

# **The Dew Breaker Study Guide**

## **The Dew Breaker**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide specifically refers to the March 2005 First Vintage Contemporaries Paperback Edition of *The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat.

*The Dew Breaker* is a novel of connected short stories by Edwidge Danticat. The stories center around the Haitian expatriate community in New York. The Haitians' lives have been forever changed by the dictatorship which drove them out of Haiti. Key to the refugees' lives unfolding in Brooklyn is the never-named father of Ka Bienaime. Ka's father had worked as a "dew breaker" or torturer for the Haitian government. The man now lives a quiet life as a husband, father, barber, and landlord. Ka's father is haunted by the things he has done in his past life –things which include outright murder of innocent people. He does his best to forget by focusing on his life in the present. When Ka creates a sculpture of her father, he throws it in a lake because he does not want a physical memorial of himself left behind. Ka herself wonders how her mother, Anne, could possibly love her father, while her mother explains it is because he is a different man than he was in the past.

There are three men who rent rooms from Ka's father –Michel, Dany, and one unnamed. The unnamed man has spent seven years in America working hard to bring his wife over. He has missed her dearly, but when she finally arrives, the emotional distance between them grows. Michel reflects sadly on how his childhood best friend, Romain, disappeared in the chaotic violence that followed the abdication of Haiti's dictator. Dany returns home to visit Haiti to inform his Aunt Estina that he believes he has found the man responsible for killing his parents (Ka's father) in New York, but Aunt Estina believes Dany's parents were mistaken for someone else and killed. The same thought plagues Dany's mind that Ka's father may not actually be who he seems to be, so Dany does not kill him.

Elsewhere, Nadine Osnac, sent to America by her parents for a better life, struggles with an abortion she had forced by the hand of her now ex-boyfriend, Eric. Nadine, a nurse, is unable to bring herself to talk to her own parents, and realizes she herself should be a mother by now. Beatrice Saint Fort, a famed local bridal gown maker, is interviewed by Alina Cajuste for a Haitian-American newspaper regarding Beatrice's retirement. It is during this time that Alina learns Beatrice was cruelly tortured by the Haitian military for refusing a date with one of the officers. Aline comes to consider that human interest pieces like this would be better than dispassionate articles about things like retirement. A young woman named Freda has come to America after refusing to sing at the national palace, for the government killed her father. Freda, now in New York, vows she will return to Haiti, join the rebels, and fight the government.

As the novel comes to an close, events come full-circle. The reader is transported back in time a few decades to the time of the Haitian dictatorship. There, Ka's father actively works for the military. He is power-hungry and self-obsessed. He delights in developing ways to torture and kill prisoners, and is given the assignment of arresting a preacher who has been verbally defying the government. When the arrest is handled sloppily, the



preacher is not killed. The superior officers become angry. Ka's father is ordered to release the preacher, telling him to stop his defiance. Instead, the preacher stabs Ka's father in the face, prompting Ka's father to shoot the preacher multiple times, killing him. Ka's father then runs out into the night, horrified at what has happened, where he runs into the woman who will become his wife, Anne. Anne tends to his wounds. The killing of the preacher has been too much for him, and he finds acceptance and redemption in his marriage to Anne. Years later, he will tell Ka that she and Anne have been masks to his face. Ironically, the preacher was Anne's stepbrother.



# The Book of the Dead – Seven

## Summary

The Book of the Dead – Ka Bienaime, an artist of East Flatbush, Brooklyn, speaks to hotel manager Flavio Salinas and Officer Bo. Ka, of Haitian descent, explains that she and her sixty-five year-old father, a barber with a facial scar, were on the way to Tampa to deliver one of her sculptures when he went missing from their hotel in Lakeland, Florida. The sculpture –a study of her father –is to be delivered to Gabrielle Fonteneau, a Haitian-born television actress who was persuaded by mutual friend Celine Benoit, to buy the sculpture. Salinas and Bo ask when Ka last saw her father. She explains it was the night before and that nothing was amiss. When she woke up, her father, the rental car, and the sculpture were gone. Bo says he will put the word out to everyone. He tells Ka to head back to her room in case her father returns. Ka then calls her mother to tell her about what has happened. Her mother is not home, but her mother calls back that afternoon. The situation is the same.

Ka thinks about how her father loves to visit the Brooklyn Museum when he is not working. He especially enjoys the exhibits on the Ancient Egyptians and how they grieved for the dead. That evening, Ka's father finally returns. Ka asks him where he has been and why the sculpture is missing. He explains that is why they must talk. He tells her that he does not want the statue sold. He brings her to a man-made lake, sits with her on a bench, and explains the statue is in the water. He explains he gave her the name Ka because in ancient Egypt, a "ka" is a double for the body which guides it through life and into the afterlife. Ka's father explains ka is like a soul and that the statue she sculpted is his double, his ka. He explains he wants to be taken into the next world with the sculpted ka because it is very good. Ka's father reflects on reading from the Egyptian Book of the Dead with Ka when she was younger, which worries Ka. She asks her father if he is dying or if he is ill. Instead, he explains that when a person's heart is too heavy, the person cannot enter the afterlife. He explains he was the hunter, not the prey. Ka asks him what he is talking about. He explains that when he was a prison guard he had killed many people.

Back at the hotel, Ka calls Bo, Salinas, and her mother to let them know what has happened. She asks her mother how she can possibly love her husband (Ka's father) after the past. Her mother explains that Ka's father is a good man who needed her and Ka to give him roots. Ka made him a better person.

The next morning, without the statue, Ka and her father drive over to give Gabrielle the bad news. Gabrielle's house is beautiful, and Ka's father explains that is why they never went back to Haiti. Gabrielle's parents look back at Haiti with fondness. In a private moment, Ka confesses what has happened to the sculpture, causing Gabrielle to storm off. As Ka and her father drive away, she realizes her father did not want a sculpture of himself because he is ashamed of himself. He does not want a permanent, Egyptian-



like monument of himself. He believes that Ka and her mother are his angels which mask his face.

Seven – At thirty-seven, it has been seven years since the unidentified man has last seen his wife. Now he is preparing for her to come to New York. The man's roommates, Michel and Dany, have promised to be respectful and keep a distance from the man's wife. They have also promised not to say anything other than the man has only ever worked his two jobs and come home. He does not want it mentioned he has dated other women. At the airport, Customs confiscates many of the man's wife's goods, including foods brought as gifts from Haiti. She is more thrilled to see her husband than concerned about Customs.

At home, the man and his wife have sex seven times between then and the man's work the next morning. At home, the wife listens to the news and listens to a story of a Haitian-American man named Patrick Dorismond shot by police in Manhattan. That night, the wife cooks a meal for her husband as well as Michel and Dany. The man's wife explains to him that she wants to get a job.

While listening to the continuing story of Dorismond on the radio, the wife begins to learn English, chanting "No justice, no peace" over and over again. The wife recalls meeting her husband at carnival in the seaside town of Jacmel. As their first weekend in New York rolls around, the wife is excited to go out into the open with her husband. He takes her to his favorite place, Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The crowds cause her to reflect on the Jacmel wedding tradition where couples ask strangers to marry them, seeing how long it takes strangers to recognize the bride and groom are dressed up as one another. Things seem to be very quiet for the man and his wife on their way home on the bus, sitting across the aisle from each other. The wife wishes that she and her husband had kept their wedding clothes in order to carry out the tradition in New York. Then, there would not be such silence between them now.

## Analysis

The past cannot be escaped. This is clear when Edwidge Danticat's novel begins. From first appearances, Ka's father is a kind, older man who has simply disappeared. However, this turns out not to be the case as the theme of false appearance and mistaken identities evolves. Ka's father was not always a good man. In Haiti, he was a brutal murderer and prison guard. Ka's father explains he has been running away from the past and that he has been doing everything he can to forget the past. Ka's mother says that her husband is a different man now. Ka's father explains that both Ka and her mother are masks for his face. They have made him a better, though not a different, man. They mask his real face of the past. Ka's father cannot escape the past, no matter what his present life is like.

The reader should note that Ka's father's decision to destroy the sculpture of himself is an act of vengeance against the self. He does not want a physical memorial of him to exist, given the horrors he has committed in life. The statue is thrown into a lake – the



water of which symbolizes both cleansing and burial –meaning that Ka’s father is giving his statue what he himself could never have. The lake itself is man-made, which reflects on the idea that Ka’s father’s situation is man-made. It is of his own making. He cannot escape the reality of his past by coming to America for a better life. According to the author, Haitians come to America for a better life. This does not always work out.

This is as true of Ka and her family as it is of the unnamed husband of Seven. Family means everything – whether it is Ka’s father finding an escape in his family or the unnamed narrator of Seven working tirelessly to bring his wife to America for a better life. Despite his family, Ka’s father is unable to forget the past. The unnamed man feels emotionally close to his wife, though she is physically distant. He longs to close that distance. However, when the distance is closed, within a week of her arrival, an emotional distance has grown between them. Physical closeness does not necessary mean emotional closeness. The wife wishes she and her husband could carry out a traditional marriage custom with strangers. In reality, the wife and her husband are now strangers to each other. Seven, traditionally seen as a lucky number, turns out to be unlucky for the man and his wife.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ka’s father go missing from the hotel? What does he do with the statue? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What shocking revelation does Ka’s father relate to Ka? How does Ka react to this? Is her reaction justified? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Despite being away for his wife from seven years, the unnamed husband of Seven finds his reunion with his wife not to be what he had hoped it would be. Why?

## Vocabulary

lilt, senility, deferential, pungent, nuanced, centrifugal, eradicated, stagnant



# Water Child – The Book of Miracles

## Summary

Water Child – Each month, Nadine Osnac receives a letter from her mother and father. In her latest letter to Nadine, her mother speaks of her father's health being difficult and thanks Nadine for the money sent to them. The letter asks for a call. Three weeks pass, but Nadine cannot bring herself to call. Nadine works as an RN at a nearby hospital with a woman named Josette, who can make even quick encounters in passing seem friendly. Nadine lives in a one-bedroom condo in Canarsie. After work, Nadine discovers her ex-boyfriend and father of her nearly-born child has left her a message telling her he does not need other women in his life. Nadine keeps a small Japanese-style water shrine on her dresser in honor of the baby never born, but aborted. Another letter arrives from Nadine's parents, speaking about her father's inflamed prostate, and that they wait every Sunday in hopes that Nadine will call and return to their previous routine of Sunday calls. At work, Nadine and Josette must restrain young Ms. Hinds while Dr. Vega is called. Ms. Hinds writes down that she is so upset that she cannot speak. She feels like a Basenji –a dog that cannot bark. Ms. Hinds is told she will need to see a speech therapist.

Nadine finally decides to call her parents. They are thrilled to hear her voice. The next day, Ms. Hinds's parents, Nicole and Justin, come to pick Ms. Hinds up. Ms. Hinds introduces them to Nadine. Nadine watches them leave and realizes that without the abortion, she herself would be a parent that day. As the elevator doors close on the Hinds, Nadine sees her distorted reflection in the metal.

The Book of Miracles – Anne tells her husband and her daughter Ka about miracles as they pass the cemetery. Anne always thinks about her brother, who drowned as a child many years before, each time they pass a cemetery. Although Ka is an atheist, she asks her mother to tell them more stories of miracles. Anne reflects on how she and her husband have raised Ka to celebrate Christmas without expecting gifts, but only to enjoy time with her family and to be thankful for what she has. To the present day, Ka only enjoys riding around to look at Christmas lights with her parents. Ka and her father attend Christmas Eve Mass with their mother, even though neither one has any interest in doing so and even though they are critical of everything. Anne, however, finds the Church beautiful and warm. She thinks about the family business, about renting a room to three Haitian men downstairs, and thinks about how her husband used to be a "dew breaker" or torturer back in Haiti. Anne wants to tell Ka about the miracle that Ka's father is a changed man. Anne hopes that her brother is up in Heaven.

In Church, her family sees a man who resembles Emmanuel Constant, a dictator wanted in Haiti for the deaths of five-thousand people, and who fled to hide in New York on Christmas Eve some years back. Constant has been sentenced to life in prison in Haiti. Ka makes a scene and takes a closer look at the man by bending over in front of him to look at him, but it turns out he is not Constance. As Mass ends, Anne thanks the





priest for such a wonderful evening. Outside, Anne's husband stands across the street with his hands in his pockets. Anne considers that life is like a pendulum between forgiveness and regret. Anne apologizes for making a scene, then says Mass is as boring as it is every year, and not like any of Anne's miracle stories.

## Analysis

The past cannot be escaped, whether it is recent or distant. Nadine comes to recognize the past will always be with her, thanks to the abortion her ex-boyfriend forced her to have. The past can also be seen in the way Ka believes she has found a murderous man in Church on Christmas Eve, a man responsible for more than five-thousand deaths in his time in Haiti. The man turns out not to be who Ka believes he is at first—a case of false appearances and mistaken identities—but ironically, Ka's moral venture is registered by her father. His going across the street to stand by himself is a physical reaction to the past catching up to him. He might as well be a wanted man for all of the horrors he committed. His daughter, without realizing it, might well be looking for him instead of the other man.

In the case of Nadine and in the case of Ka, family is critically important in their lives and the lives of those they love. Nadine has difficulty accepting she should have been a mother by now, and should have been starting her own family—therefore, she cannot bring herself to speak to her own parents for weeks. Ka has difficulty accepting her father as a murderer, and has difficulty accepting her mother accepting this as her mother believes Ka's father's changing his life has been a miracle. Nadine's lack of family, and Ka's haunted family, are central in their lives. The reader should note that when Nadine watches a family head into an elevator, her distorted image appears reflected in the door, meaning that her past has distorted who she is in the present—someone without family. Ka's father moves across the street not only for distance, but because he believes he does not deserve the life he has given the number of lives he both ended and ruined in the past. (It should also be noted that Nadine's ex-boyfriend appears to be the unnamed narrator awaiting his wife's arrival in America.)

However, as Danticat argues through the character of Anne, life is a pendulum that swings between forgiveness and regret. Nadine's finally calling her parents is done in an attempt to forgive herself for her own aborted parenthood—if her baby didn't get the parents he or she deserved, why should Nadine herself be entitled to parents? This is to be contrasted with Nadine's parents repeated attempts to hear their child's voice, while Nadine repeatedly regrets having the abortion and now not hearing her own child's voice. Nadine consistently moves between forgiving and regretting. The same is true of Anne: she forgives, and regrets for, Ka's father; and Ka's father himself alternates between forgiving himself in his present circumstances, and then being reminded of his past by his very own daughter at Church. Ka's father does not believe he deserves forgiveness, so he makes himself physically distant from Church—the very heart of forgiveness.



## Discussion Question 1

After the Christmas Eve Mass, Ka's father goes and stands by himself across the street. Why does he do this?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Nadine take so long to call her parents? Why does she finally consent to calling them? What happens as a result?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Anne believe her husband's transformation is a miracle? Do you agree or disagree with this idea, given her husband's past?

## Vocabulary

abruptly, intangibles, comprehensible, miracle, pendulum, forgiveness, regret



# Night Talkers – The Bridal Seamstress

## Summary

Night Talkers – Dany has come back to visit Haiti from New York to see his Aunt Estina Esteme, older sister of his father, whom he has not seen since moving to New York. While walking over a mountain, he feels a sharp pain in his side and thinks about how his roommate, Michel, had an emergency appendectomy some weeks before. Dany must lie down and wait for the pain to subside before continuing. He comes to a village where he greets a group of young people at work on chores where he asks for, and receives some water. He speaks to the old father of one of the girls, saying he has come to visit his aunt, Estina. The old father reveals his grandfather, Nozial, and her grandfather, Dormeus, were cousins, recognizes Dany as being the son of Maxo Jean Dormeus, and recognizes Dany as having lost both his parents in a fire many years ago. The old father is revealed as Old Zo and volunteers to lead Dany to Estina, personally. Estina lives in a beautiful valley in a wooden-framed, tin-roofed house. The house is flooded with friends and relatives, anxious to see Dany. Dany and his aunt are thrilled to see one another, though Aunt Estina is now blind.

Dany then reveals the true purpose of his visit. He explains that it was in New York where he found the man who killed his parents. However, the sudden interruption of Old Zo and a young girl bringing food changes the course of the conversation. Asleep that night, Dany listens to his aunt carry on conversations in her dreams. The next day, Dany meets Claude, a Haitian who was sent home from New York. Aunt Estina hopes that Dany will help Claude learn English. Claude explains everyone has been very kind to him since his return, especially Aunt Estina. Later, Aunt Estina asks Dany if he knows what Claude was in prison for. Dany says he does not know, so Estina says it is rumored Claude killed his father. Dany now thinks about how the man who killed his father and mother was now a barber. Dany thinks about how, for months after learning the barber was renting a room and Dany rented it, he wanted the barber to recognize him. Dany dreams of having the opportunity to kill the barber, but refusing to do so because he worries that he will be mistaking the barber for the wrong man. The next morning, Dany's aunt explains she believes her brother and his wife were killed because they were mistaken for someone else. She will not say who, though.

Not long after, Aunt Estina dies in her sleep. It is Old Zo's daughter, Ti Fanm, who discovers this. She also discovers Dany has a terrible stomachache. By the middle of the day, Dany is feeling better and begins to help with funeral preparations, including helping Old Zo to prepare a place in the mausoleum. He watches the women "mark" Estina's final dress for burial by cutting pieces from it. The cut pieces are mementos, meant to be carried forever. Friends and relatives tell stories about Aunt Estina, including that she wanted to be a baby seamstress when she was younger. Old Zo believes that Aunt Estina knew she was dying, and so blood summoned blood, meaning Dany was meant to return home for her death. Claude comes to the wake, saying how good a woman Aunt Estina was. Dany asks Claude about killing his father, to which



Claude admits doing when he was fourteen and his father tried to take away his drugs. Claude explains he has been doing everything in his life since then to be good and make up for what he has done. Dany realizes Claude is a palannit, a person able to speak their nightmares out loud in their sleep. Claude can also do this during the day.

The Bridal Seamstress – A young Haitian-American woman named Aline Cajuste arrives at the home of Beatrice Saint Fort in Far Rockaway, Queens, to interview her on her last day as a bridal seamstress. Beatrice makes coffee for Aline, which Aline admits is the best coffee she has ever had. She can taste some kind of alcohol in the coffee, but cannot identify it. Beatrice says the secret to her coffee, or to anything in her life, is taking the time to do it. Aline explains she has been assigned to write the story about Beatrice after Beatrice made a wedding dress for her boss, Haitian American Weekly editor Marjorie Voltaire. Beatrice explains she has been making dresses since Haiti, and now she has become too tired and the work too hard. She explains that she does not do her work for the money. She does her work because she loves it and because she knows everyone will be looking at the dress. She takes Aline on a tour of the neighborhood, pointing out neighbors and commenting on their professions, all except for one Haitian neighbor whom Beatrice knew back in Haiti.

Back at Beatrice's apartment, she explains she is going to move again after she retires. She explains her neighbor was a prison guard who arrested her for refusing to go to a dance with him. He tortured her by whipping her feet. Then, he forced her to walk home alone. Beatrice does not care how much her neighbor has changed. She says she would know him anywhere. Aline thinks Beatrice is a nut and admits as much to Marjorie on the phone later. However, Marjorie insists that the story be done only on Beatrice's retirement. Aline investigates the home of the neighbor, but she is told no one lives there. Beatrice explains this is how the man hides, or he would be in jail. Aline decides she will write about Beatrice as more than just a seamstress, even if it gets her fired.

## Analysis

The past cannot be escaped, no matter how long ago it might have been. This is true for Dany, who returns to Haiti to see his Aunt Estina with the news that he believes he has found the killer of his parents. He thinks that the killer is Ka's father. In the previous story, the reader is almost lulled into a sense of forgiveness with Ka's father at church. However, Dany proves to be the heartbreaking reminder that his own life has been forever changed by Ka's father because Ka's father killed his parents by setting their house on fire. There is no forgiveness in Dany's mind, only revenge. He asks his aunt why his parents were killed, but she explains that she believes Dany's parents were mistaken for someone else. Here again emerges the theme of mistaken identities and the trauma that can result from such an error.

Dany decides not to kill Ka's father. Dany thinks that there is always the chance that he could also have the wrong man. He knows what it is like to be victimized for nothing. He



does not want to cause anyone else –especially an innocent family –the same kind of heartbreak.

Beatrice cannot escape her past. She has lived her life a certain way in America because she is trying to escape memories of former life in Haiti. Though she freely talks about Haiti, it is clear that she wants nothing to do with it. Sometimes she imagines that her torturer is living next door or following her. Then, she has the urge to move again.

Beatrice and other Haitians have come to America seeking a better life. In America, Beatrice has been able to make a solid living as a bridal seamstress, while Dany has managed to get by. He is doing well enough to be able to afford a return visit to Haiti. Dany returns to Haiti because he still has family there. Beatrice, scarred by the torturous thugs of the Haitian dictator, never has a family herself, having had to rely on herself to get home after being tortured. She never wants someone else to control her life again. She does things as she wishes to do them, wanting full control over her own life rather than leaving things up to others. This is obvious through Beatrice taking her time to do things.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Dany return to Haiti? What does he seem to want to do in his dreams? Why does he not follow through with his plans?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Beatrice take her time in doing everything that she does? Why does this matter so much to her?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why have Beatrice and Dany both come to America? Have either of them found what they were seeking? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

subsided, obstacle, engrossed, enthralled, brusque



# Monkey Tails – The Funeral Singer

## Summary

Monkey Tails (February 7, 1986/February 7, 2004) – Twelve year-old Michel and his mother cower in fear in their house. Outside in the streets, mobs hunt for members of the Volunteers for National Security militia, or macoutes. The previous night, the country's dictator and his wife had fled the country, leaving his loyal supporters to the revenge of everyone else. Michel's brother, Vaval, believes the crowd means them no harm. Vaval watches the people as they sweep past, probably looking for Regulus, who has an eighteen year-old son named Romain. Romain is the best friend and hero of Michel. Michel's family does not approve of the dictatorship. Michel hopes Romain is safe, and he hopes it is only his father, a dictator loyalist, they are after. Romain has always looked out for Michel.

Out front, Vaval and the maid, Rosie, look at the damage left behind by the mobs. The crowd has damaged the local water dispensary, so water is flowing freely. Michel's mother urges everyone to collect as much as they can so no one will have to pay for the water. When the water's owner, Mister Christophe, shows up, he orders bystanders, including Michel, to help him turn off the water. Christophe is Michel's father, but he does not acknowledge Michel as his son. He does not provide for him.

At the first opportunity, Michel goes to look for Romain. The mood of the city has turned completely against the dictator and his supporters. At Romain's, Michel finds Romain and his Aunt Vesta. He hears on the news that the dictator has turned over total power to the military. Romain appears to have slept little, and he is very nervous. Romain says that he has not seen his father since May of the previous year. Romain tells Michel that they are going to escape. Romain hails a taxi and tells the driver to take them to La Sensation Hotel. Romain is going to the hotel to find his father, as his father often used the hotel for his affairs. But, Romain is disappointed to learn his father is not there. Romain then sends Michel home in the taxi. Romain says that he will be fleeing the country that night. The next morning, rumors flare that Regulus was sneaking back into his house in the middle of the night when he was spotted. He committed suicide. Michel hopes Romain will never hear of this. Michel reflects back on how they made fun of the dictator, before fleeing, denying rumors that he was going to flee as "unyielding as a monkey's tail."

Fifteen years pass. Michel, now in New York, speaks regularly to Rosie and Vaval. His mother has died. Christophe is still alive. Romain is never heard from again. Michel narrates that he is telling his unborn son that if he is born on the anniversary of the day everything changed, his name will be Romain.

The Funeral Singer – It is Week 1. Rezia owns Ambiance Creole, the only Haitian restaurant on Manhattan's Upper West Side. She, along with the narrator, Freda, take



English classes. Freda has been expelled from her country. Freda is twenty-two and a former professional funeral singer.

It is Week 2. Freda remembers playing telephone as a child with her mother while her father was a fisherman.

It is Week 3. Freda considers that life is full of dead spots, unlike beautiful paintings. Freda wears bright, colorful clothing to hide her dead spots.

It is Week 4. Rezia invites Freda and Marseille to dine at her restaurant. All of them have sorrows, and Freda begins by telling them she forgot all colors except blue when fishing with her father and that she was once asked to sing at the national palace.

It is Week 5. Freda remembers how the president of Haiti would ride around and throw out money, food, and goods to citizens to placate them.

It is Week 6. The teacher goes over riddles in English, including heights of trees based on sunshine and shadow.

It is Week 7. Freda, Rezia, and Marseilles get together to cook dinner. They talk about their pasts. Marseilles explains she left Haiti because her husband was killed after painting an unacceptable portrait of the president. Freda says she left Haiti after being asked to by her mother because she would not accept an invitation to sing at the national palace. Rezia reveals she was raped by a military man while living with her aunt who ran a brothel.

It is Week 8. Freda and her friends look for news about Haiti in the papers. They learn the brother of a childhood friend of Marseille's, a radio reporter, has been arrested.

It is Week 9. Only Rezia passes the practice test in class.

It is Week 10. Marseille and Rezia worry they will not graduate from the class. Marseilles asks how a person becomes a funeral singer. Freda explains that after singing at her father's memorial Mass, others asked her to sing at the funerals of their loved ones as well. Marseille says that she met Jackie Kennedy some years before when the Kennedys visited Haiti. Jackie had been interested in a portrait of the harbor and some local Haitians.

It is Week 11. Freda recalls how her mother would always say a person died three times: once when breath left the body; once when the bodies are put into the earth; and, finally, when people forget someone. This makes Freda think about her father's fishing boat being brought to shore without him in it.

It is Week 12. Freda remembers drawing many stick figures in a sketchbook so that they might keep her company in case her mother also disappeared.





It is Week 13. Although Freda has sung at a lot of funerals, she is not religious. She reveals she never sang at the national palace because she would rather stop singing altogether than sing for the people who killed her father.

It is Week 14. Freda, Marseilles, and Rezia have taken the final tests, but they will not know for awhile if they have passed. Freda announces she is going to return to Haiti, join a militia, and fight the government. At first, Marseille and Rezia laugh. Then, they become very concerned when they realize Freda is serious. Unable to change her mind, they sing a funeral song with Freda for herself.

## Analysis

The idea that the past cannot be escaped continues to hold great sway in this section of the novel. No matter what Michel, Rezia, Freda, or Marseilles does, the past is with each of them constantly as a matter of what they have lost. For Michel, it is the loss of his boyhood hero, Romain, who never harmed anyone. However, as the son of someone who did cause harm to others, Romain was forced to flee the country and live in fear for his life because of the revenge of the post-dictator mobs. For Michel, this demonstrates that a lack of forgiveness –or reason –can do far more harm than good by the winning side.

Rezia recalls being raped by a military man when she was much younger, an experience that still haunts her in the present day. Marseilles reveals that her husband was killed for painting an unacceptable portrait of the dictator. Freda says her father was killed by the government and that she gave up singing to avoid having to sing at the national palace. Despite leaving Haiti behind, she was not forgotten –especially by Freda, who decides to return to Haiti to fight the government.

Michel, Freda, Rezia, and Marseille have suffering in common, and all of them also share an admiration for America. They have all come to America seeking a better life, just as many other Haitians have done. Indeed, all of them have found a better life in America, but the past for Michel and Freda proves to be too strong. Michel returns to Haiti to converse with his aunt, while Freda vows to go back to change things in Haiti. For both of them, the past is unacceptable, and it must somehow be made right in the present. The reader calls to mind Anne's consideration that life is a pendulum between regret and forgiveness. Michel and Freda alternate between being consumed by the past and letting it go. In the end, Michel lets the past go by choosing to name his son after Romain. Freda is determined to return to Haiti to fight.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Michel choose to name his unborn son after Romain? How does he believe this will affect his own life?





## Discussion Question 2

Why does Freda become such good friends with Rezia and Marseilles? How do the women come to help and comfort one another in America, especially with respect to their pasts in Haiti?

## Discussion Question 3

Explain how Michel and Freda handle their past lives in Haiti. Why do Michel and Freda choose to handle the past differently?

## Vocabulary

macoutes, contemplation, imbecile, somber, brazen, inconsolable, escapade, vetiver, inquisition, baffled



# The Dew Breaker

## Summary

1 – After the preacher of the Baptist Church of the Angels refuses to preach government-approved messages in church and criticizes the government on his radio show, he is targeted for death. Even his church members are arrested and taken away to the Caesernes Dessalines military barracks. An unidentified government man is given the task of silencing the preacher, but intimidation does not work. The man does his best to reassure himself that killing the preacher would be a good thing. The man has recently been considering leaving Haiti for Florida or New York to get away under the auspice of spying on Haitian expatriate communities. The man has a dream where he must flee Haiti disguised as a nun after the government falls. He interprets the dream as a sign of things to come. He remembers first becoming transfixed by the president's speaking abilities at nineteen and joining the Miliciens, the Volunteers for National Security. He looks forward to the time after killing the preacher, when he can drink, play dominoes, and take a girl to bed. He thinks about how much he loves the power his uniform affords him and how he prides himself on inventing the worst punishments and tortures for prisoners. He enjoys soothing prisoners with words, then physically assaulting them.

2 – The preacher has already decided his life must be sacrificed for his country, so he does not fear speaking out against the government. He does not even fear his own death anymore because he has often dreamed of it. Most people are respectful of him and glad of the work he is doing. However, they do not want to endanger themselves by getting too close. This does not bother the preacher, who does his best to soothe the concerns of everyone with comforting words. The sermon for that night includes a testimonial remembrance of the preacher's wife's death from poisoning done at the hands of the government. The preacher's testimonial is meant to be heard by his wife in Heaven. The testimony is given in hopes that it will absolve him of any sins. Suddenly, armed government men break into the church and arrest the preacher in front of everyone. They put him into the back of a truck, where men are inside waiting to beat him. He is put into a cell where he falls asleep. He is awakened with his face being urinated on.

3 – Anne wonders what to do. She has left the church a few moments before, after suffering some kind of epileptic seizure.

4 – The preacher is ordered released, for the arrest had been "sloppily" handled, meaning the preacher was to have been killed, not taken to jail, according to the government man's superior, Rosalie. She tells him that the preacher is not to die in a cell. The man decides he will not follow the usual route of torture, but simply tell the preacher to stop his activities and go home.



5 – The preacher is taken out of his cell and told to follow along. He does not know if he will be set loose or killed, but he knows he will be free either way.

6 – Anne loves miracles and thinks about them as a local shoeshine man, Leon, helps her into a chair. She tells Leon she cannot stay, and she heads out into the night.

7 – The preacher is taken to an office. A government man before him says he has to tell the preacher something. He says all the preacher has to do is to stop doing what he has been doing. The chair on which the preacher is sitting shatters, so the preacher grabs a shard of wood and stabs the government man in the cheek. The man then pulls out a revolver and begins shooting the preacher.

8 – Anne runs through the streets, towards the barracks. She is the only person that she sees out.

9 – Rosalie and other armed men swarm the government man's office. She is enraged that the preacher has been killed. The man is deeply shaken and heads out into the night. He believes he will now be arrested or executed. He does not know where to go about his bloodied face. Instead, a young woman runs into him, seemingly mad. The woman pulls splinters from his face, saying she needs to get into the barracks. The man says people who go in there don't come out.

10 – The woman follows him home and watches him sleep. The man is glad for this.

11 – The woman watches a funeral in the morning, then goes out to buy ginger, yerba Buena, and honey.

12 – The man dreams of his childhood, of being in the garden with his mother who urges him to reach out to a shame plant. The man is awakened by the return of the woman, Anne, to his home, where she begins to tend to his face. She realizes she has been put in his path to heal him.

13 – The preacher, it turns out, was Anne's stepbrother. Years pass. Anne learns that her husband has gone missing in Florida. Her daughter, Ka, asks her how she can possibly love him. Anne cannot explain it. She considers that life is all about a pendulum swinging between forgiveness and regret and that her own life is always full of relationships on the verge of being severed or lost. She recalls how her epilepsy stopped the morning the news reported her stepbrother set himself on fire in the prison yard.

## Analysis

The past cannot be escaped in the title story of the novel. The past itself is explored firsthand as the novel comes full-circle back to Ka's father. Ka's father is revealed to be someone who has thrived on the power that comes with his job, but whose conscience becomes heavier and heavier over time. At first, Ka's father delights in developing tortures, but ultimately comes to have his conscience shattered through the killing of the



priest. The horrors Ka's father has caused in the past, the pain he has caused so many people, and his own guilty conscience come to be represented and physically manifested by the scar on his face made possible by the preacher stabbing him with a chair—a marking, so to speak, of a violent and evil past. Even Ka's father has had enough by that point, and rushes out of the barracks, shocked and broken.

It is Anne who comes to comfort and care for Ka's father, recognizing that there must be some good in him despite the actions of his past. Meeting Anne gives Ka's father a new direction in life, one which ultimately leads him to marriage, America, and fatherhood. The reader alternately sympathizes with Ka's father, struggling to accept the past as the past, and rightfully condemns Ka's father for his past, for countless people alive are still suffering because of his actions while he has his own family safe and sound in New York. He has come to enjoy the life he has denied to so many others.

As Anne notes, life is a pendulum that swings between forgiveness and regret. Ka's father himself cannot—and should not—let the past go. His guilt constantly eats at him—yet he will not attempt to do anything to atone or pay for his crimes, such as returning to Haiti and surrendering himself to the authorities. It becomes clear that Ka's father reacted so badly to Ka studying the face of a man suspected to be a dictator in the chapter Book of Miracles because Ka's father knows he himself should also be subject to his daughter's scrutiny. However, Anne has come to forgive Ka's father for the past, truly believing him to be a different man than he was. As it turns out, Anne is in a particularly distinct place to forgive Ka, for the preacher Ka murdered was her stepbrother.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Anne forgive Ka's father despite everything he has done? Do you believe she is justified in doing so? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you believe that men like Ka's father can ever truly atone for their crimes and sins? Do you believe they can be forgiven? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Despite the admission of guilt on the part of Ka's father, he has faced no moral or legal punishment for the things he has done. Why is this so? Why does Ka's father not even seem to want to turn himself in to receive punishment despite his feelings about the past?

## Vocabulary

illustrious, deficiency, camion, meticulously, mesmerized, caryatids, laggard, absolve, agonizing, collaboration, conspiratorial, pantomime



# Characters

## Ka

Ka Bienaime is the Haitian-American daughter of Anne and an unnamed father. Ka, an atheist, works as a sculptor. She journeys with her father to Florida to deliver a sculpture of her father to a client. It is during this time that Ka comes to learn about her father's past as a torturer, which sends her into a moral crisis. She wonders how her mother can possibly live with her father given his past.

## Ka's Father

Ka's father is a never-named former government man, soldier, and torturer who worked for the dictator of Haiti. There, he murdered and tortured countless people. He thrived on the power and fear his position extended. Over time, his conscience wore at him until he snapped after killing a preacher who marked his face for his sins. He was cared for by Anne. Eventually, he and Anne were married. They became parents to a daughter, Ka. In the present, Ka's father works as a barber. He is also a landlord. Struggling with his past, he takes comfort in his family. He considers Anne and Ka to be the masks hiding his true face.

## Anne

Anne is the wife of Ka's father, the mother of Ka, and the stepsister of the murdered preacher. Anne, who suffers from epileptic seizures until the death of her stepbrother, forgives Ka's father for his past and for the preacher's murder because she believes he is now a different man.. It is Anne who argues that life is like a pendulum which swings between regret and forgiveness. Anne knows her life is tense, as it is full of relationships that are either always about to break or be lost.

## The Preacher

The Haitian preacher of Baptist Church of the Angels is the stepbrother of Anne, and is a thorn in the side of the government for preaching defiance against the dictator. The preacher is targeted by Ka's father, and thrown in jail and tortured. Prior to his expected release, the preacher stabs Ka's father in the face with a wooden chair shard, which in turn causes Ka's father to shoot him to death.

## The Unnamed Man

The unnamed man in Seven (seemingly Eric), is one of three Haitian renters from Ka's father. The unnamed man anxiously awaits the arrival of his Haitian wife in New York



after being separated from her for seven years. During this time, he has saved money and started a better life in America. However, within a week of his wife's arrival, the man has grown emotionally distant from her, leading the wife to sadly reflect on her life in Haiti.

## Nadine

Nadine Osnac is a Haitian nurse who lives and works in New York. Having recently had an abortion at the insistence of her now ex-boyfriend Eric (seemingly the unnamed man in *Seven*), Nadine regrets the past and takes it out on herself by refusing to speak to her own parents when she could not even be a parent to her own child. Nadine struggles with the abortion for months. It is especially hard on her when the time arrives that she would have given birth.

## Dany

Dany is one of three Haitians who rent from Ka's father. Dany returns to Haiti to visit his Aunt Estina before she dies. He reveals to her that he believes he has found the murderer of his parents – Ka's father. However, Dany does not try to kill Ka's father either in real life or in his dreams because he worries that he might have mistaken Ka's father for someone else.

## Beatrice

Beatrice Saint Fort is a famed local Haitian bridal seamstress who has lived in America for years. Beatrice, having been tortured by the military in Haiti as a young girl for refusing to attend a dance with an officer, has never married. She lives alone and takes her time to do everything. She lives this way in spite of her past. She wants as much control over her life as possible.

## Michel

Michel is one of three Haitians who rent from Ka's father. Michel is expecting his first son. He decides he will name his son Romain, in honor of his childhood friend back in Haiti. Michel has not seen Romain since the overthrow of the dictator. Michel recognizes that forgiveness and reason are needed in difficult situations.

## Freda

Freda is a young Haitian woman who has come to live in New York after fleeing Haiti. A funeral singer, Freda's abilities were noted by the government. Freda refused their demand to sing at the national palace. She decided that she would rather stop singing altogether than to sing for the people who killed her father. Now in America, Freda vows

to return to Haiti, to join the resistance, and to fight the government as revenge for her father's death.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Statue of Ka's Father

A statue of Ka's father serves as a physical reminder to him of his past sins. Given his past, Ka's father does not want a statue of himself to exist anywhere. He thinks it will be viewed as a monument. Ka's father believes the statue is a reflection of him directly; therefore, it must be cleansed. He does this by throwing the statue into a man-made lake.

## Ka and Anne as Masks

Ka and Anne are like masks to Ka's father, symbolizing his hidden past. Ka's father explains that Ka and Anne shield his true nature as a murderous thug. With Anne as his wife and Ka as his daughter, he appears to be a humble father and husband. Ka knows he has been hiding behind these masks. In Florida he comes clean to Ka about his past.

## Man-made Lake

Ka creates a statue of her father. Since he committed crimes against humanity earlier in his life, Ka's father sees himself as unfit to have a monument celebrating him. He throws the statue into a man-made lake. Throwing the statue into the lake is symbolic of Ka's father's attempt to cleanse himself of his past.

Also, the man-made lake symbolizes that Ka's father is the source of his own pain (man-made) for his past crimes against humanity. He now suffers in the present.

## Green Card

A green card symbolizes the irony of closing a physical distance which, in turn, opens an emotional distance. When the unnamed renter's wife finally comes to America from Haiti after seven years of being apart, she and her husband are both thrilled. The green card she uses to come over means closing the physical distance between them. However, though she is now physically close to her husband, an emotional void opens up between the two.

## Flowers

A bouquet of flowers symbolizes cruelty by Nadine's then-boyfriend, Eric. Eric buys the flowers for Nadine as a consolation after forcing her to get an abortion. The act does not



come off as romantic or kind, but as cruel and hurtful. Nadine uses the flowers in a shrine to her unborn child as an offering of both sadness and forgiveness.

## **Shrine**

A small shrine symbolizes heartbreak and the seeking of forgiveness. Nadine puts together a small, Japanese-style shrine for her unborn child in which she puts pebbles, symbolizing unborn children, into a glass of water. The shrine is decorated by the flowers purchased for Nadine following the abortion.

## **Nadine's Distorted Reflection**

Nadine's distorted reflection symbolizes how her life has fallen apart. Nadine sees her reflection in the elevator doors as they close on a family that has been reunited following their daughter's medical procedure. The distorted reflection comes as a result of Nadine's being forced into an abortion, breaking up with her boyfriend, being unable to find forgiveness, and realizing that she would have been a mother that same week had she not had an abortion. In other words, Nadine does not recognize the person she has become. She herself is the distorted reflection.

## **Dew Breaker**

A dew breaker is a torturer in Haiti. Dew breakers are seemingly so named because they break the peace that comes with the morning dew. They break the peace of life with pain, torture, and murder. Ka's father is a dew breaker, who delights in his work until a preacher renders marked judgement on him with a wooden chair shard. The shard leaves an everlasting scar on Ka's father's face.

## **Wooden Chair Shard**

A wooden chair shard is symbolic of justice. The chair on which the preacher sits in Ka's father's office breaks and shatters. The preacher then uses a shard to stab Ka's father in the face, permanently marking him as a torturer. The shard itself is a symbol of justice, for it passes judgment against Ka's father by way of the scar through the hands of the preacher, a man of God.

## **Ka's Father's Scar**

The scar on the face of Ka's father is symbolic of his past life as a dew breaker. Ka's father's was involved in heinous activities as a younger man. As Ka's father views the scar every day in the mirror, he is reminded of the evil he carried out in the past. He cannot forget his past or let it go.



# Settings

## New York

New York is where a sizable population of Haitian immigrants have settled to start their lives anew. It is a big and bustling city. The Haitian immigrants recognize New York as being part of America, which means the promise of a new and better future. New York is where people like Beatrice live their lives as they truly want to, or where people like Ka's father try to escape their past. It is where Freda finds the courage to go back to Haiti to fight the government and where Dany finds the strength not to seek revenge.

## Haiti

Haiti is the home country of the vast majority of characters in the novel. Its landscape is beautiful, but it is a place torn apart by political unrest, violence, and cruelty. Dictators, murderers, and mobs make life in Haiti difficult. There are no clear-cut lines between good and evil or right and wrong. Because of this terrifying condition, many Haitians – including Ka's parents, Freda, Dany, Beatrice, and others – flee Haiti for a better life in New York.

## Florida

Florida is where Ka and her father travel to deliver one of Ka's statues to Gabrielle Fontenau. Florida's weather and scenery remind Ka's father of Haiti. It is in Florida that Ka's father destroys the statue she has made of him by submerging it in a man-made lake. It is also in Florida that Ka's father reveals his past as a torturer and a murderer to Ka.

## Church

The Church is where Anne, Ka, and Ka's father always attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Anne loves the Church, finding it warm, welcoming, and beautiful. However, Ka and Ka's father do nothing more than complain. It is in the Church that Ka believes she sees a Haitian man wanted for murder, which compels Ka's father to consider his own past as a murderer and a torturer. After Mass, Ka's father quickly leaves the Church and goes across the street, believing he is not worthy of the forgiveness that is among those things central to the Catholic Church.

## Caesernes Dessalines Barracks

Caesernes Dessalines military barracks is the most hated and feared military and government institution in Haiti. It is where those arrested are taken to be tortured and



killed. Ka's father is among those who work at the military barracks. He enjoys working there until he kills the preacher who marked his face with a scar. The murder of the preacher sends Ka's father reeling, causing him to flee the barracks and to run into Anne.



# Themes and Motifs

## **The past cannot be escaped.**

Edwidge Danticat argues that the past cannot be escaped in her novel *The Dew Breaker*. The past cannot be escaped because it is such a core part of a person is that it largely dictates why they have ended up in their present situation. The past is something which haunts each of the characters in the novel for different reasons.

Ka's father is haunted by his past as a torturer and murderer under state authority for the dictator for Haiti. Over time, his confidence in his work faded, until the killing of a preacher against orders caused him to snap and flee the barracks where he served. He finds his conscience through Anne, their marriage, and their daughter. However, he bears a physical scar across his face from the night of the preacher's death, and he carries the guilt of his past actions inside. Anne, likewise, cannot forget the sadness of the past, from the death of her brother to the murder of her stepbrother. However, she finds peace through forgiveness of Ka's father. Still, she cannot avoid the past because her husband is a physical reminder of it.

The three renters that live in Ka's father's building have all come to live there because of the past. The unnamed renter has come to America for a better life and to prepare the way for his wife, who follows seven years later. He is determined to make it in America. He does not want to return to Haiti. Michel has also left Haiti for a better life, and he frequently reflects on his time in Haiti with sadness because his boyhood friend and hero was forced to flee the country because of the chaos and violence. Dany fled the oppression of Haiti following the deaths of his parents, presumably at the hands of Ka's father. In the present, he contemplates killing Ka's father in revenge for the past.

Beatrice fled Haiti after being tortured for refusing to attend a dance with a soldier. Beatrice, who felt her life completely out of her hands in this instant, came to America to live her own life according to her own desires. The past constantly haunts her, urging her not to rely on anyone else and not to let anyone else control any part of her life. Nadine is haunted by the recent past, as she was forced to have an abortion by her ex-boyfriend. She is full of self-loathing. It is months before she can even begin to speak to her own parents again. Nadine is haunted by the past that never was and the future that never could be.

## **Many Haitians come to America for a better life.**

Many Haitians come to America for a better life in Edwidge Danticat's novel, *The Dew Breaker*. While America is not perfect, it is still the best possible place to live and begin life again. The chance to start over with a better life is what draws each of the characters in the novel to America.



Ka's father and mother came to America to escape the past, especially Ka's father's past. He hopes that in America he will be able to live peacefully and forget the sins he committed while working for the government and the military. In reality, he can live peacefully in America, but he cannot forget his sins because his soul carries the guilt of his past. Ka's mother has embraced America because she hopes it will be a place where life can begin again and where her husband –whom she considers a transformed miracle –will finally be able to do better things with his life.

The three renters who live beneath Ka and her parents have all also sought a better life in America. Michel has come to America seeking stability and peace after witnessing so much violence in Haiti after the overthrow of the dictator. Dany flees the oppression and violence of the dictator's regime, which specifically led to the murder of both of his parents. In America, Dany also seeks peace and happiness, as well as revenge for the deaths of his parents. The unnamed third renter comes to America and works for seven years to be able to afford to bring his wife over to be with him, so that both may one day have their own home, their own family, and a shot at a prosperous life.

Beatrice came to America to control her own destiny and to escape the past. Beatrice, having been tortured for refusing to attend a dance with a soldier in Haiti, now relies only on herself in America. She calls her own shots. America is a second chance at a peaceful life that was stolen from her.

Nadine came to America to start over after her boyfriend Eric forced her to have an abortion. Nadine was devastated by the abortion. She felt worthless and undeserving. America offers her a chance to have a family and a new life.

## **Family means everything.**

Edwidge Danticat argues in her novel, *The Dew Breaker*, that family means everything. Family is essential to the lives of most of the characters, either in positive, negative, or absent ways. Family is something which also heavily influences the lives of some of the characters in their present circumstances.

Ka's father considers his wife and daughter as masks covering his real face. Having a family shields Ka's father from the knowledge to others that he ever worked as a government-sanctioned murderer and torturer. Ka's father hides behind his family, though he cannot escape the sins of his past because of them. Anne considers family to be akin to a miracle, for she believes it is through family that Ka's father has become a transformed and totally different man than who he was in Haiti. Ka views her family with uncertainty after the truth of her father's past is revealed to her. Ka does not understand how her mother and father are still living together after Ka's father's previous life as a torturer and murderer are known. Ka alternates between loving and being repulsed by her father.

The three renters who live beneath the Bienaimes also have their own familial influences. Michel's father never acknowledged him and never cared for him. In the



present, he is determined that he will be involved in the life of his own son. He begins the journey as a parent by giving his son a meaningful name. Dany flees Haiti after his mother and father are burned alive in an act of murder committed by Ka's father. In the present, Dany returns to Haiti to visit family, including his aunt before she dies. The unnamed man in Seven, perhaps Nadine's boyfriend, Eric, awaits the arrival of his wife in order to begin his own life and family with her.

It is because of Eric, however, that Nadine is denied the chance at beginning her own family. Nadine is forced into having an abortion. She never gets to know the son she could have had. She, in turn, denies herself to her parents, not wanting to talk to them about the life they have given her in contrast with the life she has denied to her baby. Family is also something which Beatrice does not have because she rejects it. Having been tortured and had her personal space violated by the soldiers in Haiti, Beatrice chooses not to have a family so that she can live her own life without having to rely on or cater to anyone else. A lack of family allows Beatrice to call her own shots in her life, though it does make her life lonely.

## **False appearances and mistaken identities abound in life.**

False appearances and mistaken identities abound in life, argues Edwidge Danticat in her novel *The Dew Breaker*. False appearances and mistaken identities perforate the novel, either prompting or stopping the actions of the characters involved. Sometimes this is for the better, while other times, it is for the worst.

By all appearances, Ka's father is simply a man approaching his later years. He is nothing more than a humble husband, father, and business owner. However, the scar on his face denotes not all is at it appears to be. In reality, Ka's father is a murderer and a torturer who worked for the Haitian dictatorship some years before. Ka has great difficulty accepting this, and alternates between love of her father and hatred of her father for what he has done.

In Church, Ka sees a man she believes to be a Haitian dictator in hiding. She looks at the man without trying to conceal what she is doing. However, Ka is mistaken, and the man only looks like the dictator she believed him to be. As such, she does not do anything wild or attention-grabbing in Church –though she does upset her father who is reminded of his own past. Her father leaves and stands across the street.

Back in Haiti, Dany goes to see his aunt about finding the man he believes to be responsible for the murder of his parents years before. His aunt explains that she believes Dany's parents were killed because his father was mistaken for someone else. Dany now questions whether he has mistaken Ka's father for the murderer of his parents. Since he has some doubt, he does not kill Ka's father. He does not want to kill the wrong person and ruin the lives of others as a result.



## Life is a pendulum between forgiveness and regret.

Life is a pendulum between forgiveness and regret, argues Edwidge Danticat in her novel *The Dew Breaker*. Danticat argues this point through the character of Anne as Anne considers life after Christmas Eve Mass. Life involves both forgiveness and regret for past actions and situations, and the characters of the novels are no exception to this idea.

Ka's father alternates between hating himself for the past and trying to find a way to forgive himself, short of turning himself into the Haitian authorities. For example, he plunges the statue of himself into the lake as a symbolic cleansing. He cannot bear to be near the Church after Christmas Eve Mass because he does not believe he can be forgiven. Ka's father constantly carries around regrets and guilt about his past. His wife has forgiven him, believing he is a completely different man. However, does not mean the past is erased. Anne's forgiveness of Ka's father is especially critical given that he was responsible for the death of her stepbrother.

Michel regrets the past in Haiti, where violence led to the severing of his first real friendship. Michel also regrets that his own father was never in his life. But, he finds forgiveness and hope for the future by naming his son after his best friend and vowing to be in the life of his son. Dany regrets the past in Haiti where his parents were killed by Ka's father, but he tempers his desire for revenge by second-guessing the killer's identity. In so doing, his ability to resist unclear revenge is a form of forgiveness because it is an act which is purifying. The unnamed man of Seven, perhaps Eric, attempts to forgive himself and get past his regrets by finally bringing his wife to America.

Nadine regrets the recent past, wherein she had an abortion forced on her by her ex-boyfriend, Eric (presumably the unnamed man). Nadine is full of self-loathing to the point that she cannot even speak to her parents for months. She cannot forgive herself, knowing that she should now be a mother.

Beatrice has gentle regrets about never marrying. However, she forgives herself for her refusal to marry because it means she has been able to live her life on her own terms, unhindered by anyone else. She forgives herself for living her life this way because of the torture she faced when she was denied her own free will in Haiti many years before.





# Styles

## Point of View

Edwidge Danticat tells her novel *The Dew Breaker* from the first and third-person narrative modes. These vary based on the character and the story within the novel. *The Book of the Dead*, *Monkey Tails*, and *The Funeral Singer* are told from the first-person point of view from the perspectives of Ka, Michel, and Freda, respectively. The stories *Seven*, *Water Child*, *The Book of Miracles*, *Night Talkers*, *The Bridal Seamstress*, and *The Dew Breaker* are all told from the third-person narrative point of view. The characters of Ka, Michel, and Freda all seem to be relatively internal with their thoughts and feelings. It makes sense that they must narrate their own stories so that the reader has a better idea of them and understands them on a more personal level than would otherwise be possible. This is especially important when it comes to Ka, not only for matters of revelation, but so the reader can witness firsthand her struggling with learning that her father is a killer.

The third-person narrative mode used in some stories reflects the nature of other characters. This is especially true of Beatrice. Her refusal to say much of anything at all about the past makes it necessary to tell her story from the third-person narrative point of view.

## Language and Meaning

Edwidge Danticat tells her novel *The Dew Collector* in language that is simple and poetic, yet emotionally and symbolically loaded. The simple and poetic language adds an element of beauty to the otherwise sad and heartbreaking atmosphere of the novel. The simple and poetic language is rich in symbolism which deepens the significance of each story. For example, in *The Book of the Dead*, Ka explains, “The last time I had seen my father? The previous night, before falling asleep” (6). Here, there is literal as well as symbolic meaning. Ka has not physically seen her father since going to sleep, and this is especially true when he returns to tell her the truth about his past. He is not the same father she knew before the revelation when she went to sleep the previous night.

Consider how Ka’s father tells Anne (regarding the military barracks): ““People who go in there don’t come out” (232). Here, he means people who go into the barracks either come out dead or changed because of what they have witnessed. Ka’s father is one of them.

## Structure

Edwidge Danticat tells her novel *The Dew Breaker* as if it were a collection of short stories strung together by a common unifying thread –Ka’s father and his role in

supporting the Haitian dictatorship. Each of the short stories of the novel is meant to be a chapter, but each takes on the form of a short story. The short stories themselves are able to stand alone and independent of one another. However, when taken together as part of a long narrative about the lives affected by Ka's father's support of the Haitian regime, the stories become one compelling novel saturated with deep meaning and immense symbolism. The construction of the novel in such a way demonstrates that while each of the stories may be taken together, the lives of those in the stories are unique and their own. They are essentially human lives bound together by common events and situations, though each life itself is distinct. The novel structure is therefore like the community of Haitian immigrants in America that it is about.



## Quotes

The last time I had seen my father? The previous night, before falling asleep.”  
-- Ka (The Book of the Dead)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, Ka's father goes missing from their hotel room on the way to deliver a sculpture that bears the likeness of Ka's father. During this time, Ka panics. She contacts both the hotel manager and the police to report her father's disappearance. Yet, he mysteriously returns several hours later, as a different man than the one who left that morning. The truth is about to be revealed regarding his past.

The sun is setting and my mother has called more than a dozen times when my father finally appears in the hotel room doorway.  
-- Ka (The Book of the Dead)

**Importance:** After going missing early in the morning, Ka's father suddenly returns in the evening. He tells her that he has objections and does not wish Ka to see the statue she has sculpted. He explains he does not want it sold because he wants the statue to guide him into the afterlife, like the Ka of the ancient Egyptians. The father who appears in the doorway will not be the same father who left, as the father now reveals the truth about his past.

Ka, I don't deserve a statue... not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey.  
-- Ka's father (The Book of the Dead)

**Importance:** Ka learns that her father killed countless people in his life as a prison guard. He does not want to be memorialized in a sculpture because he hates his past and is filled with guilt over it. He throws the statue into a man-made lake. Symbolically, he is trying to cleanse himself of his own heinous actions in the past by cleansing the statue in a man-made body of water.

Next month would make it seven years since he'd last seen his wife.  
-- Narrator (Seven)

**Importance:** The narrator has spent seven years in New York, working and saving to bring his wife over to America. The narrator is thrilled when his wife arrives. However, within a week, the excitement fades. There is now more distance between them living together than there was distance between them living apart.

Had she carried to full term, her child, aborted two months after his or her conception, would likely have been born today... probably sometime this week...  
-- Narrator (Water Child)

**Importance:** The narrator reveals that the reason for Nadine's sadness in life is an abortion forced upon her by her then-boyfriend, Eric. The abortion led to Nadine



withdrawing from life, no longer speaking to her parents. This caused Nadine much sadness. Meeting the parents of a patient on the day of the girl's release, Nadine realizes she would have been a mother that day or that week. It is deeply depressing to her.

Now look at him. Look how calm he is... That was the miracle Anne wanted to share with her daughter on Christmas Eve night...

-- Anne (The Book of Miracles)

**Importance:** Anne reveals that the only miracle she wishes to share with her daughter on Christmas Eve is that her husband is a different man than he had been in Haiti. In Haiti, he had killed and tortured people in prison. In America, he is kind and gentle. He has been able to start over again. However, since he cannot escape the past, it still pains him to the present day.

I didn't know all my brother's secrets, but I think he was taken for somebody else.

-- Aunt Estina (Night Talkers)

**Importance:** Dany returns to Haiti to tell his aunt he believes he has found the man responsible for killing his parents. Dany's aunt explains that she does not think Dany's parents were intentionally killed. They were mistaken for somebody else. This is in keeping with the theme of people being mistaken for others –of identity confusion – through the course of the novel.

I'm the luckiest fucker alive. I've done something really bad that makes me want to live my life like a fucking angel now.

-- Claude (Night Talkers)

**Importance:** While speaking with Dany, Claude admits that he did indeed kill his father. He regrets it because he killed his father over trying to take away his drugs. He has lived his life since then doing good. He explains he is lucky because he has been able to reform his life and avoid prison because he was only fourteen when he killed his father.

These were the people Aline wanted to try to write about now, no matter what Marjorie Voltaire said.

-- Narrator (The Bridal Seamstress)

**Importance:** Aline is tasked with writing an article on retiring bridal seamstress, Beatrice Saint Fort. In her research for the article, Aline comes to learn much about Beatrice's personal life. She finds out that Beatrice had been tortured and that Beatrice had to continue living her life in spite of the horrible treatment. This compels Aline to write human interest stories, rather than merely news stories about subjects like retirement.

Strange how blessings come.

-- Michel's mother (Monkey Tails)



**Importance:** Life is full of unexpected events that bring about unexpected changes and, sometimes, blessings. The sudden departure of the dictator means a better life for most Haitians, but it also means a worse life for those against whom Haitians are seeking revenge, such as people like Romain and Regulus.

I made a choice that I'd rather stop singing altogether than sing for the type of people who'd killed my father.

-- Freda (The Funeral Singer)

**Importance:** Freda tells her friends in New York that she left Haiti because she refused an invitation, or an order, to sing at the national palace. She says that she decided she would rather stop singing altogether than to sing for the people who killed her father. She believes that not selling herself out is more important than obeying an offensive order. Now in New York, Freda decides she will return to Haiti and fight against the government, singing a funeral song for herself before she goes.

People who go in there don't come out.

-- Ka's father (The Dew Breaker)

**Importance:** Anne wants to rescue her stepbrother from the barracks, but Ka's father tells her that people who go in there do not come out. He means this both physically and symbolically. Anyone who happens to survive torture is a changed person. Anyone who comes out is either changed or dead. The same is true of Ka's father.