Breath, Eyes, Memory Study Guide

Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat

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Contents

Breath, Eyes, Memory Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....5
Author Biography....6
Plot Summary....8
Book 1, Chapter 1....11
Book 1, Chapter 2....13
Book 1, Chapter 3....15
Book 1, Chapter 4....16
Book 1, Chapter 5....17
Book 1, Chapter 6....18
Book 1, Chapter 7....20
Book 1, Chapter 8....21
Book 2, Chapter 9....22
Book 2, Chapter 10....23
Book 2, Chapter 11....24
Book 2, Chapter 12....26
Book 3, Chapter 13....27
Book 3, Chapter 14....28
Book 3, Chapter 15....29
Book 3, Chapter 16....31
Book 3, Chapter 17....32
Book 3, Chapter 18....33
Book 3, Chapter 19....35
Book 3, Chapter 20....36

Book 3, Chapter 21 37

Book 3, Chapter 22 39

Book 3, Chapter 23 40

Book 3, Chapter 24 41

Book 3, Chapter 25 42

Book 3, Chapter 26 43

Book 3, Chapter 27 44

Book 4, Chapter 28 45

Book 4, Chapter 29 46

Book 4, Chapter 30 47

Book 4, Chapter 31 48

Book 4, Chapter 32 49

Book 4, Chapter 33 50

Book 4, Chapter 34 51

Book 4, Chapter 35 52

Characters 54

Themes 57

Style 59

Historical Context 61

Literary Heritage 64

Critical Overview 65

Criticism 66

Critical Essay #1 67

Critical Essay #2 72

Critical Essay #3 76

Critical Essay #4 80

Critical Essay #5..84

Critical Essay #6..86

Topics for Further Study...87

What Do I Read Next?..88

Further Study..89

Bibliography...90

Copyright Information...91

Introduction

When *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was published in 1994, Edwidge Danticat was hailed by *Publishers Weekly* as "a distinctive new voice with a sensitive insight into Haitian culture." Although there are some similarities between Sophie's story and Danticat's own life, the work is largely fiction, informed by Danticat's own experience. The book was the culmination of many years of writing, beginning in Danticat's adolescence, when she wrote a story about coming to America to be with her mother; this story was the seed for the later, much longer work.

Danticat continued work on the novel during her pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing at Brown University, where she was given a full scholarship. Written as her master's thesis, the unfinished book was eagerly awaited by Soho Press, which offered Danticat a $5,000 advance for it.

Not everyone in the Haitian community approved of the book. In the book, Sophie's mother Martine "tests" her to see if she is still a virgin by putting a finger into Sophie's vagina. Although virginity is highly regarded in Haitian culture, most Haitian-Americans no longer follow this practice, and some felt that Danticat's depiction of it made Haitians seem backward and sexually abusive. Danticat is aware that many people see her as a spokesperson for Haitians, but disagrees with the notion: she is just one person, writing about her own experience, and there are many other voices.

Author Biography

Edwidge Danticat (pronounced "Edweedj Danticah") was born January 19, 1969, in Port-au- Prince, Haiti, and was separated from her father when she was two and he emigrated to the United States to find work. When she was four, her mother also went to the United States. For the next eight years, Danticat and her younger brother Eliab were raised by their father's brother, a minister, who lived with his wife and grandson in a poor section of Port-au-Prince known as Bel Air.

When Danticat was twelve, she moved to Brooklyn and joined her parents and two new younger brothers. Adjustment to this new family was diffi- cult, and she also had difficulty adjusting at school, because she spoke only Creole and did not know any English. Other students taunted her as a Haitian "boat person," or refugee. She told Mallay Charters in *Publishers Weekly,* "My primary feeling the whole first year was one of loss. Loss of my childhood, and of the people I'd left behind□and also of being lost. It was like being a baby□ learning everything for the first time."

Danticat learned to tell stories from her aunt's grandmother in Bel Air, an old woman whose long hair, with coins braided into it, fascinated the neighborhood children, who fought each other to comb it. When people gathered, she told folktales and family stories. "It was call-and-response," Danticat told Charters. "If the audience seemed bored, the story would speed up, and if they were participating, a song would go in. The whole interaction was exciting to me. These cross-generational exchanges didn't happen often, because children were supposed to respect their elders. But when you were telling stories, it was more equal, and fun."

Danticat's cousin, Marie Micheline, taught her to read. She told Renee H. Shea in *Belles Lettres,* "I started school when I was three, and she would read to me when I came home. In 1987. . .there was a shooting outside her house□where her children were. She had a seizure and died. Since I was away from her, my parents didn't tell me right away. . .But around that same time, I was having nightmares; somehow I knew."

When Danticat was seven, she wrote stories with a Haitian heroine. For her, writing was not a casual undertaking. "At the time that I started thinking about writing," she told Calvin Wilson in the *Kansas City Star,* "a lot of people who were in jail were writers. They were journalists, they were novelists, and many of them were killed or 'disappeared.' It was a very scary thing to think about." Nevertheless, she kept writing. After she moved to Brooklyn and learned English, she wrote stories for her high school newspaper. One of these articles, about her reunion with her mother at age twelve, eventually expanded to become the book *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

Danticat graduated from Barnard College with a degree in French literature in 1990, and worked as a secretary, doing her writing after work in the office. She applied to business schools and creative writing programs. She was accepted by both, but chose Brown University's creative writing program, which offered her a full scholarship. For her master's thesis, she wrote what would later become *Breath, Eyes, Memory* .

After graduating, she sent seventy pages of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* to Soho Press, a small publisher. They bought the book before it was even completed, sending her notes asking if she was done yet and encouraging her to finish.

Breath, Eyes, Memory and her two other books *The Farming of Bones* and *Krik? Krak!* , a collection of stories have been hailed for their lyrical intensity, vivid descriptions of Haitian places and people, and honest depictions of fear and pain.

Danticat has won a Granta Regional Award as one of the Twenty Best Young American Novelists, a Pushcart Prize, and fiction awards from *Seventeen* and *Essence* magazines. She is also the recipient of an ongoing grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation.

Plot Summary

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* begins in Haiti in the early 1980s, when Haiti was ruled by the dictator Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Widespread poverty, illiteracy, and government-sponsored violence oppress the population, but Danticat's heroine, twelve-year-old Sophie Caco, has led a relatively sheltered life in the small town of Croix-des-Rosets. Although her family have always been poor agricultural laborers, she and her aunt are better off because Sophie's mother, Martine, moved to Brooklyn when Sophie was two, and sends money home every month.

Martine's move to Brooklyn was a form of escape, since she was raped at age sixteen by a *Tonton Macoute,* or guerrilla, one of many allowed by the government to kill, torture, and rape anyone he wanted to. This rape resulted in Sophie's birth, but Martine, unable to bear the painful memories, left Haiti, and Sophie, in search of a new life and release from her emotional pain.

The novel opens a few days before Mother's Day, when Sophie has made a card to give to her aunt, Tante Atie, the only mother Sophie knows. She finds out that Martine has finally sent for her, and wants her to come to Brooklyn. Sophie is fearful and reluctant to go, but has no choice. Atie tells her that her mother wants the best for her, and that if she becomes educated, she can elevate her whole family, that going to the United States will be good for her and everyone else, and that it's the right thing to do.

On the way to the airport they are delayed by a demonstration, and see students fighting soldiers and government officials, an Army truck in flames, and soldiers shooting bullets and tear gas at the demonstrators. They also see a soldier beat a girl's head in with the butt of a gun, and on the plane, Sophie sits next to a small boy whose father was killed in the demonstration and who has no family left living in Haiti and no luggage.

Adjusting to life in Brooklyn is difficult for Sophie, who is harassed by other students because she is Haitian and does not speak English. For six years, forbidden to date, she spends all her time in the narrow circle of school, home, and church.

When Sophie is eighteen, she falls in love with her neighbor, Joseph, a kind and thoughtful musician who is her mother's age. Aside from Marc, her mother's boyfriend, she does not know any men. "Men were as mysterious to me as white people, who in Haiti we had only known as missionaries," she says.

Although Sophie has not slept with Joseph, her mother suspects that she has, and she makes Sophie lie on the bed and tests her for virginity. "There are secrets you cannot keep," she tells Sophie, meaning that if Sophie has sex, her mother will know about it. Martine herself was tested in this way, as was Atie, and although it has given her emotional scars, she continues to do it to Sophie every week to make sure she is still a virgin.

Sophie does not tell Joseph about the tests, but she feels deeply shameful about her body and avoids him. He goes away on tour, leaving her lonely and confused. She realizes that if she loses her virginity her mother will stop the invasive testing, so she uses a pestle to break her hymen.

The next time she is tested, she fails. Her mother, disgusted, tells her to get out and go to Joseph, and see what he can do for her.

She goes to Joseph and tells him she wants to get married immediately. They move to Providence and have a baby, but Sophie is not happy. For the whole first year of their marriage, she feels suicidal and experiences nightmares. Her sexual secret, her memory and experience of testing and her mother's insistence that sex is filthy and shameful, make her unable to enjoy being sexual with him. "[My mother's] nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl," she says. Confused, she leaves without telling Joseph where she is going and takes her baby, Brigitte Ife (named for her grandmother), with her to Haiti.

Sophie's mother does not know that she is in Haiti, or that she is separated from Joseph, but she sends her usual cassette down to Atie and Grandma Ife and mentions that Joseph called her house looking for Sophie. She is frightened because she also does not know where Sophie is. Atie and Ife encourage Sophie to go home, but she isn't ready. Secretly, they ask her mother to come to Haiti and talk to her and convince her to go back.

She talks to her grandmother about the testing, and her grandmother says she did it to her daughters because it was her duty to safeguard the family's chastity and honor. "I hated the tests," Sophie tells her. "It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again."

Sophie's mother shows up. Sophie asks her why she put her through the tests if she herself hated them so much. She says she did it "because my mother did it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day."

Eventually, she goes home and calls her husband and tells him she's back. They reconcile, and she begins going to a sexual phobia therapy group, where the therapist says of her mother's rapist, "Your mother never gave him a face. That's why he's a shadow. That's why he can control her. I'm not surprised she's having nightmares. This pregnancy is bringing feelings to the surface that she had never completely dealt with. You will never be able to connect with your husband until you say goodbye to your father." Meanwhile, her mother becomes pregnant with Marc's baby. The pregnancy reactivates all her old fears of rape and violation, and she tells Sophie that when she was pregnant with Sophie, she tried to abort her. She drank "all kinds of herbs, vervain,

quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn't go away."

The pregnancy reactivates all of Martine's old fears, and eventually she kills herself, stabbing herself in the belly seventeen times with a butcher knife. They take her body back to Haiti, where, at her funeral, Sophie runs into the cane field and beats, attacks, fights back against the cane and the memory of her mother's rapist, as the therapist suggested.

Her grandmother comes to help her, knowing that this is a cathartic moment and that Sophie is releasing the pain of generations. She tells Sophie, "There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: "*Ou libere?* Are you free, my daughter? . . . Now, you will know how to answer."

Book 1, Chapter 1

Book 1, Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins in the early 1980s in a small Haitian village called *Croix-des-Rosets*. The narrator, twelve-year-old Sophie, presses a daffodil into a Mother's Day card for her aunt Atie. Though Mother's Day is not until Sunday, Atie is upset that night, and Sophie decides to give her the card early. However, Atie refuses the card, saying mysteriously that this year the card belongs to Sophie's mother. This puzzles Sophie, because her mother left Haiti to live in Brooklyn, New York, when Sophie was very young, leaving Sophie behind with Atie. Sophie appreciates the fact that her mother has faithfully sent them money every month, allowing them a far better standard of living than they would have had otherwise. However, Sophie has never met her mother and only knows her from the picture on the night table beside her aunt's bed. Occasionally, Sophie has nightmares in which her mother chases her through a field of flowers to try to catch her and bring her back with her into the picture frame.

On the way home one-day, Tante (Aunt) Atie and Sophie pass the albino lottery agent coming up the road. Sophie mentions that he is thought to have the ability to turn into a snake with a flip of his tongue, and that he can see into the future just by looking into a person's eyes, unless she stops him by reciting a prayer in her head. When the lottery agent asks Atie how she is today, Atie responds, "Today, we are fine. We do not know about tomorrow." They pick a number to play and go on their way, passing some children—whose names Sophie recites, including Hope, Faith, and God-Given—playing in the park.

That night, Atie and Sophie attend the potluck dinner for which Atie has been preparing food all day. At the potluck, the men and women sit separately, and the teenage boys and girls hide in dark corners. Tante Atie and Sophie drink tea with a circle of women, where Madame Augustin asks about Martine, Sophie's mother. Madame Augustin then mentions that she saw Atie receive a very big package yesterday, and keeps asking questions about the package and New York until finally implying, loudly, that the package was a plane ticket. When Atie states that the plane ticket is not for her, the women conclude that the ticket must be for Sophie.

Outside their house, Sophie and Atie watch Madame and Monsieur Augustin go into their home across the street. Through the Augustins' bedroom window, Sophie and Atie watch the couple get ready for bed. As they laugh and tickle each other, tumbling into bed, a tear rolls down Atie's cheek, but she begs Sophie not to tell anyone about her crying. Inside, in the bedroom they share, Sophie accuses her aunt of lying to her. Atie says she did not lie; she kept a secret. Atie says she wishes that she could read the Bible to see what guidance God would offer in this situation.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

One of the first questions to ask when thinking about a work of fiction is: why did the author choose to set the book in this place? Setting is extremely important in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Edwidge Danticat herself is a Haitian-American writer, and one of her major aims as an author is to recreate her uniquely Haitian experience.

Occupied by Spain from the late 1400s until the early-mid 1600s, when French adventurers and soldiers began arriving on the islands, and occupied by France from the late 1600s to the late 1700s, Haiti is a mixture of many cultures, including that of the many African slaves brought in from Spain during its occupation. The Haitian language, Creole, is a mixture of all these languages. Though similar to French, Creole has a grammar and vocabulary all its own. Danticat has chosen to include many words in Creole to help give the book a Haitian flavor. She usually italicizes Creole words on their first use.

One of the themes explored throughout this book is the inequality between men and women in Haiti during the time in which it is set. The first chapter begins and ends on feminine or sexual notes: it starts with Sophie making a Mother's Day card and ends with the unmarried Atie begging Sophie not to tell anyone she cries when she watches the Augustins prepare for bed. At the potluck, males and females of all ages remain separate. Telling the story from the point of view of a female adolescent allowed Danticat to explore this theme in depth.

Another major theme the novel examines is Haitian spirituality. Throughout the book, Danticat emphasizes the roles religion and superstition play in her main characters' lives. In the first chapter, the lottery agent is said to be able to see the future, the names of the children at the playground are "Hope," "Faith," and "God-Given," and the chapter ends with Atie's desire to read the Bible.

In the early 1980s, a cruel dictator ruled Haiti and most of its residents were unable to read, poor, and fearful of the violent government. Atie, unable to read, wishes she could read the Bible, and tells Sophie she should be grateful to be able to go to school. The lottery is a source of hope, the two-bedroom house a source of pride. Finally, the social unrest and uncertainty in Haiti is made visible when the lottery agent asks Atie how she is today and Atie responds that today, at least, they are fine.

Book 1, Chapter 2

Book 1, Chapter 2 Summary

The next morning, Atie makes cinnamon rice pudding for breakfast. Sophie forces herself to eat, though she does not want to. Atie tries to cheer her up by telling her a funny story, but neither her nor Sophie's mood permits much laughter. After they eat, Sophie washes the dishes, and Atie talks to her from the table. She tells her that the only reason Atie has been living in Croix-de-Rosets is for Sophie's schooling, and once Sophie leaves, Atie will go stay with Sophie's grandmother. She tells Sophie that her mother really loves her, and the only reason she left Sophie with Atie was that she did not know anything about New York and did not want to take any chances. She tells Sophie they are a family with dirt under their nails, explaining that the only way they could live in the same kind of house Monsieur and Madame Augustin live in is on the money her mother sends from New York. She makes Sophie promise not to fight her mother when she gets there, because they are very alike. She says that everything she loves in Sophie she loved in her sister first and that both Sophie's mother and Sophie love the color yellow. Then she asks Sophie to give her mother the card with the daffodil pressed into it.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

In this short chapter, Danticat answers several questions the reader may have and further characterizes the main characters. In the conversation Sophie and Atie have after breakfast, Atie explains why she cannot go with her niece to New York: she has to go back home to the provinces to take care of her own mother. Atie also explains why her mother left Sophie in the first place, giving us a clearer picture of her mother's character.

Characterization is the means by which a writer reveals the personalities of his or her characters. Occasionally, the writer will describe a character directly, stating outright that he or she is kind, intelligent or talkative. Usually, however, characterization is accomplished indirectly—that is, the author reveals the personalities of characters by what they—or other characters—say, do, and think. For example, in this chapter, we learn from what Atie *says* that Sophie and her mother are alike. We also learn from Atie that Sophie's mother, Martine, is not a bad person, when Atie says Martine did not abandon Sophie by leaving her behind in Haiti. Rather, Atie explains, Martine went to New York to find a better life for both of them, with the intention of leaving her only temporarily, until she knew more about New York and knew Sophie would be safe

Atie's statement about the dirt under their family's fingernails is an important one because it does so much to explain the lives and motivations of the main characters. Sophie's family is very poor and has always made a living by working the land. This is why Atie cannot read, and why Atie is so happy to live in a two-bedroom house in the

village. Sophie's mother went to New York so that Sophie would have an opportunity to make more of their lives.

Book 1, Chapter 3

Book 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Before Sophie leaves, Atie wants her to say goodbye to her grandmother, Ifé. Atie and Sophie make the five-hour trip in a van, which lets them off in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Because the roads from the village to her grandmother's house are so rough, they must make the rest of the trek on foot. On the way, they pass a cane field full of bare-chested, sweaty, hard-working men. Upon arriving at her grandmother's house, Sophie races into her front yard to give her a hug. Her grandmother cooks a meal of Sophie's favorite foods, and then Sophie goes to bed. That night, Sophie has trouble sleeping. Tomorrow, the nightmare she has had all her life about her mother will finally come true: her mother will finally take her away.

In the morning, they leave quickly for Croix-des-Rosets, before Sophie's grandmother gets too used to them and suffers an attack of chagrin, or sorrow. To her grandmother, Sophie explains, chagrin is a real disease, which is treated by drinking a special tea. On the way home, Sophie asks her aunt if one could really die of it. Atie tells her a story about people in Guinea chosen by their Maker to carry the sky on their heads because they are strong. If you see a lot of trouble in your life, Atie explains, it is because you are chosen to carry part of the sky on your head.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to give further information about Atie, Martine and Sophie, by introducing Ifé, and La Nouvelle Dame Marie, the village in which they were born. The rough roads and isolation of Ifé's home confirms what we learned in previous chapters: this family is indeed poor. The men they pass working in the cane fields on the way to Ifé's confirm this, as well. The cane fields are also important because of what happened there to Sophie's mother, which we will learn later. The discussion at the end of this chapter about chagrin helps set the mood, or atmosphere, of the novel. Additionally, it foreshadows the sorrow to come in Sophie's life.

Book 1, Chapter 4

Book 1, Chapter 4 Summary

The following week, Atie leaves for work early and comes home late. Friday afternoon, Atie is waiting for Sophie when she comes home from school. Atie explains that she has worked overtime all week to save money to buy Sophie some farewell gifts. From a white box, she pulls out a yellow dress embroidered with baby daffodils for Sophie to wear on her trip. That night, Sophie dreams again about her mother.

During the week before she leaves, Sophie tries to tell herself she will be able to attend more potlucks. The night before she goes, Sophie dreams of her mother with arms like hooks, wrestling her to the floor. On her last day in town, she wakes up to Atie's face. As they get ready to leave, Atie tells Sophie that Martine was a wonderful sister and will make a great mother. She hands Sophie the Mother's Day card, now wrinkled and faded, and asks her to give it to her mother. Before Atie can stop her, Sophie reads it to her. Atie only shrugs and says the card was not meant for her. The lottery agent knocks on the door to inform Atie that her number finally won, and hands her ten *gourdes*. Atie says her sister has brought her luck; the number she played was Martine's age.

The taxi comes for Sophie and Atie while they are still eating breakfast. The Augustins come to say goodbye. On the drive out of Croix-des-Rosets, Sophie does not see any children playing, or daffodils. All she sees is red dust rising behind the car.

Book 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

There are two things being developed in this chapter. The first is that Atie is stepping further back from the role she has played for most of Sophie's life—that is, Sophie's mother—and showing Sophie that Martine, her real mother, will take her place. Atie again refuses to accept the Mother's Day card from Sophie, remarking instead on how much Martine will love it. Later, when Atie wins the lottery, she credits not her own luck, but her sister's.

The second thing being developed in this chapter is Sophie's growing anxiety over leaving Haiti. She dreams about her mother's hook-like arms trying to steal her away. When the taxi pulls out of Croix-des-Rosets, Sophie does not notice any of the beautiful things about it she noticed before. All she notices is the dust rising behind the car between her and the life she has known.

Book 1, Chapter 5

Book 1, Chapter 5 Summary

When the taxi arrives in Port au Prince, Atie begins shouting the names of places she and her sister used to go. When they were young, she and Martine—Sophie's mother—would sneak into the city on Christmas Eve wearing their Sunday dresses. They would pretend to be students at the university and make dates with men for the following day, which they would never keep.

Just outside the airport, there is a huge traffic jam. The taxi driver explains that they are changing the name of the airport from François Duvalier to what it was named before Duvalier was president, and there is trouble. On the way to the airport, Sophie sees a car on fire, an army truck and a group of student protestors being beaten by soldiers. Atie asks Sophie if she sees why she is leaving. Sophie can only think that she is leaving Atie.

At the airport, while Sophie and Atie exchange tearful goodbyes, a woman who has been hired by her mother meets Sophie. In addition to Sophie, the woman is also caring for a young boy whose father—a corrupt Haitian government official—was just killed by the fire Sophie passed outside. He is going to live in America because all his relatives in Haiti are dead.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

During the early 1980s, dictator Jean Claude Duvalier, son of François Duvalier, the dictator for whom this airport was named, ruled Haiti. Both Duvaliers employed many *Macoutes*, or soldiers, who they encouraged to terrorize the country and do as they pleased. Here, Danticat shows us two vivid effects of the cruel Duvalier regime: the fire and subsequent mistreatment of student protestors, and the plight of the poor orphaned boy. However, neither of these situations registers more with Sophie than the fact that she is leaving her beloved aunt behind.

Book 1, Chapter 6

Book 1, Chapter 6 Summary

When Sophie arrives at the airport, she is met by a woman who looks very little like the woman in the picture on Tante Atie's night table. This woman's face is not laughing; it is long and hollow and there are dark circles under her eyes. Nevertheless, she is cheerful and friendly. She spins Sophie around in the air and looks at her face.

They get into Sophie's mother's car—a pale yellow thing with cracks in the windows and springs sticking out of the seats. Her mother straps Sophie in and begins to drive. She asks Sophie if her sister is still in night school. When Sophie tells her Atie never started it, her mother comments that she must have lost her nerve. When they were young, her mother says, they dreamed of becoming important women. Then she asks after Madame Augustin, who, she says, was never supposed to marry Monsieur Augustin. He was supposed to marry Atie, her mother says, but the heart is fickle.

Sophie's mother takes her to an apartment building in Brooklyn that is covered in graffiti. There are homeless people sleeping outside. Once inside, she shows Sophie to her room. The room is covered in blue wallpaper and there are water stains on the ceiling. On the nightstand of the bedroom is a picture of Tante Atie holding a baby. Instantly, Sophie knows she is the baby.

As she gets ready for bed, Sophie hands her dress to her mother. The Mother's Day card is sticking out of a pocket. Sophie's mother looks at it, and then asks if it is for her. Sophie only says Tante Atie told her to give it to her.

That night, Sophie cannot sleep. Much later, she hears her mother screaming in her sleep. She runs to her bedroom, where she sees her mother thrashing in the sheets. Sophie wakes her, and her mother admits that she sometimes has terrible nightmares. Outside, there are sirens and radios blaring. Sophie gets in bed and tries to calm her mother. She stays there for the rest of the night.

In the morning, Sophie looks at herself in the mirror and sees new eyes looking back. In one day, she seems to have aged.

Book 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Irony is a contrast between what we expect to occur and what actually does. Sophie's first day in New York is full of irony. Everyone in Haiti told Sophie she was lucky to be going to New York, that things would be so much better for her there. When she gets there, however, she sees that her mother's living conditions are almost as bad as her living conditions were at home. Though her mother has a car, while her family back in Haiti did not, her mother's car is not particularly impressive; it is old and its seats are torn and splitting with springs. Her new apartment building is covered in graffiti and

there are homeless people sleeping outside. The apartment itself is old and stained. New York is far less appealing than Sophie had been led to expect.

Her mother, too, is different from Sophie's expectations. She looks nothing like the woman she expected to see, the woman in Tante Atie's picture. In addition, she wakes up at night from terrible dreams, and seems to need more comforting from Sophie than Sophie needs from her.

Sophie's mother's terrible dreams hint at the events of her past, which Danticat has chosen—probably for the purposes of suspense—not to reveal. An author uses suspense to create in the reader the desire to find out what is going to happen next, or the desire to find out something that the author has chosen not to reveal. Used skillfully, suspense often adds to the reader's interest in the story. Here, the reader may wonder what is causing Sophie's mother's terrible dreams, or what events they may predict or foretell.

Book 1, Chapter 7

Book 1, Chapter 7 Summary

In this chapter, Sophie describes her first impression of Flatbush Avenue, the area of Brooklyn where her mother lives. There are many Haitian shops. When she walks with her mother down the street, her mother often speaks to the people passing by in Creole. However, Sophie's mother has been told that in the schools—outside the neighborhood—there is a lot of prejudice against Haitians, and Sophie's mother begs her to learn English quickly.

Sophie's mother drives her to a building hung with a sign that reads MARC CHEVALIER, ESQUIRE, and introduces her to her boyfriend. Later, Marc takes Sophie and her mother out for dinner to a Haitian restaurant. Inside, there are people at tables loudly arguing politics. When the food is served, Marc complains about his *boudin*. Sophie feels out of place, as if she is a part of her mother's past, and Marc is part of her mother's present. She focuses on her food, stuffing herself as if she has not eaten in days. When Marc asks her what she wants to be when she grows up, she says she wants to be a secretary. Marc and her mother tell her there are a lot of opportunities in America and she should reconsider. Her mother tells Sophie she is going to be a doctor.

Book 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Sophie's mother's experience reflects the experience of many first-generation American immigrants. Too busy working two jobs to pay the rent, Sophie's mother has been unable to change her own fortune in the ten years she has been in the city. Sophie, however, she expects to take advantage of the opportunities available to American children. Being a secretary is not good enough. Her mother wants Sophie to be a doctor. This mapping out of Sophie's future increases the tension between Sophie and her mother and foreshadows the conflict to come.

Book 1, Chapter 8

Book 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Because school does not start for two months, Sophie spends her first couple of months in America going with her mother to work. Her day job is cleaning up after bedridden people at a nursing home. Her night job is looking after an old woman. Sometime near the end of the summer, Sophie and her mother have a serious conversation. Her mother tells her the story of how she met Marc, and asks Sophie if she has been good. When Sophie nods, her mother goes on to explain that when she was a girl, her mother used to test them to see if they were still virgins by putting her finger inside their private parts to see if they were still whole. Then she says her mother stopped testing her early, and she asks Sophie if she knows why. When Sophie says no, her mother explains how a man grabbed her from the side of the road, pulled her into a cane field, and put Sophie in her body. She never saw his face.

Book 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

In this chapter, we learn the source of Sophie's mother's nightmares, and we learn more about what it might have been like to be a woman in Haiti in the mid-twentieth century. The themes here are clear. In some families, virginity was prized above all other things —enough so that mothers might put their daughters through "testing." Because Sophie's mother does not criticize the testing, we may begin to wonder whether she would try to "test" Sophie. We also learn Sophie was the product of a rape.

Book 2, Chapter 9

Book 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Sophie is now eighteen. Her mother has been working even longer hours so that they can move to a house in a nicer neighborhood. Sophie's mother's hard work, as well as her own—for six years, she has done nothing but study and pray—has paid off. Sophie has been accepted into college.

Tante Atie once told Sophie that love was like rain. It comes in a drizzle at first. Then it starts pouring, and if you are not careful, it will drown you. Sophie experiences love firsthand when she meets her neighbor, Joseph. He is a musician, a much older Creole man from Louisiana who slowly—through a series of chance meetings when her mother is not home—wins her heart. She learns that he comes from a middle class New Orleans family, and that, when not playing in New York or elsewhere, he lives in Providence, Rhode Island. Sophie is fascinated by the name of the town.

Sophie begins visiting him next door every day. At first, she listens to him practice, as they talk about their lives. Soon, Joseph begins to bring up marriage. Late one night, Joseph knocks on her door, and invites her out to Café des Arts in Long Island. They go, and she has a cappuccino spiked with rum. After she goes to bed, she hears him playing his keyboard:

"The notes and scales were like raindrops, teardrops, torrents. I felt the music rise and surge, tightening every muscle in my body. Then I relaxed, letting it go, feeling a rush that I knew I wasn't supposed to feel."

Book 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

Sophie's first experience with love goes much the way Tante Atie described it. At first, Sophie is careful, seeing Joseph only on chance meetings. Soon, however, her desire to see him overcomes her, and she sees him during the day at his home and goes out with him late at night. By the end of this chapter, they have discussed marriage, and Sophie is overcome by an unfamiliar pleasure just listening to him play.

Book 2, Chapter 10

Book 2, Chapter 10 Summary

The next night, Sophie's mother asks her to go out, saying it has been a long time since they have done something, just the two of them. While crossing the Brooklyn Bridge on the D train, Sophie asks her mother if it is all right for her to like someone, now that she is eighteen. Her mother immediately jumps on the question, asking her whom she likes. Sophie, not wanting to tell her mother she likes the thirty-three-year-old man next door, makes up a name: Henry. Her mother wants to know Henry's last name. Sophie thinks quickly: Napoleon. Unfortunately, her mother actually knows a Henry Napoleon. She asks to meet him. Sophie says he went back to Haiti after graduation. Her mother asks to meet the parents. Sophie says they are in Haiti, too. If they ever come back, her mother says, she wants to meet them.

During the next month, while Joseph is out of town, Sophie's mother asks around about the Napoleons. Listening to her talk about the Napoleons, Sophie grows more and more uncomfortable. At night, Sophie comforts her mother, who still has nightmares.

Book 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

The conflict, or tension, between Sophie and her mother is coming to a head. Sophie is sneaking around without her mother's knowledge and lying. Her mother, wanting to make sure that Sophie's love interest has acceptable career aspirations, asks around about his family. Sophie knows her mother would disapprove of her feelings for Joseph; Joseph is a musician and fifteen years her senior. Sophie's mother wants her to be a doctor, or at least marry a doctor with a good family name, but Joseph wants her now, when she has not even started college.

Book 2, Chapter 11

Book 2, Chapter 11 Summary

When Joseph comes home from touring, he takes Sophie out to the Note. She wears a tight yellow dress she hid under her mattress. The night is like a daydream. At the end of it, Joseph slips a ring onto her pinky finger, and tells her he has to go out of town again. She does not see him for a while, but when he comes back, he asks her to marry him. She does not answer. Her mother would never allow it. He asks her to sleep on it.

When her mother comes home from work, they go on another train ride. Sophie wishes she could tell her mother she loves someone, but only tells her Henry Napoleon is never coming back. Her mother tells her Henry is studying in Mexico to be a doctor. When Sophie expresses surprise, her mother echoes it, saying she thought he was the one sending her postcards from all over.

The next night, Sophie comes home from seeing Joseph and finds her mother waiting for her in the living room. It is three in the morning. She is very upset. She makes Sophie lie on her bed and "tests" her. Sophie mouths the words to the Virgin Mother's Prayer to distract herself. Her mother tells her a story about two inseparable lovers, the *Marassas*. She says: "The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you did not know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marassas.* You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand?"

Book 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, our earlier concern as to whether or not her mother would *test* Sophie is proven founded. As she lies down on the bed, Sophie mouths the words to the Virgin Mother's prayer. Sophie's prayer is, at least to some degree, ironic. Her mother tests her because she suspects Sophie may have sinned—that she may have slept with Joseph—but we know that Sophie is still a virgin. Yet, Sophie still feels guilty enough to ask the Virgin to "pray for us sinners," perhaps because she has lied to her mother.

Roman Catholicism became the official religion of Haiti in the mid-1800s. Even after this took place, however, Africans enslaved by the French continued practicing their original religion, Voodoo, by blending the identities of its gods with those of the Catholic saints. Thus, the Virgin Mary became associated with Erzulie, the Voodoo goddess of love, who manifests herself in three identities—as Erzulie Freda, a virgin goddess similar to the Virgin Mary; Erzulie Dantor, a goddess of jealousy and passion; and La Siren, associated with motherhood and the sea. It is important to note that here—and throughout her life so far—Sophie prays to Mary, rather than Erzulie, the worship of whom might help Sophie to think of herself as a more complex woman, with desires and passion and sexuality.

The story Sophie's mother tells her as she tests her is both a revelation and a threat. We learn that her mother knows Sophie is in love with Joseph, and in saying that Sophie is giving up a lifetime with her, her mother is threatening not to speak to Sophie again if she chooses to be with Joseph.

Book 2, Chapter 12

Book 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Sophie does not tell Joseph what happened. He goes to Providence and stays away for five weeks. When he returns, Sophie avoids him, hoping that he will forget her. One day, he bangs on the door for two hours until she finally opens it. He tells her he is leaving for good after next week, and he asks if she wants anything from his house. She says no.

Sophie listens to the wailing of Joseph's music next door. Her mother has not spoken to her since she began the tests. Feeling alone and lost, Sophie goes to the kitchen to retrieve the mortar and pestle her mother uses to crush spices. She takes the pestle to bed with her and hugs it to her chest. She thinks of a story she once heard about a woman who never stopped bleeding. After twelve years, the woman decided to ask Erzulie what to do. The woman realized that in order to stop bleeding she had to give up her right to be a human being. Erzulie asked her what form of life she wanted to take. The woman chose a butterfly. Erzulie transformed her and she never bled again. Thinking of the woman who became a butterfly, Sophie breaks her hymen with the pestle.

The next time her mother tries to test her she fails. She tells Sophie to go to Joseph. Sophie does, though her body aches, the wound she made with the pestle causing her to limp. They run off to get married.

Book 2, Chapter 12 Analysis

The story of the woman who would not stop bleeding symbolizes Sophie's feelings and the actions she takes. In breaking her own hymen, she means to stop her own bleeding —her mother's test—and transform herself into a butterfly, an adult woman free from the control of her mother and—like Erzulie—allowed to love as she pleased. Unfortunately, the only way she knows to free her leaves her physically damaged.

Book 3, Chapter 13

Book 3, Chapter 13 Summary

The third book opens with an older Sophie in Haiti with her daughter Brigitte, on her way to La Nouvelle Dame Marie. The driver in the van is flirting with her, calling her beautiful. After she gets out of the van, she runs into a woman she used to know named Louise, who is selling cola on the side of the road. Some *Macoutes* climb into the van to have their lunch. Louise tries to sell Sophie a pig, but Sophie declines, and then asks Louise if she has seen her aunt Atie. Louise says no, but recognizes her as Sophie, and they make small talk, Louise telling Sophie her aunt has learned to read and write. As they talk, the *Macoutes* in the van begin arguing and throwing food. Sophie tells Louise she is a secretary back home, but has not worked since the baby. Atie appears at the crossroads, and Sophie lets her hold Brigitte. Atie says the baby looks like Sophie's mother.

Book 3, Chapter 13 Analysis

Danticat skips several years to open this chapter, because the events during that time are not central to the plot; rather, she uses the passage of time to create suspense. At this point, we do not yet know how old Sophie is, or how long it has been since she ran off with Joseph. Nor do we know why Sophie is visiting, or why Louise is so obsessed with selling things. These facts will be revealed in time.

The behavior of the *Macoutes*—their utter disregard for the property of others—and the fact that no one tries to challenge them foreshadow the fact that the violence, which we only saw near the airport before Sophie left Haiti, has now come to this village.

Book 3, Chapter 14

Book 3, Chapter 14 Summary

On the walk home, Atie and Sophie talk about Brigitte and how strong she is. Sophie asks Atie if what Louise said was true, if she has really learned to read and write. Atie says sometimes she writes poems. Atie asks if Sophie's mother has met Brigitte. Sophie says no; they do not talk.

At her grandmother's house, Sophie drops her suitcase on the porch. Her grandmother is teary-eyed. Sophie says she named the girl Brigitte Ifé after her. Grandme Ifé looks closely at her, and she says it is a miracle visits her relatives by looking into this face.

Book 3, Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter is thick with the theme of mother- and daughterhood, in the discussion about Sophie and her mother's falling out, Atie's talk about Louise's mother's death, and in the implication by both Atie and Grandme Ifé that Brigitte looks just like Sophie's mother.

Book 3, Chapter 15

Book 3, Chapter 15 Summary

At dinner, Grandme Ifé asks if Sophie's mother still cooks Haitian food. Sophie says she does not know. Ifé lowers her eyes. Then, Ifé and Atie have an argument about Atie's reading lessons, which apparently occur at night, and far away. Ifé says Atie is like a devil, the way she goes about so free in the night. Atie says she was not born being able to read. Ifé says most people are born with everything they need. Atie says she was born short of her share. Ifé says Atie can complain to her makers when she meets them in Guinea. Atie says they can hear her from here, and yells at them right there at the kitchen table. Ifé is shocked.

Finally, Ifé asks Atie to read to them before she goes. Atie reads the poem Sophie wrote on that Mother's Day card to her so many years ago:

My mother is a daffodil,

limber and strong as one.

My mother is a daffodil,

but in the wind, iron strong.

That night, after Atie leaves, as Sophie gets ready for bed, she hears her grandmother mumbling in her sleep, just like her mother used to, asking some unknown person to leave her alone. Sophie asks her daughter if she is going to remember this, if she is going to be mad at her mother for severing her from her father, and if she is going to inherit her mother's problems.

Much later, Atie comes home. Sophie hears her giggling in the yard. Sophie thinks it sounds as if she has been drinking. Ifé yells at Atie when she comes inside, and asks Atie if she wants Sophie to respect her. Atie says Sophie is old enough; she does not have to be a saint for her anymore.

Book 3, Chapter 15 Analysis

Danticat explores the similarities and conflicts between mothers and daughters in this chapter. Grandme Ifé is shown to mumble in her sleep just like Sophie's mother; Sophie asks her daughter if she, too, will inherit her mother's problems. Atie and Ifé are shown arguing about Atie's purity and behavior; an issue similar to what Sophie and her mother always argued about.

Atie's giggling in the yard is the first sign that she is doing more than learning to read at night. More will be revealed as the novel progresses.

Finally, Sophie's question to her daughter—whether Brigitte will be mad at her for severing her from her father—sheds some light on why Sophie is in Haiti. Apparently, she has come—at least in part—to get away from Joseph. Danticat's choice to have Sophie use the word "sever," indicates that Sophie is planning, or at least considering, severing ties with Joseph.

Book 3, Chapter 16

Book 3, Chapter 16 Summary

Sophie gets up in the morning to watch the sun rise. She bathes outside, mentioning that she has felt fat since she had the baby. Her grandmother calls to her from her room. Answering her, Sophie notices a statue of Erzulie on Ifé's dresser. Sophie retrieves her daughter from Atie's room, where Atie is bouncing her on the bed. After Sophie bathes and changes the baby, she sees her grandmother naked outside in the bath shack, through the window. Sophie notes her grandmother's curved spine and the pineapple-sized hump which is not visible through her clothing. She thinks of the egg-sized mounds her mother once developed in her breasts.

Book 3, Chapter 16 Analysis

It is important that Sophie sees her grandmother's statue of Erzulie on the dresser. This entire chapter, along with the image of the complex goddess on the dresser of the family matriarch, serves as a reminder that the women of Sophie's family are physical beings. Sophie feels fat as she bathes. Atie bounces Brigitte on the bed. Brigitte needs a sponge bath and changing. Ifé stands naked outside in the bathhouse, her elderly, deformed body exposed for Sophie to see. Sophie thinks of the breast cancer her mother developed. No matter how pure and spiritual they might aspire to be, these women cannot escape their flesh.

Book 3, Chapter 17

Book 3, Chapter 17 Summary

It is breakfast. Atie keeps her head down as she eats. Sophie does not eat much. Grandme Ifé and Sophie go to the market, where they buy beans. Louise, at her stand selling colas, asks if they have come to buy her pig. Ifé and Sophie ignore her.

At the market, they witness an argument between a *Macoute* and a coal vendor. The *Macoute* slams the back of his gun into the vendor's ribs. Ifé tells Sophie they should get out of there—she knows what happens next. On the way home, Ifé talks about Atie's recent behavior. She says Atie has changed a lot, and not just by learning to read.

Book 3, Chapter 17 Analysis

Atie's cowed or seemingly repentant behavior at breakfast, along with Ifé's and Sophie's discussion on the way home from the market, furthers the suspicion that Atie is doing more than getting reading lessons. The argument between the *Macoute* and the coal vendor begins a return by Danticat to her earlier exploration of the political situation in Haiti. Louise's aggressive salesmanship, which remains unexplained, is even more apparent in this chapter.

Book 3, Chapter 18

Book 3, Chapter 18 Summary

Tante Atie sits on the rocker with Brigitte on her lap. Sophie says she did not realize Atie would remember the words from the card for that long. Atie says if you have something precious, then you do not forget it. Atie gets up to go to the market. Grandme Ifé warns her about the dispute they witnessed earlier between the *Macoutes* and the coal vendor. Atie says she has to go get a remedy for the lump in her calf. A boy wanders into the yard. Ifé calls him Eliab and gives him water.

That night, Grandme Ifé cooks beans. Sophie feels fat and guilty after supper. Grandme asks her why she left her husband so suddenly. Sophie says she has not left him for good. Ifé asks if she was having trouble with her marital duties. Sophie admits she could not perform, because it was painful. Ifé asks if her husband is a good man. Sophie says yes, very much so, but she has no desire and feels like sex is evil. Ifé asks her if her mother ever tested her. Sophie says she would not call it that; she would call it humiliation. She has become so ashamed of her body she does not want Joseph or anyone else to see it.

That night, Ifé tells a story to a group of neighborhood boys. Sophie hears the story through her bedroom window. It is about a lark that fell in love with a little girl. He began giving her pomegranates for the honor of looking at her face. This went on for some days. One day, the lark offered her two pomegranates if she would just kiss him. From then on, she got two pomegranates. The lark was satisfied with that for a while, until one day when he told the girl he wanted to take her to a faraway land. As soon as the girl got on his back, he told her there was a king in the faraway land who would die if he did not have a little girl's heart. The little girl said she had left her heart at home, that all little girls always leave their hearts at home. The bird took her home and put her on the ground. Then he waited for her to come back with her heart. The girl ran all the way to her family and never came back to the bird.

Book 3, Chapter 18 Analysis

When Sophie tells Ifé that she has not left Joseph for good, Ifé knows very quickly what is wrong: her first question is whether Sophie is having trouble with her marital duties. Her understanding of Sophie's problem implies that this is a common problem with women in her family, perhaps even one that Ifé experienced herself. Her second question, after Sophie explains that she has no desire and feels like sex is evil, is whether her mother tested her. This is odd because it implies Grandme Ifé understands the negative effect that testing has on girls, and yet we know from what Martine told Sophie that Ifé tested her own daughters. Perhaps Ifé only came to understand the negative effects of testing later in life, after she had raised her own daughters, or perhaps Ifé knew of no other way to ensure that her daughters remained pure.

The story Ifé tells the neighborhood boys appears to be a retelling of Sophie's story. She is the little girl, Joseph is the lark who wants her heart, and she has run away from him all the way back to her family in Haiti. Sophie finds herself unable to love Joseph, to enjoy being with her husband in the way that a wife should. She may never be able to do this, unless she addresses the issues she and her mother brought with them from Haiti: the obsession with purity, the testing, the feeling that sex is evil and that good women do not desire. Like the little girl, Sophie left her heart at home.

Book 3, Chapter 19

Book 3, Chapter 19 Summary

The next day, Louise shouts Atie's name from the road. Louise plays with Brigitte and then Atie and Louise leave. Sophie takes a picture of her grandmother. Ifé objects mildly, remarking that the camera might trap her soul. Sophie explains that she wants Brigitte to know how much each of the women in her family is in her. After Ifé goes back inside, Sophie pulls out her wallet and looks at the pictures in it. She thinks about how she almost wouldn't let Joseph take pictures of her after Brigitte was born, because she was even more ashamed of her body than usual, both from the Caesarian section stitches and the flab all over her. She looks at a picture of her and Joseph on their wedding day. It took place one month after they ran off, one month after the incident with the pestle. Right after they arrived in Providence, she had spent two days in the hospital with stitches between her legs. Joseph could not understand that she had done it as an act of freedom. By the wedding night, the ache and soreness still had not disappeared. Joseph was very kind about it; he asked Sophie several times if she really wanted to go through with it, but Sophie felt like it was something she owed him. Their first painful time together in bed had given them Brigitte.

Book 3, Chapter 19 Analysis

Sophie's comment that she is taking pictures of each of the women in the family so that Brigitte will know how much each of the women is in her echoes the theme introduced earlier about a woman's connection to her ancestors and the conflicts and similarities passed down through the womb. Sophie's reflection on her painful wedding night and the revelation that their first time together gave them the child indicates that Sophie's problems with her marital duties are not only psychological—due to her sexual shame—but also physical.

Book 3, Chapter 20

Book 3, Chapter 20 Summary

That night, Louise comes to supper, bringing a pig as a gift. Over dinner, Atie announces that a cassette arrived for the family at the post. It is from Sophie's mother. Martine talks about the money she sent last month, then mentions that Joseph called her worried about Sophie because he thought Sophie might have come to spend time with her. Atie asks Sophie if it is not about time for she and her mother to reconcile.

Book 3, Chapter 20 Analysis

Finally, Sophie's past has caught up with her. Martine's cassette is a device used to push the plot forward. People in Sophie's life have begun wondering where she and Brigitte are. In addition, a push for Sophie and Martine to reconcile has begun.

It is odd that Louise—a woman who until recently was so obsessed with selling her pigs—has brought one to the family as a gift, but no explanation is given in this chapter.

Book 3, Chapter 21

Book 3, Chapter 21 Summary

Just before dinner, Louise ties the pig to a pole in the yard. After the meal, everyone sits on the back porch and listens to Atie read a love poem Louise helped her translate from French from her notebook. After reading the poem, Atie and Louise walk off into the night like silhouettes on a postcard.

Later that night, Atie comes home. Sophie finds her on the steps feeding the pig. Atie talks about how her life is empty here, but was painful in Croix-des-Rosets too. She says the oldest child is supposed to walk at the head of her mother's coffin, but she is tired. "They train you to find a husband," she says. "They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you are peeing too loud. If you pee loud, it means you have got big spaces between your legs. They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing."

The next morning, Louise runs over, sweating and upset, to tell Atie the *Macoutes* killed Dessalines, the coal vendor. Atie massages Louise's scalp. Louise says, inexplicably, that is why she has to leave.

Dessalines' death gets Sophie thinking about the *Macoutes:* how they roam the streets with their Uzi machine guns, how ordinary criminals have to sneak around in the night, but the *Macoutes* do not. Her father, she thinks, may have been a *Macoute*. All she knows is that he was a stranger with a black bandana over his face and hair the color of eggplants. Sophie's mother was sixteen when he grabbed her on the way home from school, dragging her into the cane fields and threatened to shoot her if she looked up. For months, she was terrified that he would kill in her sleep, or tear her baby out of her. When she had nightmare, "she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh."

Sophie remembers what little else she knows about how these events affected her mother: she tried to kill herself several times when Sophie was a baby, because the nightmares were too terrible. Then, Atie took Sophie when Martine moved to New York.

The next day, Sophie hears her grandmother recording a reply cassette to her mother. She tells Martine not to worry about Sophie, and then calls to her from the next room. Sophie answers, and her voice—as well as Brigitte's accompanying shrieking—is recorded on the tape. Now Martine will know Sophie is there.

Book 3, Chapter 21 Analysis

Atie's behavior is obviously getting worse. When Sophie finds her feeding the pig on the front steps, Atie complains about the way women are raised in Haiti and the way it has left her life empty. She did everything right, but she still never was able to marry. Her

depression may also be related to what is going on with her friend Louise, with whom Atie has obviously become very close.

The comment Louise makes the following day while Atie is stroking her scalp, that this—what the *Macoutes* did to the coal vendor—is why she is leaving, is our first clue as to why Louise is always selling something, and another reason Atie may be upset: Louise is saving money to buy a ticket off the island.

Sophie's reflections on what happened to her mother are the first details we get on how Sophie was conceived, why she was left with Atie, and why her mother has nightmares. The mention of her mother's earlier suicide attempts foreshadows events to come.

Book 3, Chapter 22

Book 3, Chapter 22 Summary

The next morning, Sophie sits on the porch, watching a pack of rainbow butterflies. Her grandmother goes to the cemetery—her face covered in ashes, wearing a black veil—to pay her last respects to Dessalines. Tante Atie does not come home for supper. Ifé and Sophie eat their dinner outside in the yard, watching a light move back and forth in the distance. Ifé explains that a baby is being born. The light is a midwife making trips from the shack to the yard, where a pot is boiling. If it is a boy, the lantern will be left on all night and the father will stay with the child. If it is a girl, the lantern will go out, and the mother will hold the daughter alone. About an hour later, Sophie sees the light go out.

Book 3, Chapter 22 Analysis

The pack of rainbow butterflies hovering near the front porch bring to mind the legend about the woman Erzulie turned into a butterfly to free her from bleeding. Because of what that legend meant to Sophie, butterflies have come to symbolize transformations, particularly those that liberate women from the male-dominated culture that brings them pain. Here, the butterflies hovering on the porch suggest or foreshadow that some sort of positive change may be on the way for Sophie. That suggestion, however, is complicated by the birth of the baby girl in the distance, whose father, disappointed that she is not a boy, turns out the lantern just as Grandme Ifé predicts. Even if Sophie's life changes for the better, Danticat seems to be implying, girls will continue to be born in Haiti, where they may grow up wishing they, too, could turn into butterflies.

Book 3, Chapter 23

Book 4, Chapter 23 Summary

That night, Atie does not come home. In the morning, her bed is still made. She comes up the road with Louise. Sophie offers to make dinner: rice, black beans and herring sauce (her mother's favorite meal). She is surprised at how fast her memory of how to make the meal comes back. Atie eats four servings of Sophie's meal, and then goes for her reading lesson. Sophie and her grandmother sit and listen to night sounds. Grandme asks Sophie if she can hear the girl in the distance. She says she can hear her in the bushes with a boy. She says the boy and girl are saying good night. A moment passes. Sophie asks her what is happening now. Grandme Ifé says the girl has gone home. Her mother is pulling her inside to test her.

Sophie remembers the story of the rich man who married a poor black girl, because—out of hundreds of prettier girls—she alone was untouched. For their wedding night, he bought the whitest sheets, but the girl did not bleed. The man had his honor to defend. He did not want to face the town the next morning without bloodstained sheets. He took a knife and cut her between her legs. The girl bled to death.

Sophie tries to ignore the memories that come to her of her mother testing her, but she cannot. Whenever it happened, Sophie *doubled*—pretended she was somewhere else. She did the same thing when she and Joseph were together.

Sophie asks her grandmother why mothers test their children. Ifé says a mother is responsible for her daughter's purity. Sophie tells her grandmother she hated the tests, and now when she is with her husband, it gives her such nightmares she has to bite her tongue. Her grandmother says this will go away. Sophie says it will not. Grandme Ifé says the girl in the distance passed her examination. She tells Sophie everything a mother does she does for her child's own good. She says Sophie has a child of her own now. She cannot carry the pain forever. Sophie says she will go home to her husband soon.

Book 3, Chapter 23 Analysis

This chapter is very similar to the previous chapter, thematically. Both chapters have Sophie and Ifé sitting out on the porch at night, observing an event occurring to women in the distance. In the previous chapter, the event was the birth of a baby girl. In this chapter, it is a teenaged girl experimenting with a boy, and then dealing with her mother afterward. There is something hopeful about each chapter: in the previous one, the butterflies suggest a kind of hope for Sophie's future; in this chapter, Ifé tells Sophie her hatred of sex will go away and she cannot carry the pain forever. However, both chapters also serve to remind Sophie and the reader that even if Sophie overcomes her issues, girls in Haiti will go on facing what she has faced.

Book 3, Chapter 24

Book 3, Chapter 24 Summary

Three days later, Sophie's mother comes to visit. Sophie stands on the porch as Atie and Ifé run to her mother in the yard to hug her. Sophie's mother says when she got the cassette she decided to come help Ifé take care of her funeral affairs, like she had promised, and at the same time visit Sophie. She walks to the porch and kisses Sophie on the cheek. Awkwardly, she examines Brigitte. She tells Sophie she got all the pictures she sent. When Sophie asks why she did not answer, her mother explains that she could not find the words. She tells Sophie Ifé asked her to come and make things right between them. She says Joseph is worried about her.

Book 3, Chapter 24 Analysis

Sophie's mother's visit is not altogether surprising, as Ifé made her quite aware of Sophie's presence in the cassette she sent. The tension between Sophie and her mother is not surprising either, considering the fact that the last time they talked was just after Sophie failed the testing, right before she ran off to marry Joseph. Nothing is resolved in this chapter, but the opportunity for resolution has now appeared.

Book 3, Chapter 25

Book 3, Chapter 25 Summary

Sophie's mother and Ifé decide to see the notary the next day to make the land papers show all the people it belongs to. That night, Atie does not go to Louise's house. Instead, she sits on the porch with Sophie's mother. They look at the sky and talk about their relationship with their parents—Atie was their father's favorite. They also talk about the stories their parents used to tell them about the stars. Their father's stories described the stars as brave men who, when they fell, would fall in love with his daughters. In contrast, their mother's stories told of women who fell in love with the stars, and—after going up into the sky to meet them—found the men they had fallen in love with were monsters.

Book 3, Chapter 25 Analysis

This chapter serves to illustrate the relationship between Martine, Sophie's mother, and her sister Atie. Atie chooses to stay home to visit with her sister, instead of seeing Louise. They were obviously very close once. It is interesting to note the contrast between the stores their mother and father told them. Their father's is happy; their mother's instills fear. It is as if their mother was unhappy with her lot as a woman, or was trying to keep her daughters frightened of men.

Book 3, Chapter 26

Book 3, Chapter 26 Summary

The next day, Sophie's mother and grandmother leave early for the notary. Sophie calls Eliab to go to the market to buy her some milk. He comes back with the milk for Sophie and a mango; at the same time, Sophie's mother and grandmother arrive. Sophie's grandmother jokes that Eliab wants to marry her. Sophie notices that her mother and grandmother are in very good spirits. They explain that the land has been equally divided between Sophie's mother, Atie, Sophie and Brigitte. Sophie's mother asks where Atie is. Sophie says she went out. Ifé says the gods are going to punish her for Atie's ways.

Atie is home when Sophie goes to bed, but everything in her room is rustling, and Sophie does not want to disturb her. She overhears her mother and grandmother talking. Her mother says she wants to be buried in Haiti, the day after she dies, without a mass. Her grandmother tells Martine she should make up with Sophie, so she will carry out her wishes. Her mother comes into her room. Sophie pretends to be asleep. She can hear her mother crying.

The next morning, her mother comes into her room while she is changing Brigitte. Sophie blurts out the question that has been on her mind: Why did her mother put her through those tests? Martine says she has no excuse. She did it because her mother did it to her, even though she knows it was horrible. The one good thing about the rape was that it made her mother's testing stop. She says she relives both—the testing and the rape—every day. Then she tells Sophie she wants to be her friend, because Sophie saved her life each time she woke her up from a nightmare.

That day, her grandmother buys the pig from Louise. At dinner, Tante Atie is upset. Louise took her grandmother's money and left the valley, without even saying goodbye.

Book 3, Chapter 26 Analysis

Finally, Sophie confronts her mother. The first time her mother comes to her in this chapter, Sophie ignores her, pretending to be asleep. However, the second time Martine comes into her room, Sophie confronts her. To Sophie's disappointment, her mother's answer is not an apology, but an explanation: it was the only way she knew to raise a daughter. The fact that she was actually happy that the rape made the testing stop draws a parallel between rape and testing, and shows just how terrible Danticat believes the tradition is. When Martine says that she relives both the testing and rape every day, and thanks Sophie from waking her from her nightmares, we realize the rape may not be the only reason for her nightmares; she may dream of the testing, too.

Book 3, Chapter 27

Book 3, Chapter 27 Summary

That night, Sophie asks Atie if Brigitte can sleep in her room. Atie answers her with her back to the wall, as if she does not want Sophie to see her cry. She tells Sophie she was a fool to think Louise was her friend.

The next day, the van takes Sophie, her mother, and their bags to Port-au-Prince. They kiss Atie and Ifé goodbye. Atie tells Sophie to treat her mother well; she does not have her forever. Ifé makes a comment about all the faces she sees in Brigitte. The van pulls away slowly. Sophie describes the sights as they go, including the hill in the distance, the one Tante Atie used to call Guinea: the place where all the women in her family hoped to see one another again, in the afterlife.

Book 3, Chapter 27 Analysis

Sophie's last view of her birthplace is poignant. Because her mind turns to the idea of Guinea, the place where women meet again in the afterlife, we realize this may be the last time Sophie sees Tante Atie and her grandmother.

Book 4, Chapter 28

Book 4, Chapter 28 Summary

On the plane, Sophie's mother throws up. Sophie asks if it is the cancer. Her mother says no, it is being back in Haiti. At lunch, her mother comments that Sophie does not eat much. Sophie explains she has bulimia, a disease that causes you not to eat at all, then eat too much, or binge. Her mother says that is normal. When Sophie first met her, she was thin from the cancer. Before that, when she first came to America, she ate too much, too. It was because in Haiti you did not know when your next meal would come. It took being in America for a while before she got used to the fact that she did not have to worry when next she would eat.

When they arrive back in New York, Brigitte is asleep. They take a cab to her mother's apartment. On the answering machine, Marc has left her many messages. Sophie calls Joseph. He asks if she is coming home and she says yes. He asks her why she left. Sophie says she left because they cannot *be* together. He says he can wait. It will get better over time. Sophie changes the subject.

Book 4, Chapter 28 Analysis

This is the first time Sophie speaks in clear terms about her body image. Sophie obviously hates her body; her actions so long ago with the pestle and her inability to enjoy being with Joseph are proof of that. Now, we realize this self-hatred has manifested itself in bulimia. Sophie's mother tries to explain it away by saying she, too, binged a lot when she first came to America, but it does not quite explain everything.

Book 4, Chapter 29

Book 4, Chapter 29 Summary

Sophie's mother cooks her a big breakfast. Sophie picks at her food. She remarks that her mother does not look happy to be home. Her mother confesses that she is pregnant, but afraid. The baby inside her gives her nightmares. Sophie asks her if she is going to have it taken out. Her mother crosses herself. She says every time she thinks about *that,* she cannot breathe. Sophie asks her mother if she has the nightmares when she is with Marc. Her mother says yes, but she pretends she does not. She does not like being alone. Sophie offers to stay with her longer. Her mother says no; Joseph wants her home. She lends Sophie her car, to guarantee that she will come back and see her. As Sophie drives home, she thinks about the first year of her marriage. The whole time she had suicidal thoughts. She woke up in the night with her own nightmares. Sophie looks back at her daughter sleeping in the back seat. She hopes that Brigitte will always be able to sleep, unlike her mother, and her mother's mother, and her mother before her.

Book 4, Chapter 29 Analysis

Martine's pregnancy has brought back her nightmares of her rape, stronger than ever, and for some reason—perhaps because she does not want to bother him with her issues or drive him away—she has not explained this to Marc. We begin to see more of a parallel between mother and daughter. Both women wake in the night with nightmares, about which they do not fully inform their significant other. Both women have trouble sleeping and suicidal thoughts. The idea of inheritance—of suffering passed down from woman to woman over many generations—is being explored again, especially when Sophie looks back at her own daughter and hopes she will not pass the suffering to her.

Book 4, Chapter 30

Book 4, Chapter 30 Summary

When Sophie pulls into the house, Joseph nearly falls over himself as he rushes out to see her. She asks him if he misses her. He says yes, but he wants to kill her. Later, he asks her if she left on a whim or if she had planned it a long time. Sophie says they were not connecting physically. Joseph asks if she found an aphrodisiac in Haiti. Sophie says she does not need one; she just needs understanding. Joseph says he does understand—she is reluctant to start but after a while gives in, and seems to enjoy it.

That night, Joseph and Sophie watch a movie about two lovers. Sophie tells Joseph her mother is pregnant.

The next day, Sophie takes Brigitte to the doctor, to make sure she did not catch anything on the trip. The child is fine. Sophie calls Joseph to tell him. After dinner, she calls her mother, who asks when they are coming up. Sophie says soon. Then she asks about her mother's baby. Her mother asks her not to call it that. Sophie agrees to see her that weekend.

After she hangs up, she goes to bed with Joseph. As he pulls her toward him, she thinks about the *Marassas*, the doubling. She is not with Joseph on the bed. She is somewhere else. She is consoling her mother, who finally approves of her life. It is like they are finally twins in spirit, *Marassas*. After it is over, Joseph says she was good. Sophie says, "I kept my eyes closed so the tears wouldn't slip out."

Book 4, Chapter 30 Analysis

The idea of inheritance and the parallel between Sophie and her mother is continued here. Sophie's conversation with Joseph when they reunite shows that she is not able to be completely honest with him. Sophie does not correct Joseph when he states that though she is reluctant to be with him in the beginning, she seems to enjoy sex later. That evening, she has sex with him and we see that what we suspected is true—she does not enjoy it at all. Instead, she *doubles,* pretending to enjoy it, but thinking of other things. This time, she thinks of her mother, her twin. They share the same problems, the same nightmares and fears. Neither has been completely honest with the man in her life. However, when Joseph compliments Sophie on how good she was in bed, she takes a step toward honesty, by telling him how she really felt. This indicates that a transformation may be coming.

Book 4, Chapter 31

Book 4, Chapter 31 Summary

Sophie goes to her sexual phobia group. There are two other girls in the group with her. At the end of the meeting, they each write the name of their abuser on a sheet of paper and burn it. Sophie realizes she no longer feels guilty about burning her mother's name. She knows that her own pain and her mother's were only links in a long chain of pain. After the meeting, she feels broken, but a little closer to being free. When she gets home, Joseph shows her that Brigitte has learned to say "Dada."

Book 4, Chapter 31 Analysis

Sophie's understanding and lack of guilt over burning her mother's name indicate progress toward recovery. She understands now that her mother, and her mother before her, was only one link in a long chain of mothers, who each felt the same pain.

Book 4, Chapter 32

Book 4, Chapter 32 Summary

Sophie goes to see her therapist, who scolds her for disappearing so suddenly. Sophie tells her about her trip, and how she found out that her grandmother and her mother were all tested. Her therapist asks her if she ever hated her mother. Sophie says it was not hate. She says her mother wants to be good to her now, and she wants to be good to her mother. Sophie explains that her mother is pregnant, and it has brought back her nightmares of the rape. Her therapist asks if she went to the spot where her mother was raped during the trip. Sophie says, on the contrary, she ran past it.

Book 4, Chapter 32 Analysis

The suggestion of Sophie's therapist to return to the spot where her mother was raped as a way of confronting her demons will become important later in the book. Given that Danticat has placed considerable emphasis on the chain linking mother to daughter, this chapter suggests that it will only be when Sophie confronts her mother's demons that she can fully confront her own.

Book 4, Chapter 33

Book 4, Chapter 33 Summary

That weekend, Joseph and Sophie drive to her mother's with Brigitte in the back. Over dinner, Marc and her mother are very kind. The four of them make small talk. They talk about what it means to be African, Southern, and Southern African-American. Her mother sings an old Negro spiritual:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

A long ways from home.

The day ends quickly, and Sophie must leave before she finds out what her mother has decided to do about the baby. When she gets home, she finds two messages from her mother on the answering machine. When she calls her back, her mother tells her that last night the baby spoke to her. It had a man's voice, and it called her a whore. She is going to have it taken out the next day.

Book 4, Chapter 33 Analysis

The old Negro spiritual brings to mind Sophie's vision of the long chain of mothers, each causing the same pain to her daughters. Each daughter in that chain may feel that she is a "motherless child," because the pain her mother caused her damaged the link between the mother and the daughter.

Sophie's telephone conversation with her mother about how her unborn child talks to her is evidence that Martine is not doing well. Martine does not seem to be speaking metaphorically about the baby talking to her; she really seems to believe she has heard its voice. With her history of suicide attempts and visits to mental hospitals, this does not bode well.

Book 4, Chapter 34

Book 4, Chapter 34 Summary

Sophie goes back to her therapist and tells her she is worried about her mother. She explains about her mother's condition. Her therapist says Martine should see someone, or at the very least have an exorcism. She says it is very dangerous for her to go on like she is. She also suggests that the unborn child is proof of Sophie's mother's sexuality, something that neither Sophie nor her mother may be comfortable with. After the appointment, Sophie stops by the place where her sexual phobia group is held, and drinks tea by candlelight.

Book 4, Chapter 34 Analysis

Sophie's therapist's advice—that Martine should see a therapist immediately or at the very least, have an exorcism to try to confront her demons—confirms that Martine is in danger and thus heightens the suspense. After the appointment, Sophie feels the need to return to the room where her sexual phobia group is held. It is as if she wants to face her own demons.

Book 4, Chapter 35

Book 4, Chapter 35 Summary

As soon as she gets home, Joseph plays a message for her from the machine. It is Marc asking her to return his call. He says it is about her mother. Sophie calls him back, but he is not home. She is hysterical. When she finally does talk to him, all he says is he is sorry. She begs to speak to her mother, asking where she is, if she is in the hospital. Joseph says no; she is in the morgue. That morning, he found her on the floor of the bathroom. She had stabbed herself in the stomach seventeen times with a rusty knife.

Sophie goes to Brooklyn, leaving Brigitte with Joseph. She will not let him come with her. Marc asks her to find something for her mother to be buried in. Sophie chooses a bright red two-piece suit, the reddest of her mother's clothes:

It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them,* and killed *them.* She was the only woman with that power. It was too bright for a burial. If we had an open coffin at the funeral home, people would talk.

There would not be an open coffin. The service would be simple, like she wanted, and she would be buried in a bright red dress.

When Sophie arrives in Haiti, she sees her grandmother, sitting on the porch staring at the road. Ifé says she knew before she was told. She also knew that her daughter was pregnant, because of her gift.

They decide to have the funeral the next morning. They make a pot of tea and play cards. They sing a festive wake song about a ring that is passed from mother to daughter. Sophie realizes this is a common theme in Haitian songs.

The next day, they take Martine's coffin up the hill in a cart. People shake gourd rattles and talking drums. Sophie and her family throw dirt on the coffin as it is lowered.

Sophie runs into the cane fields. She takes her shoes off and beats down the cane. The funeral crowd and the cane workers watch her, as if she were possessed. However, her grandmother holds back the priest. Then she raises her voice. She asks, "*Ou libéré?"* Are you free? Sophie tries to answer, but the words will not come out. Her grandmother puts her hand on her shoulder and says:

"There is a place where women are buried in clothes the color of flames, where we drop coffee on the ground for those who went ahead, where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place, if you listen closely in the night, where you will hear your mother telling a story, and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free, my daughter?"

Now, her grandmother tells her, she will know how to answer.

Book 4, Chapter 35 Analysis

This long chapter contains both the climax of the novel and its resolution. The climax of a novel is the decisive moment in a novel or play, the event or decision that affects the action in a way that releases the novel's building tension. Sophie's mother's death is the climax of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* because it forces Sophie to return to Haiti and confront the demons she was unable to confront the first time. In other words, Sophie's mother's death sends Sophie on the road to recovery.

This is somewhat ironic, as the reader would not expect the death of a character's mother to have a positive effect on her life. However, taking a closer look at Sophie's complex relationship with her mother helps to explain why this is so. Though Sophie loved her, Sophie's mother is the person whose name she burned in her sexual phobia group. Though Sophie has come to forgive her for what she did, Sophie's mother was, in fact, her abuser.

Sophie's choice to bury her mother in red is an interesting one, because—as suggested earlier by Sophie's therapist—her mother was not comfortable with her sexuality. For the most part, this choice is symbolic. By choosing to bury her mother in a color more appropriate to Erzulie Dantor, the goddess of passion, than Erzulie Freda or the Virgin Mother, Sophie acknowledges and accepts both her mother's and her own sexuality.

The resolution of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* occurs when Sophie takes off her shoes and beats the cane during her mother's funeral. As suggested by her therapist, Sophie is confronting her demons. Though the priest does not understand, her grandmother—who holds him back—knows what she is doing. Afterward, when Ifé and Tante Atie ask her if she is free, Sophie cannot form the answer. Her grandmother's statements that "there is a place where women are buried in clothes the color of flames" and that "the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her" suggest the answer. Figuratively speaking, if there is a place where women are buried in red, then it is possible for women to accept and love their bodies and their sexuality. If there is a place where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother is dead, then perhaps her mother's tragic suicide has set Sophie free.

Characters

Tante Atie

Tante Atie, Sophie's aunt, raises her like a mother. Atie has never married, and carries the secret of a lost love: Monsieur Augustin, the village schoolteacher, once loved her, but married someone else. Illiterate and kind, Atie passes on folklore and family stories to Sophie, telling her that her mother left her in Haiti for a reason, that her mother loves her, but that circumstances out of her control led her to leave Sophie in Haiti for a while. By the end of the book her friend Louise, who may also be her lover, has taught her to read and write, and she is never without her notebook, in which she copies other writers' poems and writes her own. Despite the fact that she began this growth so late in life, she is a much stronger, more self-aware woman.

Martine Caco

Sophie's mother, who is recovering from breast cancer, works as an aide at a nursing home during the day and as a private health care aide at night. She came to the United States when Sophie was two, in an attempt to put Haiti behind her. She is constantly tormented by nightmares of a traumatic event that occurred when she was sixteen: a strange man, wearing a mask, took her into a cane field and brutally raped her. This resulted in Sophie's birth.

Martine was also sexually traumatized by her mother, Grandma Ife, who tested her for virginity until after the rape. Ife meant well when she did this traditional practice, but it resulted in lifelong emotional and sexual scars in Martine. Even though Martine hated being tested and knows that it deeply hurt her, she also does it to her daughter, Sophie, in a desperate attempt to keep her chaste. She is frightened and disturbed by her daughter's growth into a woman, and does all she can to keep her young and away from men. When Sophie becomes interested in a neighbor, Martine is deeply hurt, viewing this as a break in the mother-daughter bond.

Sophie has difficulty integrating her Haitian heritage, which both comforts and frightens her, with her new life in America. Still suffering from nightmares brought on by the rape that resulted in Sophie's birth, and from her mother's "testing" of her virginity when she was a girl, she is burdened by fears and sexual anguish. A new pregnancy reminds her of the rape and increases her nightmares, and she eventually seeks escape from her pain by committing suicide.

Sophie Caco

Sophie Caco, the narrator of the novel, is twelve years old when the novel begins, being raised by her aunt, Tante Atie, in a small Haitian town; her mother has emigrated to the United States. Born after her mother was raped, she doesn't know her father, and

because her mother left Haiti when Sophie was two, she doesn't know her mother either. As a child, she imagines her mother as being like the Haitian goddess Erzulie, "the lavish Virgin Mother. . .Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn."

In truth, however, her mother is a wounded woman, with problems of her own, and Sophie must learn to come to terms with them, as they are handed down to her from past generations. "I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one," Sophie says, reflecting on the burden of the past, the emphasis on family honor, chastity, and duty that fall on the women in her family, "a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head."

Throughout the novel, she struggles to come to terms with her family's history of pain and loss, to be comfortable with her body and her sexuality, and to avoid passing on her own and her mother's nightmares to her daughter. In addition, when she moves to Brooklyn, she must decide for herself what she wants to keep from her Haitian heritage, and what traditions she wants to drop. In particular, she is frightened and confused by her mother's traditional Haitian practice of testing her to ensure that she is still virgin, and by her mother's mental and spiritual illness.

The rift between Sophie and her mother widens when she falls in love with Joseph, a neighbor who is much older than she is. Ultimately, she chooses to be with him, asserting her own knowledge of what is good and right for her, against inflexible tradition; this move marks her as becoming Americanized.

Joseph describes Sophie as a "deep, thoughtful person," and she is, describing events in a poetic and vivid way, feeling all her emotions deeply, and reflecting on them in solitude.

Marc Chevalier

Marc is Martine's boyfriend, a prosperous Haitian immigrant and lawyer who helped her get her green card. He lives in a well-to-do neighborhood in Brooklyn, unlike Sophie and her mother. He is very traditionally Haitian in outlook, particularly regarding food, and once drove to Canada because he heard of a good Haitian restaurant there. Martine says of him, "Marc is one of those men who will never recover from not eating his [mother's] cooking. If he could get her out of her grave to make him dinner, he would do it." Apart from his wealth and his interest in food, he is not very clearly drawn; although he is the father of a child Martine conceives later in the book, he seems unconnected to the horrifying events connected with her suicide, and only appears again after she is dead.

Grandma Ife

Ife is Sophie's grandmother, a widow who lives in a Haitian village that is so remote that it can only be reached on foot or by mule. A very traditional woman, she has worn black

ever since her husband died. When her daughters, Atie and Martine, were young, she followed the traditional Haitian practice of testing their virginity each week, resulting in unintentional sexual and emotional scars in both her daughters. She is a storyteller, passing on old folktales, family stories, and healing wisdom. When Sophie asks her about the testing, she explains that a mother is responsible for her daughter's chastity, and that when a girl is married, if she is not a virgin her new husband can shame the entire family and bring bad luck to them. She doesn't question the practice at all; to her, it's simply an obligation to keep girls "clean," and the right thing to do. However, when she realizes how much the custom has hurt Sophie, she gives her a statue of the goddess Erzulie and tells her, "My heart, it weeps like a river, for the pain we have caused you."

Joseph

Sophie's neighbor, a jazz musician from Louisiana who is the same age as her mother, falls in love with her because she seems like a deep, thoughtful person. She also falls in love with him, although her mother has forbidden her to date. Eventually, he becomes her husband and the father of her child. Like Sophie, he is deep and thoughtful, and this is what attracts her to him; she realizes that he is the kind of man who would be interested in a woman for more than her looks. She chooses wisely, as he is indeed a kind, wise, and loving man. Later in the book, when she leaves him because physical intimacy with him reminds her of her sexual problems, he is understanding, welcomes her back, and encourages her to stay with him and go to therapy to sort things out.

Themes

Immigration and Assimilation

Throughout the book, Sophie and Martine travel from Haiti to the United States, and back to Haiti. The contrasts between the two settings and cultures are vivid and all-encompassing, and as both women note, it is difficult to find your way in a foreign country. Both women learn to speak English - which Grandma Ife refers to as "that cling-clang talk," and which Sophie says sounds "like rocks falling in a stream," but they also continue to speak their own language, Creole. They eat American food because Haitian food reminds them of the emotional pain they endured in Haiti, but at the same time they long for traditional dishes with ingredients like cassava, ginger, beans and rice, and spices. Sophie hates her school because it is a French school, and she feels she might as well have stayed in Haiti - but she is also uneasy because American students harass her for being Haitian. Sophie's difficulty with assimilation is also shown by her conflicting attitude toward gender roles: she believes women should be traditionally chaste and sheltered, but talks disparagingly of traditional Haitian men, who, she says, will want a woman to stay at home, cooking Haitian food.

Eventually, Sophie becomes Americanized: when she returns to Haiti, a cabdriver is surprised that she speaks Creole so well, and when Martine shows up too, the two of them speak English together without realizing it.

Generational Bonds and Conflicts

"The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea," Martine tells Sophie, and generational bonds and conflicts between mothers and daughters are a major theme in the book. Grandma Ife, the matriarch of the clan, followed the traditional Haitian practice of ensuring her daughters' chastity and "tested" them each month to make sure their hymens were still intact. This resulted in lifelong emotional scars for both daughters, particularly Martine, whose sexual guilt, pain, and fear only increased when she was brutally raped at age sixteen. Although Martine knows firsthand how emotionally and physically painful the testing is, she still does it to her daughter Sophie, passing on the family curse of sexual phobias and nightmares. When Sophie finally asks why she did this, she says that she has no real explanation or good reason; she only did it to Sophie because it was done to her. Interestingly, although Grandma Ife was also presumably a victim of this practice, she does not seem to be bothered by it, presumably because she has accepted a much more traditional life than either her daughters or Sophie. Sophie realizes that there is a way out of this pain: she manages to exorcise the fear of her mother's rapist, and she vows not to test her daughter or pass on the nightmares and eating disorders that affect both her and her mother. Rather than unthinkingly accepting tradition, she knows that she must shape her own life. She says of her family's emotional pain, "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares."

Emotional Pain and Liberation

Throughout the book, the female characters suffer from emotional pain that prevents them from living fully, but they seek liberation and in some cases find it. At the beginning of the book, Tante Atie is resigned to being illiterate and unloved, but several years later a friend, who also seems to be her lover, has taught her to read. She carries a notebook everywhere so that she can copy poems and write down her thoughts, and even writes a poem of her own.

Martine also seeks liberation from her pain, but she is unable to do this in a constructive way. For a while things seem to have improved for her: she's involved with Marc, who is a good man, and makes enough money to send some home to Haiti every month. Sophie's arrival disturbs her, however, since Sophie resembles her father, the rapist, and Martine is also disturbed by Sophie's growth into a woman and her relationship with a man. When Martine gets pregnant, it reawakens all her memories of the rape, her pregnancy with Sophie, and her mother's sexual testing. Unable to find a cure for her emotional pain, she eventually commits suicide.

Sophie inherits her mother's fear, sexual guilt, and nightmares, but through a therapy group, she is able by the end of the book to move beyond them and to prevent her daughter from inheriting them. She also realizes that her mother, despite her suicide and the testing she inflicted on Sophie, was a strong, capable woman who was simply overwhelmed by circumstance.

Style

Point of View

Sophie's story is told in the first person and is largely chronological, although some events are not explained or explored until later in the book, when other events give the explanations more depth and context. Sophie is twelve when the novel begins, and nineteen when it ends; the book is told from the grown Sophie's viewpoint. Skillfully, Danticat conveys a child's sense of the world in the early chapters, and a more mature view in the later ones, where Sophie becomes more aware of the suffering of other women in her family and how it relates to her own emotional pain.

Setting

Set in Haiti and in Brooklyn, the book is steeped in Haitian culture, language, folklore, cuisine, and customs. Danticat's description of Haiti is lush and vivid, filled with colors, smells, and sensory experiences, but with an undercurrent of fear brought on by dangerous political unrest and deep poverty. As a child, however, she is largely sheltered from this fear. The bright colors, tropical tastes and scents, and warmth of Haiti are sharply contrasted with the cold, gray, graffiti-covered, and run-down Brooklyn neighborhood she moves to. In addition, in Haiti she is part of a small-town neighborhood where everyone knows everyone else, and where her grandmother and aunt tell family stories and folktales. In Brooklyn, her life in her mother's small apartment still revolves around Haiti, as her mother shops in Haitian stores, sends money home to Haiti, insists that she stay away from American teenagers, and sends her to a French-speaking school. American students tease her, and because she spends all of her time either at school, church, or home, she doesn't have any friends, and also does not know any of her neighbors until, by stealth, she discovers Joseph's name.

Use of Myth and Folklore

Danticat does not directly use myth as a source for her story, but the book is infused with Haitian folklore and the presence of Haitian deities, particularly Erzulie, the goddess whose image is often mingled with that of the Virgin Mary, but who is also considered to be beautiful and sexually enticing. Erzulie, "the healer of all women and the desire of all men," who unites and reconciles these two images□the chaste and the sexual□embodies one of the major themes of the book, the need for sexual healing that all the women characters experience.

In addition, many folktales are told in the book, often as lessons or as ways of deepening the characters' understanding of real life. Sophie's grandmother tells her that some people have more trouble in their lives than others; this is because, though they don't know it, they are special people, spiritually tall, mighty, and strong, who support the sky on their heads. Sophie's father, the unknown rapist, is compared to a

cannibalistic bogeyman known as a *Tonton Macoute*□also a name for the real-life guerrilla vigilantes who roam the countryside killing people.

Symbolism

Several symbols recur throughout the book. Daffodils, which are not native to Haiti, are Martine's favorite flower, because they grow in a place they are not supposed to; after Europeans brought the flowers to Haiti, a vigorous kind of daffodil developed that could withstand the tropical heat. To Sophie and her mother Martine, they are a symbol of resilience and survival, qualities the women need to withstand the sexual and emotional torment they have gone through. Danticat writes a Mother's Day poem for her Tante Atie, comparing her to a daffodil, "limber and strong," and as a child is upset when Atie insists that she give the poem to her real mother, whom she has not seen since she was a baby. By the end of the book, however, she realizes that the poem applies to her mother, too.

Stories, which in the book are always told by women, are a symbol of the connections between generations of women, stretching into the past as well as the future. Late in the book, Sophie says, "I realized that it was neither my mother nor my Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of the land."

Historical Context

Political Terror in Haiti

Haiti in the early 1980s was ruled by Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, son of the infamous dictator Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier. During Papa Doc's regime, the longest in Haitian history, he executed all opponents without trial, and kept troops of unpaid volunteers, known as *Tontons Macoutes*, who were given license to torture, rape, and kill people at will. During his rule, the Haitian economy deteriorated and only 10 percent of the population could read. Papa Doc encouraged the population to believe that he was an accomplished practitioner of *voudon*, or voodoo, and possessed supernatural powers; to rebel against him invited death. After Papa Doc's death in 1971, his son succeeded him, continuing his reign of terror until 1986, when he was overthrown. Even after his overthrow, although the *Tontons Macoutes* were no longer officially condoned, they still terrorized the population.

The *Tontons Macoutes* are ever-present in the book, since Sophie was born as a result of one of them raping her mother when she was sixteen years old. For the rest of her life, long after she has moved to Brooklyn, Martine has terrifying dreams of this event and of the rapist, and passes her fear on to Sophie, who, everyone believes, looks just like the rapist since she does not look like anyone in her family. As a child, Sophie is aware that there is unrest and killing beyond her small town, and sees it for herself on the trip to the airport when she is leaving for the United States. Outside the airport they see a car in flames, students protesting, and soldiers shooting bullets and tear gas at them. They watch helplessly as a soldier beats a girl's head in with his gun. On the airplane, Sophie sits next to a small boy whose father has just been killed in the demonstration but who is traveling alone anyway, because he has no relatives left in Haiti.

The prevalence of poverty and illiteracy in Haiti is also important in the book. Sophie's Tante Atie, who cannot read, tells her, "We are a family with dirt under our fingernails," meaning that they have always been poor agricultural laborers, and says that the only way Sophie will improve her life is to become educated. Atie tells Sophie that when Atie was small, the whole family had to work in the sugar cane fields, and when Sophie's grandfather died in the field one day, they simply had to dig a hole, bury him, and move on. Her mother also tells her, "Your schooling is the only thing that will make people respect you. If you make something of yourself, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads* ."

Traditional Role of Women

In Haiti, traditional belief holds that a woman's place is in the home. Tante Atie tells Sophie that when she was a girl, Grandma Ife told her that each of her ten fingers has a purpose: Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing.

Scrubbing. Wistfully Atie says that she sometimes wished she had been born with six fingers on each hand, so she could have two left over for herself.

Despite the fact that women do so much, they are not valued as much as men. When Sophie returns to Haiti with her baby daughter, one night she and her grandmother sit watching a light moving back and forth on a distant hill. Her grandmother tells her this means someone is having a baby, and the light is the midwife walking back and forth with a lantern in the yard, where a pot of water was boiling. She also says that they can tell from what happens to the light whether the child is a boy or a girl. If it is a boy, she says, the lantern will be put outside the shack and if the father is there, he will stay up all night with the new baby boy. Sophie asks what will happen if the child is a girl, and her grandmother tells her, "If it is a girl, the midwife will cut the child's cord and go home. Only the mother will be left in the darkness to hold her child. There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light."

In Haiti, it is considered very important for a girl to remain a virgin until she is married, because her chastity, or lack of it, affects the reputation of the entire family. Because of this, Martine goes to great lengths to keep Sophie away from men, encourages her to dress in conservative clothes that do not show her figure, and does not allow her to date until she is eighteen. As Sophie says, "Men were as mysterious to me as white people, who in Haiti we had only known as missionaries." In addition, although they have moved to America, Martine follows an old Haitian custom of "testing" Sophie to make sure she is still a virgin by inserting a finger into her vagina and checking to see if her hymen is still intact. This "testing" was done to Martine and Atie by Sophie's grandmother, and presumably her grandmother was tested as a girl, too. Although it has caused great emotional pain to every generation, women have continued to do it to their daughters only because, as Martine explains, it was done to them and because they were told it was the right thing to do.

Culture Clash in Brooklyn

In Brooklyn, both women try to balance the two cultures: Haitian and American. Sophie goes to a French-speaking school but hates it, because it's as if she is still in Haiti, and because American students in the neighborhood taunt her, calling her "Frenchie" and "stinking Haitian," and saying that because she's Haitian and many Haitians have died of AIDS, she must be a carrier of the AIDS virus. Martine, who associates Haitian food and customs with the rape she experienced as a young girl, cooks American foods such as lasagna, but still goes to Haitian shops to buy castor oil to dress her hair, Haitian spices, and images of Erzulie, a Haitian goddess. Martine is aware of the difficulties for immigrants and tells Sophie, "It is really hard for the new-generation girls. You will have to choose between the really old-fashioned Haitians and the new-generation Haitians. The old-fashioned ones are not exactly prize fruits. They make you cook plantains and rice and beans and never let you feed them lasagna. The problem with the new generation is that a lot of them have lost their sense of obligation to the family's honor. Rather than become doctors and engineers, they want to drive taxicabs to make quick cash."

When Sophie moves to Brooklyn, although she and her mother live in a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn, she is aware that by Haitian standards, she is rich. Her mother's closet, for example, would have been considered a whole room in Haiti, and any child lucky enough to sleep in it would not have been bothered by the hanging clothes. Both Sophie and her mother suffer from eating disorders after they come to the States, because they are not used to the huge variety and abundance of food. In Haiti, where food is scarce, when people have a lot of it, they eat like they may not see any tomorrow□ because they may not. So, in Brooklyn, both Sophie and her mother can't shake their fear of hunger, and when they have food, they can't stop eating. Martine gains sixty pounds during her first year in the United States, and Sophie becomes bulimic, eating huge quantities of food and then vomiting it up.

Literary Heritage

Haiti is a country long marked by its political unrest and economic depravity as a result of years of dictatorship, government corruption, and a large gap between the wealthy elite and profitable cities and the poverty-stricken non-industrial provinces.

A written or recorded literature was never a priority in Haitian culture, therefore, the number of internationally recognized Haitian authors is understandably few. In addition, Haitian women writers are rare due to the secondary positions they hold within the society, remaining mostly in the home or in non-professional occupations.

Although fiscally poor, Haiti is a culture rich in its language, folktales, customs, and community. The Haitian people often looked to their families and friends not only for support but also for forms of entertainment. In a sense, it was the effects of poverty and illiteracy that made the practice of storytelling an important and favorite pastime, allowing this craft to endure throughout the generations, preserving the nation's culture and history.

Haitian literature was not known outside its borders until well into the 1960s, when the Civil Rights and Women's movements pushed for social reforms and gave the Haitian people an impetus to search out and explore their voices. Still, it was not until the 1990s that Haiti and Haitian literature started to receive the attention it deserved. As more and more nations began to learned of Haiti's oppression and the violence its people faced under the Duvalier government, the call for information about the country and its people increased. New emerging writers began to meet this demand, describing the horrors as well as the jewels of this besieged nation. These writers were creating a literature of social consciousness that demanded acknowledgement from the outside world. Their writing also served as a mirror in which to look back and examine their own background and culture.

When Haitian-born writer Edwidge Danticat began to write and record her memories of Haiti, fictionalizing them in her books, her writings became an extension of the oral tradition of her culture, capturing in print what was natural to her at an early age. What is present in Danticat's work is Haiti's painful history but also its uniqueness and beauty. It is this beauty and cultural lushness that are making people more open to Haitian literature and leading to changes in its presence and proliferation.

Critical Overview

Danticat was only twenty-five when *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was published. The book immediately attracted critical notice and acclaim for the clarity and precision of the writing, and its emotional depth. The book was the first novel by a Haitian woman to be published by a major press and to receive wide notice and readership among non-Haitian Americans.

Jim Gladstone wrote in the *New York Times* that the book "achieves an emotional complexity that lifts it out of the realm of the potboiler and into that of poetry," and in *Ms.,* Joan Philpott described it as "intensely lyrical." Danticat was also compared to African-American writer Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and other works. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote, "In simple, lyrical prose . . . she makes Sophie's confusion and guilt, her difficult assimilation into American culture and her eventual emotional liberation palpably clear." Renee H. Shea noted in *Belles Lettres,* "To read Danticat is to learn about Haiti - the folklore and myth, the traditions, and the history."

On May 22, 1998, Danticat's critical praise was augmented by commercial success, when the book was selected by talk show host Oprah Winfrey for her book club. This catapulted it into the number one spot on the bestseller lists and led Danticat to do a 17-city author tour, as the book sold 600,000 copies. Danticat's agent was flooded with requests for interviews, and Danticat was chosen by *Harper's Bazaar* magazine as one of twenty people in their twenties who will make a difference for the future, and was also named in a *New York Times* magazine article about thirty creative people under thirty who were expected to do great things in the future.

After her television appearance on *Oprah*, Danticat rented an apartment of her own in a Haitian community outside New York, so that she would not have to keep giving interviews in her parents' home. She told Mallay Charters in *Publishers Weekly*, "I just feel you need a little safe place sometimes, some place that you have just for yourself."

Since writing the book, Danticat has also published two other books, *The Farming of Bones*, a novel set during the 1937 genocide of Haitians by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina, and a collection of short stories titled *Krik? Krak!*.

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and has written for a wide variety of academic and educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the genesis, recurring themes, and critical reception of Breath, Eyes, Memory*.*

Breath, Eyes, Memory weaves several threads of sexuality, body image, generational bonds and conflicts, the immigrant experience, and the desperate social and political situation in Haiti, to portray a young girl's coming of age and eventual emotional liberation. It was the first book by a Haitian woman to be published in English by a major publisher and to receive wide readership and attention, and because of this, some have seen Danticat as a voice for all Haitian Americans. Danticat has emphatically stressed in many interviews that this view is inaccurate and that she is one voice among many, telling a Random House interviewer, "My greatest hope is that mine becomes one voice in a giant chorus that is trying to understand and express artistically what it's like to be a Haitian immigrant in the United States." However, she is also aware that not everyone is as articulate as she, and also told the interviewer, "I hope to speak for the individuals who might identify with the stories I tell."

She told *New York State Writers Institute Writers Online* 's Christine Atkins, "[I hope] that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with - the ones that have passed on - will choose to tell their story through my voice. . .for those who have a voice must speak to the present and the past. For we may very well have to be Haiti's last surviving breath, eyes, and memory."

She also told Megan Rooney of the *Brown Daily Herald,* "All my conscious life I have wanted to write. I was persistent, I love writing. I wouldn't be stopped."

Although the book is not factually autobiographical, it is emotionally true to her own life. She told a Random House interviewer that one of the most important themes of the book is "migration, the separation of families, and how much that affects the parents and children who live through that experience." Another is the political situation in Haiti - that ordinary people live in fear for their lives and property because of the lawless *Tontons Macoutes,* armed with Uzi rifles, who roam the countryside raping, pillaging, and killing at will. And a third, she noted, was the relationship between mothers and daughters.

The genesis of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was Danticat's own childhood in Haiti, where she was raised by relatives because her parents had emigrated to the United States when she was very young. When Danticat was twelve, she joined them in Brooklyn. She told Rooney, "It was a big culture shock. I didn't speak English. I was clueless in school. I was getting readjusted to being with my family. And all of this happened when I was on the verge of adolescence."

Sophie attends the Maranatha Bible Institute, a French-English bilingual school where most of the instruction is in French. Surprisingly, she dislikes the school because, as

she says, "it was as if I had never left Haiti." Harassed by American students as a "Frenchie," accused of having "HBO - Haitian Body Odor," and accused of carrying the deadly AIDS virus because of the high rates of the virus among Haitians, Sophie struggles to find a sense of home in Brooklyn, and to learn English. At first, the lone English words in her mother's Creole conversation stand out among others - words such as "TV," "building," or "feeling" - "jump out of New York Creole conversations, like the last kernel in a cooling popcorn machine." Gradually, she learns to read and speak English, although at first the words sound heavy and foreign, "like rocks falling in a stream."

Despite her new language, her mother keeps her sheltered, so that for the next six years, she lives in a narrow world of school, home, and prayer. Martine, trying to keep her daughter traditionally pure and chaste despite the loose American society, forbids her to date until she is eighteen, and takes her to work with her. She has no American friends, no Haitian friends, and no knowledge of men. As she says, in a comment that says as much about relations between the races as it does about those between genders, "Men were as mysterious to me as white people, who in Haiti we had only known as missionaries."

Later, after her marriage to an African-American musician, she learns more about her new country, travels, and even attends a therapy group - something unheard of in Haiti. However, she is still pursued by the ghosts of her own and her mother's past in Haiti - the custom of virginity testing, and her mother's rape by a *Macoute.* Before she can become free and truly live her life fully as a Haitian American, she must come to terms with her Haitian heritage and past.

The experiences and daily lives of women in Haiti are largely unknown to most Americans, who are rarely educated about Haitian culture and history. According to Danticat, Haitian women's lives are defined by what Bob Corbett, in the *Webste University* website, called "the ten fingers of Haitian tradition." According to tradition, each finger on a woman's hand has a purpose: mothering, boiling, loving, baking, nursing, frying, healing, washing, ironing, and scrubbing. Sophie and Atie both struggle to find space for their own needs and wants in this list of services to others, with varying success. As Corbett noted, the novel is about "the struggle of three individuals to rise above the shaping of their history and to take control of their own lives. It's not a story of much success, but of people in motion."

As Danticat makes clear, a girl's virginity and chastity is highly prized in Haiti, where a young woman's conduct can affect the reputation of her entire family. Danticat told a Random House interviewer that the virginity testing described in the book is not unique to Haiti, and cited the apocryphal gospels, in which the Virgin Mary is similarly tested for virginity when it becomes apparent that she is pregnant. Danticat stressed the fact that none of the mothers in the book intended the testing to be abusive, but were doing what they believed was best for their daughters and their families, and because they wanted their daughters to go farther and do better in life than they had.

Because this custom results in emotional harm, Sophie attends a sexual phobia therapy group so that she can heal. She describes her therapist as "a gorgeous black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess." When Rena, the therapist, hears that Sophie's mother Martine is pursued by nightmares of the rape that led to Sophie's birth, Rena suggests that if Martine is uncomfortable with the idea of therapy, she should have an exorcism. This openness to non-Western and non-American modes of healing marks the therapist/priestess as a bridge between the cultures, an integrator. Rena recommends rituals the members of the group can perform to release their fear and pain: burning slips of paper with the names of their abusers written on them, and releasing a green balloon to the sky. Danticat is realistic in depicting the mixed results of these rituals; Sophie feels better after burning her mother's name, but some time later sees the green balloon stuck in a tree - it has not traveled very far from home. However, Rena does offer some advice that ultimately does result in healing, saying about Martine's rape memories and Sophie's phobia of being with her husband:

"Your mother never gave him a face. That's why he's a shadow. That's why he can control her. . .You will never be able to connect with your husband until you say good-bye to your father."

She recommends that Martine undergo an exorcism, but Martine commits suicide before she can follow this advice. Sophie, however, ultimately does follow it, revisiting the scene of her mother's rape in the cane fields and experiencing a violent catharsis. Her grandmother and aunt watch, and in the end, acknowledge that she has been liberated from the burden she has carried for so long.

Reviewer Ann Folwell Stanford comments that the therapy section "barely escapes trendy cliche," but in fact the therapist's use of ritual is highly appropriate for Sophie, whose whole life has been enriched by ritual, symbol, and story. This is a language that Sophie understands, since she was raised with stories of Erzulie and other Haitian deities, and since in Haiti even an ordinary bath has ritual elements: at her grandmother's house, they bathe in an outdoor shack using rainwater that has been steeped with healing herbs: "a potpourri of flesh healers: catnip, senna, sarsparilla, *corrosol,* the petals of blood red hibiscus, forget-me-nots, and daffodils." Ritual is part of everyday life in many other ways, from the use of lanterns to mark the sex of a newborn child, the weekly Mass that people attend, and the endless stories of ancestors, deities, and folk heroes and heroines.

The book ends on a hopeful note. Sophie's baby, Brigitte Ife, is a symbol of the integration of her old and new lives and the potential healing in the generational line of women: the child is untouched, untroubled by nightmares, born in America. At the same time, she resembles Sophie's mother so closely that Grandma Ife, on seeing the girl, is astonished. "'Do you see my granddaughter?' she asked, tracing her thumb across Brigitte's chin. 'The tree has not split one mite. Isn't it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking at this face?'"

Danticat emphasizes this possibility later in the book, when Sophie says, "I looked back at my daughter, who was sleeping peacefully. . .The fact that she could sleep meant that she had no nightmares, and maybe, would never become a frightened insomniac like my mother and me." And again, when Sophie, after burning her mother's name in the therapy ritual, wisely realizes, "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the fire."

She will succeed in this, the reader knows, because at the end of the book, when she revisits the scene of the rape, she beats and pounds at the cane, as if she is possessed. The priest walks toward her, but Grandma Ife stops him, knowing that Sophie must do this. Ife and her aunt, Tante Atie, both call, "*Ou libere?*" - "Are you free?" - a phrase women traditionally use when one has dropped a heavy and dangerous load. Thus, they acknowledge her freedom from the burden that has oppressed her for so long. Before she can answer their question, Grandma Ife puts her fingers over Sophie's lips and tells her, "Now, you will know how to answer," meaning that she is free, and knows it.

The events in the book are shaped by the political, social, and economic chaos in Haiti during the regimes of Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier and his successors. During Duvalier's regime, the illiteracy rate in Haiti was 90 percent and the population was oppressed by widespread poverty and disease. In addition, ordinary people lived in fear of the *Tontons Macoutes,* formerly the volunteer secret police and death squad of dictator Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier. Named for a cannibalistic ogre, the *Macoutes* arbitrarily murdered, raped, and tortured anyone suspected of opposing the regime, or anyone they happened to run into. Sophie's birth is the result of a *Macoute*'s rape of her mother, when Martine was sixteen years old, and throughout the book these figures of terror reappear, shooting students, killing a coal seller, appearing in the market and on a bus Sophie is riding. Sophie herself is a permanent reminder of the power of the *Macoutes,* since she does not resemble anyone in her family, and it is believed that she looks just like the rapist: a physical, daily reminder to Martine of the torture she went through.

In the *Michigan Daily,* Dean Bakopoulos wrote that "in her fledgling career, Danticat has definitely brought a new freshness and vividness to American fiction, a new voice that shows great promise of evolving even further." *Austin Chronicle* writer Belinda Acosta described Danticat as a "gifted, compassionate young writer," and noted that one of the most remarkable aspects of Danticat's career is that she "consistently turns out work that is at turns compelling, beautiful, and breathtakingly painful." Christine Atkins remarked in *New York State Writers Institute Writers Online* that the book "traverses between cultures, negotiating an identity constructed in two sharply distinct worlds." The emotional impact of the book was summed up by a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who wrote, "In simple, lyrical prose enriched by an elegiac tone. . .she makes Sophie's confusion and guilt, her difficult assimilation. . .[and her] emotional liberation palpably clear."

Source: Kelly Winters, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory*, author Myriam J.A. Chancy discusses the concepts of female and sexual identity within textual and cultural contexts. Chancy shows the reader that the literary structuring used in Danticat's work serves as an illustration of and framework for both Haitian social culture and the alienation of women from themselves, their bodies, and each other. This emphasis on the novel's structure, according to Chancy, further underscores the important theme of the function of literacy for the women in Danticat's novel.*

In Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Haitian women are represented through images drawn from folk traditions. The subtext of the story of three generations of the Caco family involves a careful subversion of Haitian tropes of identity. Danticat uses the symbol of the *marassa,* the cult of twins in *vodou,* to highlight the divisions that are created between women who have been brought up to deny their sexuality as well as each other. In invoking *vodou* traditions, she strives, moreover, to disassociate them from their prevalent use as tools of state control during the Duvalier years of terror. Danticat also makes use of the principles of *palé andaki,* a practice of code-switching particular to Haitian creole, to underscore the complex dimensions of Haitian women's survival in varied social contexts. Danticat thus engages the challenge of Haiti's cultural doubleness in order to emphasize the need to reformulate the traditional Caribbean novel genre to reflect the particularities of Haitian women's lives.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, narrative acts ironically as a metaphor for the absence of writ social existence; in this way, the physical text becomes the manifestation of the social forces at work in Haiti over the span of three generations of Haitian women. It also provides a vital link to indigenous languages while using the vehicle of literary production to supply the context for female liberation. The Cacos of Danticat's novel are a family of women from the working classes who struggle both to maintain continuity from one generation to the next, and to reshape through education the fate of the younger generation, represented by the narrator and protagonist, Sophie. Throughout the novel, education, and, more specifically, literacy, are posited as the only means to salvation; ironically, access to literacy is connected to a life of exile, to a move from valley to city for the older generation within Haiti, from Haiti to the United States for the younger. Resisting this movement, the older generations, represented in part by Sophie's grandmother, cling to their sense of Haiti's "glory days," an invisible African past that is textualized in the novel through the oral folk tales the older generations tell to the younger ones. It is through the thematization of secrecy that the damage resulting from generational disruption is unveiled. The language of the ancestors, which grows increasingly difficult to access, is the key to each woman's freedom.

Sophie is alienated from her natural mother by the latter's memory of the rape of which she is a product, an act that is duplicated by her mother who abuses her sexually in adolescence under the guise of protecting her from future harm. Martine, who wants to make sure that Sophie remains sexually "whole," persists in describing her acts of sexual abuse in terms of a spiritual "twinning" of souls. Presented as a ritual enacted

BOOKRAGS

between mother and daughter through the generations, the "testing" that scars Sophie for life is a product of the suppression of female sexuality and the codification of women's bodies as vessels for male gratification in marriage. The Cacos perpetuate this ritual, although none of the women in the family has ever married, in what Danticat terms a "virginity cult."

It is because she has internalized the ideology of female inferiority that Sophie's mother is capable of abusing her daughter. Taught to despise the female body for itself and to covet it only as a means by which to acquire a male mate, Sophie's mother commits incest against her daughter, rationalizing her behavior as necessary to her daughter's survival. Social worker and therapist E. Sue Blume notes in *Secret Survivors* that it is rarer for women to incest their children than it is for men. She writes: "Incest often manifests itself in a manner consistent with gender socialization: for a man, the abuse is generally overtly and directly sexual; for a woman, it may be more emotional, more focused on relationship and bonding, or perhaps manifested through care of the child's body, her primary domain." The incest motif overwhelmingly present in the literature by women of the African diaspora□in the works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Joan Riley, Maya Angelou, to name the most notable□clearly demonstrates that Danticat's portrayal of incest between mother and daughter should not be taken as evidence that Haitian women are any more apt than other individuals to commit acts of incest against their daughters and that men are hapless bystanders to such abuse. Rather, Danticat demonstrates (as do the aforementioned women writers) through this aspect of her text the *extent to which the subjugation of women* has led to one mother's sexual oppression of her own daughter. The effect of this subjugation is that the mother believes that she is taking "care of the child's body" when she is in fact subjecting it to very abuse from which she is hoping to save it.

After having been raised for most of her early life by her mother's sister, Tante Atie, in Haiti, Sophie is summoned to New York by her mother. The community rejoices at what appears to be a "natural" turn of events, the reclamation of a daughter by her mother. As grandmother Ifé says to Sophie: "You must never forget this. . . . Your mother is your first friend." Sophie, however, knows her mother only as an absence; she reacts to her dislocation by withdrawing from the world which until this time had seemed so familiar, so unchangeable. When she is told that she will have to leave Haiti for her mother's New York, she says: "I could not eat the bowl of food that Tante Atie laid in front of me. I only kept wishing that everyone would disappear." Only later do we learn that her inability to eat the bowl of food is symptomatic of what will become a cycle of bodily abuse; once she is in the United States□a place her mother describes to her as a sort of paradise□Sophie becomes bulimic.

For Sophie, the United States is not a garden of Eden; instead, it is a place in which she hungers for the comfort of her true mother, Tante Atie, whom she honors in a poem as a brilliant, delicate, yet nonetheless hardy, yellow daffodil. That image is connected to Erzulie who is the "Goddess of Love, the divinity of the dream. . . . [t]o Haitian women, the goddess . . . signifies escape from a life in which women carry a greater share of work and suffering." Thus Sophie recalls:

> As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn.

Sophie's mother can never be Erzulie, who is herself most often imaged as a mulatta of the upper classes, and whose power□defined as both erotic and sexual□is derived from these combined class and race distinctions. She nonetheless seeks Erzulie's elusive powers, attempting to transcend Haitian barriers of class, race, and color by exiling herself to the United States, where she appears to find love with Marc Chevalier, a lawyer and a member of the Haitian elite. "In Haiti," she explains, "it would not be possible for someone like Marc to love someone like me. He is from a very upstanding family. His grandfather was a French man." Marc idolizes Erzulie and decorates his home with small busts of her image; it would appear that Sophie's mother has begun to access Erzulie's world. Danticat, however, quickly undermines the association of the mother with Erzulie.

In *The Faces of the Gods,* Leslie Desmangles writes that "[i]n combination with Damballah, Ezili guarantees the flow of human generations," and that "[s]he is believed to have given birth to the first human beings after Bondye [the supreme Being] created the world." Erzulie, or, as Desmangles writes, Ezili, is the mother of us all, that is, of all Haitians, male and female; as such, she is allpowerful and all-controlling. Her power over men is legendary, as is her power over other *vodou loas* [gods]. She is often shown wearing a crown or a halo, "a symbol of her transcendent power and of her radiating beauty." It is crucial to note that Erzulie's power is defined in terms of her relationships, primarily to male deities and human male subjects: she is concubine to all but subjugated to none; she is beyond containment. As much as she seeks to transcend temporality by emulating Erzulie, Sophie's mother is bound to self-negating mores of womanhood embedded in nineteenth-century ideals; for this reason, Sophie is the painful memory of what she perceives to be her failure as a woman.

Sophie's mother never comes to terms with the fact that the man who raped her in her late teens robbed her of her sexual autonomy; she perceives herself as "damaged," incapable, in fact, of being Erzulie, because she is no longer "virginal," or "chaste," a status the Caco women associate with social mobility. It is through marriage that freedom from poverty, and endless toil, can be achieved; marriage, however, is an institution that, historically, has been socially constructed in such a way as to benefit men and deny women their autonomy. Thus, Danticat's protagonist recalls the story of a man who bleeds his young wife to death in order to be able to produce the soiled, bloody sheets of their first marriage night: "At the grave site, her husband drank his blood-spotted goat milk and cried like a child." On the surface, it seems as if Sophie is

being led away from such a tragic fate. In the United States, she will be freed from the constraints of class that attend marriage in Haiti; she will gain an education and no man will be able to reject her as one Mr. Augustin rejected her Tante Atie because of her illiteracy. That possibility, however, is as elusive as Erzulie's loyalties, for Sophie knows only what she is in the process of losing. As she leaves Haiti behind, she imagines the friend/twin she has never had: "Maybe if I had a really good friend my eyes would have clung to hers as we were driven away." Sophie has no point of contact, no shared sight, with another human being who can complete for her her sense of self. Identity, Danticat appears to say, is inextricably linked with community, and the image of the twin, the true friend, is the vehicle for communal (re)identification.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #3

In *vodou* culture, the *marassas* are endowed with the power of the gods. Twins are *mysteres* (mysteries), who, since they can never be deciphered, must be held in high esteem and revered. As Alfred Metreaux writes: "Some even contend that the twins are more powerful than the *loas.* They are invoked and saluted at the beginning of the [*vodou*] ceremony, directly after Legba." This is no small thing, for Legba is the sun god, the keeper of the gates; he is thus associated with Christ and, as the "guardian of universal and individual destiny," with St. Peter as well. Twins are believed to "share a soul": "Should one die, the living twin must put aside a bit of all food he [sic] eats, or a small part of any gift given him [sic], for the other." Sophie's inability to eat, then, can be understood as having been caused by her separation from the unknown twin, the best friend she wishes she had had in Haiti. On the other hand, because she has been deadened by her loss of family, Sophie can in some sense be regarded as the twin who has died. Her "living twin" on this reading would be the Haitian landscape to which she had last looked to for comfort in her departure from Haiti; it stores away its resources while awaiting her return. Sophie's mother, however, insists on figuring herself as her daughter's *marassa.* The image of her mother as her *marassa* only serves to terrorize Sophie and alienate her from her identity, which becomes both sexualized and demonized in its association (by the mother) with *vodou.*

In the United States, when Sophie has her first love affair, clandestine and innocent, with an older man, Joseph, her mother suspects her of ill-doing; this is the occasion for Sophie's first "test." Characteristically, Sophie prays to the "Virgin Mother" Mary/Erzulie while her mother tells her a story about the *marassas,* "two inseparable lovers . . . the same person duplicated in two." At first, the story seems to be a warning to Sophie to resist her desire for sexual union with a man. Her mother says: "When you love someone, you want him to be closer to you than your *Marassa.* Closer than your shadow. You want him to be your soul. The more you are alike, the easier this becomes." In the story, then, the union between man and woman is presented as a bond that can only be a pale imitation of the union between the *marassa,* who are described as reflections of oneself: "When one looked in the mirror, the other walked behind the glass to mimic her." The story, as does the testing, ends chillingly as Sophie's mother tells her:

> The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marassas.* You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand? There are secrets you cannot keep.

Secrecy is central to the image of Haiti created by Danticat, suggesting that holding on to a sense of renewed options is a narrow, almost non-existent possibility. Secrecy, in the above passage, refers to Sophie's inability to keep her body to herself: it is positioned as her mother's reflection and is consequently not her own. But the truly

unkeepable secret is the act of abuse itself, which Sophie attempts to exorcise through the only thing she feels she can still control: food.

Sophie's bulimia is a manifestation of her sexual abuse. As E. Sue Blume explains, eating disorders are manifestations of the ways in which women who have been abused attempt to regain control over their bodies; ironically, these attempts at regaining control perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Blume writes: "Most men can achieve mastery in the real world, but many women can exercise total control only over their own bodies. Additionally, rigid social expectations define women through their appearance. Body size relates to power, sexuality, attention, self-worth, social status and the aftereffects of incest." Unlike anorexics, who try to rid their bodies of the sex characteristics they feel (consciously or unconsciously) have led to their victimization, bulimics attempt to *maintain* the sex characteristics they feel they must possess in order to achieve a "perfection" which will put a stop to their abuse. Sophie becomes the prototypical sexual abuse survivor described by Blume as she attempts to control her body - which remains the only socially sanctioned site for her rebellion - precisely because it has fallen beyond her control. She binges and purges in an effort to cleanse herself of her violation.

Sophie's eating disorder will not, however, erase the abuse she has suffered. Through the "testing," Sophie loses her mother a second time and instead of becoming her twin becomes her victim. She clings to an elusive image of perfection, of Erzulie, which neither she nor her mother can attain. Like Nadine Magloire's protagonist Claudine in *Le mal de vivre,* Sophie cannot reclaim her identity because her *Haitiennité* demands that she deny her desires as well as her need for sexual autonomy. This implicit denial of self, as I will demonstrate below, leads Danticat to reject those cultural markers most associated with Haitian Afrocentricity, such as *vodou* and matriarchal family structure, because they signify oppression rather than liberation; *this is not to say that, in so doing, she abandons what those markers represent.* Rather, Danticat shows that in order to reclaim the landscape of the female body and of Haiti, both must be redefined. Thus, the novel introduces at its start a set of seeming dichotomies that will be reshaped and reimaged as the plot advances: mother versus daughter, food versus starvation, language versus silence, ritual versus violation, *marassa* versus life partner. Each of these seeming dualities reflect the rigid sex roles Haitian women are taught to desire, even though they defy those social sanctions through their very acts of daily survival.

As Ira P. Lowenthal points out in his essay "Labor, Sexuality and the Conjugal Contract," Haitian women of the rural working classes appear to have some power equity due to the fact that many are market women (handling booths at the market, money, trade) while their male counterparts work the fields. Lowenthal writes: "men make gardens for someone and that someone is invariably a woman. . . . she is a socially recognized spouse of the man. The control of produce, then, as opposed to production itself, falls to women - as men's gardens mature." Lowenthal points out that this seeming inversion of sex roles does not guarantee women's economic autonomy. Instead, it suggests a potential that is never realized because male and female sex roles are maintained in such a way as to prevent an equal division of labor. Women continue to have to sustain

the home even as they manage the commerce: "domestic labor is overwhelmingly the responsibility of women and . . . [w]hen men cry out, as they sometimes do - especially when actually faced with the unsavory prospect - that they 'can't live without a woman' . . . it is to these basic domestic services provided by women that they primarily refer." Put more bluntly, in Haiti, as in other parts of the Caribbean, even though a quasi-matriarchal system seems to be in place, it is one "that represses women": "women are stuck running the household, and if they are tough and strong it is because their children would starve if they weren't." The Caco women thus represent the sort of matriarchal family formation that has been celebrated in many Caribbean women's writings (most notably in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng,* both semi-autobiographical novels), but which, in most Haitian contexts, is one born both out of necessity and out of the legacy of African social formations where quasi-matriarchal societies did indeed flourish and empower women.

In the Caribbean context, where identity resides at the crossroads of creolization or *metissage,* matriarchal society is a product of a disrupted society (or societies). Sexuality takes on a striking importance in a repressive matriarchal society for it is the ultimate site of women's subjugation and is, by extension, the site of possible empowerment. As Lowenthal explains,

> [f]emale sexuality is here revealed to be a woman's most important *economic* resource comparable in terms of its value to a relatively large tract of land. Indeed, when discussing their relations with men, adult women are likely to refer to their own genitals as *interem* (my assets), *lajan-m* (my money), or *manmanlajan-m* (my capital), in addition to *tem* (my land). The underlying notion here is of a resource that can be made to work to produce wealth, like land or capital, or that can be exchanged for desired goods and services, like money.

Lowenthal insists, however, that, just as women wield full control over the goods balanced precariously in weaved baskets upon their heads for sale at market, they have full control of the ways in which their bodies are exchanged or marketed. Yet, if women did, in point of fact, have full control over their bodies and their sexuality, one would expect that they would be endowed with power in whatever social strata in which they were born; this, of course, is not the case. Thus, when women attempt to control their sexual interactions with men, they do so precisely because social and sexual power is taken out of their hands from birth: theirs is an unrelenting struggle.

Danticat's very carefully exposes this truism as one would expose a frame of film to light. The result is not often clear or pleasing to the eye, but it reveals part of what has been obscured by inadequate representations of the difficulties faced by women in Haiti and elsewhere. Haitian women are not immune to what Catharine MacKinnon has called the "body count [of] women's collective experience in America," by which girls are taught to suppress their own ambitions in order to fulfill the sexual needs of men. As

Danticat shows, even in a family in which men do not "exist," the threat of sexual violence and subjugation remains a reality too immediate to be ignored.

Critical Essay #4

In many ways, the novel's true heroine is Tante Atie who gains a sense of self and identity only as she grows older. Rejected by a suitor, Augustin, because of her illiteracy, Atie's social role becomes that of caretaker to her aging mother, Ifé. Nonetheless, Atie rebels against her position in the family, and when she has to give up her role as Sophie's surrogate mother-figure, she begins to construct for herself a new life. Her life is reactivated through her being taught to read and write by a market woman, Louise, with whom she develops a strong love relationship. Although both Atie and Ifé have worked diligently to give Sophie and her mother the means to escape the endless cycle of work, poverty, and exploitation, Ifé strongly resents Atie's newfound independence at the same time that she covets it. Through Atie, Danticat presents literacy as a metaphor for the fulfillment of identity and yet she also demonstrates that freedom for the Haitian woman cannot be achieved solely through education; she must also be able to control the passage of her body through a society that rejects her presence and demonizes her sexuality.

Atie defies social convention by severing her relationship to her mother (whom it is supposed she will take care of as she ages since Atie is yet "single") in order to have a primary relationship with Louise. Her relationship with Louise is, in fact, subtly coded as a lesbian love relationship. Although there is the merest hint that the two are not sexually involved, suggested through numerous scenes in which Louise leaves at sundown and in which the two only come togther at daylight, theirs is undoubtedly an erotic relationship. They embody the power of the erotic as theorized by Audre Lorde who writes:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experience it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and selfrespect we can require no less of ourselves.

This reflects Atie's experience with Louise as she grows in her "sense of self," escaping the strict confines of her role as dutiful daughter and becoming more literate in her own (woman's) language. Access, through education, to both the past and to the future provides an increasingly empowering double-sightedness imaged through the *twinning* of these two women. Louise's descriptions of her relationship with Atie imply as much. She says: "We are like milk and coffee, lips and tongue. We are two fingers on the same hand. Two eyes on the same head." In the end, these two women are the true *marassas* of the novel. Danticat deftly and subtly inverts the linguistic terms with which relationships between women can be described in the Haitian context in a manner akin to that involved in *palé andaki* (as described more fully below), the process of code switching within creole (the equivalent, perhaps, to what Zora Neale Hurston has defined as "specifyin'" in Black English). Through this code switching, Danticat appears

to reject the identifiable markers of *vodou* and to reformulate them in terms which are inclusive of its origins but that also encapsulate the exigencies of workingclass and impoverished women. Creole is the mother tongue that links these two women to their Haitian identity, and, thus, to each other, through the process of literacy. Through creole, that literacy retains its oral roots.

Why should literacy be linked so explicitly to Haitian women's process of self-actualization? The languages in which we speak, write, and communicate are signifiers of the societies and/or cultures we live in. Haitians, male and female, have, since Haiti's tragic beginnings, been made to feel as if our ways of speaking are deficient. Creole, to this day, is often referred to as a "bastard" tongue, "denigrated as a lesser language of French," even though it has certainly always been the "dominant" language of the country despite efforts to enforce French as the language of the polished, accomplished, upper classes. For the last several decades, creole has been taught in the schools and used as the common language of the untutored in various literacy programs. It is a living language that is continuously changing; it accurately reflects a culture that is constantly in flux both socially and politically.

Cultural sociologist Ulrich Fleischmann notes in his article, "Language, Literacy, and Underdevelopment," that in rural Haiti, where the older Caco women live, creole culture distinguishes itself from those "recognized" in Western contexts in that it "cannot be considered as culturally integrated . . . for each member is in some way aware that his [sic] culture seen from a socially more elevated position appears as a 'lower variant' of the dominant culture." Haitians are acutely aware of the ways in which linguistic creolization is perceived to be a deviation, but they are also ardently opposed to assimilating.

Fleishmann describes oral creole as follows:
[T]hough a nationwide intelligible form of Creole
speech exists, there is a continuous change and generation
of meanings in the narrow local context.
Therefore, Creole speech can take on double and even
multiple meanings. The information it conveys can
vary considerable according to the social context. The
diligent use of contradictory explicit and implicit
references, for instance, is a highly esteemed art
which Haitians call *palé andaki.*

In effect, Danticat's novel is speaking *andaki* to those who are open to the possibilities of cultural doubleness. A little more than halfway through the text, readers are made aware that they have been reading in another language. When Sophie's mother comes to Haiti to reclaim her daughter for a second time, Ifé and Atie complain about their use of English. "Oh that *cling-clang* talk," says Ifé, "It sounds like glass breaking." What should, in effect, be broken in the reader's mind is the illusion that s/ he has been reading an English text; the narrative reveals itself to be a masquerade, and the unevenness that is palpable in the passages of dialogue between the Caco women

(between those who have stayed in Haiti and those who have emigrated) can be seen as evidence that the text is in fact a creole one.

Danticat's Atie becomes the translator of the camouflaged text, a translator to rival the Dahomean god Eshu, the trickster figure who has become the focus of some phallocentric, Afrocentric criticism, such as in Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey.* Like the poeticized women of Dahomey in Audre Lorde's poetry collection, *The Black Unicorn,* Atie embodies a marginalized ancient African *woman-identified* culture in which "[b]earing two drums on my head I speak/whatever language is needed/to sharpen the knives of my tongue." Atie's language is one of covert resistance as she appropriates the French language through creole translations when she learns to read and write and as she appropriates the image of the *marassa* to constitute her own Haitian female identity.

As she becomes literate, Atie creates a new language in order to write down her thoughts in her notebook; Louise "calls them poems." At times, Atie reads to the family from her notebook; one of her most significant creations is an adaptation of a French poem, which remains unidentified in the novel, given to her by Louise. Her poem serves a dual function□one can assume, first, that it is in creole, and secondly, it tells the same story as that of the young husband who kills his young bride because he wants to prove her virginity, or purity, to the community. The important difference, of course, is that the story is now told in Atie's voice:

She speaks in silent voices, my love. Like the cardinal
bird, kissing its own image. *Li*
palé vwa mwin, Flapping
wings, fallen change Broken bottles, whistling
snakes And boom bang drums. She speaks in silent
voices, my love. I drink her blood with milk And
when the pleasure peaks, my love leaves.

The line Danticat leaves untranslated suggests the interconnectedness of like spirits: she speaks my voice, thus, she is my voice. And since Atie's tongue is creole, it can never be entirely translated, nor does her love attempt that transmutation. The last two lines of the poem echo the traditional tale except that Atie has taken the place of the male hero; she occupies his position but is not male-identified.

This latter distinction leads us to the key element of Atie and Louise's relationship: the partings that figure so prominently in the text are metaphors for the non-acceptance of their union in their community, which denies that women can choose one another as their primary sources of emotional and erotic support. This societal rejection is verbalized by Atie's mother, Ifé, who continously opposes the relationship, saying "Louise causes trouble" and "the gods will punish me for Atie's ways." But Atie defies her mother and the community: "After her reading, she and Louise strolled into the night, like silhouettes on a picture postcard" (135). And after Louise hears that one of her fellow market workers has been killed, Danticat chooses to reveal the women's closeness in an overtly erotic image: "Their faces were so close that their lips could

meet if they both turned at the same time." Their lips "could meet" but do not; what keeps the women from "turning" at the same time is the overt misogyny of Haitian society that Danticat exposes in the shattering of Martine (Sophie's mother) and Sophie's own life; their lives are kept out of view, and silenced. The many departures that occur in the novel symbolize, like the last line of Atie's poem, these women's stifled desires. Their partings culminate in Louise's emigration to the United States; she leaves without saying goodbye to Atie, an event that surprises Sophie. Atie, however, speaks the same language as Louise: there is no need for the articulation of goodbyes, for she knows already the loss she is about to experience: "I will miss her like my own second skin." For Atie and Louise, options are few. They are denied all but each other, but cannot live for and with each other in Haitian society and expect to survive the consequences of that transgressive choice.

In the end, Nadine Magloire's *Le mal de vivre* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* resist the romanticization of the Caribbean, and of Haiti specifically, as a culture within which the infinite play of meaning, of subjectivity, can be achieved through the recognition of cultural creolization and/or *métissage.* Magloire reveals the novel genre as inadequate for the textual representation of Haitian women's lives at the same time that she convincingly represents the social and psychological mores that prevent her protagonist from being able to express her own identity. Claudine occupies a position at the crossroads of cultures but is not enabled by that positionality; hybridity, then, can only become a useful force if it is used in the service of disrupting rather than maintaining social and class privilege. Magloire's novel reveals that Claudine's inability to survive is ultimately a function of her being a woman in Haiti; as a woman, she is denied most privileges, and it is for this reason that she clings so fiercely to those privileges that class alone can provide. Similarly, Danticat's Sophie is caught between her memories of happiness in Haiti among women immobilized by their illiteracy and her exile to the alienating U.S. landscape, which will alleviate the oppressions that attend female existence in Haiti. Danticat's use of *andaki* strategies of doubling within the novel form also underscores the need to reformulate the traditional Caribbean novel genre. It is up to us, as readers, to realize that both Magloire's and Danticat's heroines lose "le goût de vivre" because Haitian/North American culture has relegated them to the margins of a text they cannot forcibly rewrite. In that resounding silence, in the absence of textual representations of identity that reflect a vision of hope, we should hear the "cri du coeur [cry of the heart]" of all Haitian women whose bodies are subject to endless commodification in art, in literature, in everyday domestic life. If we fail to do so, then perhaps not even their shapes upon the sea shores will be left behind; their magic will remain as yet unwritten.

Source: Myriam J. A. Chancy, "Lespoua fe viv: Female Identity and the Politics of Textual Sexuality in Nadine Magloire's Le Mal de Vivre and Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory," in *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women,* Rutgers University Press, 1997, pp. 120-33.

Critical Essay #5

In this brief review of Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Mary Mackay outlines the pain and struggle of the women in the novel, and describes it as a compelling record of the Haiti that Danticat wishes to be remembered, "a rich landscape of memory."*

Edwidge Danticat dedicates her powerful first novel to "The brave women of Haiti . . . on this shore and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall." Such optimism is extraordinary, given the everyday adversity faced by the women whose stories are interwoven with that of Sophie, the narrator.

Grandmother Ife, mother Martine, aunt Atie, and daughter Sophie (and later Sophie's daughter, Brigitte) are rooted as firmly in their native Haitian soil as they are bound to one another, despite the ocean, experiences, and years that separate them. The ties to Haiti, the women's certainty of meeting there at the "very end of each of our journeys," affords their only apparent security. "Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land," Danticat writes. Structurally, the book reflects the centrality of Haiti: the longest of its four sections takes place there, although covering only a few days in a novel that covers years.

The story begins in Haiti. Through Sophie's 12- year-old eyes, the island seems a paradise of bougainvillea, poincianas, and the unconditional love of Tante Atie. Then Martine, the mother Sophie knew only as a photograph, sends for her from New York City. It seems a mean place that has worn out her mother: "It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all." Sophie is haunted by the hardships of immigrant life, together with the ghosts from the past and the burdens of womanhood in a hostile world. She describes herself as a frightened insomniac, but somehow survives the test. Her older, jazz-musician husband, Joseph, one of the novel's few male characters and certainly the most loyal and gentle, gives her some strength. She copes through a resilient melange of love, ties to home, and therapy. And when she returns to Haiti as an adult, she senses a sinister edge to the place, represented by the Tonton Macoutes (militiamen), the boat people, and her Tante Atie's bitterness.

"There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms," writes Danticat. In this book, one of those places is "testing," part of a "virginity cult, our mothers' obsession with keeping us pure and chaste," in which the mother probes her daughter's vagina (sometime violently) to see if she is still whole. She also listens to her daughter peeing to see if the sound suggests a deflowered, widened passage. Even rape has one positive result: the end of "testing" by an otherwise trusted mother. The invasiveness, pain, and humiliation turn daughter against mother generation after generation, Atie against Ife, Sophie against Martine.

But there is reconciliation, too. As mothers and daughters, the women are bound in love as in hate. A mother may inflict on her daughter the same pain that drove her from her own mother. Why? "I did it because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater

excuse." The book is a plea to end these divisive rituals. Mothers indeed long to break the cycle of pain, asking pointedly from beyond the grave, "'Ou libere?' Are you free, my daughter?"

Suffering inflicted by a well-intentioned mother is all the more treacherous in a world where the birth of a girl child is marked by "no lamps, no candles, no more light." Danticat leaves the reader with no illusions as to why the welcome is so dark. As well as "testing," the women in this family endure rape, unwanted pregnancy, and violence that lead to mental illness, nightmares, sexual phobias, bulimia, and self-mutilation. Breast cancer seems almost benign in this context; being unmarried and childless does not.

Sophie wants and seems to be the hope for breaking with painful tradition. Returning to Haiti with her mother's body for burial, she reaches an important understanding: the testing was painful for Martine, too. Doing what she had to do as a Haitian woman, "My mother was as brave as stars at dawn." Sophie breaks free as she madly attacks the sugar cane in the midst of which her father had raped and impregnated her mother. We sense that Sophie□and Brigitte□are finally safe.

Despite all the suffering ("'Can one really die of chagrin?' I asked Tante Atie."), Danticat writes with a light and lyrical touch. Her characterization is vivid, her allusive language richly unembellished. Color (literal as well as linguistic) carries the reader from the daffodil yellow associated with Haiti and Sophie's early days in New York, to the more ominous red with which her mother surrounds herself in interior decoration as in death. Occasionally Danticat devotes too many details to a banal incident or action, but this is a minor criticism for a first novel.

In a personal essay, Danticat calls Haiti a "rich landscape of memory." But she is afraid that female storytellers like herself may be Haiti's last surviving breath, eyes, and memory. In this compelling novel, the reader experiences the Haiti that Danticat fears will be lost.

Source: Mary Mackay, *"Breath, Eyes, Memory," (book review) in Belles Lettres,* Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall, 1994, p. 36.

Critical Essay #6

The following brief review describes Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory *as a graceful first novel outlining the coming-of-age story of Sophie, the novel's protagonist and narrator, in a world where traditions clash and the beauty of Haiti is inexorably mixed with the burden of sexual trauma, mental brutality, and political terror.*

A distinctive new voice with a sensitive insight into Haitian culture distinguishes this graceful debut novel about a young girl's coming-of-age under difficult circumstances. "I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head," says narrator Sophie Caco, ruminating on the chains of duty and love that bind the courageous women in her family. The burden of being a woman in Haiti, where purity and chastity are a matter of family honor, and where "nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms," is Danticat's theme. Born after her mother Martine was raped, Sophie is raised by her Tante Atie in a small town in Haiti. At 12 she joins Martine in New York, while Atie returns to her native village to care for indomitable Grandmother Ife. Neither Sophie nor Martine can escape the weight of the past, resulting in a pattern of insomnia, bulimia, sexual trauma and mental anguish that afflicts both of them and leads inexorably to tragedy. Though her tale is permeated with a haunting sadness, Danticat also imbues it with color and magic, beautifully evoking the pace and character of Creole life, the feel of both village and farm communities, where the omnipresent Tontons Macoute mean daily terror, where voudon rituals and superstitions still dominate even as illiterate inhabitants utilize such 20th-century conveniences as cassettes to correspond with emigres in America. In simple, lyrical prose enriched by an elegiac tone and piquant observations, she makes Sophie's confusion and guilt, her difficult assimilation into American culture and her eventual emotional liberation palpably clear.

Source: Mary MacKay, "Breath, Eyes, Memory," (book review) in *Publisher's Weekly,* Vol. 241, No. 4, January 24, 1994, p. 39.

Topics for Further Study

Read about the dictatorship of Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier in Haiti and discuss how it affected poverty, illiteracy, and crime in Haiti.

Explore the use of *voudon,* or voodoo, by Jean Claude Duvalier and his father, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, to frighten the population of Haiti into submitting to their rule. How did these dictators use people's spiritual beliefs to enhance their power?

Research the Haitian deities of *voudon,* particularly the goddess Erzulie, and compare her to Catholic images of the Virgin Mary.

Find a Haitian cookbook, or if possible visit a Haitian restaurant, and try some Haitian foods. How does Haitian cuisine differ from the food you are used to?

In the eighteenth century, a slave rebellion ended white rule in Haiti. Read about this rebellion, and compare the plight of the slaves in Haiti to that of slaves in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* is a collection of short stories set in Haiti. The title comes from a traditional Haitian custom of listeners asking "Krik?" before a story is told. The teller answers, "Krak," and begins the tale.

Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* is a novel set during the 1937 mass genocide of Haitians by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina; it vividly shows the brutal existence of workers in the sugar cane fields.

Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica, by African-American writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, examines spiritual beliefs in these two countries.

*The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier,*by Amy Wilentz, is a vivid portrait of Haiti in the late 1980s, and provides a clear examination of the parade of dictators and terrorists who have ruled the country since Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

All Souls' Rising, by Madison Smartt Bell, is a historical epic set during the eighteenth-century slave rebellion that ended white rule in Haiti.

Diane Wolkstein's *The Magic Orange Tree: And Other Haitian Folktales*, is a collection of Haitian folktales and legends, and features an introduction by Danticat.

Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters, edited by Patricia Bell-Scott, is an anthology of stories by women writers.

Further Study

Acosta, Belinda, "The Farming of Bones," in *Austin Chronicle*, January 19, 1999.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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