, and Lauren never finds out for sure what happened to him. At that point, it's up to her to create her own family and her own community; this is when she realizes that community is necessary for *survival*. Sure, she hooks up with Bankole, another mystery man who's also a sort of provider, but really, Lauren's doing the community building mostly on her own.

Now, during the first half of the novel, which is when Robledo's still standing, Lauren grows, but relatively slowly. She goes along with her baptism in Chapter 2 despite the fact that she's not actually into the Baptist religion. At this point, she's still doing what's asked of her without rebelling. But by Chapter 11, she's already decided to head north when she comes of age, regardless of what Curtis or anyone else thinks.

Of course, Robledo gets destroyed before she turns eighteen, but what does she do in this situation? She heads north on her own, that's what.

Once she's on the road, migrating north as a refugee from Robledo, Lauren and those who join up with her have to decide how to treat strangers. At first, Lauren maintains a real dog-eat-dog, everyone's-got-to-survive mentality—that's so she keeps strangers seeking help at bay (16.9-11). This troubles Harry.

But as the journey progresses, Lauren becomes more welcoming of others (for example, 23.62-63). She wants recruits for Earthseed, after all, and she's gained confidence about how to survive outside Robledo. What is it that pushes her to change? Maybe it's her compassion for others' suffering (17.57-59), which may be rooted in her hyper empathy syndrome. Maybe she's been a compassionate person all along, even back in Robledo, and the way she wards off strangers right after the destruction of Robledo is just a temporary blip in her personality, resulting from the fear that she feels after her home is destroyed.

Either way, other people have an effect on Lauren: she has to work with them or against them, but it does seem that from the get-go, she's highly independent. She has her own ideas—you know, Earthseed—about what life means and what a person is supposed to do, and she follows those ideas. Rather than join up with someone else's philosophy, she creates her own—and she gets other people to agree with her.

No wonder Bankole tells Lauren (21.35): "What you are now [...] is a very unusual young woman."

TAYLOR FRANKLIN BANKOLE

Character Analysis

Bankole is one of a May-December romance right at the heart of *Parable of the Sower*.

Yeah, this dude is Lauren's 57-year-old cuddle muffin.

Bankole enters the story on August 27, 2027, pushing a saddlebagged cart of supplies (19.24). He's just a year older than Reverend Olamina (19.33), which kind of makes him a father figure for Lauren, whose religion doesn't even have a father figure in it. (She's got to have a father figure somewhere, right?)

Anyway, Bankole seems to come from some degree of money, since he doesn't "look like a man who scavenged" (19.24) and has clothes that "fit him well" (19.24), as well as other good stuff, including "an expensive professional haircut" (19.24). He's also got this good-looking beard that he's kind of vain about combing (23.30).

As Lauren eventually figures out (21.63), Bankole is a doctor—a family practice doctor, in fact (21.64). That makes him a good match for Lauren, since she's got a medical condition, that old hyper empathy syndrome. Like Lauren's hometown of Robledo, Bankole's home community was destroyed by fire and scavengers (21.51). That's why he's headed north. He almost left when his wife, Sharon, died, but stuck around since people were taking care of him (21.43-45).

Bankole is happy to join up with Lauren's growing Earthseed group because they share his concern for the wellbeing of strangers. Initially, that's Jill and Allie, whom Bankole helps Lauren save from the earthquake rubble in Chapter 19. As Bankole puts it, he is "surprised to see that anyone else cared what happened to a couple of strangers" (19.132). He even very formally asks permission to join Lauren's group—"If you don't mind, I'd like to travel with your group" (19.134)—and is welcomed by her.

Bankole and Lauren end up having sex, which allows Lauren to *benefit* from her hyper empathy syndrome for once instead of just suffering from it. Lauren is cautious about opening up to Bankole, though. She wants to be assured he won't laugh at Earthseed, and that he'll still accept her after learning about her hyper empathy syndrome. He finds the syndrome interesting (22.91), but is pretty wary of the Earthseed. He even calls Earthseed his "rival" (22.49)—but he tolerates it enough for Lauren to accept his offer of letting her clan settle on his land.

Yeah, Bankole's got some serious acreage going on here—three hundred acres of land, to be precise (22.15-43). That's property that can be of use to Lauren. It may be kind of un-romantic to see him in such terms, but Lauren and her group are really focused on survival and can't afford to just turn stuff down. Before accepting his land, of course, Lauren does quiz Bankole on whether he accepts Earthseed and her hyper empathy, and he does pass the tests. But something feels not quite right about it all. Check out the novel's sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, for more.

All in all, it seems Bankole does share Lauren's concerns for others, and he is highly motivated to win over our narrator—even to marry her (22.76-78). But in many ways, like Lauren's father, or like the impersonal God of Change, Bankole is a mystery man, not someone entirely transparent to Lauren or to us.

Of course, even Bankole's father, according to Bankole himself, "had to be different" for "all his life" (19.31), so maybe being mysterious just runs in families.

REVEREND OLAMINA

Character Analysis

Lauren is totally the daughter of a preacher man: Reverend Olamina.

We never learn the dude's first name in *Parable of the Sower*, but that doesn't mean he's not important. In fact, the book opens on his 55th birthday on July 20, 2024. Dude's an older gent, and he's totally a Baptist preacher. He's *also* a professor and a dean; that makes him a source of income for Lauren's family (2.26). Plus, he's a respected leader of Lauren's hometown community of Robledo, a small place he was eager to abandon as a young man (2.19) but has come back to.

Basically, dude's got a lot of authority. But what impact does that have on Lauren, our protagonist?

While Lauren does respect her father and admire how he leads her community—she takes his side over Keith's, after all, when the two are at odds over Keith running away (10.51)—not even Reverend Olamina can make Lauren into a completely obedient child. Sure, he leads the target practice sessions (4.28), gives sermons (6.8), and more, but as we all know, Lauren is headstrong.

Reverend Olamina doesn't always do so perfectly himself. His relationship with his son Keith is all messed up, since Keith runs away from Robledo and into danger—and blames it on his father (8.42). The Rev fights with Cory, Lauren's stepmother. But again, he does seem to try as much as he can, and he does pretty well at it, so we'll say Lauren has a good role model in him. His own life has been pretty tough, after all: his parents were murdered (2.19), and Lauren's mother died in labour.

Anyway, remember the recurring dream the novel opens with, in Chapter 1? Lauren says she has unsettling dreams when she tries "to be my father's daughter" (1.1). Ultimately, Lauren can't follow in the footsteps of her dad *and* be successful. She can't be his daughter 100%. He's a religious leader, and she's a religious leader, sure, so they have a lot in common—but "A tree / cannot grow / in its parents' shadows" (7.Verse4.1-3), as Lauren puts it. She ultimately has to separate from him.

It seems that fate held their separation in store, because Lauren never actually has to abandon her father of her own volition; it happens on its own. Dude mysteriously disappears at age 57 (13.6-7), probably captured and killed by wrongdoers beyond Robledo's external wall. The loss of income wreaks havoc on the Olamina family, but things quickly go from bad to worse when Robledo is destroyed entirely not long afterward. Frown.

All in all, Reverend Olamina seems like a man who wants to do the right thing and help people, but he's not someone who can fully understand and guide Lauren. She's just too much her own person. He does try, even going so far as to discipline her with physical beatings (10.47) and lecture her about how to properly alert others—such as Joanne—to danger (6.67), but in the end, Lauren takes charge of herself. It's not his job.

KEITH OLAMINA

Character Analysis

Yeah, we'll be real: Lauren's brother Keith is a brat.

As Lauren says, Keith doesn't care about much (2.11). He's kind of a foil to Lauren: she's passionate and idealistic, but he just likes to "dodge work and dodge school and dodge church" (2.11) and pretty much any other responsibility that comes his way. He's twelve, and he's her stepmother's favourite (2.11)—but Lauren says he's the dumbest of the Olamina kids. His goal, if he has one, is to move to Los Angeles (2.11), not for any particular reason, as far as Lauren can make out, but just because.

Keith seems downright mean compared to Lauren—or compared to anyone, really. For instance, Keith "used to pretend to be hurt just to trick [Lauren] into sharing his supposed pain [due to her hyper

empathy syndrome]. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make [her] bleed" (2.23). Yep. Mean guy. And it gets worse.

Keith wants to think of himself as an adult. So, he really wants to go to target-practice, for example, even though he's too young according to the age rule (4.42). Eventually, his whining pays off, and his parents get him a weapon (9.1). It isn't too much longer before he leaves Robledo for good and joins up with whatever wrongdoers he can on the outside to stay alive.

Keith's survival in the outside world is the topic of conversation between him and Lauren during one of the brief times he returns to Robledo. Lauren wants to find out how he's surviving, and he admits that he killed a man. Yep, we told you it gets worse. What's more is that Keith says shooting this guy to death didn't bother him (10.93). In a way, Keith is pretty antisocial (in the real meaning of the word, which means someone who doesn't abide by any of society's rules), which, when you think about it, makes him the opposite of Lauren, who's all about hyper empathy and building community.

All this antisocial behaviour apparently ends up getting Keith killed. On August 26, 2026, his parents have to go downtown to identify his dead body (10.121). Turns out he had been gruesomely tortured prior to death (10.123)—a drug deal gone wrong, perhaps. Reverend Olamina uses Keith's death as a way to warn his other kids about how dangerous the world is beyond Robledo (10.124). Yet Lauren has to go outside eventually, too.

It seems that Keith is driven, to some extent, by an urge to differentiate himself from his father. Lauren calls Keith out on this, telling him: "Every time you look at him, you see yourself" (10.32). Keith doesn't believe that, but it seems true to us. By disobeying his father, Keith tries to prove that his father doesn't matter—hmm, a little contradictory there, eh? Because if he didn't matter, then why disobey him so spectacularly?

ZAHRA MOSS

Character Analysis

Zahra plays a big role in the novel, but at first, Lauren doesn't really know her that well. She's just one of Richard Moss' three wives—and according to Lauren, Zahra is the "youngest and prettiest" (4.29) of those three. She has only one kid, Bibi, who is shot to death during the destruction of Robledo (14.90 and 15.6). After that tragic incident, she joins up with Lauren and follows her all the way to Bankole's land, where the crew founds Acorn.

Zahra has a scary background with Richard. Basically, he purchased her with money and totally controlled her like a slave (16.53-54). She explains this background to Harry:

Zahra told how Richard Moss had bought her from her homeless mother when she was only fifteen [...] and brought her to live in the first house she had ever known. He gave her enough to eat and didn't beat her, and even when her co-wives were hateful to her, it was a thousand times better than living outside with her mother and starving. Now she was outside again. In six years, she had gone from nothing to nothing. (15.12)

Zahra turns out to be a huge help to Lauren on the road north. That's because Zahra has had the experience of living on the streets, so she's able to give Lauren survival advice. For instance, Zahra recommends sucking on a little rock while walking to defeat thirst pangs (16.4). It's unfortunate that Zahra and Lauren didn't team up prior to the destruction of Robledo—maybe they could have kept the hometown afloat if they'd met sooner. But it seems Richard Moss was in the way of that, preventing Zahra from socializing with others.

The ol' Z definitely digs Earthseed: Lauren calls her the second convert (18.83). Zahra says, "[I]f you want to put together some kind of community where people look out for each other and don't have to take being pushed around, I'm with you" (18.83). That's how Zahra sees Earthseed. She doesn't really care about the Destiny—"I don't care about no outer space" (18.83)—but other than that, Zahra is game.

On the way north, Zahra romantically pairs up with Harry (17.32). Seems one of the main reasons for that is that he rescued her from rape during the destruction of Robledo (14.104).

All in all, Zahra was pretty ignored back in Robledo, but once she's out of that town, she turns out to be one of the most helpful people to have around.

HAROLD "HARRY" BALTER

Character Analysis

Prior to the destruction of Robledo, Harold "Harry" Balter is Joanne Garfield's boyfriend, despite the fact that they're—oops—cousins (4.28). Once Lauren's hometown is destroyed, he pairs up romantically with Zahra (17.32). Harry's a white guy (4.28), he doesn't get along with his father (5.67), and he thinks that Olivar is a big debt trap (12.15-16). In a nutshell, Harry's a bit rebellious, and for that reason, he makes a good teammate for Lauren.

Lauren and Harry don't interact much prior to the destruction of Robledo, but once their hometown is destroyed, the two have to work together. Harry rescues Zahra from rape (14.104) during the destruction, and that rescue kind of forms the basis of their kinda sorta relationship. At first, they join with Lauren simply because they know one another from the town and need allies. Once Robledo is out of the picture, Harry wants to find a job in the north somewhere (15.24), so much so that even when they all get to Bankole's land, he resists the idea of settling there at first since there's no paid work available (25.46-47).

As Lauren and company migrate north, Harry's the one who most questions Lauren's changing attitudes about whether to welcome strangers or ward them off. Early in their journey, Lauren turns away some people seeking food and help—including an old guy Harry wanted to let sit with them (16.11)—and Harry says to her: "What, then? [...] Everyone's guilty until proven innocent? Guilty of what? And how do they prove themselves to you?" (16.15).

Yeah, Harry's not having it.

But a few chapters later, Lauren starts helping Emery and Tori and others, and that leads Harry to tell her: "I say you're going soft" (23.62), because Lauren "would have raised hell if we'd tried to take in a

beggar woman and her child a few weeks ago" (23.62). Seems Harry is happier with the friendlier Lauren.

Maybe some of the credit for Lauren's change should go to Harry, since with his constant commenting, he's one of the main forces responsible for prompting her to think over how they should treat others.

Harry doesn't seem to go in much for Earthseed, despite listening to Lauren talk about it during their journey. At one point, Lauren notes that he "refused to take the discussion seriously" (18.57). At other times, he says "Amen" as a joke (18.53) or mischievously identifies their group as "Earthseed" (19.105) to strangers. It seems that maybe he's flirting with the idea of finding faith in her religion—or maybe he's just too focused on trying to get to a place where he can make money to survive.

TRAVIS CHARLES DOUGLAS

Character Analysis

Travis and his family come into the story in a pretty spectacular way. The opportunists or "coyotes" who hang around water stations looking to take advantage of people go after him, Natividad, and their child—but Lauren trips the attacker and saves the day (17.51).

After that, the two groups—that's Lauren and Zahra and Harry on one side, and Travis, Natividad, and their kid Dominic (a.k.a. Domingo) on the other—are kind of wary of each other for a while, hiking north and camping in close proximity to one another; but eventually, after more help from Lauren (17.129-133), the groups team up, adding numbers to Lauren's wonderful migrating Earthseed crew.

So that's the story of how Travis gets involved, but who is he, really? Well, let's start with some basics. The dude has a "deep-black complexion" (17.152), he's "young, good looking, and intense" (17.152), and he's a "stocky, muscular man" (17.152). He's all that good stuff. But more importantly, he's the person Lauren calls her "first convert" (18.83). He argues with Lauren about her beliefs, but she admires his persistence in doing so (18.82), and she's eventually able to win him over.

Travis doesn't get all bent out of shape about whether Lauren's ideas are "realistic" or not. As Lauren puts it, "He didn't point out that a person walking north from L.A. to who-knows-where with all her possessions on her back was hardly in a position to point the way to Alpha Centauri" (18.82). He seems to recognize that ideals are important, and so he gives Lauren a good hearing.

Maybe Travis is so open to Lauren's ideas because he, like she, is into reading and writing and books. Travis says his mother "taught [him] to read and write" and "taught [him] to teach [himself]. The man she worked for had a library—a whole big room full of books" that she would smuggle him (18.37-42).

GLORIA NATIVIDAD DOUGLAS

Character Analysis

Natividad is the mother of the mixed family whom Lauren helps at the water station. Her child is Dominic, a.k.a. Domingo, and her man is Travis. When she first teams up with Lauren, Natividad tells her they're on their way to Seattle for work that pays money (17.153). But they end up joining Lauren's group and staying at Acorn with them on Bankole's land.

So who's Natividad? What's she all about? Well, Lauren says she's "a pale brown woman with a round, pretty face, long black hair bound up in a coil atop her head" (17.152). But that's just physical description. What's more interesting is that she asks to hear some of Lauren's poetry (17.173) and says that she's really concerned for her child's wellbeing (17.151). She asks interesting questions about Earthseed—like whether God is male or female (18.57). All in all, she rocks.

What's her background? She was the maid of a rich family, and she met Travis, the son of the cook, while working there. They got married but took off once the master started scoping out Natividad as a possible victim to rape. (18.42-46)

ALLIE AND JILL GILCHRIST

Character Analysis

Spoiler alert!

Only one of them will make it out alive...

Okay, Allie and Jill Gilchrist are the sisters Lauren's group rescues in Chapter 19. They're caught in the rubble of their home after the earthquake, and Lauren and company pull them out of the ruins, even though the two sisters are bloody and confused. Helping the two women makes Lauren and her friends targets, but they fight off the attackers who come, and Allie and Jill become members of the northward migrating Earthseed show.

Allie and Jill are 24-25 years old, poor, and they're running away from a life of prostitution. Yeah, their father was their pimp (19.100). That's gross, sad, and bad in all kinds of ways. Jill admits that the two of them are grateful that's Lauren's people saved them, but Jill and Allie are still suspicious at first of all this Earthseed business (19.106-118). They wonder if it's "Some kind of cult or something" (19.110).

Their suspicion is justified by their life backgrounds. Allie used to have a little boy named Adam (20.93-99), but her pimp father killed the infant. That's pretty horrifying. So it kind of makes sense later when Allie adopts Justin Rohr, the orphan he group finds (20.89-92). But back to their nasty father—Allie and Jill burned down their own home at one point, in the town of Glendale, aiming to escape him (20.99). When life is that bad, you get desperate.

Eventually, the two sisters begin to appreciate Lauren and Earthseed more. For instance, Allie starts asking real questions about the religion (21.115). It all seems to be going pretty well.

But then Jill gets killed during a battle between Lauren's group and some of the painted-faces freaks in Chapter 24: she's shot in the back while helping Tori (24.34-35). Minus one for the Earthseed crew. Not too long after that, Lauren comforts Allie (24.98-101), and things start looking up again. Once they reach Bankole's land, Allie's attitude toward Earthseed is a smiley one (25.18), and she—and Justin—agree to stay (25.39-40).

Allie and Jill fit into this novel in that they're good examples of the sort of people who need Lauren's help and a community to survive. The sisters have their own tragic stories, but once they meet up with Lauren, they get a family, so to speak, that wants to help them.

GRAYSON AND DOE MORA

Character Analysis

A big gray enigma, that's what Grayson Mora is.

Grayson, born in Sacramento (24.73), and his daughter Doe, age eight, encounter Lauren's group on the road north. Grayson is "a tall, thin, Black Latino, quiet, protective of his child, yet tentative, somehow" (23.102). That hesitation of his turns out to be because he has hyper empathy syndrome, too, just like Lauren and a few others. At first, he only sticks around with her group because his daughter, Doe, befriends Tori Solis (23.102).

Lauren's able to figure out that Grayson and Doe, like Emery and Tori, are sharers (people who have hyper empathy syndrome); that's because they all have an odd "tentativeness and touchiness—not wanting to be touched" (24.51). Lauren's encounter with other people who have hyper empathy syndrome plays out more in this book's sequel, *Parable of the Talents*. But it's safe to say that meeting other sharers is a startling experience for Lauren. She's not entirely sure what to make of it.

For his part, Grayson is startled to see Lauren hanging out with people who *aren't* sharers (24.92-95). And his hyper empathy doesn't seem to make him particularly compassionate—Lauren tests this out by purposefully stumbling to see if he comes to her aid, which he doesn't do (24.96-97). Oh, well. But yeah, maybe hyper empathy and compassion don't always go together. That seems part of the point of Grayson Mora being in this book, in fact: he contrasts with Lauren.

At the end of the novel, Grayson agrees to stay on Bankole's land (25.66), but he remains something of a mystery to everyone.

EMERY TANAKA SOLIS AND TORI SOLIS

Character Analysis

The Earthseed family keeps on growin'.

Emery and her daughter Tori are two people who come to Lauren's group while pretty much everyone is sleeping during a nearby gun battle. They're "the most racially mixed" (23.86) individuals Lauren has

ever met: Emery had "a Japanese father, a Black mother, and a Mexican husband" (23.86). She's twenty-three, and her daughter is nine.

What's their background? In short, Emery worked as a debt slave for an agribusiness conglomerate, and her sons were taken away by the firm. When she protested this, she was given a drug to "quiet her down." Eventually she escaped with her daughter, and after lots of trouble, they encountered Lauren's group (23.86-98).

So Emery and Tori are basically some more hard-off, poor, ethnically mixed individuals who join up with Earthseed—what makes them special or unique, and why are they important in this novel? One thing that stands out about them is that their life experience with the agribusiness conglomerate suggests what might have happened to Lauren had she followed the Garfields to Olivar. In other words, Lauren would probably have become a debt slave.

Luckily, Emery gets away from the debt slavery and lives to tell Harry about it when he's considering finding paid work instead of staying on Bankole's land. Emery tells him (25.52-60) that the types of places where he might find paid work are the sorts of places where he might be expected to work as a slave-driver, something he turns away from in horror.

Not surprisingly, like many people in this novel, Emery is driven to survive and to take care of her kid, Tori. And there's one more fact about Emery: she's a sharer. Like Lauren, she has hyper empathy syndrome (24.48-51).

JOANNE GARFIELD

Character Analysis

Joanne Garfield is Lauren's BFF—

Oh, wait. Scratch that second F.

Joanne is Lauren's best friend in Robledo *before* all the big changes happen—before the Garfields move to Olivar, and before the neighbourhood is destroyed. Joanne kind of gives our prodigious Lauren some normalcy, some ability to just be a regular teenager a little rather than some super genius out to found a religion. Of course, Lauren doesn't really want things to be normal, so she pushes Joanne to see life from her perspective. And we all know how that ends up.

Let's get some basic facts on Joanne. Her boyfriend is her first cousin Harry Balter (4.28). She's white (4.28). She's scared of dogs (4.46-49).

So, yeah. That's Joanne.

The big incident everyone remembers is Lauren's attempt to make Joanne see the importance of change. Lauren's got a point, but she scares everybody when she talks about how the neighbourhood is becoming increasingly dangerous and how it'll eventually be destroyed by attackers. Lauren recommends that she and Joanne learn how to survive, but Joanne dismissively sums it all up as "we learn to eat grass and live in the bushes" (5.136). Then she tattles on Lauren, telling her mother that Lauren is loony tunes (6.1-4). Gee, thanks, Joanne. What a big help you are.

Eventually, Joanne and Lauren kind of patch things up, but it's not long until the Garfields decide to move to Olivar, hoping the company town will give them a brighter future. Poor Lauren, so very friendless.

CORAZÓN "CORY" OLAMINA

Character Analysis

Ladies and gentlemen, meet the wicked stepmothers.

Oh, except she's not wicked.

But she *is* Lauren's stepmother. Cory's native language is Spanish (1.13), she plays piano (5.5), and she teaches the kids of the neighbourhood (3.39). Seems pretty cool, right? Yeah, for Lauren, she kind of serves as another role model of a community leader, just like her husband Reverend Olamina. When Lauren wants Amy, the poor girl no one cares about, to start school early, Cory says sure, so long as our narrator takes charge of her (4.13). That's an example of how Cory keeps Lauren thinking in terms of responsibilities and work.

There are some downsides to Cory, though. According to Lauren, Cory favours Keith over the other Olamina kids—"Keith is Cory's favourite" (8.49). The favouritism basically continues despite Keith running away from home several times, a habit that eventually gets him killed. Maybe the favouritism is one reason Cory barely enters Lauren's mind—only once or twice—once Robledo is destroyed and she migrates north.

Once Lauren has reached Bankole's land, she does think back to Cory briefly. Regarding her time in Robledo, Lauren thinks: "I think I was into my own brand of denial, as bad in its way as Cory's or Joanne's mother's" (25.15). So Cory, for all her upsides, represents more Robledo-style denial for Lauren. Like Lauren's father, Cory, one of the adult leaders of Robledo, didn't see the trouble coming as clearly as Lauren did.

Don't forget the argument between Reverend Olamina and Cory that Lauren overhears in Chapter 6. That's when Cory's trying to talk Lauren's father out of the night patrols, saying they're just going to get him in trouble. This conversation is an example of the denial Lauren later thinks about. At least Reverend Olamina wanted to solve problems in Robledo; Cory was having a hard time acknowledging the existence of any problems.

Nevertheless, when Lauren's father goes missing, Cory really steps up to the plate, taking over his university job in some way that's not quite legal (13.100). So she does her best, it seems. That's just not good enough, of course, in the face of the change that's coming: Robledo is going down, and Cory and Lauren are just going to be separated for the rest of the book.

CURTIS TALCOTT

Character Analysis

Meet Lauren's boyfriend, folks.

Well, he's Lauren's boyfriend before Bankole, anyway. And you'd kind of hardly know Curtis was Lauren's boyfriend at all from the way she writes about him. She says a few things to indicate she cares about him and his opinions, such as "I care about him more than I want to" (2.34) and "I care what he thinks of me" (2.34), but she never tells him about Earthseed or her hyper empathy syndrome.

She kind of looks at Curtis as being her option of staying in Robledo forever. "It's not [an option] that I intend to exercise, but it is pretty much what the neighbourhood expects of me—of anyone my age. Grow up a little more, get married, have babies" (8.6). So that's how Curtis fits into the novel: just a big fat picture of the status quo.

In Chapter 13, Curtis finally pries out of Lauren that she intends to leave Robledo and go north. She didn't even tell him. Yeah, they don't have much of a real relationship, no matter what Lauren tells herself about him. But she has good reason for hiding her emotions: her hyper empathy syndrome could be a weakness, a way for others to take advantage of her. When Curtis does let on that he's been thinking of going north, Lauren conceals her reaction and thinks: "My sharing has been a hard teacher" (13.26). She doesn't want him to know about her chief vulnerability.

That she planned to go north—without discussing it with him—obviously upsets Curtis. He asks her to marry him (13.52), but she puts him off. All he can offer is: "We could live at your house" (13.59), and: "My parents would help out with food" (13.59). Not much compared to what Bankole has later: three hundred acres.

"I have things to tell you" (13.63), Lauren thinks, regarding Curtis...but she never gets the opportunity to fill him in on her hyper empathy syndrome and her plans for Earthseed, because Robledo is destroyed first. On her way north, Lauren remembers Curtis briefly (21.98-104), but even then, his memory doesn't matter all that much to her life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Character Analysis

Lauren's Mother

We never learn the name of Lauren's birth mother—it seems that maybe Lauren doesn't like to think much about her. We know she was from Texas (12.64), but we don't know much else. Lauren does say that her hyper empathy syndrome was caused by her mother's drug abuse: "Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I'm crazy" (2.27). So it seems that while this woman didn't get to raise Lauren, she did leave Lauren with the syndrome that possibly instils a lot of compassion in her.

Marcus Olamina

Marcus is one of Lauren's brothers. Lauren describes him as "trustworthy" (7.22), and he's the one who mutters about how he'd like to leave the family (8.48). Lauren also describes Marcus as "beautiful" (11.42), saying girls stare at him when they think he's not looking. He's attached to Robin Balter, but she gets killed when Robledo is destroyed (14.70).

Gregory Olamina

Gregory is another of Lauren's brothers, but he isn't super important. Sorry, Gregory. Lauren describes the kid as a "clownish smartass of a baby brother" (14.52). He gets gifts from Keith (9.38)...but you know what? We never learn all that much about Gregory. Lauren looks for him in the ruins of Robledo, but she never finds him.

Bennett Olamina

Bennett? Well, Bennett is *yet another* of Lauren's brothers, and we don't learn all that much about him, either. He's just there to be cute, we guess. He receives gifts from Keith (9.38) and plays on the KSF truck that comes to pick up the Garfields (13.11). And that's about where it ends.

Alicia Catalina Godinez Leal

Alicia of the many names is the astronaut who dies on Mars but inspires Lauren.

Alicia's story is kind of awful. She totally kicks the bucket on Mars, and she's asked to be buried there. Yeah, well, it doesn't happen: the Secretary of Astronautics says no, since her body might be a contaminant (3.12-14). So Alicia doesn't get to be buried on Mars.

The point is that Alicia and her mission to settle on Mars inspire Lauren and encourage her to get to thinking about the Destiny and the ultimate purpose of humanity. We learn that Alicia was a chemist who devoted her life to getting to Mars, trying to figure out how to terraform it and establish a community there (3.20). It's a kind of paradigm for what Lauren later tries to do by gathering followers for Earthseed.

Jay Garfield

Jay's one of the adults who's supposed to be saving the day in Robledo. He's a white guy (4.28) who's another community leader, like Lauren's father; he's also the father of Lauren's best friend, Joanne.

Jay helps lead the target practice in town, and he even helps look for Reverend Olamina when he goes missing, even though the Garfield family is already preparing to leave for Olivar (12.39). These actions lead Lauren to describe him as a "good man" (12.39), so it seems his role in the novel is to provide another fairly positive example to Lauren of what a community leader looks like.

Phillida Garfield

Ugh, parents. Always getting in the way. Phillida Garfield is Joanne's mother and also Jay Garfield's wife. Joanne tattles to her about Lauren's survivalist ideas, and Phillida tells Jay, who then tells Reverend Olamina, who makes trouble for Lauren. Eventually, the whole Garfield family goes to Olivar.

President William Turner Smith

No one in this book much likes presidential candidates. Not much new there. One of these candidates, the incumbent in 2024, is President Smith. He ultimately loses the election to Donner (3.53).

Christopher Charles Morpeth Donner

This guy wins the presidential election in 2024 (3.53), though Reverend Olamina didn't vote for him. According to Lauren, Reverend Olamina said that "politicians turned his stomach" (3.56).

Dunn Family

Yeah, by the "Dunn family", we pretty much just mean Tracy and Amy. Tracy (4.9-10) is a young woman who's only a year older than Lauren. She gets impregnated at age twelve due to her rapist Uncle Derek. Then, at age thirteen, she gives birth to Amy, another Dunn nobody much cares about except Lauren. The main point of Tracy and Amy Dunn seems to be to show what could have become of Lauren had she stayed in Robledo and been less lucky in terms of the quality of her family. Other, unimportant Dunns include Silvia, Edwin, Allison, Marie, and Christmas.

Balter Family

The main cat of the Balter family is Harry, who you can read about separately. This is just here to say there are some other Balter family members, too, none of whom are all that important in the grand scheme of things. They include Lisa, Robin, Jessica, Jeremy, Drew, Caroline, and Russell. We *think* we named them all.

Moss Family

Richard Moss is the main boss of the Moss family. He takes three wives, the youngest of whom is Zahra. You can read all about how bad this dude is in Zahra's character analysis. Aside from Richard and Zahra, there are other Moss family members, including the kids Aura and Peter, the wives Karen and Natalie, and Zahra's kid Bib, who is shot to death during the destruction of Robledo.

Cruz Family

The Cruz family is one of the families that get robbed by outsider thieves when Robledo is going downhill. This family consists of Lidia, Dorotea, and others. The inclusion of so many families in *Parable of the Sower*, when we don't even learn much about them, depicts a world where social relationships are pretty important, even if you don't always know for sure who's who. Social relationships, building community, and saving the world all turn out to be really important to Lauren once she's on her own.

Hsu Family

The Hsu family consists of George, Robert, Gary, and others. They're another Robledo family that at one point gets robbed by outsiders. But hey, Robert Hsu gives astronomy lectures (8.53), and that's pretty unique. Unfortunately, those lectures aren't enough to save Robledo from the fate Lauren foresees.

Montoya Family

The Montoya family includes, among others, Juana, Alex, Alejandro, and Bianca. They teach "martial arts classes" (6.118) after Lauren manages to wake up the Robledo residents just a little to how badly they all need help. But it's too little, too late.

Yannis Family

The Yannis family charges admission for people to look through their Window, a big TV-like thing (3.7), until the picture finally goes dark. It's an unsettling sign we see early on in the novel about how the futuristic United States is falling apart. Yannis family members include Layla Yannis and others.

Michael Talcott

Michael Talcott is the brother of Curtis, Lauren's boyfriend. Lauren says she got in a fight with him once and had to be really rough since her hyperempathy made her especially vulnerable. During one of the target practice sessions, Michael is almost shot by Aura by accident. Lauren says that it's a "pity" that Curtis is stuck with Michael, and that no one gets to choose their siblings (9.4).

Wyatt and Kayla Talcott

Wyatt and Kayla, the parents of Lauren's (initial) boyfriend Curtis, aren't super important, but isn't it nice to read a science fiction novel where characters actually have families, rather than just being super-duper heroes with no plausible backstories to accompany their hero-dom? That's because Octavia Butler is focusing on social change and how communities and relationships help or hurt people who are trying to thrive.

Jorge Iturbe and Bianca Montoya

This is the couple whose pregnancy strikes Lauren as a sign that maybe she should be thinking about getting out of Robledo and finding a better future for herself (8.2-8). Bianca is 17, and Jorge is 23—and, well, they're unmarried, so it's scandalous. Lauren's not interested in the scandal, though. She's just looking at them and thinking, *Meh, that's the future I want for myself.*

Mrs. Sims

Mrs. Sims shoots herself really early on in the novel. She's very religious, so in that regard, she functions as a contrast to Lauren. Mrs. Sims is all about being judgmental: she "talked about everyone who wasn't as holy as she thought she was" (3.23). And yet, for all her self-righteousness, she totally ends up killing herself. That prompts Lauren to wonder if Mrs. Sims really even believed any of her religion after all (3.37-38). Maybe her God demanded too much of her, Lauren thinks (3.38). From Lauren's perspective, Earthseed is a much more manageable faith.

Wardell Parrish and Rosalee Payne

Wardell Parrish and Rosalee Payne inherit Mrs. Sims' home after she kills herself. They move into Robledo and are very suspicious of everyone (4.14-27). Reverend Olamina tries to explain that Robledo is a community of people helping one another, but these folks aren't having any of it. During one of the eventual attacks on Robledo, Wardell gets really freaked out (13.89), and Cory helps take care of him (13.99), but he eventually can't stand it and has to go home to wherever he was from prior to moving to Robledo (13.106). Seems communities can't always welcome everyone, or be the right fit for just anyone.

Hector and Rubin Quintanilla

The Quintanillas are another Robledo family that gets attacked by outsiders. Man, these people need to get out Robledo, right? Why won't they listen to Lauren? Anyway, Mrs. Quintanilla gets killed by attackers who Hector and the Rubin brothers just barely fight off (11.4). Poor Robledo—doesn't sound like a safe place, does it?

Reverend Matthew Robinson

Robinson is a colleague of Reverend Olamina who helps out sometimes. His church is where Lauren and other youths get baptized (2.6), and he preaches the funeral for Reverend Olamina (13.1). It's good to have colleagues, we guess. It's just another example of how social relationships are important in this novel. Lauren doesn't grow up a loner—she grows up as a person in a world where community matters.

Sharon

Sharon is Bankole's wife (21.43), who has died. That's all we know about her, because Bankole's a mystery man.

Dominic/Domingo Douglas

Travis and Natividad have a kid, and that kid is Dominic (or Domingo). He's important because he helps Lauren sympathize with the Douglas family, and that sympathy inspires her to risk helping them. As a result, the Douglas family joins Lauren's group.

Justin and Sandra Rohr

Justin is the orphan Lauren's group rescues; he attaches himself to Allie. Sandra was his mom, but she's already dead by the time the Earthseed crew finds him. We don't ever learn a whole lot about Justin; he's around mostly to show how Lauren's group is able to show compassion for suffering people when the time is right.