Speech Sounds

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OCTAVIA BUTLER

Octavia Butler was born in Pasadena in 1947. After her father died, Butler was raised by her mother, a housemaid, and her grandmother. She learned about racial discrimination by observing how they were mistreated by their white employers. Butler spent much of her childhood reading and writing, going on to attend Pasadena City College, various UCLA extension courses, and finally the prestigious Clarion Workshop for science-fiction writing. She became the first science-fiction writer to be awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, also winning Nebula and Hugo awards for her stories. In her writing, Butler wanted to critique sexism, racism, and classism in society. She wrote protagonists who defied these norms, using their differences as sources of power, rather than weakness. She also used the science-fiction genre to reimagine class and ethnicity and to explore alternative systems of power. Butler liked writing survival stories, imagining how moments of victory for the already disenfranchised could lead to societal change. Later in life, she struggled with depression and writer's block. Butler died of a stroke at 58 in her Washington home.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written in 1983, "Speech Sounds" appeared near the end of the Cold War. This was a period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union in which many people across the globe feared that a nuclear war would break out between the feuding superpowers and cause widespread devastation. Living in an era in which catastrophic violence felt imminent led to a rise in post-apocalyptic fiction—many writers, Butler included, imagined dystopian near-future scenarios in which human society was ruined at the hands of technology or some other cause. "Speech Sounds" itself tells the story of a post-pandemic society (perhaps a natural pandemic, perhaps a product of biological warfare). Butler's preoccupation with a virus laying waste to society may have been informed by some of the major pandemics of the 20th century, including the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, which killed millions of people and infected a substantial portion of the global population. It's also possible that Butler was thinking of the nascent AIDS epidemic when she wrote this story. 1983 was the year in which the medical community began to understand the nature and scope of AIDS, so it's possible that Butler was attuned to this growing calamity.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a child, Octavia Butler was introduced to classic science fiction through the stories of John Brunner, Zenna Henderson, and Theodore Sturgeon, but she soon broke ranks with this manner of science fiction and distinguished herself by situating female characters and people of color as protagonists. Butler is often regarded as the mother of Afro-futurism, a movement that merges celebration of technology with African traditions, envisioning what technologically-advanced future African societies might look like. Many writers and creators have followed in Butler's footsteps, particularly black female authors. Nnedi Okorafor, author of the *Binti* series; N.K. Jemisin, author of fantasy novels such as *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Fifth Season*; and Nisi Shawl, author of the award-winning *Filter House*, all cite Butler as a powerful influence on their own successful work. Butler's outsized influence in the birth of Afro-futurism has had an effect on mainstream commercial media, as well. Marvel's *Black Panther* comics and the ensuing blockbuster film were made in the genre of Afro-futurism, as is Jay-Z's "Family Feud" video. The concern with pandemics evident in "Speech Sounds" can also be found in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (in which a virus creates a zombie-ridden post-apocalyptic society), and in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793*, a young adult book that tells the story of the yellow fever epidemic in the early American republic. Finally, another book that explores the loss of human speech is *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir, which he dictated by blinking his eyelid after a stroke left him paralyzed and without the ability to speak.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Speech Sounds
- **When Written:** 1983
- **Where Written:** Pasadena, CA
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Post-modernism
- **Genre:** Science fiction, speculative fiction, Afrofuturism
- **Setting:** Between Los Angeles and Pasadena (California) in an imagined future, sometime in the 1980s
- **Climax:** Rye discovers two young children who are able to speak
- **Antagonist:** While the story has no single antagonist, Rye often finds herself struggling against people who have been most impaired by the illness. The illness itself could also be considered the story's antagonist.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Prizewinner. In 1984, "Speech Sounds" won Octavia Butler her

first Hugo Award for Best Short Story. This award helped her rise to prominence as a writer.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Speech Sounds" takes place in the aftermath of a global pandemic that left most of its survivors without the ability to speak, read, or write. A woman named Rye is traveling through Los Angeles by bus when a fight breaks out between passengers. Rye observes the violence and tries to stay out of its way, exiting the bus when the driver slams on the brakes to disrupt the fight. She waits on the sidewalk and plans to get back on board once the fight has ended, noting that public transportation has become rare and unreliable.

Moments later, a man arrives in a car, which is unusual, since cars are scarce due to a shortage of fuel and capable mechanics. The man communicates with Rye through gestures, discussing the fight on the bus. She is surprised to see him wearing a police uniform, since governments and institutions have all dissolved. The man throws a gas bomb onto the bus to disrupt the fight, forcing all of the passengers out onto the sidewalk. The bus driver and some of the passengers gesture angrily at the man, but he stands back and refuses to engage—behavior that Rye notes is typical of those less affected by the disease. Through more hand gestures, the man invites her to leave with him, and Rye considers her loneliness: she has lost all her immediate family to the illness, leaving her so alone and sad that she's near suicide. She decides to leave with the man.

Once in the car, the man hands Rye a black rock on a necklace to introduce himself. She perceives this as an indication that his name is Obsidian. She introduces herself with a pin shaped like wheat. Obsidian pulls out a map to ask Rye where she is going, and he reveals that he is able to read and write, a dangerous secret to share in a world marked by jealousy and rage towards less impaired people. Overcoming a brief moment of envy and fury, Rye confides in Obsidian that she is still able to speak and understand spoken language. They have sex and Rye finds solace in their closeness. She asks Obsidian to come home with her and he agrees, so they begin driving back towards Los Angeles.

Just as Rye is beginning to settle in for the drive, Obsidian slams on the brakes. A woman runs across the street in front of them, followed by a man with a knife. Obsidian jumps out of the car to intervene and Rye follows. The woman and the man stab each other, both collapsing. Rye attempts to help the woman, but he realizes she is dead. As Obsidian bends over to see if the man has died, the man grabs the gun from Obsidian's holster and shoots Obsidian in the head. Rye shoots the man and is left with the three corpses.

As Rye considers what to do with the bodies and mourns the sudden loss of Obsidian, two children run out into the street towards the woman's corpse, whom Rye realizes must have been their mother. Rye begins to walk away from them before remembering that she should bury Obsidian. She decides to bury the woman as well. As she grabs her corpse, one of the children shouts out in protest and the other tells the first to be quiet. Realizing the children can speak, Rye is hopeful that the disease has run its course. She decides to take them home with her to protect and teach them. She introduces herself to them, telling them that they do not have to be afraid of her. Suddenly, Rye feels that she has a reason to live, and she puts them in the car to bring them home.

CHARACTERS

Valerie Rye – Rye, the protagonist of "Speech Sounds, is a woman living in dystopian Los Angeles in the wake of a global pandemic that has left most of its survivors unable to use language. Three years ago, the pandemic killed Rye's husband and children and left Rye—who was a teacher and writer—without the ability to read or write. While (somewhat unusually) Rye can still speak, the pandemic has robbed her of everything she cares about (her family and her passion for reading and writing), leaving her hopeless, alone, and contemplating suicide. While taking a bus to find surviving relatives, however, she meets a man (Obsidian) who steps in to defuse a fight between passengers. Having learned to expect violence and cruelty from those most impaired by the disease, she is hesitant to trust strangers, but since Obsidian appears calm and relatively unimpaired, she gets in his car when he invites her. The two quickly establish trust and mutual affection, and they ultimately have sex and agree to live together. Rye's feelings for Obsidian reveal how desperate she is for genuine connection and how isolated she has felt since the pandemic—as soon as they establish their partnership, Rye no longer feels at risk of suicide. Tragically, though, Obsidian dies immediately afterwards when he pulls the car over to try to break up a fight between two parents (who also die). Sick with grief, Rye almost leaves the dead couple's young children, but she stops when she realizes that they can speak. The notion that language might be returning after the pandemic gives Rye hope, and she takes the children with her, planning to teach them language and protect them, feeling that she finally has a reason to live.

Obsidian – A former Los Angeles police officer who has retained his ability to read and write, Obsidian is Rye's companion and lover for much of the story. Obsidian is a kind and peaceful "protector" who is devoted to helping others and maintaining some semblance of public order, even though society and institutions have broken down in the wake of the illness. He is young, bearded, handsome, and relatively unimpaired—a rarity among men, whom the illness affected

more than women. Obsidian meets Rye when he breaks up a fight on a bus she is riding; he keeps the peace with a gas bomb and refuses to engage when the bus driver tries to intimidate him. Impressed that Obsidian seems peaceful and unimpaired, Rye accepts his offer to ride in his car instead of continuing on the bus. Obsidian puts Rye at ease by following her directions and behaving respectfully towards her. When he asks (through gesture) if she would like to have sex, she accepts, and afterwards the two decide to become a couple. As they drive back to Rye's home, where they plan to live together, they witness a man with a knife chasing a woman across the street. Obsidian pulls over to help, but the man murders the woman and kills Obsidian with Obsidian's own **gun**. Afterwards, Rye reflects that—as a cop—Obsidian should have known how lethal domestic violence can be, although she recognizes that the knowledge wouldn't have kept him from helping someone in need.

The Bus Driver – The bus driver is the owner and driver of the bus that Rye takes towards Pasadena. He is a touchy and heavily-impaired man who supports his family by driving people around Los Angeles, asking for various practical items as fares. After the bus driver responds to a fight among passengers by pulling over, Obsidian throws a gas bomb onto the bus to try to quiet the fight. Despite the fact that this has saved the inside of his bus from ruin, the bus driver reacts with fury, threatening Obsidian with gestures and shouting nonsense words. It's Obsidian's peaceful and rational reaction to this that makes Rye begin to understand that he is safe.

The Children – At the end of the story, Rye adopts two children—a toddler boy and girl—whose parents are dead and who are miraculously able to speak. Initially, when Rye sees these children, she wants to leave them to fend for themselves, but she realizes that she wouldn't be able to live with that decision. Then, by accident, she learns that they can speak. This makes Rye wonder if perhaps the illness has run its course, and she vows to protect and teach these children. She brings them home with her, and the story implies that this has given Rye a reason to live.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MISCOMMUNICATION AND VIOLENCE

In the world of "Speech Sounds," a mysterious illness has spread around the globe and left most of its survivors unable to speak, read, write, or understand spoken language. Because of this, society has broken down: the government and police no longer exist, armed bandits roam the streets sowing chaos, and when communicating by gesture fails—as it often does—violence erupts between civilians. By narrating a day in the life of Rye, a resident of dystopian Los Angeles who is trying to travel to Pasadena, Octavia Butler shows how the loss of language leads inevitably to chaos and violence.

Butler opens the story by directly linking miscommunication with violence. As Rye takes the bus towards Pasadena, she watches two men "grunting and gesturing at each other," on the brink of physical violence—they're engaged in "a disagreement of some kind, or, more likely, a misunderstanding." As this description makes clear, these men aren't about to fight because they actually disagree or because their interests are at odds—instead, they're going to fight simply because they're failing to communicate. Showing how common this is, Rye correctly predicts how this altercation will go: that they'll fight as soon as something happens that breaks their "limited ability to communicate," such as one of their "mock punches" accidentally making contact. Rye is more or less right: the bus hits a pothole and one man is thrown into the other, who interprets this as aggression rather than seeing it as an accident. Without a way to communicate, neither man can de-escalate the fight or clear up what actually happened. This miscommunication leads to a larger brawl between other passengers on the bus, which disrupts their journey. Rye's reaction suggests that this is a regular occurrence: as soon as the driver hits the brakes, she exits the bus, wanting to duck behind a tree trunk in case the men start shooting. Clearly, this is something she's experienced before; without language, even the most normal, straightforward activities—like riding the bus—have become fraught with danger.

In addition to provoking violence between strangers, loss of language triggers widespread despair that can make people violent towards themselves and the people they love. Towards the end of the story, Butler reveals the purpose of Rye's trip to Pasadena: she's leaving her home to keep herself from suicide. Before the illness, Rye was a historian, writer, and lover of books who was married with children. But the pandemic took everything she most valued: she lost her ability to read and write, her whole family died, and—in a final twist of the knife—the illness "cut even the living off from one another" by ending their ability to communicate, thereby making survivors unable to collectively grieve. Loss of language has taken from Rye what gave her life meaning, and without language, she is on the brink of ending her own life.

In addition to making her contemplate violence against herself, Rye's inability to read or write provokes a jealousy that stirs violent impulses towards others. When Rye learns that Obsidian—a stranger who becomes her ally and lover—can still read and write, she feels "sick to her stomach with hatred,

frustration, and jealousy." In the midst of these emotions, she notes that, "only a few inches from her hand was a loaded **gun**." While Rye does not shoot Obsidian out of jealousy, she speculates that this kind of jealousy does ultimately lead to his death. At the end of the story, they witness a man kill a woman, and when Obsidian tries to intervene, the man kills him, too. Once Rye learns that the dead woman's children can talk, she speculates that the woman could talk, too, and she guesses that the man killed her because he was jealous that she still had language. Rye believes that "the passions that must have driven him" were "anger, frustration, hopelessness, insane jealousy"—the same emotions that made her want to kill Obsidian earlier. Furthermore, she shows how widespread this kind of jealous violence is when she thinks that this man is just one of many people who are "willing to destroy what they could not have." This suggests that they live in a world of widespread despair over the loss of language, which has robbed people of something universally precious.

Throughout the story, Rye is clear-eyed about the connection between loss of language and escalating violence: she sees how simple miscommunication, jealousy, and personal anguish are all, in the wake of the illness, routinely fatal. This leads her to bigger conclusions about the future of humanity: she pities the children growing up in this world, burning books as fuel, running through the streets and "hooting like chimpanzees." Rye says that these children have "no future. They were now all they would ever be." Losing language, she believes, has robbed people of their humanity—their ability to develop meaningful lives and relationships—leaving them, essentially, violent animals. And while the story ends with some hope for the future, that hope rests entirely on the return of language: the young children that Rye rescues can speak, which makes her wonder if the illness is over, or, at the very least, whether she can imagine a future where she isn't alone. Despite this cautiously optimistic ending, it's important to remember that this optimism rests on language. If it weren't for the possibility of language returning, Butler suggests that the world would continue to be a dismal place of chaos, despair, and relentless violence.

LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION, AND PEACE

After a global illness robs most people of the ability to use language, the world is left in chaos: institutions have collapsed, minor miscommunications spiral into brawls, and people feel isolated and vulnerable, unable to connect to others. Everyone seems on edge and ready to use violence at the smallest sign of danger. However, some of the story's characters are notably less violent: those who have maintained some language ability. Rye can still speak and understand spoken language, while Obsidian can read and write; significantly, these two characters are the story's peacemakers, associated with cooperation and order in the face of chaotic violence. By associating peace with language ability and showing how Rye and Obsidian communicate and develop a partnership, Butler suggests that language is the foundation of peace and social order.

Throughout the story, Butler shows how successful communication—verbal and nonverbal—keeps people safe. For example, carrying a **gun** helps keep Obsidian safe, not because of its firepower but because of what its presence communicates to others. Butler demonstrates this when the bus driver becomes physically aggressive with Obsidian, but then backs away. Obsidian's gun being on "constant display" sent a clear message to the driver that Obsidian is dangerous, which (ironically) helped to keep the peace. Butler also associates successful communication with safety when Rye and Obsidian are first driving in his car. The two are strangers, and Rye suspects that Obsidian might be dangerous until she gestures to him to turn left and he follows her instruction. Rye reflects that if Obsidian is willing to listen to her, then the situation seems safe. In other words, the mere fact that they're able to communicate indicates that they're in a safe situation and they can begin to trust one another.

Perhaps most poignantly, communication promotes peace and safety because human connection helps fight despair. Without language, people are hopelessly isolated from one another, which leads Rye to contemplate suicide. However, in the moment when she holds up two entwined fingers and Obsidian grabs them—a gesture that affirms their intent to be in a relationship—Rye no longer feels that she needs to go to Pasadena, a trip she was making to keep herself from suicide. Communicating with Obsidian, then, seems to have given her a hope and happiness that could save her life.

In addition to communication leading to safety, Butler links language ability—even when characters aren't actively using it—to peace. This is clearest after the fight on the bus, when Obsidian refuses to react to the driver (who has no language ability) shouting wordlessly and making violent gestures towards him. As Rye watches this interaction, she reflects that "the least impaired people tended to do this—stand back unless they were physically threatened and let those with less control scream and jump around." In this moment, Butler makes clear that people without language are more likely to be violent and erratic, while those with some language capacity (the "least impaired") are more inclined towards peace. To make this connection between peace and language stronger, Butler notes that Obsidian is wearing an LAPD badge, even though the police department is long defunct. This emphasizes Obsidian's commitment to order in the face of the chaos that surrounds him. While these examples are relatively passive, Obsidian's connection to peace is also apparent in how he acts. For example, he breaks up the fight on the bus by releasing tear gas and then helping passengers get outside. Rye was initially

worried that the fight would end in shooting, so it's reasonable to infer that Obsidian's intervention might have saved lives.

For most of the story, Butler shows how language and communication help fight the violence, chaos, and despair of this dystopian world—but she generally shows language losing the battle. After all, practically nobody has language ability, and the moments of successful communication are few compared to the many instances of devastating disorder and violence. Within this dynamic, language and communication can provide individual comfort and can defuse some tense situations, but disorder seems to be the more powerful force. This perhaps changes at the end of the story, though, when Rye finds two children who can speak. These children were born after the outbreak, which suggests that maybe the disease has receded—maybe the next generation's language ability will be intact. Neither Butler nor Rye addresses this outright, but the story's ending implies a hope that the world might return to peace and order: if language is, in fact, returning, then peaceful society might be restored.

SELF-PRESERVATION, PROTECTION, AND PARTNERSHIP

After losing all of her immediate family to a mysterious illness, Rye is left alone in a world of violence and chaos. From the beginning of the story, she leads an isolated existence, unable to communicate with those around her. Though she spends all of her time fighting for her life, she finds little value in it, plagued by a sense of purposelessness and loneliness. However, Rye finds solace in her relationships with Obsidian and the children she meets at the end of the story. Butler contrasts isolation and despondency with the hope found in partnerships, suggesting that the best way to protect oneself is to live for and alongside others.

Throughout the story, it's clear that isolation makes Rye vulnerable and miserable, which compromises her safety. This is immediately apparent when she describes taking a dangerous journey from Los Angeles to Pasadena simply because she's lonely and wants to see if she has surviving relatives. Her loneliness, in other words, makes her take a wild risk in traveling by bus alongside violent strangers towards relatives who might not even be alive. However, Rye's isolation would still be a danger if she remained at home. The foremost risk is suicide, which Rye admits that she has come close to doing because she finds nothing in her lonely life worth living for. Furthermore, since she has no one to protect her from the violence all around her, being alone at home leaves her vulnerable to the whims and predations of dangerous people, such as her sinister neighbor who seems to want to abduct her, or the men on the sidewalk who gesture crudely at her, making her realize that if one of them raped her, the others would be more likely to watch than intervene. Without any family or friends, Rye is all alone in combating the dangers of the world.

Rye's partnership with Obsidian, however, alleviates this isolation, making Rye safer and more emotionally fulfilled. After Rye and Obsidian have sex, she is eager to do it again, realizing that "he could give her forgetfulness and pleasure. Until now, nothing had been able to do that." Obsidian is able to distract Rye from the tragedy around her, helping her to forget, at least for a moment, all the loved ones she has lost. This allows her to feel comfort and joy again for the first time since the illness, and she immediately feels that she no longer wants to die. Being with Obsidian also means that she has a measure of protection from others. Throughout the story, Rye has never once relaxed; she is constantly on alert for imminent danger, remaining skeptical of everyone around her. Once she and Obsidian establish a partnership, though, she allows him to drive while she leans back in her seat and rests her head on his shoulder, showing that she no longer feels afraid of imminent danger. Being with Obsidian finally gives her the "comfort and security" she was unable to achieve on her own.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GUNS

In "Speech Sounds," guns represent the thin line between chaos and order. Knowing that communication is difficult and violent outbursts are common, Rye always carries a gun on her, hoping that simply displaying a weapon will discourage others from messing with her. The gun, in other words, is itself a form of nonverbal communication, sending others a message that Rye is dangerous. Paradoxically, then, the gun keeps the peace by promising violence, showing how order and chaos, as well as peace and violence, are intricately linked. Even though displaying a gun helps both Rye and Obsidian (during the incident with the bus driver) maintain peace, Octavia Butler still insists throughout the story that guns are dangerous and that the peace one establishes by carrying one can easily be turned on its head. For instance, when Rye learns that Obsidian can read, she is suddenly filled with envy and becomes aware of the fact that her gun is nearby, suggesting that she has the impulse to harm or kill him. Although she doesn't decide to use it, the gun reveals the fragility of the peace they have established: in a second, she could turn their partnership and connection into chaos. Similarly, Rye's loaded gun always gives her the option of taking her own life, which she implies several times that she's been close to doing. Finally, at the end of the story, Butler shows Obsidian's gun—which has so far helped keep peace—creating unbearable violence. When Obsidian tries to break up a fight

between a man and a woman on the street, the man grabs Obsidian's gun from its holster and fatally shoots him. Throughout the story, displaying a gun has successfully deterred violence, but here it does the opposite: the man sees in Obsidian's weapon not a warning, but an opportunity, and he uses it to end Obsidian's life. In this way, Butler illustrates how fragile peace and order are. Because peace and order are interlinked with violence and chaos, they can disappear at any moment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Seven Stories edition of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* published in 1996.

Speech Sounds Quotes

Two young men were involved in a disagreement of some kind, or, more likely, a misunderstanding.

Related Characters: Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story, when Rye is on the bus to Pasadena and she senses that a fight is about to break out between two passengers. Here, she notes at first that these men seem to be involved in a disagreement, but then she corrects herself—it's probably not a disagreement, but rather a misunderstanding. The difference between a disagreement and a misunderstanding is a subtle but important one that illuminates a fundamental dynamic of the story.

A disagreement—unlike a misunderstanding—implies that two people have genuinely different opinions or interests. In other words, when people disagree, they are truly at odds over something. A misunderstanding, however, implies that two people do not necessarily have a genuine disagreement—instead, they are just communicating their positions unsuccessfully. The implication of a misunderstanding is that, if they were to communicate successfully, the underlying issue would be resolved. The fact that these men seem unable to resolve their misunderstanding by communicating is one of the story's first clues that something in this world is deeply amiss, and it involves an inability to use language.

The fight that inevitably does break out shows the connection, throughout the story, between violence and the loss of language. These men had no real reason to fight—they were misunderstanding each other, not disagreeing—but without a way to resolve the misunderstanding, they come to blows, which ruins the bus trip for a whole group of passengers.

She watched the two carefully, knowing the fight would begin when someone's nerve broke or someone's hand slipped or someone came to the end of his limited ability to communicate. These things could happen anytime.

Related Characters: Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rye is on the bus to Pasadena watching two young men who seem to be itching to fight. Rye's ability to correctly predict the fight that is about to start shows how commonplace this kind of violence is, even in such normal day-to-day activities as riding the bus. It seems that she has witnessed altercations like this countless times before, so she can predict exactly how this situation will turn out. This shows just how treacherous and violent the post-illness world has become.

Furthermore, this passage shows the connection between violence and the inability to communicate. Rye previously said that these men are likely about to fight because they are having a "miscommunication" that, due to their limited language abilities, they are unable to resolve peacefully. Here, Rye reiterates that physical violence will likely ensue once they come "to the end of [their] limited ability to communicate." This explicitly links the moment in which communication totally breaks down to the outbreak of violence, showing how communication keeps the peace, while miscommunication leads directly to violence.

The bearded man stood still, made no sound, refused to respond to clearly obscene gestures. The least impaired people tended to do this—stand back unless they were physically threatened and let those with less control scream and jump around. It was as though they felt it beneath them to be as touchy as the less comprehending.

Related Characters: Obsidian, Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Obsidian (the bearded man) has just gas bombed the bus to break up a fight, and the furious bus driver is threatening him. This moment is significant because it's the story's first explicit explanation of the link between impairment and violence; people with less language ability (like the bus driver) tend to be more violent and menacing, while those who have retained some language (the "least impaired people," like Rye and Obsidian) tend to be more rational, peaceful, and nonreactive. This once again links language and the ability to communicate with peace and nonviolence, while linking the inability to communicate with violence and irrationality—but here the connection seems more physiological than behavioral. In other words, before this moment, miscommunication seemed to cause violence (like the fight on the bus), but here it seems that an effect of the disease has also been to make people without language more inherently violent. So this makes people without language doubly prone to violence: they are inherently more "touchy" (easily angered), and in addition, they have no language ability with which to de-escalate tense situations.

This moment also suggests to readers some important aspects of Obsidian's character. First of all, it's clear that he's less impaired than most people in this dystopian world, which immediately indicates that he has some language ability and that he is more peaceful. Second, his behavior—both gas bombing the bus to break up the fight and refusing to engage with the threatening bus driver—shows that he has control of himself and that he believes in order and nonviolence. Because Rye is seeing all of this firsthand, she can begin to trust this man.

> As a result, she never went unarmed. And in this world where the only likely common language was body language, being armed was often enough. She had rarely had to draw her gun or even display it

Related Characters: Obsidian, Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as Rye reflects on her past brushes with violence—she implies that she has come close to being hurt by people impaired by the illness, which is why she carries a gun. This is a significant quote because it introduces the symbolism of guns. Without the ability to use language to de-escalate tense situations, violence has become much more common in this society, and all communication must happen via body language—either posture or gesture. Rye carries a gun, then, not simply to have access to a weapon; she primarily carries it without the intention of using it, just to send a message to others that they should not mess with her. In this way, carrying a gun is a form of communication meant to keep the peace, rather than an instrument of violence (although Rye suggests that she would be willing to use the gun violently if she did have to protect herself).

It's also notable that Rye conceals her gun and she says that she rarely has to display it—this implies that simply knowing that she has the gun makes her carry herself in a more confident way, which discourages others from threatening her. So what's keeping her safe is not always people seeing her gun and backing off—instead, it's people backing off because Rye is confident and assertive, a posture she adopts because she herself knows that she has a gun to keep her safe. This shows how effective body language is at sending messages—even if those messages are not always subtle or successfully received, carrying a gun has kept Rye safe for three years.

> The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another. As it swept over the country, people hardly had time to lay blame on the Soviets (though they were falling silent along with the rest of the world), on a new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution... The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and stroke-like in some of its effects. But it was highly specific.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

This is the story's first clear explanation of what has caused the breakdown of language and order that plagues this dystopian society. Throughout the story, Rye refers to what happened as an "illness," suggesting that there was a global

pandemic of a disease that cripples language ability. However, in this passage, Rye admits that it's not even totally clear what happened; it might have been a side-effect of pollution, or some odd nuclear event, or even "divine retribution"—nobody really knows. While it does seem (based on Rye's constant reference to illness and her comparison to the effects of a stroke) that a virus is the most likely cause, perhaps society was so debilitated by whatever happened that scientists and governments (which collapsed) were never able to pinpoint the source.

This passage is also the story's only reference to global events of the 1980s when "Speech Sounds" was published. The notion of laying blame on the Soviets refers to the Cold War, which was happening at the time. This was a decades-long conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union (and other proxy nations) in which the two superpowers stockpiled more and more weapons, including an amount of nuclear weapons that could destroy the whole globe many times over. In this time, apocalyptic fears ran high, and it led to an increase in dystopian science fiction (of which "Speech Sounds" is an example).

❝ Obsidian lifted her hand and looked under it, then folded the map and put it back on the dashboard. He could read, she realized belatedly. He could probably write, too. Abruptly, she hated him—deep, bitter hatred. What did literacy mean to him—a grown man who played cops and robbers? But he was literate and she was not. She never would be. She felt sick to her stomach with hatred, frustration, and jealousy. And only a few inches from her hand was a loaded gun.

Related Characters: Obsidian, Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When Obsidian pulls out a map to ask directions, Rye realizes that he can still read, while she lost the ability to do so during the illness. This causes a violent fury in her that is shocking—her reaction seems much more like the anger of an impaired, violent person than a rational, relatively unimpaired person like Rye (who has, throughout the story, avoided conflict and stayed calm). That this is the only thing in the whole story that rouses her fury shows how powerfully jealous she is of Obsidian's ability to read, which indicates how much this means to her.

It's also worth noting that, in her anger, Rye mocks Obsidian by calling him a "grown man who played cops and robbers." What she means is that Obsidian is still wearing his LAPD uniform, even though there has been no law and no police for years. Nonetheless, he seems to still be patrolling around in his car, looking for ways to bring order to society (as shown when he sees the fight on the bus, pulls over, and interrupts it with a gas bomb). Rye has previously respected his kindness and his peaceful nature, but here she mocks him as playing a child's game rather than acknowledging reality. It's reasonable to assume that she doesn't entirely mean this—she's just having a moment of jealousy—especially since, at the end of the story, she realizes that he probably wears his uniform and continues to help the public in order to feel like he has a reason to live.

Given that Rye likes Obsidian so much and is generally able to empathize with him, it's truly surprising that merely learning that he can read makes her feel a fury in which she is tempted to use her gun. Her gun is generally meant to keep peace—she wants to send a message to others not to mess with her—but here, having access to the gun in a time of impulsive fury shows that the gun gives her an opportunity to be violent, therefore illustrating how intimately and dangerously connected peace and violence are.

❝ She nodded and watched his milder envy come and go. Now both had admitted what it was not safe to admit, and there had been no violence. He tapped his mouth and forehead and shook his head. He did not speak or comprehend spoken language. The illness had played with them, taking away, she suspected, what each valued most.

Related Characters: Obsidian, Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

After Rye learned that Obsidian can still read, she experienced a wave of near-violent jealousy; here, after learning that Rye can still speak, Obsidian experiences a milder wave of jealousy. Throughout the story, Rye indicates that this jealousy is common; people who are more impaired are often violent towards the less impaired either out of jealousy or because they believe that the less impaired see

themselves as superior. Regardless, revealing one's lack of impairment is something that is clearly often met with violence, so it's something of an achievement that Rye and Obsidian both reveal their status to one another and—despite intense feelings—manage to stay peaceful. This indicates that they can trust one another with their vulnerability, an essential step in their becoming a couple.

This passage also shows something profound that they have in common; they both lost the facility with language that they most value: Rye (who was a writer and professor) loved to read and write, while Obsidian (a cop) loved to speak with others. At the end of the story, when Rye adopts the children who can mysteriously speak, she will come to see the value in her ability to speak; rather than remaining isolated, her ability to speak will enable her to protect and nurture others like Obsidian did, a form of fulfillment that takes the place of the reading and writing that Rye lost.

❝ She had told herself that the children growing up now were to be pitied. They would run through the downtown canyons with no real memory of what the buildings had been or even how they had come to be. Today's children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be.

Related Characters: Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rye has been remembering her three children who died in the illness. To comfort herself, she thinks about how children now deserve pity, implying that she is trying to convince herself that it's better that her own children didn't survive, since they don't have to suffer in this dystopian world. While some of Rye's negativity is likely meant to make herself feel better, some of her observations are probably true. Children who grew up without language certainly wouldn't value knowledge and find the joy in language that Rye herself did, and without governments, schools, laws, or the ability to communicate, there is little order left to structure their lives. For that reason, children probably don't have much reason to believe that the future will hold anything different than the present—they have nothing to work for and no hope that things will improve. For that reason, Rye thinks that children are "all they would ever be."

However, at the end of the story when Rye adopts the two children who can speak, she seems to change her mind about everything she says here. Knowing that children may regain their facility with language allows her to imagine the future again. It's significant that merely losing language has such an impact on society, personal morale, and even a people's ability to imagine the future. It emphasizes how essential language is to human life.

❝ Rye glanced at the dead murderer. To her shame, she thought she could understand some of the passions that must have driven him, whoever he was. Anger, frustration, hopelessness, insane jealousy... how many more of him were there—people willing to destroy what they could not have?

Related Characters: Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rye has just witnessed a man stab a woman, and she speculates that his jealousy of her ability to speak drove him to a murderous rage. This parallels Rye's earlier claim that she carries a gun because she has had too many close calls in which impaired people—after learning that she is less impaired—became violent with her. And, of course, this moment also recalls when Rye found out that Obsidian can read; Rye's intense jealousy made her consider murdering him for a moment, which shows how widespread this jealous rage is. Throughout this society, impaired people miss language so much that they lose control of themselves when confronted with others who still have language ability. The notion of people being "willing to destroy what they could not have" (or kill other people to ruin their language ability) is the inverse of what Obsidian has done with his life, which is to try to keep peace and help others. Here, Rye sees in herself the impulse towards jealous rage and knows that she could be like this murderous man. At the story's close, however, she will push aside these feelings and make a different choice, which shows that this kind of horrible emotion can and should be contained.

Obsidian had been the protector, had chosen that role for who knew what reason. Perhaps putting on an obsolete uniform and patrolling the empty streets had been what he did instead of putting a gun into his mouth. And now that there was something worth protecting, he was gone.

Related Characters: Obsidian, Valerie Rye

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which comes near the end of the story, is Rye's epiphany about why Obsidian continued to dress and behave like a police officer long after the police shut down. Throughout the story, Rye has been perplexed by this choice of Obsidian's (even mocking him at one point for playing cops and robbers), but in this climactic moment, Rye begins to understand. By patrolling and wearing his uniform, Obsidian chose to continue living his life for others, even after society broke down, whereas Rye spent her life after the virus living only for herself—her family was dead, so she spent her days alone and trying to keep herself alive. However, this was not enough for Rye; as she acknowledges earlier in the story, living by herself and for herself led her to become suicidal, which means that the way she was living was becoming dangerous. When Rye realizes that living for others gives people a reason to live, however, she understands that Obsidian's choice to be a police officer was as much for himself as for others—it kept him safe by giving him purpose. It's in this context that Rye reimagines her future; adopting the two orphaned children will give her life meaning because she will become their protector, just as Obsidian designated himself the protector of society. In this way, Rye will be able to keep on living, even without Obsidian.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SPEECH SOUNDS

Rye senses trouble brewing on board the bus to Pasadena. She'd expected this, which is why she waited to travel until she was too lonely and desperate to stay at home. In order to find her relatives who might still be alive, Rye has to travel twenty miles, which will likely take a full day.

From the reference to Pasadena, readers can intuit that the story takes place in the Los Angeles region. However, it's immediately clear that something is amiss, since traveling twenty miles—which should take under an hour on a bus—will likely take Rye a full day. Between that and the reference to finding relatives who might be alive, readers can sense that something is seriously wrong.

The trouble on the bus stems from a "disagreement [...] or, more likely, a misunderstanding" between two men. As the bus careens over rough road, the men stand in the aisle gesturing aggressively to each other without making physical contact. Warily, Rye watches them, knowing that a fight will begin as soon as one of them slips or comes "to the end of his limited ability to communicate." The bus lurches and one man falls into the other, which provokes the fight. As passengers move out of the way, another fight starts, likely because someone "inadvertently touched" someone else.

It's noteworthy that these men are fighting not because they have a legitimate disagreement, but rather because they misunderstand each other. Simple communication should be able to clear this up, but they seem unable to speak, communicating via crude gestures instead. This passage makes clear that there has been a widespread loss of language and communication ability, and that—without language—simple misunderstandings frequently break down into physical fights.

Rye braces for the bus driver to hit the brakes, which he does, throwing the fighting men to the ground. As soon as the bus stops, Rye exits through the back door alongside a few other passengers. Buses have become "rare and irregular," so when they come, people will often ride them regardless of what happens during the trip. Planning to get back on the bus when the fight dies down, Rye moves to shelter behind a tree trunk in case there's shooting.

That Rye knows exactly what will happen in this scenario (the driver will hit the brakes and shooting might begin) shows that fights on the bus are commonplace. This reality is so dystopian that the simple act of taking the bus twenty miles has become a dangerous and volatile situation. Furthermore, busses themselves aren't running regularly, which shows that there has been a significant breakdown in public order and services.

A beat-up car pulls up to the bus, which is unusual. Cars are rare now, due to a shortage of both fuel and "relatively unimpaired mechanics," and cars are also dangerous, since drivers sometimes use them as weapons. For this reason, Rye is wary when the man driving gestures for her to come over to him. She watches this big, bearded young man to see how he behaves, remaining aware of the **gun** inside her jacket.

Rye has learned to distrust everyone, since even the most banal things—bus rides, cars, other people—can be sources of danger. The notion that unimpaired mechanics are scarce adds to the sense that something has affected people's ability to speak and think with disastrous consequences for society. This is the first mention of Rye's gun, and simply knowing that it is there seems to make her feel safe.

When the man points towards the bus, Rye notices that he is left-handed, which is more interesting to her than the question he seems to be asking. Left-handed people are generally "less impaired"—rational and calm, rather than angry and violent. Gesturing with her left hand, Rye indicates that there's fighting on the bus. The man takes off his coat, revealing a Los Angeles police uniform, and Rye recoils; the LAPD doesn't exist anymore. There is no more government or large institutions, just "neighborhood patrols and armed individuals."

Rye becomes curious about this man only when she realizes that he might be less impaired than others. This isn't simple bigotry against those who are more impaired; as this passage reveals, people who have been less affected by the illness are actually safer because they are calmer and more rational. This immediately links having language ability (which is typically what Butler means when she says "less impaired") with being peaceful and safe. However, Rye loses her trust a little bit when she sees that he's a cop. It's not that she's categorically afraid of police—it's that police don't exist *anymore, so his choice to wear a uniform is inexplicable to her. In this dangerous society, anything inexplicable can be threatening.*

With something in his hand, the man walks to the bus and gestures for Rye to follow. Curious if he can stop the fighting, she obeys. He throws the object in his hand onto the bus, and people start fumbling out the door, fleeing what was apparently a gas bomb. Rye helps the passengers out the back door, while the man helps others out the front.

While throwing a gas bomb into a bus full of people is a somewhat violent thing to do, the man is actually trying to keep the peace. A fight is happening on the bus and Rye previously expressed her fear that it would turn into shooting, so by temporarily impairing all the passengers with gas, this man has stopped the violence from escalating. It's even clearer that throwing the bomb was meant to be kind when the man starts helping struggling passengers get off the bus.

When the man helps the bus driver out, the driver appears ready to fight, but the man won't engage. While the driver yells incomprehensibly and makes aggressive gestures, the man simply steps back and stays silent. This behavior is typical of the "least impaired people," Rye reflects. It's almost like it's "beneath them" to be as quick to anger as the "less comprehending." Of course, more impaired people often interpret this as a sense of "superiority," which often leads to violence—even death. Rye has experienced this herself, which is why she carries a **gun**. Now, the "only likely common language [is] body language," so merely being armed can prevent violence, even without drawing the weapon.

In the man's peaceful refusal to engage the bus driver's threats, Rye sees more evidence that he isn't very impaired. Impaired people tend to turn quickly to violence and to escalate tensions, whereas people who are more "comprehending" tend not to engage. In this way, Butler strengthens the tie between language ability and peace—just as the inability to communicate leads people to resort to violence, the ability to communicate makes people likelier to choose peace. By referencing the threat that Rye faces from people more impaired than herself, Rye suggests two things. First, that she isn't as impaired as others (meaning that she has better language abilities) and second that she is under constant threat. It's noteworthy that she sees her gun not necessarily as a firearm, but rather as a way to send a message; if others know that she's armed, they're unlikely to mess with her, which ironically spares her from having to be violent.

Seeing the man's **gun**, the bus driver returns to his bus. It's filled with gas, and he cannot continue driving until it clears. The bus belongs to the driver, and he has pasted to its walls magazine pictures of things riders can give him as fares—this is how he makes a living for his family. The driver seems angry about the gas in his bus, and he shouts without forming words. Rye isn't totally sure, though, if the bus driver is failing to speak or if she simply cannot recognize speech anymore.

Just as Rye previously suggested, the mere presence of the man's gun leads the bus driver to walk away instead of escalating his threats. The gun sent a message—being armed is a form of communication in a world where language has been lost. Rye shows some sympathy for the bus driver here, as he is driving—at some peril to himself—in order to support his family, and the gas disrupts his livelihood. Rye's confusion over whether the bus driver is failing to speak or Rye is failing to understand shows how rare spoken language is in this world. While Rye believes that she has retained her ability to speak and comprehend language, she hasn't heard anyone speak in so long that she's not totally sure.

The man gestures to Rye to get in his car, which she doesn't want to risk. Even though she shakes her head no, the man continues to beckon, which draws the attention of the other passengers on the street. One of these other passengers walks towards her, and Rye doesn't believe that she can outrun him, nor does she think anyone would help if she needed it. But when she gestures for him to stop, he does. He makes an obscene gesture, and Rye believes that everyone else would stand by if he tried to rape her or if she shot him.

This moment in the story clarifies the social reality in which Rye lives; without police, government, or interpersonal communication, it's every person for themselves. As a woman, Rye is particularly vulnerable to predatory men who are bigger and faster than she is, and in this moment, she understands that she might face a choice between being raped and killing someone. Horrifically, she doesn't think anyone else would bother to intervene either way.

The man in the LAPD uniform is still by his car, but he has put away **his gun**, now gesturing with empty hands. Rye thinks that this might mean he is safe; maybe he is simply lonely, as she has been for the past three years, since the virus killed her children, husband, and extended family. In addition to killing people, the illness caused a widespread loss of language—most people lost language altogether, while some were partially impaired.

While the story has already shown how unwise it is to trust strangers, Rye intuitively feels that she can trust this man. In part, it's because he seems peaceful and kind, but in part it seems like it's because she wants *to trust someone. An illness killed everyone she loved, and she has been alone—fending for herself amidst terrible violence—for three years. Her desire to trust this man, then, might not simply be because he has given her signs that he is peaceful; she might just be desperate to connect with anyone, despite the inevitable risk.*

Despite the "possibly deadly consequences" of getting into a car with a stranger, Rye decides to go with the man. As she walks to his car, she thinks of her neighbor, an unwashed man who pees in public and keeps two women, one to tend each of his gardens, who "put up with him" because he protects them. Rye understands that he wants her to be one of his women, too.

The neighbor who wants to keep Rye as a concubine shows how Rye, as a woman alone, is under constant threat. This is not just from strangers who might rape or kill her, but also from men she knows who take advantage of their physical power by offering protection in exchange for labor and sex. This is obviously a horrible and abusive situation that Rye wants to avoid at all costs, but it's also understandable why a woman might—in this violent and dangerous society—take a man up on this offer.

As the man drives, Rye wants to relax, but she doesn't stop worrying about being in a stranger's car until they reach an intersection and he gestures for her to tell him which way to go. When he follows her cue to go left, she begins to believe that he might be safe. Passing abandoned buildings and wrecked cars, he hands her a pendant from around his neck: it's a piece of obsidian. Rye isn't sure if his name is actually Obsidian, or whether it might be "Rock or Peter or Black," but she decides to think of him as Obsidian. She hands him the pin she wears of a stalk of wheat, which is the closest symbol to "Rye" that she could find. She knows that people likely think of her as Wheat, but it doesn't matter, since she won't ever hear her name spoken again.

It's noteworthy that Rye doesn't really begin to trust this man until their first successful communication: she tells him to turn left and he understands and obeys. Here, their communication is a sign of safety and peace that puts her at ease. It's also worth noting that it's a left turn in question—when Rye noticed that the man was left handed, she revealed that left handed people are often less impaired. Therefore, the car turning left is a sign that they're headed into a more peaceful and communicative situation than the one they just fled. When they exchange names, they communicate the best they can, but there's no certainty that either has intuited the right name. This is tragic; this is about as much communication as any two people can have in this post-illness world, and even so, they miss fundamental facts about each other's identities because of their impairment.

Obsidian pulls over and takes out a map, pointing to where they are and asking Rye to point to where she's going. She can't; she lost the ability to read and write with the illness. This was a devastating loss for her, as she was a history professor and freelance writer before the illness, and now she cannot even read the books she wrote. Watching Obsidian with the map, she realizes that he can read and likely write, too. This makes her feel a "deep bitter hatred," since she guesses that reading and writing don't mean as much to him as they did to her. Sick with jealousy, she remembers that she has a **gun**. After a moment of stillness, though, her rage subsides.

Here, Rye reveals how deeply she feels the loss of her language abilities. Her passion is reading and writing; she even wrote books of her own that she can now no longer read. In this way, the illness has truly robbed her of everything she loves: her passion, her work, and her family. Even so, it's still shocking how viscerally angry she becomes when she realizes that Obsidian has the ability to read and write—she feels so jealous that she wants to kill him, which is behavior that the story associates with less rational, more impaired people. The fact that jealousy of another person's language ability is the only thing that can rouse Rye to violence shows how powerful the connection between loss of language and violence is.

Having recognized Rye's jealousy, Obsidian takes her hand. It unsettles her how powerfully she had wanted to kill him a moment ago. She is traveling to Pasadena because, at home by herself, she felt that she had "no reason to stay alive" and she had almost killed herself. Obsidian gestures to ask if Rye can speak, and she nods—she sees him experience a similar wave of envy, and he gestures that he cannot speak. Rye suspects that the illness took from both of them what they most valued, but nonetheless they have been able to share this without inciting violence.

This is a startling revelation of Rye's motivation for trip to Pasadena; she fears that if she stayed home alone any longer, she would take her own life. This confirms how deep her despair and purposelessness are—she can't bear life without her family or her work as a writer and teacher. That Obsidian reacts with a jealousy similar to Rye's when he finds out that she can still speak shows how common this type of jealousy is. Everyone, it seems, misses language so viscerally that they're tempted to hurt those who have it. But the fact that Obsidian and Rye can communicate all of this without either of them becoming actually violent is a good sign. It shows that they're able to be truly vulnerable with each other.

While Rye is wondering why Obsidian still wears an LAPD uniform, he puts his hand on her thigh and—thinking of how horrible it would be to bring a child into this world—she shakes her head no. It's a shame, though, because she hasn't been touched in three years and she finds Obsidian attractive: he's young, clean, and he "ask[s] for what he want[s] rather than demanding it." As he pulls her closer, she sadly pushes away—then he pulls a condom from the glovebox, which makes her laugh for the first time in years.

Rye wants to have sex with Obsidian, but she sees the world as being so awful that she doesn't want to risk becoming pregnant and subjecting a child to the despair she feels. This makes sense, as she previously confessed that she struggles to want to stay alive herself. It's also noteworthy why she finds Obsidian attractive. Sure, he's young and clean, but it seems equally important that he communicates *(he asks for things instead of demanding them or taking them by force like everyone else does). This once again shows that Rye and Obsidian are able to connect only because they can communicate, even in a limited way.*

They get into the back seat of his car and eagerly have sex. Afterwards, they lay together and—through gestures—Rye tells Obsidian that her children have died. To fight her grief, she tells herself that children deserve pity; they have no memory of the world before the illness, and instead they run around like monkeys with no future to look forward to.

It's worth noticing that Rye is telling herself *that children should be pitied. She has just been thinking about how her own children died, so it's unclear whether she truly pities children who survived, or whether she tells herself this to soften the loss of her own children, a way of thinking that they're better off not having survived. Regardless, it's startling to think about a generation of children who have never been able to communicate and have never known orderly society—without the structures of society such as careers and family, the notion of the future is probably pretty hazy to these children, which might be what Rye means when she thinks they have no future.*

Rye asks Obsidian to have sex with her again, thinking he can make her forget all of this. Nothing until now has brought her pleasure, which is why she came close to killing herself. When she asks if he will come home with her, though, Obsidian shakes his head. Disappointed, Rye imagines that he probably has a wife, since relatively unimpaired men are so rare that women try to hang on to them. When she asks him again to come home with her, he hesitates, making her think she can convince him. Through a series of gestures involving pinning his LAPD badge next to her wheat stalk, the two of them confirm that they will be a couple. Then, she directs Obsidian to return to her home—she no longer needs to go to Pasadena.

This is the moment in the story that most clearly establishes the connection between partnership and happiness. Having sex with Obsidian make Rye forget her grief and loneliness and—more significantly—finally confirming that he will come home with her makes her feel that she is no longer at risk of suicide (this is evident when she decides that she won't go to Pasadena, since her reason for the trip was to keep herself from ending her life). It's clear, then, that Obsidian's companionship has completely turned Rye's life around, making her feel a happiness and fulfillment she hasn't known since the illness.

As they drive towards her house, Rye imagines what it will be like to have a partner—she has enough food and enough room in her house, and best of all, her predatory neighbor will back off. She puts her head on Obsidian's shoulder to rest, but he suddenly brakes; a woman is running in front of the car, followed by a man with a knife. Shouting nonsense, Obsidian gets out of the car to help and Rye follows; both of them draw their **guns**.

Rye is obviously thrilled not to be lonely anymore, but part of the appeal of Obsidian's partnership is practical: he can physically protect her from her predatory neighbor. For a while now, the two of them have existed in the peaceful bubble of the car where they communicate rationally and behave with kindness—it's striking, then, how quickly things change when Obsidian leaves the car to help the woman. Immediately, he draws his gun and begins shouting nonsense, signaling a return to violence, chaos, and noncommunication after their interlude of peace.

The woman jabs the man in the face with a piece of broken glass, and before Obsidian shoots the man in the stomach, the man manages to stab the woman. Rye leans over the woman, recognizing that her wounds are fatal, and she taps Obsidian—who is leaning over the man—to tell him. While Obsidian is distracted, the man opens his eyes, grabs Obsidian's **gun**, and shoots him dead. Rye shoots and kills the man.

Throughout the story, nobody has used a gun; in fact, Butler has taken great pains to describe guns as something that people carry more to send a message to others (thereby de-escalating violence) than to actually use. However, the fact that this man uses Obsidian's own gun to kill him shows how thin the line between order and chaos is. That very gun is what earlier kept Obsidian from getting into a fight with the bus driver—in that case, the gun successfully sent a message—but now, in a shocking moment, the gun kills him.

As Rye leans over Obsidian's body, thinking that he has left her like everyone else, two small children come out of a house and walk to the dead woman—the girl shakes the woman's arm trying to wake her. Feeling sick, Rye gets up and heads back to Obsidian's car. The children will have to fend for themselves—Rye doesn't want to raise someone else's children who will grow into "hairless chimps."

The dead woman is obviously the children's mother, and it's a moment of extreme heartlessness when Rye decides to leave these young children without parents. She dehumanizes them by thinking of them as "chimps" instead of people, which calls back to her previous comments about how children these days run around the destroyed city like monkeys. It seems that Rye thinks that there's no point in helping these children because it would only cause her grief and, besides, she has already said that she thinks children have no future now.

Back at the car, however, Rye realizes that she wants to bury Obsidian, so she returns to his body and sees how frightened the children are. She realizes that she cannot let two toddlers die, so she must take them—she wouldn't "be able to live with any other decision." Thinking of where to bury the bodies, she muses that Obsidian should have known, as a cop, how dangerous domestic violence is—but she realizes that this knowledge wouldn't have kept him (or her) from helping the woman.

When Rye changes her mind about leaving the children, her remark that she wouldn't be able to live with it otherwise has a double meaning. Of course, it's an acknowledgement that it would be morally monstrous to leave two toddlers to die, but it's also perhaps a more personal statement. Having Obsidian in her life gave Rye confidence that she could return home without killing herself, but without Obsidian she is now alone again. Perhaps when she says she couldn't live with a different decision, she means it literally; without bringing these children home, she would have nothing to live for.

As Rye drags the woman's body to the car to bury her at home, the little girl screams "no" and tells Rye to go away, while the boy tells the girl not to talk. The children's speech is perfectly intelligible to Rye. Marveling at this, Rye wonders if the children's mother shared their ability to speak, if maybe her husband—or a stranger—killed her out of jealousy. Then she realizes that the children were born after the onset of the illness, and she wonders if maybe the disease is over—maybe very young children are safe and ready to learn language, and maybe they need people to teach and protect them.

Rye is speculating here; she doesn't know who the man was that killed the woman or why he did it, and she doesn't know what it means for the world that the children can speak. But her eagerness to put together a narrative of hope shows how starved she is for purpose and happiness—it's the same longing for connection and joy that led her to get in Obsidian's car despite the obvious risks. It's notable that Rye's vision of children (and society) having a real future revolves around language returning. For her, the absence of language can only mean chaos and violence and despair. If language may return, though, it's possible to think of the future with something other than dread.

Looking at the dead man, Rye understands his jealous violence, his commonplace desire to "destroy what [he] could not have." Unlike him, Obsidian had been a protector—maybe he had patrolled the streets in his uniform so he wouldn't kill himself. She had also been a protector, but lately she had only protected herself—now she can keep these children alive. As the children begin to cry, she tells them that it's alright and that they're coming with her. When the boy tries to cover her mouth, she explains that it's okay to speak with her as long as nobody else is there. As they begin to look less afraid, she tells them that her name is Valerie Rye and that they can talk to her.

Throughout the story, Rye has wondered why Obsidian wore a police uniform even though the police haven't existed for years. Here, she finally seems to understand: his commitment to protecting others gave him purpose, even if it seemed silly or insufficient to others. Rye seems to realize here that she has a choice between being a destructive and isolated person or being a protector like Obsidian; she wants to be a protector, and the children have given her the opportunity to do so. When she tells them her name, it hearkens back to when she and Obsidian tried to exchange names and she thought that nobody would ever say her name—Rye—again. The children will presumably now call her this, so she is already making progress towards a better life.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Berman, Lucy. "*Speech Sounds*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Mar 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Berman, Lucy. "*Speech Sounds*." LitCharts LLC, March 29, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/speech-sounds.

To cite any of the quotes from *Speech Sounds* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Butler, Octavia. Speech Sounds. Seven Stories. 1996.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Butler, Octavia. Speech Sounds. New York: Seven Stories. 1996.