

Being a Part, But Not Consumed

By Savannah Newkirk, English 300

In *Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn addresses the freakish nature of societal norms and acceptance. These two contrasting, yet analogous ideas develop throughout the novel to create a bevy of puzzling dilemmas, one of which is the very nature of acceptance. Dunn subtly highlights this dilemma through the subplot of the Arturan cult's evolution, which forces the reader to conclude that as one develops a disdain for the restraints and malevolence of conventional society, one may seek the acceptance originally denied in a new venue. Mirroring Arty, the leader of the cult, the faithful allow themselves to become fully and completely dependent on the opinions and acceptance of those around them, thereby becoming exactly what they fought to resist: another cog in a machine, a small and insignificant part of a new social standard, even if that standard is more freakish than the mainstream. Dunn voraciously attacks the fundamental, literal and figurative, human need for the approval of others, which she implies will cripple those who succumb to the power they allow others to have.

Dunn allows Arturo the preconceived notion of rebellion against convention early in the novel. Through the family structure of the Binewskis and the choices Arty makes as an individual, the reader detects this obsession with his own freakishness, for he "could live only in the show" (87). Because his only usefulness and hope for furthering his vocation exists within the circus, he must create a way to assert himself in

power over the others, who seem comfortable existing on the fringes of society. Despite the beliefs of his siblings who think they can co-exist with the norms, Arty embraces the thought that "[they] are the things that come to the norms in nightmares" (46). Whatever the perspective on Arturo, one concludes that his own disposition to rebellion allows him to evolve his actions later into a self-fulfilling prophecy: no one will ever accept him; therefore, he makes himself so contrary to society that his own polarity draws his followers to him.

Though the cult arises out of a superficial desire for beauty, its evolution speaks to the dynamic nature of the leader and his ability to manipulate the wishes of those who are drawn to him. Alma Witherspoon, arguably the most susceptible to Arty's self-serving charms, becomes his most outspoken advocate and promotes the desire to "feel what a rot [her fingers and toes were] to [her]" (183). Her own value soon expires

after Arty's cult expands beyond her abilities and "she[d] gone to the old Arturans' home to rest in peace" (186). Through Alma's unique qualities, his cult draws in the people who not only are the Alma Witherspoons of the world, desperate for a little improvement in their personal desirability, but also those who reject the world entirely because of its vanity. The latter represents Arty's greatest desire for "people who know what life has to offer and choose to turn their backs on it" (231). Through the observation of Sanderson, Dunn asserts a paradoxical conclusion that even those who have



Figure 7 *Papa's Roses* by Jandruff ©2008

essentially witnessed greater hypocrisy and degradation than a cult could find themselves attracted to or even, in an extreme case, fall victim to this anthropological mystery despite their cynical, questioning minds.

Exploiting this desire to belong explains the exclusion of those deemed too normal by Arturo. His own brother was “depreciated for his lack of abnormality” (221). Through his evil and narcissistic genius, Arty creates a complex in the marginalized people and drives them to further make themselves freakish in order to meet the extraordinary burden the cult places on its members. Not only do they have their toes and fingers removed, but they also transition to amputation of major appendages. This action makes them fully dependent on the will and favor of the cult, now a full-blown society, which regulates and determines their schedule, their aid, and their living arrangements based on the whims of their leader (185).

Arty’s vehement desire to be accepted, despite his utmost denial of said desire, shows itself in the evolution of the cult. He begins with seemingly decent intentions; however, those motives change when he discovers he can create a society that looks to him for guidance and over which he can have power. Dunn uses this development to expose Arty’s own hamartia: his own desperate need for acceptance drives him to create this cult when he only wants to “know that [he’s] alright” (178). All of his assertions and statements about finding self-acceptance refer to a man so desperate for approval that he will literally have his followers “all belong... to him” (188). His need for control undermines his own ability to love or do anything that a normal person would do, and eventually he believes that “the more deformed [he is], the higher [his] supposed sanctity” (114). In his cult and in his personal life, he exercises his complete and utter loathing of anything and everything normal, so much so that he cannot or, rather, refuses to have ordinary relationships, believing that these attachments are just another way for others to reject him; therefore, he creates a sub-culture where he controls the norms and has the ability to reject people, just as he is rejected by conventional society. Bound by his own self-

consciousness, Arty exemplifies the “ruthless egotism that was exploiting the nation’s psychic undertow,” which overtakes and victimizes those who desire for someone to love them just as they are (189).

The dream for which most continue to grasp, the desire for others’ esteem, allows the cult to create an illusion of kinship and societal acceptance, yet throughout the text, the faithful are forced to succumb to the standards set by the oligarchy of the cult. They must pay a dowry, serve the cult for up to a year, and, in some instances, take care of those more advanced in Arturism. Despite all this work, the faithful, in some sense, feel accepted. This illusion, comforting though it may be, is still an illusion. None of these people is accepted for who he or she is. They all must change something about themselves in order to be an Arturist. This submission to the rules and regulations derives from their desire to please others, which is just another method of social control. They are no longer free to make their own choices. Through Chick’s singular pleading and groveling, Arturism allows the Admitted chances to change not only their bodies but their minds through surgery. Stripping away the faithful’s humanity illustrates Dunn’s point: when humans succumb to the opinions and approval of others, they cease to be humans at all. They are simply objects to be reviewed and rejected. Dunn’s skillfully tailored theme arises and becomes poignant with the lobotomy of Dr. P (272). Forever a proponent of free will and the agency achieved through the medical removal of one’s loathed regions, Dr. P becomes a victim of the cult’s social control. The lobotomy of Dr. P symbolizes the total power the cult possesses over the Arturans—with devastating results. The removal of parts of her brain presents the reader with the abstract truth Dunn attempts to expose: an opinion or a standard set by someone else, which one embraces, does not only reverberate in one’s actions, but it causes the loss of one’s mind, and, therefore, common sense. Dunn moves to prevent this total loss of self from occurring in society.

Throughout the text, the Arturan cult provides an avenue for Dunn to argue, quite

convincingly, for social change. Her undeniable efforts do not go unnoticed, and her complete vehemence allows the reader to ponder and question whether Arty would, or if he does already, allow others power over him. At the same time, Dunn questions whether humans really have a choice over their own lives or if they are simply an extension of their culture, steadily retooled based on the pleasure and pressure of those around them? According to Dunn, this conclusion that individual choice is sacrificed for the majority's standards must not prove true. Her belief states that the will and ability to choose must always trump the society's attitudes, institutions, and conventions designed to limit one's own individuality. People must not allow themselves to be

persuaded to act as Oly and the faithful did: "for [them] there was only Arty" (270). Though often easier philosophized than applied to life, one must strive to discover oneself as being a part of society but not consumed by it, functioning within the world but not succumbing to the pressures induced by it. The line is quite thin, but the human race is capable.

Works Cited

Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1983. Print.