Children of the Sea Study Guide

Children of the Sea by Edwidge Danticat

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in the October, 1993, issue of *Short Fiction by Women* under the title "From the Ocean Floor," "*Children of the Sea*" was also included in Edwidge Danticat's 1995 short story collection *Krik? Krak!* The story of a young couple separated by political strife in Haiti, it received positive attention from critics as did the book, and the author quickly gained a reputation as one of the most promising writers in the United States. The tragic story, which concerns a doomed fate of a young couple, concerns many of the issues Danticat addresses in her other stories and in her novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which was published in 1994.

A native of Haiti, Danticat writes almost exclusively about the country's people, particularly its women, who during the 1980s suffered at the hands of a dictator, Papa Doc Duvalier, as well as from poverty and violence. The story was inspired by the author's conversations with "boat people," as the refugees are sometimes known, who had made their way to Providence, Massachusetts. "*Children of the Sea*" has been commended for the way in which it blends political concerns with the emotional lives of the characters, thereby putting a human face on the suffering that many Westerners have only read about in the newspapers. Written in the alternating viewpoints of the young man and woman, the reader experiences the situation from both characters' perspectives. Through this technique, Danticat demonstrates the danger inherent in any choice a Haitian makes, whether it involves standing up to the government and trying to gain political asylum in the United States, or complying with the regime's demands even if it means betraying others through silence.

Author Biography

Brought up in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Edwidge Danticat has had firsthand experience with many of the harrowing events she relates in her stories. Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city, on January 19,1969. Four years later her parents immigrated to the United States, leaving their young daughter behind. She rejoined them in 1981, and the family settled in Brooklyn, New York. She felt somewhat like an outsider at school, and she took refuge in her isolation by writing about her homeland. As a teenager, she began writing the novel *Breath, Eyes. Memory,* which became her first published work in 1994.

Danticat's parents wanted their daughter to become a nurse and sent her to a specialized high school in New York City, but by the time she graduated she had decided to concentrate on writing. She attended Barnard College in New York City, receiving her B.A. in 1990, and followed up with an M.F.A. in creative writing from Brown University in 1993, Breath, Eyes, Memory served as her master's thesis and was received warmly by the critics. *Krik? Krak!*, the collection of short stories which includes "*Children of the Sea*" appeared in 1995 to similar acclaim. The collection was nominated for the National Book Award, and the author was named one of the best young American novelists by *Granta* magazine the following year.

In her short career, Danticat has been praised for her lyrical prose and has been compared to Alice Walker, the author of The Color Purple, Due to the fact that Danticat's writing has thus far focused on the experiences of Haitians and Haitian-Americans, some have begun to see her as a spokesperson for that community. It is a role that makes the young author uncomfortable. As she told New York Times reporter Garry Pierre-Pierre, "I don't really see myself as the voice for the Haitian-American experience. There are many. I'm just one." Danticat lives in New York where she teaches creative writing at New York University,

Plot Summary

The story opens with an unnamed narrator, a young Haitian revolutionary, thinking of his girlfriend. He is on a small boat that has set sail for Miami, Florida. He is going into exile because he is wanted by the Haitian government. These details are disclosed by the young woman, who is the second narrator of the story. While her lover has left the country, she remains behind with her mother and father. The man and woman tell their stories through a series of letters. Though they cannot mail these letters, they are writing to appease their loneliness while they are away from one another. When they are reunited, they will feel as if they have not been apart.

In Haiti the young man, a university student, was a member of a youth federation that protested the dictator and called for a new government. He fled the country when the secret police, known as the Tonton Macoutes, cracked down on his group. The other members have been killed by the army, and even more students were shot while demonstrating for the return of their friends' bodies. One woman, Madan Roger, a neighbor of the young woman's family, returned with only,the head of her son.

The young man speaks of the difficulties of life aboard the ship: the vomiting, the temperature changes, the lack of privacy, the shortage of food. He dreams that he has died and gone to heaven, only heaven is at the bottom of the sea. The young woman is also in heaven, but her father continues to keep them apart. The young woman's father does not approve of their relationship, thinking that the young man was not good enough. Now that the young man is gone, the father is still afraid that his daughter's connection with the revolutionaries will endanger their lives. One night soldiers beat Madan Roger in order to coerce her into naming her son's associates. The young woman and her mother think the father should go to Madan Roger's aid. But the father knows he can do nothing for his neighbor, and that it is impossible even to protect his own family. The father only wants to move to Ville Rose, which he thinks will be "civilization" compared to Port-au-Prince, a crowded and impoverished city.

On board the ship a young teenager named Celianne gives birth to a dead baby. The passengers gossip about her, saying her parents kicked her out for having an affair, but the truth is much worse. One night the secret police came to her house and forced her brother, a revolutionary, to have sex with their mother. The soldiers then raped Celianne and arrested her brother. She cut her face with a razor so no one would know who she was, and then she escaped on die boat. Because the boat is leaking, the passengers are forced to throw their belongings overboard but Celianne will not throw her baby into the waterIn Ville Rose, the young woman's family decides to be honest with each other. The young woman tells her father of her love for the young man. Her mother tells her that the Tonton Macoutes had intended to arrest her because of her involvement with a member of the youth federation. But when the father hears of the plan, he bribes them with all the money he has as well as the family's house and land. The young woman does not know how to thank her father. On the radio, she hears her lover passed his university exams.

On board the ship everything is tossed overboard. Celianne throws her baby into the sea and then jumps in herself. The young man is forced to throw away his notebook. Before doing so, he writes the last page which contains his final thoughts. He knows he is about to join the "children of the sea," those who have escaped slavery to live in a world away from the earth and sky, and away from all the violence. He knows that even in death he will always remember his girlfriend.

Right after the young woman thanks her father for saving her life, a black butterfly tells her the news about the boat. She hears on the radio that the soldiers are killing more people in Port-au-Prince, and she realizes that she cannot stay safely in Ville Rose forever. She sits under the banyan tree, which her mother tells her is holy, surrounded by black butterflies. She knows that the boat that sank off the coast of the Bahamas was her lover's. From where she sits the sea is hidden by the mountains, but she knows it will always be there, endless, like her love for him.

His Narrative

His Narrative Summary

A young man, who has taken to the sea with a group of fellow refugees from Haiti, writes to his young love that he has had to leave behind. Friends since childhood, the man fears that she will be married off by her father in his absence. He describes his longing for her and asks her to promise not to marry a soldier because he had seen the way their experiences strip them of their humanity.

The young man describes in detail the other passengers on the ship. Most of them are older, but one girl seems to be about his age. She is pregnant. He is thankful that there are not any children on the boat because he feels their eyes would convey the despair each passenger struggles against. He attempts to remember what he can of America and Miami where they hope to land. Floating on the open sea, the passengers do not know how far they have progressed. They think often of death. The young lover remembers the life he left behind, a radio show where he was free to discuss the political state of the country and the future they hoped to create.

As time passes, the passengers on the boat grow seasick and sunburned. The young man describes the plight of another passenger who had previously escaped to Miami with a group of Cubans, only to be returned to Haiti by the Coast Guard. Now, with a broken leg and papers to prove that the Haitian police are after him, he tries a second time to survive the journey. The young lover talks about the women on the boat who sing and cry. He describes the overpowering smell of the sea adding to their nausea. There is little food on board and he fears the pregnant girl will give birth soon. The boat has developed a small crack that they were able to patch with tar. The man describes himself as finally an African now that his skin has darkened in the blazing sun. He tells her about dreaming that he died and went to heaven at the bottom of the sea.

The passengers on the boat tell stories to keep each other and themselves alive. One of the passengers has a radio and sometimes they listen to signals that they pick up from the Bahamas. They discuss how there is much discrimination against Haitians there. The young man confesses to his lover the humiliating aspects of life on the small ship, having to go to the bathroom in front of so many others. He begins to wonder if the sea is endless.

The pregnant girl, Celianne, goes into labor and the young lover moves to the other end of the ship to distance him from the event. More cracks have developed in the boat and been patched. He tells his lover that the food supplies have run out.

Celianne gives birth to a baby girl. The baby does not cry. The boat has continued to take on water and the passengers have to continually offer more of their belongings to the sea to lighten the ship. They name the baby Swiss for the Swiss Army knife used to cut her umbilical cord. The passengers gossip about the circumstances of Celianne's

pregnancy. The young man writes about his lover and his fear of her father's disapproval. He mentions how his mother fainted when the boat set sail and how he does not even know if his parents are ok. Baby Swiss still does not cry. The passengers have to take turns bailing water out of the boat.

The young man relates Celianne's story about the baby's father. Swiss does not cry, pressed against her young mother's chest. He says that she cannot bring herself to throw the baby into the ocean. Celianne told him how soldiers broke into her home and held a gun to her brother's head as they forced him to have sex with his mother. Then they tied them up and took turns raping Celianne. When they were finished, they arrested her brother and took him away. She took a razor to her face so that no one would know whom she was. Then she began to swell with pregnancy. She is only 15.

The young man describes how people have volunteered to throw the dead baby into the ocean. Celianne will not. Despite the growing smell, she clings to the child's body. The young man describes to his lover how Celianne threw baby Swiss overboard and watched as she sank and then followed her to the bottom of the ocean. He says that there was no time to save her. The water in the boat has continued to rise. The passengers need to dump the remainder of their possessions. The young man tells his lover that he must throw out the notebook in which he has been writing to her. He talks about how perhaps he too was fated to be a child of the sea and promises his love that he will always remember her.

His Narrative Analysis

The young man's letters are written to his lover back home in a notebook that he has carried with him on his journey. His language is eloquent and well crafted. He begins with a saturated piece of verbal history, layered with meaning. "They say behind the mountains are more mountains" (page 3). This line not only grants perspective, indicating that the world is much larger than it seems, but also informs of the obstacles endlessly appearing on life's path. He writes of his longing for the young girl and how they never consummated their love. He describes the sails of the boat as being made from stained bed sheets and imagines that he can still smell the blood and semen.

Realizing that he may never see his love again he asks her not to marry a soldier. This request not only demonstrates his desire for her to go on living, but also speaks of a violent truth of war. He has seen how soldiers are forced to sacrifice their soul in order to preserve their lives.

He writes to his love about how the sea seems endless and it is impossible to tell how far they are from where they left or if they are getting closer to where they want to be. In a poignant line he says, "There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one" (page 6). A powerful metaphor for the imaginary lines that people draw to divide the land into ours and theirs, delineation over which blood is shed, though they are no more real than the theoretical lines of latitude and longitude.

Describing the way that some of the people cope with being trapped at sea, he describes the hope for some form of divine intervention. Not ever having been given much, he feels he has little to lose. As the days pass, the endless sun darkens the skin of the refugees. At first he sounds embarrassed by how dark he will be, but after a while he begins to liken the group to their African ancestors.

As his mind begins to wander, suffering from the heat, dehydration and lack of food, he writes to his love of his daydreams and nightmares. They all involve sinking into the sea, which can be seen not only as foreshadowing but also has a returning home. He talks about those who have made the journey before and those who died doing it.

When Celianne gives birth to the stillborn baby Swiss, he begins to talk about feeling like a coward for having run away. Though the child is not alive, the young girl clings to it with every ounce of strength she has left in her. That child is all she has, which is why she must travel with her to the bottom of the sea.

When at last he is forced to throw out his notebook along with the remainder of the possessions on the ship, he says goodbye to the young lover whom he has left in Haiti. He writes of his probable drowning as his fate as one of the children of the sea. Many fled from slavery only to find their freedom there.

Her Narrative

Her Narrative Summary

The second narrative of the story is written from the perspective of the lover left behind in Haiti. She begins by telling her departed love that Haiti is just as he left it. She speaks of her anger and frustration that the army has taken over. They have closed all of the schools and now no one comes out of their homes. She tells him that her father instructed her to burn all of the tapes of his radio show. She confesses to him that she secretly saved a couple of them so that she would still have his voice. She is glad that he was able to escape imprisonment or death at the hands of the soldiers even if it means that she may never see him again. She says that she has stopped drawing butterflies because her mother told her that the brightly colored ones bring good news, but the black ones if they land on your hand, bring news of death.

The young girl writes to her lover that a group of students was killed protesting the disappearance of the other members of the radio group. She tells him that he has left quite a reputation behind, that they call the group Radio Six. She tells him that the bodies of the other members are being claimed by the families. She promises him that she will continue writing in the hope that he has been able to escape and one day they will be reunited.

The young lover confesses that her father discovered the radio tapes that she had hidden. She tells him of the gasoline ban that prevents them from driving out of the city. She writes of the terrible argument that ensued with her father, how they both said terrible things out of anger and fear and in her frustration she wishes for death.

The girl tells her lover how the soldiers have been storming into people's homes and forcing fathers to sleep with their daughters and mothers with their sons. She tells him that now her uncle and father sleep at each other's houses just in case. She tells him that her father has arranged to secure some gasoline to get them out of Port au Prince to safety in Ville Rose. She confesses that her father feels powerless against the soldiers. She tells him of a conversation she had with her mother. Her mother had asked about the young man, told her that she respected him and that her father merely feared that the young man wouldn't be able to provide for her, give her more than they had had. The girl writes to him that her mother hopes she will find a well educated man since their standing in society does not warrant a well connected man. She promises to listen for the results of the university exams to see whether he passed.

The young girl informs her absent lover that a neighbor, Madan Roger's house was invaded. The soldiers were looking for her son, a member of Radio Six that they had already killed. They had given his mother only his head to bury. She writes about how her father ushered the family out back to hide in the latrines. They could hear the soldiers interrogating the poor woman about her son's activity in the youth federation, the radio group and anti army protests. When she finally broke down out of anger and

confessed her hatred of them, they beat her to death. The young girl and her family could hear the poor woman's bones breaking. Her mother wanted to help, but her father stopped her, saying nothing could be done. He insisted that they needed to get to Ville Rose.

The young girl writes to her lover about a rumor that the old President will return. She tells him that they had begun selling gasoline again and that her family was headed to Ville Rose. She tells him that they saw much death and torture at the hands of the soldiers along the way but that her father would not stop.

The old President did not return. She writes to her lover that she has confessed her love for him to her father. He did not respond. She describes their new house in Ville Rose, the two rooms and noisy tin roof. She tells him of conversations with her mother under the Banyan tree in their yard. She writes to her lover that her father seems jealous of the time that her mother spends with her.

The young girl writes to her lover of a story told to her by her mother in whispers. Her mother explained to her that the soldiers were going to come for her as a member of the youth federation, but that her father had given them all the money he had to save her. She explained that this is why they left their home in Port au Prince. Her father gave everything he had in order to save her. She tells her lover that they announced the list of people who passed the university exams and that his name was on the list.

The young girl describes the life that she is becoming accustomed to in Ville Rose and the Banyan tree in the yard. She tells him that there are butterflies everywhere. She talks about the mountains as though they are what keep the two lovers apart.

She writes to her young lover at sea to tell him that she finally said thank you to her father for saving her life, and that it was at that moment she saw the black butterfly carrying the news of her beloved's death. Writing to him from under the Banyan tree, she tells him that there are butterflies everywhere and that she heard a report on the radio that another boat sank off the coast of the Bahamas.

Her Narrative Analysis

The young girl's letters to her departed lover are written in almost a stream of consciousness narrative. Her informal tone, lacking punctuation, is very intimate, as though the letters are being carved into her heart. She writes to her lover of her anger and frustration at the powerlessness she feels against the soldiers. Her lover's death is foreshadowed in her mother's warning about the butterflies.

She writes to him about the deaths of the other members of the radio group. She wishes that she knew for sure that he escaped alive and promises to keep writing, though it reminds her that she will probably never see him again. She writes to him of the tension between her and her father. With the limited perspective of a young girl, she resents his efforts to protect her by burning the boy's tapes and destroying any evidence that she associated with the youth federation. She blames her father for her lover's absence

while knowing that he was not responsible. She lashes out in anger because she cannot change the situation.

As time passes, she describes the escalating violence of the soldiers. Her mother is the first to reach out to her and share her concern for the young man. She provides her daughter with a framework in which to understand her father's actions. Though they may seem selfish, his only intention was to provide the best life for his daughter. Having struggled since birth, he hopes that his daughter will be lifted out of that struggle in the only way she can, through marriage.

"People are just too hopeful, and sometimes hope is the biggest weapon of all to use against us" (page 18). The young girl writes this line to her lover describing the reaction to the rumor that the old President might return. An extremely powerful line, it speaks of the vulnerability of the human condition. While hope can keep a person alive, it can also be used to destroy everything it creates.

The young girl describes her family's journey from Port au Prince to Ville Rose and the gruesome images they encounter on the way. She describes her father's madman-like intensity as he drives them away from the mayhem. Once in Ville Rose, the girl confesses her love for the young man to her father. She writes that she thought he should know that about her, that she was capable of loving someone. Her mother reaches out to her under the Banyan tree, telling her that sometimes a woman is forced to choose between her father and her lover. She tells the girl how her father gave everything he had in order to save her life. She tells her that she must love her father for this. In this way, the young girl is forced to grow up and let go of her anger and hurt in order to appreciate the gift of life that her father had given her.

The young girl describes the butterflies appearing everywhere. From her spot under the Banyan tree, she describes the mountains. The mountains seem to be pushing her farther from the sea and farther from her lover. At last, she is able to thank her father for his sacrifices. She describes the black butterflies that surround her and the sinking knowledge that her lover is forever gone. She describes the sea, which is blocked by the mountains, as endless.

Characters

Celianne

Celianne is a young woman of fifteen who is on the boat with the first narrator. She is pregnant, rarely eats, and "stares in space all the time and rubs her stomach." Celianne has been raped and impregnated by the soldiers who had come to her house to arrest her brother. During the voyage she gives birth to a girl who is stillborn. The child's silence underscores the symbolism of her mother's silence, which indicates that spiritually, Celianne is already dead. When she throws the baby's body into the sea, she jumps in after it and drowns.

Male narrator

The male narrator's words are the first in the story. The reader never learns his name, but he reveals his circumstance to the reader through his writings. He is at sea after having fled his homeland, and he has left behind the woman he loves. As the story unfolds, more is learned about the young man from the other narrator in the story. He has left Haiti because he was a member of the "Radio Six," a group of young people who opposed the Haitian government and broadcast anti-government radio programs. He spends the entire duration of the story on a leaky boat escaping from Haiti to Florida.

The young man's story is incomplete. The reader never learns his fate because he is forced to throw his diary, which contains his half of the story, overboard. The second narrator, the woman he has left behind, learns that another boat of refugees has been lost at sea. This strongly suggests that he has drowned.

Female narrator

The second narrator is a young woman who lives with her family in Haiti. She has been romantically involved with the young man on the boat, and as the story progresses she comes to understand how much she loves him. Her feelings are repressed because to love him would be dangerous and arouse the opposition of her father. She reveals little else about herself, but her presence in Haiti allows the reader to witness the tragedy inflicted upon the Haitian people by the dictatorial government. The fact that she simply relates these horrors with little emotion or reflection indicates how oppressed the country's people are. Many of them have been numbed into submission. Near the end of the story, however, the narrator tells her father that she loves the young man, proof that the political situation has failed to suppress the human spirit completely, "I think he should know this about me," she writes, "that I have loved someone besides only my mother and father in my life." This realization indicates her psychological growth. At the end of the story, after fleeing the city for the relative safety of Ville Rose she realizes that the young man she loves has died at sea in his attempt to escape.

Narrator's father

The young woman's father is primarily concerned with the safety of his family. While the Tontons Macoutes threaten the neighbors and his wife urges him to intervene, he forces her to remain quiet. When he finds that his daughter has audiotapes of her boyfriend's anti-government radio programs, he loses his temper with her because he fears for her safety. He leads his family to Ville Rose, where they are safer than in the city. Although he is opposed to his daughter's involvement with the young man, he respects the young man's convictions. The father represents the actions and beliefs of the majority of the Haitian people. He wants to cause no trouble, not because he supports or believes in the government, but because he is afraid his family may be tortured or killed by the regime.

Themes

Justice and Injustice

One of the most important themes in "*Children of the Sea*" is justice. From the reader's perspective, the overwhelming injustice of the narrators' situation is highlighted by the events the author chooses to recount in the story. A totalitarian dictator has made his country an unbearable place to live. People are killed for disagreeing, for speaking publicly, and for trying to protect their families. Even when the young man is forced to flee for his life on a boat, injustice prevails. His fellow passengers are so bent upon survival that for them, the only question of "justice" is whether they should throw the sick people off the boat to save themselves. The harsh conditions on the boat seem no better than the world they had left behind. The story's emotional power stems from its unrelenting portrayal of injustice that the reader understands to be more or less real.

Injustice prevails back home for the female narrator as well. The soldiers of Haiti rampage through the country, taking revenge on all the people who had opposed their authority during the short-lived Anstide administration. What they perceive as justice, however, is violent revenge that is manifested in murder, rape, and incest. The young woman's father, no matter how strong his convictions, realizes that he cannot do little to prevail over the soldiers' sense of "justice," thus adding to the plight of the people by failing to come to the aid of his neighbor. Injustice is so pervasive and overwhelming in the society, that most have stopped assessing it and can do no more than try to save themselves.

Politics

"*Children of the Sea*," though in many ways a love story, is essentially an example of political writing. The characters' situations are forced upon them by the political situation of their country. Even simple acts, like the woman's parents having supported Aristide while he was in power, now put them in danger. In this way, Danticat uses storytelling to protest the injustice of a totalitarian regime. She wants readers to identify with her characters and be urged to feel outrage for the injustice they suffer. She also demonstrates how politics can become the most important factor in a person's life: politics can separate you from the ones you love, they can determine where you live, how your parents act toward you, and whether you live or die.

Violence and Cruelty

The cruelty and vengeance of the military government of Haiti forms the backdrop of "*Children of the Sea*." The Tonton Macoutes, the private army of the Duvalier regime that specialized in torture, public terror, and oppression, run wild in the streets after Aristide, the democratically elected president of Haiti, is forced out in a military coup. Aristide supporters are hunted down and killed, and members of a protest group known

as the "Youth Federation" are particularly in danger, though they have committed no violent acts themselves. However, no one is safe, as the second narrator informs us when she discusses the soldiers' violent practices and the bodies that lie in the streets. The soldiers rape Celianne, a cruel act that begets more violence when Celianne disfigures herself, then again when she commits suicide. On the boat, the cruelty that has forced the refugees to flee again manifests itself when they consider getting rid of the weaker people on the boat. Violence results in more violence, Danticat shows. By comparing the refugees, soon to drown, to the African slaves hundreds of years ago, themselves forced from their homeland through violence and cruelty, Danticat connects the horrific acts of the past to those of the present. Like the sea, which is "endless," and like the young woman's love for the drowned man, violence is shown also to be timeless.

Human Rights

Related to the themes of violence and politics is the issue of human rights. The Western concept of human rights includes the right to free speech, to organize, to believe in democracy and religion, and not to live in fear from die government, among other things. The list of rights violated by the Tonton Macoutes in "*Children of the Sea*" encompasses almost every conceivable outrage. Their repression results in a culture of fear and powerlessness among the Haitians, where even the young woman's declaration of love for a political activist is in itself a political act. The Haitian people's right to protest, to be safe in their own homes, and to speak freely has been eliminated in the face of the Tonton Macoutes' cruelty. Less apparent in the story, but providing an ominous undertone, is the realization that had the boat actually reached Miami, the refugees most likely would not have been granted political asylum by the United States, an act that some would also consider a violation of human rights.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"*Children of the Sea*" is narrated in the first person by two distinct voices. The first belongs to a young man who is fleeing Haiti on a leaky boat. The second voice is that of the man's lover, a young woman who remains in Haiti with her family. The story is written in the form of letters from each of the characters to the other, a style known as "epistolary," which is derived from the ancient Greek word meaning "message" or "letter." To underscore the danger of their respective situations, neither of the characters refers to each other by name. To do so would jeopardize their lives even more. Through their letters, which cannot be mailed, the reader learns of the characters' deepest thoughts, the ones they are afraid to voice.

The characters' personalities are revealed by how they write and what they choose to write about. The man on the boat is primarily concerned with his current predicament and writes about the people around him and the experience of being at sea. The woman, conversely, remains in Port-au-Prince and tends to reminisce about the past more, since her situation is not as dire. Through her memories, the reader learns many of the background details of the story. The difference in their personalities is shown by the way each of them discusses their relationship. The young man speaks naturally about their intimacy; the woman is more shy and hesitating. This difference may also represent the cultural attitudes of their country.

Setting

The two settings in the story, the middle of the sea and the island of Haiti, underscore the conflict in the story—that a couple in love has been separated by political upheaval. Across this distance there is no connection between the two main characters. Their separation has been absolute, though they try to bridge the gap with letters. But even these letters will never be read by the other person. Thus, the distance between the two lovers heightens the feeling of pathos (a sense of suffering) that permeates the story.

Symbolism

"*Children of the Sea*" relies on a number of symbols for its narrative power; most notably is the sea itself. The man dreams of the sea as heaven. When the people of the boat drown, they join the hundreds of other slaves who have died and become "children of the sea." They are martyrs of a sort, and in the Christian tradition martyrs—those who die for their beliefs—go to heaven.

Another symbol is Celianne's stillborn baby. Conceived by violence it is born dead, symbolizing that fact that cruelty does not beget life. The baby could also represent the crushed Aristide democracy, which was quelled by the military coup almost from the

moment it began. In another symbolic interpretation, the dead child could also be said to represent the young couple's doomed relationship. Their love has forged an alliance between them, but political strife has torn them apart, effectively aborting their chance for happiness together. In an instance of foreshadowing, Celianne drowns herself when forced to abandon her dead child. This hints at the impending tragedy in which the rest of the passengers will drown. Again, this action symbolizes that the violence inflicted upon Celianne by the Tonton Macoutes has not only resulted in the death of her child, but also her own death. Not only does cruelty not beget life, Danticat demonstrates, it frequently begets more cruelty.

At the end of the story the woman sits under a banyan tree, itself a symbol of holiness, and is surrounded by butterflies. Though they are black, a color that frequently represents death, the butterflies may also represent a bittersweet hope of eventual freedom. Love is endless, the young woman realizes, like the sea. But the sea, like love, is hidden from view by the mountains. She and others, symbolically then, will need to move mountains to see heaven—the sea—with their own eyes. The woman at this point, after publicly declaring her love for the man to her parents, represents the country's best hope for the restoration of justice.

Historical Context

Haiti: The Early Years

Although Danticat had been living in the United States for fourteen years by the time "*Children of the Sea*" was first published, the story draws upon her experience of having spent her early years in Haiti. With generations of experience in poverty, dictatorship, and oppression, Haiti's population knows hardship well. "*Children of the Sea*" takes place in the turbulent mid-1980s, when the longstanding Duvaher dictatorship was toppled, and people's brief hopes for democracy were dashed by the military government which succeeded the dictator.

Haiti shares a large island in the Caribbean Sea with the Dominican Republic. In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on this island, which he named Hispaniola, and found what he believed was an earthly paradise. In the seventeeth century, the French and the Spanish divided the island between them. Spain received the eastern half, which later became the Dominican Republic, and France took the western half. The French landowners used many Africans as slaves on their plantations, which produced sugar, indigo, coffee, and cotton. In the 1790s, a black ex-slave named Toussaint Louverture led a revolution, and by 1801 the country had gained its independence and was die world's first black republic.

Papa Doc and the Tonton Macoutes

However, for the next two centuries the country suffered from extreme poverty and misrule, and it was even occupied by United States Marines for twenty years in the early twentieth century. In 1957 a man named Francois Duvalier took power and ruled for fourteen years. Duvalier was known as "Papa Doc" because he had practiced medicine before going into politics. He was a brutal ruler who jailed or killed his opponents and stole money from ordinary Haitians and from the international aid funds that gave money to the country. The United States government supported Duvalier because he was not a communist.

Papa Doc had his own private army called the Tonton Macoutes, whose responsibility was to keep an eye on dissenters. The name comes from the Creole term meaning "Uncle Knapsack." Creole, a combination of French and African dialects, is the language spoken by the people of Haiti. "Uncle Knapsack" refers to a monster in Haitian folklore who steals children from their parents and hides them in his knapsack. The Tonton Macoutes wanted the people of Haiti to fear them, so they chose a name that would inspire horror in anyone familiar with the folk tale. There was good reason to fear the Tonton Macoutes, for they would often kill people or burn their houses for no reason other than to remind people that they were in charge.

Baby Doc and Revolution

After Papa Doc died in 1971, his son Jean-Claude (known as Baby Doc) assumed power. Baby Doc maintained control over the country and continued to live the rich and lavish lifestyle to which his family and friends had been accustomed. While the people of Haiti starved, Jean-Claude and his wife entertained lavishly and spent much time out of the country on vacations in Europe or the United States. Those who protested the unequal distribution of wealth were killed by the Tonton Macoutes. As a result of Haiti's poverty and violence, many Haitians began to leave the country and look for a better life in the Bahamas, Jamaica, or the United States.

In 1985, however, things began to fall apart for Duvalier. During a student demonstration in the impoverished city of Gonaives, the Tonton Macoutes shot into the crowd, killing four teenagers. This angered the people greatly, and demonstrations soon began all across the country. Radio stations, some affiliated with the Catholic Church and some illegal, broadcast anti-government programs. As Duvalier intensified the repression, the United States withdrew its support. Duvalier fled to France in January, 1986, and the army assumed power. The Haitian people were ecstatic.

The army officers who took over, though, were less than the embodiment of democracy. Many of them had been close to Duvalier and were more interested in assuming power themselves than in improving conditions in the country. The Tonton Macoutes were officially disbanded, but many of them continued to terrorize the country. Thousands of Haitians began to leave the country, fleeing to Miami on small boats. Many of these refugees died at sea.

Critical Overview

The collection Krick? Krak!, in which "*Children of the Sea*" appeared, garnered impressive reviews by critics. The title of the book comes from the Haitian tradition of the storyteller who asks the audience "Krik?" to see if anyone wants to hear a story. The reply, "Krak!" indicates that audience's enthusiasm and willingness to listen. In many reviews, "*Children of the Sea*" has been singled out as one of Danticat's most poignant and effective stones. Like most of her work, it concerns the lives of ordinary Haitians and bears witness to the tragedies she witnessed firsthand as a child living in the country. Danticat tells Renee Shea in *Poets and Writers* that the story is about the "need to be remembered." Some of the refugees Danticat had spoken with following their arrival in the United States, particularly the women, "feared that no one would know they had been alive, no one would speak of them" had they drowned in the sea during their voyage.

Joanne Omangin *Washington Post Book World* calls the story "virtually flawless" and states that "All the island's troubles are braided seemlessly into these letters." Likewise, Kimberly Hebert calls it *Krik? Krak!* 's "most powerful story" in a review for *Quarterly Black Review*. Shea writes in *Belles Lettres* that the story is "stunning in the power of both the tale and language." She elaborates that Danticat changed the title to emphasize the Middle Passage of the slave ships and quotes the author: "That journey from Haiti in the 1980s is like a new middle passage.... I often think that if my ancestors are at the bottom of the sea, then I too am a part of that."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the imagery in "Children of the Sea."

At the age of twenty-six, young for a writer, Edwidge Danticat has many honors credited to her name. Aside from publishing two books, the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and a collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!*, she has also received much critical acknowledgment. Her novel earned her recognition by the New York Times as one of the "thirty young artists to watch," and it was nominated for a National Book Award in 1995. KriW Krak! drew as many rave reviews; *Publishers Weekly* writes that it "confirm[s] Danticat's reputation as a remarkably gifted writer."

Danticat, who emigrated from Haiti to the United States when she was twelve years old, writes about life in her country and its people. The Haiti that emerges from Danticat's fiction is the one in which she grew up, a country under the rule of dictators Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude, known as "Baby Doc." The Duvaliers governed Haiti by dint of oppression and cruelty. Their brutal secret police—the Tonton Macoutes—committed many atrocities against the Haitian people. The Duvalier regime was not overthrown until 1986, but the political situation suffered upheaval until well into the 1990s.

Haitian writers from the mid-1940s on have often found themselves, like Danticat, far from home. Given the restrictive and violent dictatorship that has controlled Haiti and its people, many Haitian writers have not been allowed to express themselves freely in their own country. Danticat, even though she lives in the United States, has stated that she doubted not only her ability to write, but she also had the feeling that it might be a dangerous profession. A strong part of the culture, however, is its tradition of storytelling. The title of Danticat'scollection bears witness to her rich heritage of storytelling and is explained in the epigram: "We tell the stories so that the young ones will know what came before them. They say Krik? We say Krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts."

Danticat follows in another tradition; that of writers from other cultures living in the United States who give voice to the sorrows and the joys that have shaped their experiences. The works of Jamaica Kincaid, who was born in Antigua, highlight the anger that West Africans feel about their past enslavement. Toni Morrison, though born in the United States, explores the issue of oppression through the institution of slavery. Perhaps most similar to Danticat's writings are those of Julia Alvarez, whose family fled from the Trujillo dictatorship and the Dominican Republic. Alvarez, like Danticat, revisits her homeland in her work and describes the horrors of living under a regime of terror and examines how the bonds of family are perhaps strengthened by such circumstances.

Some of the power of Danticat's fiction lies in its shocking subject matter; she often depicts violent death, incest, rape, and extreme poverty. Danticat fills her stories with

characters who exist within a painful external world. Like Haitian writers who have come before her, Danticat battles against the despair of the past and the pain of exile while also describing a culture in which people learn, love, and laugh. Despite growing up in a society which often seeks to silence women, Danticat has found her voice. She has found a way to tell the stories of her country's men and women and in a modern voice that brings attention to the problems of the past.

"*Children of the Sea*," the first story in the collection *Krik? Krak!*, tells of young lovers separated by the political situation. He is a revolutionary who has been forced to flee Haiti on a small, rickety boat or risk his life at the hands of Duvalier's secret police. The young woman he wants to marry remains with her family in Haiti where she continues to witness the ever-present horrors. The hero of the story, who is never given a name, epitomizes the choice that so many Haitians have faced over the years: exile or imprisonment. The heroine, also nameless, exemplifies the people who stay behind but must pay the price of silence.

The story is in the epistolary style, which means that it is written as a series of letters between the two main characters. Though they cannot send these letters, their telling of stones in the "Krik? Krak!"method lessens the pain of separation for them. "When we see each other again, it will seem like we lost no time," one of them writes. Expressing their stories through writing rather than speaking also symbolizes their political oppression, since their separation is caused by their inability to speak freely in Haiti. The exchange of ideas must be secretive. The Haitians understand this and break their code of silence only when secrecy loses its power to affect change. The mother tells her daughter "sometimes you have to choose between your father and the man you love" after the young man has gone into exile. Conversely, Madan Roger holds on to her secret and never reveals the names of her dead son's associates to the secret police. The young woman, while not hiding her relationship with the young man, does not tell her father of their love until the issue has become moot. Even when she does speak the truth, her father does not acknowledge the secret: "he looked me straight in the eye and said nothing to me ... papa just turned his face away like he was rejecting my very birth." The young man is the only person who cannot keep his thoughts to himself. His involvement with a revolutionary group, "the Radio Six," provided him with a forum where "we could talk about what we wanted from government, what we wanted for the future of our country." Though he escaped from Haiti, he will die because of his boldness.

The young woman's father is the person who best understands the importance of secrecy. He wants his daughter to get rid of her radio show tapes because they would incriminate her. When Madan Roger is attacked by the secret police, he refuses to go to her aid because he knows he cannot protect anyone. While he is presented as a man too willing to submit to the injustices of Duvalier's regime— "you can let them kill somebody because you are afraid, they are the law. it is their right," he says — he does have a reason for being so paralyzed. The mother tells the daughter that the Tonton Macoutes were "going to peg [her] as a member of the youth federation and then take [her] away." To save his daughter's life, the father bribed them with the family's money, home, and property. Her lover, unable to keep secrets, sacrifices himself to his beliefs

But her father, who keeps even this a secret, "gave everything he had" to save someone else. While the father is willing to find a way to live in Haiti, the young man, though he does not "want to be a martyr," cannot keep his feelings to himself. The young woman is torn by the polar opposites the two men represent. At first she feels frustration at her lack of self-determination and her separation from her lover; then she takes out this frustration on her father instead of on the true culprit, Duvalier. After she learns of her lover's death, however, she gets ready to take on a more active role in her future as she acknowledges "1 don't know what's going to happen, but i cannot see staying here forever."

A young pregnant girl traveling on the same boat as the revolutionary further represents the dilemma of secrecy. The other passengers speculate that Celianne was thrown out by her parents for having an affair, but the truth is far worse. Her baby is the result of being raped by the Tonton Macoutes. Immediately afterward, Celianne "cut her face with a razor so that no one would know who she was"; her desire to keep her secret is so strong that she is even willing to destroy her identity Like the young woman's father, Celianne keeps silent about her experiences, allowing the people of Haiti to cast blame on her rather than on the oppressive regime. But unlike the young man, she did nothing to bring her fate upon herself; even though she was innocent, she pays the cost of keeping her secret with her life. The only alternatives for Haitians, represented by Celianne and the revolutionary, both can lead to death. In the face of such options, it makes more sense to give up the secrets in hopes of creating a society in which such secrets will no longer exist.

As the lives of Haitians play themselves out against this backdrop of secrecy, it is fitting that the hidden world of the sea becomes the only place where the lovers can be together, at least spiritually. For the young man, the sea increasingly welcomes him. While he had first imagined he was "going to start having nightmares once we get deep at sea," he instead dreams of dying and going to heaven and heaven is at the bottom of the sea. By the time the ship is about to sink, however, he knows he will "live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery." With these words he draws the link between Haitians under Duvalier's regime and the Africans who were forced from their homeland centuries ago. His speeches have hinted at this connection—"Yes, I am finally an African" because the sun has darkened his skin, the passengers go to the bathroom "the same way they did on those slave ships years ago"—but only when he has finally given himself to the idea of death does he accept that he has been "chosen" for this destiny because it is the only way to escape oppression. The sea is a vast, open space, and though it is far away from the young woman, they both 'know the sea is "endless like my love for you."

Souice: Rena Korb, for Short Stones for Students, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Hart comments on the influence of Haiti on Danticat's fiction, mentioning "Children of the Sea."

More than anything else, the storytelling of the young Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat has given the world honest and loving portraits of Haitian people, both on the island and in the United States. She has smashed the numbing stereotypes created by a barrage of media accounts of Haitian poverty, misery and death.

Danticat's debut novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, garnered international acclaim last year. In her new book, a collection of nine short stories called *Krik? Krak!*, she draws on her experience growing up in dictatorial Haiti as well as stories of Creole culture and myth.

Danticat, 26, a teller of stories in the truest sense, takes us heart-pounding into a breathtaking Haiti, whose culture and people are so often diminished, even disfigured, in the writings of those who do not know and love the island.

Of course, Danticat cannot avoid placing her tales within the brutal world of the *tonton macoutes*, Haiti's former thuggish soldiers, and the oppressive political system that until recently pushed tens of thousands of Haitians to flee the island by vessel— often only to meet their death or internment in a Florida camp.

It is the details of everyday life, however, the depth of her characters and Danticat's own love and respect for her culture that make her stories at once disturbing yet beguiling.

Like her first novel, these stories are mostly told from the perspective of women: her mother, whom she follows unseen along a New York City street only to find out she is a 'day woman,' a nanny caring for a white child; a young wife deeply in love with her husband, who kills himself by jumping out of a hot-air balloon because he's despondent that he cannot raise his family out of poverty.

Danticat tells a couple of her best stories in two voices. The first one, "*Children of the Sea*," is told by a young woman and also by a politically active young man, her would-be lover, who is fleeing Haiti with 36 other "deserting souls" in a rickety boat. He writes to her about the experience in a journal:

Once you have been at sea a couple of days, it smells like every fish you have ever eaten, every crab you have ever caught, every jelly fish that has ever bitten your leg I am so tired of the smell. I am also tired of the way people on this boat are starting to stink. The pregnant girl, Cehanne, I don't know how she takes it. She stares into space all the time and rubs her stomach

With such detail, Danticat manages to place us in the midst of this terrifying voyage— the middle passage to the United States we have read about so often in news accounts —as the boat takes on water and the people are forced to throw even their most

cherished belongings overboard to lighten the load. Celianne clutches her still-born infant to her chest, he says, refusing to give her up to the sea god, Agwe.

In "New York Day Women," Danticat recounts with humor the intergenerational and cultural gaps that have developed between the older Haitian mother and her Americanized daughter, Suzette. The account is set off in unusual paragraphs, some only a sentence and statement long, as Suzette recalls her mother's quirks.

"My mother .. sews lace collars on my company Softball T-shirts when she does my laundry," Suzette recounts

"Why, you can't look like a lady when you play softball"—obviously a retort from her mother. In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," a story wrapped in haunting folklore about winged women who escape a Dominican massacre, a girl visits her mother in a Port-au-Prince prison, jailed for life for being a "*lougarou*, witch, criminal." The mother has been wrongly accused of killing a child with witchcraft.

Before the prisoners go to sleep, the guards force them to throw cups of cold water on one another so that their bodies cannot generate enough heat to grow "those wings of flames, fly away in the middle of the night, slip into the slumber of innocent children and steal their breath."

In the storytelling tradition of Haiti, the children ask "Krik?" urging the stones to begin, and the elders reply "Krak!" and tell the fables "so that the young ones will know what came before them." This is very much what Danticat, as a child and now as a writer, has done.

Source: Jordana Hart, "*Danticat's Stories Pulse with Haitian Heartbeat*," in *The Boston Globe*, July 19,1995, p 70

Critical Essay #3

In the following interview, Danticat discusses the stories in her collection Krik? Krak!, including "Children of the Sea."

This epigraph sets the stage and tone for the nine stories of the heart by Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat in her recent collection entitled *Krik? Krak!* In these tales of the politics and people of Haiti, past and present, on their island home and in newly formed immigrant communities, she lures us not simply to read but to participate in the tradition of *Krik? Krak!* that she remembers from childhood:

"*Krik? Krak!* is call-response but also it's this feeling that you're not merely an observer—you're part of the story. Someone says, 'Krick?' and as loud as you can you say, 'Krak!' You urge the person to tell the story by your enthusiasm to hear it."

So compelling are these stories, filled with the myth and poetry of Haiti, that as one ends, it is hard not to call out a resounding, "Krak!" to keep the momentum of Danticat's storytelling going.

Taken individually, several stories are stunning in the power of both the tale and language. "*Children of the Sea*" is told as a dialogue between *two* young lovers—one on a boat bound for Miami, the other reporting from Haiti on the horrors wrought by the TonTon Macoutes. The young man reports the desperate life of himself and the "thirty-six other deserting souls on this little boat" and the story-within-the-story of Celianne. Pregnant after a gang rape by the TonTon Macoutes, Celianne fled her accusing family, and when she gives birth aboard the boat to a still-born child, she refuses to give it up. Finally forced to throw the baby overboard, she follows by jumping into the sea. The young woman's story of her family's struggle in Haiti, the increasing violence, and the lengths her father finally goes to protect her are counterpoint. The nightmarish reality of the TonTon Macoutes is challenged by the fierce love of the two young people; the unnamed he wonders, "Maybe the sea is endless. Like my love for you," and she exclaims, "i love you until my hair shivers at the thought of anything happening to you." The vividness of their "letters" belies the reality that only we can hear both voices. Will he survive? Will she? Will their written records?

What will survive is memory, a collective spirit that the young man speculates may be "life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live." Danticat changed the original title of this story, "*From the Ocean Floor*," to "*Children of the Sea*" to emphasize the link to the Middle Passage:

"It's a very powerful image—from the ocean floor. No one knows how many people were lost on The Middle Passage, There are no records or graves— and the ocean floor is where our fossils are. That journey from Haiti in the 1980s is like a new middlepassage. Not to romanticize it, but the comforting thing about death is that somehow all these people will meet. I often think that if my ancestors are at the bottom of the sea, then I

too am part of that. So we are all children of the sea. There are no museums, no graves, really no place to visit—there's a timelessness about it."...

"It's so important for people to read things that somehow mirror their own experience. I remember when I was in junior high school and read Paule Marshall. *Brown Girl, Bmwnstones* was the first book that was similar to what we were going through. My father always had a desire to own property. He wanted to buy a house. We had to have something concrete, a piece of the country, a piece of the land—like the people in this novel: they wanted to have a brownstone. I had three brothers, and I'm the only girl. In most of my adolescence, that was okay, but I had to be in the kitchen with my mother, learning how to cook. Marshall's essay on 'kitchen poets' describes something very similar to when my mother's sisters would come over—their talking, the way they said things, their faces. It was so beautiful! I used to resent being in the kitchen with them because I wanted to be with the boys, but then I read Marshall's essay. She talks about doing her homework on the kitchen table while the women were talking about home, what was happening there, what they're doing—and just sort of soaking it in. She called it 'kitchen poetry.' After reading that, I didn't resent so much being in the kitchen. I felt like part of a sisterhood, and I remember feeling then that I didn't necessarily have to rebel."...

Taken together, the stories in *Krik? Krak!* have a continuity derived from recurrent themes and motifs, yet they are more profoundly bound by a spiritual vision where "the warm sea air" and "the laughter of children" coexist with the painful history of slavery and more recent violence:

"My idea was to have a progression. The first story would be '*1937*' and the last, historically, '*Caroline's Weddin*g.' We also go from Haiti to the New York stories. My editor and I chose them with that idea in mind. Just naturally from writing the stories over several years, some of the characters recurred, so that came together too. But we ended up with a different order because my editor thought that "Children of the Sea' is a story that's easy to get into; also, it has '*krik? krak!*' in it, which introduces the idea of why to write the stories. The book was put together with the idea of the stories flowing together and complementing one another."

Such interconnections, resonances, echoes, and blending are best described by Danticat's own image of braids in the final selection, "*Epilogue: Women Like Us*," a poetic coda to the nine stories:

"When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity. Your fingers have still not perfected the task. Some of the braids are long, others are short. Some are thick, others are thin. Some are heavy. Others are light. Like the diverse women in your family. Those whose fables and metaphors, whose similes and soliloquies, whose diction and *je ne sais quoi* daily slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers."

Recurring characters are one connection: the main character of "Between the Pool and the Gardenias " is the goddaughter of Lili from "A Wall of Fire Rising" and the

granddaughter of Defile, the alleged lougarou in "1937." When asked if not knowing Haitian myths and folklore makes it difficult to appreciate her work, Danticat calls on yet another connection in response:

"I think more of the depths of emotion. The stories deal with humanity and what we all go through. Different people will walk away learning different things; there'll be differences even among people from Haiti."

Generations of women strengthen these connections. Even death cannot break the line, as she writes in the Epilogue: "The women in your family have never lost touch with one another. Death is a path we all take to meet on the other side. What goddesses have joined, let no one cast asunder. With every step you take, there is an army of women watching over you. We are never any farther than the sweat on your brows or the dust on your toes."

An image that recurs throughout Danticat's work is the butterfly as symbol of both continuing life and transformation. In "Dream of the Butterflies, " a poetic vignette published in The Caribbean-Writer in 1991, violence is juxtaposed with tenderness, danger with safety, and, finally, sheer hatred with pure love. She sees the redemptive butterfly as suggesting that hope triumphs even in the face of terrible loss:

"There aren't that many legends in Haiti about butterflies, but I'm fascinated by the idea of transformation. I think in some ways we all think we could go from a caterpillar to a butterfly—that whole metamorphosis is a metaphor for life, especially a life of poverty or struggle because you hope that this is temporary and that one way or another, you'll get wings. It's the Christian ideal we grew up with that people are willing to suffer very much if that means one day they'll get their wings and fly. Haiti has such beautiful butterflies in all different colors."

The most uncanny connections seem to assert themselves in the life of this author who bears witness:

"The year I wrote '*Children of the Sea*' there were so many boating accidents; whole families would be wiped out. One woman I had read about was Marie Micheline, whose mother and daughter were on the boat with her. They all died."

Danticat dedicated the original publication of this story as follows: "In ancestral kinship, I offer this piece to Marie Micheline Marole, her daughters, and her granddaughters—three generations of women lost at sea." Coincidentally—or maybe not—another "Marie Micheline" played a key role in Danticat's life:

"My cousin Marie Micheline taught me to read. I started school when I was three, and she would read to me when I came home. In 1987, when I was in France, 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. They were afraid I might have a reaction. But around that same time, I was having nightmares; somehow I knew.

"Mane Micheline was very dear to me. When I read about this woman who drowned, I was so struck that they had the same name."

In *Krik? Krak!*, Danticat serves a "survival soup" of characters struggling to find a place of peace, a sliver of happiness, a glimmer of a brighter future amid terrorism and political chaos. Ultimately, it is in these stones that they find a moment of grace, stones that Danticat believes give people "a sense of the things that I have inherited." It's a rich inheritance—and one, we can be thankful, she generously shares.

Source: Edwidge Danticat with Renee H. Shea, an interview in *Belles Lettres*- A Review of Books by Women, Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer, 1995, pp. 12-15.

Topics for Further Study

Find some other examples of epistolary novels and stories. Do you think diaries fit into this category? In "*Children of the Sea*" and other epistolary works, do you think the format heightens or detracts from the work's meaning?

Investigate the role that the United States has played in Haitian politics during the 1980s and 1990s. What has been the United States's foreign policy regarding the country and what has been done to enforce it? Do you think the U.S. government has acted appropriately?

Research what happens to refugees from Haiti and other Caribbean countries when they come to the United States. Where do many of them decide to live? Why do you suppose they choose to settle where they do?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Before the fall of communism, the United States largely bases its foreign policy on a country's relationship with the Soviet Union. Especially in Latin America, the U.S. government supports corrupt dictatorships in Guatemala, Chile, and the Dominican Republic, simply because they are not communist.

1990s: Communism is no longer viewed as a threat to Western-style democracy, and American foreign policy reflects this shift. Dictators like Manuel Noriega of Panama are deposed because of their involvement in drug trafficking, and democratically elected leaders like Aristide are restored to power.

Haiti in the 1980s: The country's infant mortality rate is 124 per thousand.

United States in the 1980s: The country's infant mortality rate is 31 per thousand.

Haiti in the 1980s: The average life expectancy is 48 years.

United States in the 1980s: The average life expectancy is 72 years.

Aristide and the Refugees

In 1990 the country was again racked by anti-government demonstrations, and the military government was forced to hold elections. Jean-Ber-trand Aristide, a priest who had worked extensively with Haiti's poor, was elected president. However, he only served eight months before the military overthrew him and forced him to flee to the United States.

The Haitian exodus, temporarily stemmed by public enthusiasm for Aristide, returned in full force. The United States told Haiti that all refugees would be "repatriated," or sent back to Haiti, but the desperate people continued to come. Many people felt that America's refusal to accept Haitian refugees was hypocritical. They held that the United States welcomed refugees from Cuba because they were being saved from communism. Conditions in Haiti were just as bad or worse than in Cuba, the Haitians claimed, and they should be granted political amnesty as well, or they would surely die.

After much public pressure, President Clinton sent troops to Haiti in 1994 to restore President Aristide to office. The military leaders who ran Haiti left the country and Aristide returned in October. Although Haiti continues to be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, there is much hope among Haitians that real democracy will soon improve their lives. Outside of Haiti, too, the question of justice is raised. In addition to the repression in their country, Haitian refugees are not welcomed in any country. The United States, well-known as a haven for refuge-seekers, turns the Haitians back at sea while they welcome Cubans. In the Bahamas, a woman tells the first narrator in "*Children of the Sea*," "they treat Haitians like dogs. To them, we are not human ... even

though we had the same African fathers who probably crossed these same seas together."

What Do I Read Next?

Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994), Danticat's novel about four generations of Haitian women as they struggle in their homeland and in the United States, Told through the eyes of Sophie Caco, the novel has been commended for its lyrical prose which counterpoints its dire subject matter.

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991) by Mia Alvarez, a native of the Dominican Republic. Four young sisters arrive in the United States from the Dominican Republic and become increasingly Americanized as they grow up. Now adults, each one comes to term with her heritage and learns to integrate it with her identity.

Reef (1995) by Romesh Gunesekera, a coming-of-age novel also praised for its lyricism despite its stark political backdrop. A poor houseboy on the island of Ceylon, soon to become Sri Lanka, learns to appreciate the simplicity of life.

Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) by Paule Marshall, an author whose influence Danticat has praised. A girl whose parents are from Barbados struggles amidst the poverty of Brooklyn to find her identity.

The Comedians by Graham Greene, a novel about the Duvalier regime and its attack dogs, the Tonton Macoutes, which was banned in Haiti immediately upon publication.

Further Study

Ferguson, James *Papa Doc, Baby Doc. Haiti and the Duvahers* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 195-7.

A good brief overview of Haitian history, concentrating on the Duvaher years (1957-1985).

Perusse, Roland I. *Haitian Democracy Restored* 1991-1995.

Lanham, MD- University Press of America, 1995. A detailed play-by-play account of the events following Aristide's election in 1990, leading up to the restoration of his government in 1995

Danticat, Edwidge, and Renee H. Shea. "*The Dangerous Job of Edwidge Danticat*," in *Callaloo*, Vol 19, no 2, Spring, pp 382-89.

Focuses on Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The author talks about some of the ideas behind her fiction, particularly the concept of "mother" as it refers to a language and a person's homeland.

Short Stories for Students

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535