Kindred’s “Dirty Pink Water”: Double Consciousness is Pain and Pain is a Friend

“In the tub, I sat for a long while without moving, without thinking…The pain was a friend. Pain had never been a friend to me before, but now it kept me still. It forced reality on me and kept me sane…I leaned forward and cried into the dirty pink water” (Butler, 113). Dana’s knowledge of African American history had come to life. She was now “an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body…” (Allen and Bagozzi, 6). Although Dana’s pain was unlike anything she had ever felt, in her state of double-consciousness she considered her pain to be a friend. Here is where the novel hooks double-consciousness, pain, and friendship together in an intersectional loop. Dana moves throughout the novel inside the intersectional loop and inside the loop is where she discovers her more cultivated self and true friendship. My argument is that African American double-consciousness causes Dana pain through the story’s entirety by physically and mentally bringing her previous knowledge of African American history to life; but, the pain of her newfound physical and mental knowledge of African American history from specific incidents during her time in the past demonstrates to Dana an unconventional form of friendship. This paper will first define double-consciousness and display an example of its connection to pain that Dana encounters, then use Greek philosophy to define friendship and show pain’s connection to the
unconventional friendship that Dana experiences. Lastly, I will explain what Dana’s “dirty pink water” represents.

The double-consciousness that Dana is conflicted with is a major theme in *Kindred* that cannot be ignored. In *Consequences of the Black Sense of Self*, co-authors Richard Allen and Richard Bagozzi describes DuBois’ coined term, double-consciousness (6). The term is described as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” and that it “suggests an internal tension” (Allen and Bagozzi, 9). The tension comes from trying to balance one’s self-awareness and who the people around one perceive him/her to be. Instances of Dana balancing her two beings can be seen from the novel’s beginning to the novel’s end. An example of Dana’s double-consciousness as described here is when she and Alice were talking in the cookhouse after Alice lost her memory. Alice asked Dana what it was like to be a slave. Dana answered with, “I don’t know” (Butler, 156). On one hand, Dana only answer Alice with statements that were short and would keep Alice from finding out more than Dana felt she needed to know at that time. On the other hand, Dana still did not feel like a slave even though she had been living a slave’s life. Dana was aware of how she saw herself and how the community around her saw her. As a slave, Dana’s internal tension is an ongoing battle where peace is close to impossible to gain. Any sliver of peace seemed to only come through a vessel of pain. In the search for a positive sense of being in a negative situation, Dana’s pain created slivers of peace in the form of friendship.

Dana found a friend in her pain during the pink water scene in the novel. Although she does not say that she found a friend in each painful incident, Dana does consistently sustain a friendship in her pain. Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, give a canteen filled with the knowledge in which to understand the many levels of friendship. John Cooper, author of
Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship, gives a general interpretation of Aristotle’s analysis of friendship. He states that friendship is “any relationship characterized by mutual liking...by mutual well-wishing and well-doing out of concern for one another” (621). This generalization says that friendship can only be between two individuals that wish well for each other. Aristotle eliminates all non-human forms of friendship (Aubenque, 24). He believes that friendship can only dwell between two people and can never be extended to anything otherwise. This friendship is considered perfect. Although Aristotle defines friendship in a perfect sense, he does acknowledge a tolerable amount of inequality allowed in friendships. In this case, friendships are flawed.

Plato critically examined theories concerning the ways in which “one becomes the friend of another” (Bashor, 271). Bashor talks about the three stages of friendships. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll only discuss emotivism, the first stage. Emotivism is expressed as “the question of whether ‘the friender’ or ‘the friended’ is truly ‘the friend’ of the other” (Bashor, 271). Emotivism fails as a characteristic of perfect friendship in that the necessity for a mutual interest of well-wishing for one another may not exist, producing an unequal friendship. One of the subjects in the equation could experience an unreturned interest to “friend” or one of the subjects in the equation could be the object of an unwanted “friending” (Bashor, 272). Even if there is an inequality in the making of a friendship, the subject interested in being “the friend” or interested in “the friending” can still be considered “a friend.” In considering how Dana felt friendship in the stillness and reality that her pain provided, would it be adequate to acknowledge pain as “the friender” and Dana as “the friended”? Although stillness and reality are not organisms of existence and have no concept of “friending” another subject, the creation of an unequal friendship has occurred.
Kindred presents many cases where Dana’s pain produced an unequal friendship between Dana and mechanisms of no existence. One case in particular is after Dana was whipped the second time for running away. Humbleness became her friend. Dana made a point that she finally understood what Mr. Weylin meant by his statement, “…educated nigger don’t mean smart nigger” (Butler, 175). Dana stated that she and Alice had been failures. She recognized that although she was educated and had knowledge from the future about the geographical layout of the Eastern shore, none of it had helped her to have a successful escape. Dana had obtained a larger respect for successful runaway slaves such as Harriet Tubman and the three hundred fugitive slaves that she helped escape to freedom. The unconventional friendship of humbleness that Dana had fallen into after she was whipped not only changed what she understood about African American history, but also how she felt about African American history for the rest of her life. Dana’s newfound friendship with humbleness connects to her friendship with reality and sanity in that they both reside in the “dirty pink water”.

What exactly is Kindred’s “dirty pink water”? What does the water represent? My interpretation of the water is a harsh and confusing womb of maturation. The warm water housed Dana and allowed her time to grow. Although the water harshly caused the skin on Dana’s cuts to expand and hurt, it engulfed her in a safe environment in her time of need while she thought about how pain befriended her. The “dirty pink water” seems to also be a physical representation and foreshadowing of the maturation that Dana stumbled across in the epilogue. In the scene, Dana wondered why she wanted to go back to Baltimore after everything that she had been through. Kevin stated that maybe like him, she wanted “To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (Butler, 264). This scene reiterates the “dirty pink water” in that Dana had harsh experiences in Baltimore, but
Baltimore is the place where she had an internal growth as she did in the tub. She used both the water and the trip to Baltimore to remind her of her sanity and to try to understand what had happened to her. Dana had matured since the beginning of her journey’s to keep Rufus alive and she would now be forever changed within.

In conclusion, Dana became a better person through the interlocking of double-consciousness, pain, and friendship. The reader can see Dana’s struggle to oscillate between who she was and who she was forced to be. Her double-consciousness brought her much pain, but in the pain Dana was befriended by non-human entities. Aristotle would argue that Dana’s odd friendships were imperfect and non-existent. Plato would argue that the success of the friendship is in the friendship’s failure to be perfect. The imperfection in the non-human friendship unselfishly rears Dana into a more humble and knowledgeable woman. Dana’s birth of awareness of her two selves occurred during the cry in the “dirty pink water”. She cut the cord of ignorance and immaturity during her visit back to Baltimore. The interlocking of double-consciousness, pain, and friendship brought forth reality, sanity, and humbleness for Dana and the wisdom she gained allowed her a “chance to stay that way” (Butler, 264).