Krik? Krak! Study Guide

Krik? Krak! by Edwidge Danticat

BOOKRAGS

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Children of the Sea

Children of the Sea Summary

A lover (for the purposes of this guide, the Man) addresses his beloved (the Woman) in the form of a journal. The Man is at sea with thirty-six other people, refugees, on a small boat. To him the water seems endless. The Man thinks of the Woman often, and every image at sea reminds him of her. The Man figures the Woman will be married off by her father now that he is gone.

Now a journal entry from the Woman, addressed to the Man. She has cabin fever in her dilapidated little house, and is going crazy from boredom. She cannot go outside because the army has taken over the government in some kind of military coup. Woman's father wants her to throw out tapes of the Man's radio show, but she can't bear to be without the Man's voice, so she does not obey. It is revealed that the Man is the member of a "youth federation" and that all members of this federation have disappeared.

More from the Man. A pregnant teen girl is on board. The boat is on its way to America, to Miami, to escape the violence in Haiti. The Man has become more comfortable with the idea of dying, not that he wants to be a martyr. He hopes another group of young people step to the microphone to do his radio show in his absence.

The Woman reports a group of students got shot in front of the prison. They were demonstrating for the Man's radio group, who everyone is now calling the Radio Six. Most believe the Radio Six are all dead, and the students are protesting in order to receive the bodies for proper burial. Several bodies are returned, and one mother named Madan Roger, crazy with grief, parades her son's head around town to demonstrate what the army did to her son. The Woman wonders if the Man did indeed survive and escape.

Back on the Man's boat, many are seasick and vomiting. Women sing songs and tell stories to pass the time. The Man is too emotional to join in the singing. The Man doubts the Woman would know much of misery or suffering, considering her "genteel" upbringing. The Man is sick of the "seafood" smell. There is a hole in the boat which the captain plugged up with tar. There is a desperate hope that the U.S. Coast Guard finds the boat soon.

The Woman's father found her hidden radio tapes, and started slapping her and calling her a "man-crazy whore." The Woman hopes the army will kill her father. Meanwhile, the army has been raiding houses at night and forcing relatives (sons and mothers, fathers and daughters) to have sex with each other. For this reason, her father has stopped sleeping in the house. They desperately want to find gasoline (which apparently is impossible to find during the coup) so they can escape the town by car.

The army visits Madan Roger and interrogate her about her son's activities. The Woman's family hides in the latrine. When Madan Roger reveals her son was a member of the youth federation, she is beaten with guns until dead.

Back on the Man's boat, everyone is quite sunburned and in a daze from the sun. The pregnant teen, named Celianne, is having her baby. The captain urges Celianne to not rock the boat, because violent movement may cause more holes in the boat.

Back in Haiti, there is a rumor that the recently-ousted president is coming back to the city to try to reclaim power. This causes hope in the people, but the Woman thinks such hope is ill-conceived, and her family will still try to escape the city. Violence and mayhem continue. The family escapes to a town called Ville Rose. They hear reports that the president failed to reappear, and that supporters of his were shot dead at the airport. The Woman is hunted for as a youth federation co-conspirator, and only by her father bribing soldiers with the remainder of his wealth is the Woman's life saved.

Celianne has a baby girl on the boat, but it is lethargic and it refuses to cry. The boat is taking on water and the people take turns using pails to empty it. People are bickering and spirits are very low. Celianne's story is revealed: she was raped by soldiers, and her brother was forced to have sex with their mother. She is only fifteen. Her baby is dead, but she continues to hold it and will not admit the death.

Finally, Celianne throws the dead baby overboard, and also throws herself overboard. Water continues to seep into the boat, and the Man writes a last journal entry before the water overtakes the boat and he drowns. Back in Haiti, the Woman sees a black butterfly, symbol of death, and knows that the Man has died.

Children of the Sea Analysis

"Children of the Sea" is an example of epistolary fiction, fiction written in the guise of "genuine" entries in a journal. The author/publisher uses different fonts and degrees of boldness to differentiate the two voices of the short story.

The central tragedy of the piece is that the lovers are writing to one another but they cannot communicate. The entries are presented one after another, and both Man and Woman write as if addressing the other, but in fact none of either lover's correspondence will ever reach the other. This contributes to the bleak, pessimistic, and fatalistic tone of the piece, augmenting the obvious horrors of wartime atrocities, a dead baby, and slowly dying in the middle of the ocean. War has separated the lovers, and they are just one more casualty. The entries, little more than wishes upon a star, will not be granted, and any thought of the bliss of lovers reunified is quickly quashed. The Woman will not even have the satisfaction of the Man's last words and his expressions of love, because (as the reader knows) the journal will be lost to the sea.

The fatalistic tone is also enhanced with descriptions of the ocean as never-ending. It is as if the Haitians on the boat are doomed to die, and there is no hope of rescue, no escape from the abyss of the great sea. Plot details also increase this fatalism—the

Haitians are running out of food, the boat continually develops more holes, the captain is running out of tar to patch the holes, the water level in the creaky boat is continuing to rise. The fatalism is summarized succinctly when an older man asks the Man what he is writing and he responds, "my will." The Man realizes his journal entries will be the last records of his thoughts and his existence.

Fatalism also dominates the Woman's narrative. She holds not a scrap of hope that the re-arrival of the ousted president will have any effect on the city, for one example. In a moment of weakness, she wishes death upon her father for scolding her about keeping the Man's radio tapes, although she later recants. There seems to be very little hope of resistance or an alternative to military terror. The soldiers appear to have all the power, and any shred of resistance (as with the students protesting about the Radio Six) is immediately met with violence and a massacre.

Particularly vivid and unpleasant details help the author portray the horrors of war. These include the Woman and her family hiding in the latrine from the soldiers and almost fainting because of the smell of excrement, or the dark purple color of Celianne's dead baby. The author is clearing "pulling no punches": she wishes to shock the reader with an unfiltered examination of war's consequences.

Nineteen Thirty-Seven

Nineteen Thirty-Seven Summary

The narrator (Josephine) is carrying a small Madonna statue. She observes the Madonna shed a tear, and takes this as a sign that her mother has died. Josephine is on the way to the prison in Port-au-Prince (capital of Haiti). The reader learns that the Madonna has been in the narrator's family for generations.

An old woman takes an interest in the Madonna, and then shows Josephine where to buy food for her prison visit. She is taken inside the prison and visits her mother, who is alive, but barely. She is a ghost of a woman, very thin and wrinkled. All the women of the prison are accused of being witches and of causing the deaths of children. The mother has little reaction to the food, but warms to the Madonna statue, fondling it and sobbing.

Josephine recalls when her mother was arrested. They were new to the city and staying at a friend's house. The friend had a baby with colic that the mother was attending to. The baby died, and the friend accused the mother of witchcraft. The mother was taken outside and beaten by an angry mob.

More about Josephine's mother's past is revealed. Her own mother was killed on the Massacre River (where there was a famous Haitian massacre) and dismembered before her eyes. The Massacre River has since become somewhat of a holy site for daughters who lost their mothers in the massacre.

The mother tells Josephine she will one day reveal the secret of how the Madonna cries, but the narrator already knows: weeks in advance, the mother puts a bit of oil and wax in the Madonna's eyes, and when the wax melt it looks like a tear. The next time the narrator visits her mother, she is sick and fears she has tuberculosis.

One day, an old woman named Jacqueline comes to Josephine, claiming to be one of the mothers united by the massacre at Massacre River. Josephine tests the woman's identity with several questions, which are correctly answered. Jacqueline tells Josephine that her mother is dead, or nearly so, and that she can tell because of a spiritual connection. The two journey to the Port-au-Prince prison, and the guard confirms the mother has died. Jacqueline and Josephine go to her cell, where several women inmates are mourning the mother's loss. It is revealed that the mother, though already very sick, was beaten to death in the prison yard.

Jacqueline and Josephine go with the inmates to watch the body get burned. At the end, Josephine is convinced that her mother will go to heaven, having already been tested on earth by the horrors that took place at Massacre River.

Nineteen Thirty-Seven Analysis

This is a story about, among other things, faith. Josephine's mother's only comfort is the Madonna statue (representing the Virgin Mary and thus Christianity and its promise of salvation). The mother believes that her wretched existence on earth is only temporary, and that her faith will be rewarded with eternal happiness in the hereafter. By contrast, Josephine is more of a skeptic. She does not hold the Madonna statue in nearly the same level of esteem as her mother does, and she dismisses the Madonna's tears—with statues shedding tears become a commonly observed "miracle"—as a simple trick of oil and wax. In fact, it was a matter of religious faith—being accused of witchcraft—that led her mother to be imprisoned. Josephine doubts that her mother will be able to "fly," that is, ascend to heaven. However, at the end, Josephine is convinced that her mother can fly, and that they will be reunited in heaven.

"Nineteen Thirty-Seven" (a title that references the year of the Massacre River massacre) is also a story about the relationship between mother and daughter. The horrible events at Massacre River and the unjust circumstances of her arrest as a witch have changed the mother. She is estranged and distant, and Josephine never quite gets up the courage to really talk with her. The breakdown in communication, especially between different generations, is a common thread in KRIK? KRAK! It takes an outside member of the family, Jacqueline, to lead Josephine to a kind of reunification with her mother, even if this reunification happens after the mother's death. The story ends with Josephine clutching the Madonna statue tightly to her chest, a sign that she has come to understand her mother and that she has come to understand why the Madonna was important to her.

A Wall of Fire Rising

A Wall of Fire Rising Summary

A man named Guy returns to his family, wife Lili and son Little Guy. Little Guy just got the part in a school play. He will play Boukman, a famous rebel leader and the founder of Haitian independence. As a proud Guy looks on, Little Guy recites a passage from the play.

The family is very poor, and sometimes has trouble finding foot to eat. Guy only occasionally gets odd jobs that barely support the family. They live in a shantytown which is dominated by a sugar mill owned by a rich Arabian family. For some recreation, the family travels through the shantytown and near to the mill to lay about and relax on the grass. Guy is fascinated by a hot-air balloon owned by the Arabian family that is locked behind a gate at the mill. The son of the mill owners sometimes flies in the balloon over the town.

Later that night, Guy reveals that he got a one-day job at the sugar mill, cleaning latrines. He wishes to put Little Guy on the mill's hiring list, so that by the time Little Guy comes of age, he will have a good place on the list and more frequent work. However, Lili begs Guy not to add Little Guy to the list. She wants more for her son than mill work. Guy agrees. Guy muses about the hot-air balloon and about how he would love to fly in it. The sight of it, and the thrill of flight, gives him hope for the future.

The next day, Little Guy does such a good job memorizing his lines that he is given more lines, which he recites for Guy after a hard day's work. Character Boukman's stirring words touch Guy, and he cries.

That night, Guy again talks of the hot-air balloon. He wonders about the nature of a man's legacy, how he is remembered. He thinks of his own father, a very poor and struggling man, and concludes that a man should not be remembered for poverty and strife.

At dawn, Lili wakes up and discovers Little Guy in the yard peering into the sky. Guy has taken the hot-air balloon. Lili takes Little Guy to the sugar mill, where the workers are watching Guy in the balloon, cheering him on. Assad, the mill owner's son, wonders how Guy managed to get the balloon airborne, as it usually takes a small crew. Suddenly, Guy climbs over the balloon basket and jumps to his death.

Little Guy rushes to his father's body, and loudly recites his Boukman lines in grief. Lili gazes one last time into her husband's dead eyes. The foreman asks Lili if she would like the body's eyes closed, and Lili instructs him to keep them open, as Guy loved to look up at the sky in life.

A Wall of Fire Rising Analysis

One man's (Guy's) desperate wish to rise above his station in life and escape his desperate poverty is literalized when he steals his rich employer's hot-air balloon. It is not difficult to arrive at various interpretations of the hot-air balloon—power, rebirth, freedom from worry, freedom from the responsibilities of supporting a family and making a living, etc. Importantly, Guy does not answer Lili when she asks whether Guy's dreams of floating in the air and making a new life in a new land include his son and wife. The balloon is a chance to live another life for Guy, and the fact that he does not confirm Lili and Little Guy's presence in that life is appropriate considering his selfish final act of suicide. Guy is a man that feels trapped, burdened by poverty and by a family. Alone in the balloon, and then in death, he is finally free of such burdens. Even such a minor detail as the mill owner's son wondering how Guy managed to get his balloon aloft without a small crew contributes to this sense of Guy's aloneness.

Guy is, ultimately, a romantic. Just as he believes in the power of flight as somehow rejuvenating and life-altering, he cries when he listens to the rhetoric of rebel leader Boukman as recited by his son. He is literally a star-gazer, a dreamer. Guy is not "of the moment": he does not care to watch the 8 o' clock news on the government television with the other shantytown citizens, but instead wishes to gaze up at the sky from the grass near the sugar mill. On a similar note, Guy is concerned with his legacy and how he will be remembered, and with his spectacular suicide he has cemented his legacy—his death will not soon be forgotten by the sugar mill workers or the mill owners of the shantytown.

Night Women

Night Women Summary

The reader is told that there are two kinds of women: night women (prostitutes) and day women (those who run a household in the typical sense and who operate by day).The narrator, a twenty-five-year-old prostitute, considers herself to be in between. While she does have sex for money with "suitors" who visit her, she is doing it because the deep love she has for her young son. Because they are poor, she lives and sleeps in the same one-room house with her son, and she is constantly fighting to protect her son from the reality of what she does. She has divided the room into two with sheer curtains. She makes sure her son sleeps with a radio and earphones on so any sounds of lovemaking do not disturb him. Plus, the prostitute frequently caresses her son's face and lovingly pokes at him to ensure he is asleep prior to a suitor arriving. If he does get a glimpse of her "working," the son is told that the man he saw was just a mirage. The prostitute thinks that soon such an explanation will not be believed, and so she is prepared to tell her son that the man having sex with her is his dead father come to visit her on the wings of angels.

That night, a man named Emmanuel will be her suitor. He visits her twice a week, and is a doctor. They have sex, and the son sleeps soundly through it. After Emmanuel leaves, the prostitute crawls in bed with her son. He wakes and asks if he missed the angels, and she replies that "the angels have themselves a lifetime to come to us" (p. 88).

Night Women Analysis

It is clear that the prostitute narrator feels ambivalent about her existence: she is neither day nor night. She is pleased with the freedom that comes from setting her own hours as a prostitute and does not envy the workers she sees flock to the market in the morning. At the same time, she fears what the realization of her job will do to her cherished son, and so she takes great pains to shield him from reality. The very fact that she feels her job is something to be protected from demonstrates her conflicted feelings.

The prostitute sometimes behaves with her son like a lover; in fact, early in the story the reader learns that her son reminds her of his father, a "suitor" from long ago. And the prostitute's playful caresses and certain uncomfortably sensual details—"in his sleep he squirms and groans as though he's already discovered that there is pleasure in touching himself" (p. 84), or "when my smallest finger caresses the narrow cleft beneath his nose, sometimes his tongue slips out of his mouth and he licks my fingernail" (p. 86)—reinforce a subtextual sense that the prostitute, in absence of a true partner, is mentally substituting her son. This unexpected sensuality could also be interpreted as the simple product of a woman whose life revolves around sexuality, and who therefore relates and describes even her own son in a sexualized manner.

Between the Pool and the Gardenias

Between the Pool and the Gardenias Summary

The narrator discovers an abandoned baby near a sewer. She likens the baby to Baby Moses or Baby Jesus, and takes her in as her own. The baby has "R-O-S-E" stitched on her clothes, and so she calls the baby Rose.

The reader learns that the narrator has recently escaped from her life in nearby Ville Rose. There, her husband of ten years, frequently slept around with other women, to the point the narrator felt compelled to run away. The narrator has had miscarriage after miscarriage, and so Rose's sudden arrival in her life is especially seen as a gift from the spirit world.

The narrator works and lives as a maid at a large mansion. Taking the baby there, she feeds and bathes her. The baby is very quiet, which the narrator considers a blessing. The reader also learns of a fellow staff member, a Dominican groundskeeper, whom the narrator had sex with once but who never talked to her again.

The narrator talks of her family, and it is revealed that she is related to characters in other books. Great-grandmother Emilie (who was massacred at Massacre River in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven,") grandmother Defile (who died accused of witchcraft in prison in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven,") and godmother Lili ("A Wall of Fire Rising"). The narrator is convinced her own mother (in spirit form) frequently visits her at night or in the glimpses of passers-by or other mundane moments.

Rose dies—presumably she was already quite ill by the time the narrator found her. But the narrator refuses to accept her death, continuing to bathe her and apply perfume to reduce the odor of death. After a few days, however, with no amount of bathing killing the stench, the narrator realizes the baby must be properly buried in order to let the spirit free.

She buries the child in the gardenia garden by the pool in the backyard of the mansion. The Dominican groundskeeper catches her, and accuses her of witchcraft. The story ends with the groundskeeper and the narrator in the gardenia garden waiting for law enforcement to come.

Between the Pool and the Gardenias Analysis

Like Defile, the mother in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the narrator of this story is accused of witchcraft for presiding over the death of an infant, even though neither woman had any blame in the death. A mention is made of people in the village calling the narrator a "manbo," a woman who still believes in voodoo and witchcraft, and the fact that such silly beliefs are holding the Haitian people back from progressing. The author most likely has an ambivalent and complex attitude toward this presence of witchcraft in Haiti.

While it may be true that clinging to such beliefs causes unnecessary grief and suffering—not to mention stifles progress in the socio-economic sense—it's clear that faith is a comfort to many of the women in the stories of KRIK? KRAK!, and especially to the narrator of this story. She compares Rose to Baby Jesus and Baby Moses, and after all of her miscarriages, the narrator believes God has finally delivered her a child to love. The fact that the baby dies—and moreover, that the narrator is accused of witchcraft because of it—is one more example of the kind of dispirited, disillusioned sentiment that unites the stories of this volume. Just as in "A Wall of Fire Rising," Guy triumphs by achieving flight in a hot-air balloon only to crash to his death in the next moment, the narrator of "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" celebrates the initial thrill of motherhood only for that new motherhood to devolve into death and misery just as quickly as it arrived.

The Missing Peace

The Missing Peace Summary

A girl of fourteen plays around the burned ruins of a schoolhouse with a young man named Raymond. Raymond wants to have sex with her, but she declines. Raymond tells the story of how he got his limp: the night of the military coup in Port-au-Prince, he had an old regime uniform on and was shot in the leg by his friend, Toto, who was fighting for the new regime. Only the "password"—Peace—prevented Toto from killing him.

The girl returns home to her grandmother. Her grandmother rents out rooms in their house to visiting journalists and tourists. They have a new roomer, named Emilie, a woman from America. The girl visits Emilie, and probes her about what regime she is on the side of and why she has visited Haiti. The girl's name is revealed, Lamort, French for "death." When Emilie presses Lamort about her odd name, she says it was given to her by her grandmother because her mother died in childbirth having her.

With a bit of coin, Emilie convinces Lamort to act as her guide to the churchyard, where many bodies are buried of those killed in the military coup. Emilie reveals that her mother, Isabelle, was among the many presumed dead in the coup, and Emilie has come to Haiti as a means of finding peace and closure. Lamort agrees to help Emilie. Lamort's grandmother comes to check in on Emilie, and Lamort must hide because her grandmother would surely object to her going out into town after curfew.

Well after the military-enforced curfew, Emilie and Lamort journey to the churchyard. They don't get far when Toto, the new regime soldier, stops them and questions them about being out past curfew. Emilie becomes belligerent, questioning Toto and the new regime's morals, considering the massacre that just took place. Toto responds by knocking Emilie to the ground with his rifle, and he appears ready to pull the trigger to kill Emilie. Lamort begs Toto to stop, using the "password" of "Peace" she learned from Raymond. The password doesn't seem to work. At the right moment, Raymond shows up and tells Toto to stop, and that the two women will leave. Toto stops and does not kill Emilie, and Emilie and Lamort leave.

Back at the house, Emilie convinces Lamort to stay with her through the night as she stitches a patchwork quilt of various pieces of cloth handed down in her family. The quilt will be mostly a purple color, Emilie's mother's favorite color. Lamort sleeps in Emilie's room as she takes all night to make the quilt. The quilt is completed in the morning, and Emilie achieves a measure of closure about her mother. Based on Emilie's suggestion that Lamort be named after her own mother rather than death, the story ends with Lamort insisting with her grandmother to be called "Marie Magdalene" after her mother.

The Missing Peace Analysis

The setting of "the Missing Peace" is particularly important. The story begins with Lamort and Raymond playing around in the burnt-out ruins of a schoolhouse that was destroyed in the recent military coup. Surrounding the characters is, literally, death and destruction, and this lends an overall pallor to the proceedings. As is often the case in stories in this volume, as with "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" or "Children of the Sea" and others, characters are doing their best to struggle through incredibly difficult times with some degree of normalcy.

Emilie has arrived in Haiti from America to obtain some sense of closure regarding her mother's murder in the coup. Her mother is just another of the unnameable, unrecognized victims of the violence, and no one, including Lamort and her grandmother, recognize Emilie's picture of her. Emilie's journey shows that the past, and especially family past, can powerfully influence the present. Only by being physically near to her mother's resting place in the churchyard, and by stitching a memory quilt, can Emilie close this chapter of her life and move on.

The omnipresence of death continues with Lamort's very own name and subsequent story of her mother dying while giving birth to her. Putting Lamort into a thematic context, the author conveys the sense that, as Lamort is defined by death, so too are so many young Haitians, considering its long history of violence in the nineteenth century, with its various military dictatorships and bloody coups. The fact that Lamort is unable to stop Toto's violence by uttering "Peace" is a sign of the author's opinion that death and violence in Haiti is subject to a kind of inexorable, never-ending cycle. The new regime, as embodied with Toto, is just as violent as the old regime. Nothing has changed.

Seeing Things Simply

Seeing Things Simply Summary

The story begins with a cockfight taking place in a town named Ville Rose, and many men cheering on the roosters. A thin girl of sixteen, Princesse, walks by, and she is fascinated by an old man sitting in a chair watching the fights, despite being nagged by his walk. Princesse heads to a house on the shore owned by a woman named Catherine. Catherine is an artist, and Princesse strips nude in order to pose for her. Princesse is shy about posing nude and feels self-conscious, but she is doing the job because she hopes to learn more about painting. Catherine assures Princesse that the villagers will never see any of the nude paintings, and that only in famous French art galleries will the pictures ever hang to be admired by Princesse's grandchildren and others.

Catherine reveals she used to pose nude for painters to make a living in France. Catherine believes that the best way for an artist to capture a person is to spend a lot of time with them, and so Princesse returns every day to Catherine, asking her about painting and learning about Catherine's views on life.

Princesse hopes to one day be able to paint the old man at the cockfight, to somehow capture his mood and expressions. She learns something new every day from her sessions with Catherine.

The next day Princesse poses (clothed) on a rock on the beach. Catherine is doing this because she knows Princesse is self-conscious. Catherine hopes to make Princesse more and more comfortable until one day Princesse will pose nude on the beach. A few days later, Catherine tells Princesse about the best teacher she ever had, who told her to literally wear his boots around town, which she did. Catherine learned that the best way to paint is to understand your subject, and literally walk a mile in their shoes. Catherine recently learned that this teacher had died very recently.

Princesse returns the next day, and Catherine is gone. Princesse returns each day for a week, but Catherine is absent. Finally, Catherine returns and reveals that she left for Paris. She took all the sketches of Princesse with her, except one, which she gives to Princesse. Princesse has never received a painting from Catherine, and she cherishes it greatly, seeing her essence captured in the painting. Catherine went to Paris to visit the grave of her recently-dead mentor.

On the way back home, Princesse sees the old man and his wife at the cockfight again. She sketches their likeness in the dust as another rowdy cockfight goes on.

Seeing Things Simply Analysis

This story is about the nature of art, and how an artist does what he or she does. Princesse has a budding artistic spirit, but she has no skills or theoretical background of art, perhaps partly because she comes from a poor Haitian family.

Catherine serves as Princesse's teacher, and her conduit to the world of art and of seeing things artistically. Part of art is seeing things like an artist does, seeing the beauty in them. For example, most people might ignore the old drunk man who cheers on the roosters at the cockfight and yells at his nagging wife, but Princesse sees something beautiful in noble and him, and thus gets an urge to draw him. Similarly, Catherine comments on the beauty of Princesse's black skin. She says that others might say black skin is a poor subject to paint because it absorbs all colors, but Catherine sees black skin as "dazzling" and beautiful. There is undoubtedly some subtextual urge in this exchange on the part of the author for black women to value their blackness and see it as beautiful rather than a detriment.

The old saying "walk a mile in one's shoes" is literalized when Catherine tells Princesse about the best lesson she ever had about art, and that was to literally walk in the worn-out boots of her mentor. The artist must know their subject intimately before they are able to properly capture their essence in a painting or drawing, and this is the lesson learned from Catherine's mentor's unusual directive.

Toward the end, Princesse realizes that she wants to practice art in order to leave her mark on the world, to demonstrate that she saw the world in a way that no one else saw the world. In a sense, Princesse is also realizing her own mortality. She realizes that, unlike the rocks and the sky, she is constantly changing, and one way to "preserve" her feelings/life/essence is to make a lasting work of art.

New York Day Women

New York Day Women Summary

A young professional American woman of Haitian descent is the narrator of the piece. She works at an advertising firm in Manhattan and she commutes from Brooklyn, where she still lives with her mother. Her mother is called a "day woman," which is roughly akin to a housewife, a woman who stays at home and who does not have a job per se.

On her lunch break, this young woman happens to see her mother on the street in Manhattan. This surprises her greatly, because she thinks of her mother as never leaving Brooklyn, never leaving her small "comfort zone." Intrigued, the young woman follows her mother, unnoticed.

The mother does some window-shopping at the expensive stores on Madison Avenue. She walks with a cheerful gait, not seeming to be intimidated by the hustle and bustle of the city, something which also surprises the narrator. The mother buys a soda from a street vendor, and then meets a woman in the park. The woman gives the mother her son as the woman takes off for an hour to exercise in the park. This brief babysitting appears to be a regular occurrence, because the mother and the woman's child share some familiarity. The mother gives the child the soda she bought. An hour later, the exercising woman returns and takes back her child.

Though her lunch break is long over, the narrator is still intrigued and follows her mother further. Her mother meets up with a group of other black women to chat. This is another surprise, because the narrator thinks her mother is a homebody and not a social being. At this point the narrator decides to leave her mother be, returning to her work.

Throughout the narrator's following of her mother, the narrator remembers advice or sayings that her mother has told her, and in this way the reader finds out more about the mother.

New York Day Women Analysis

"New York Day Women" is a story of one grown woman's (re)discovery of her mother. By following her mother around Manhattan for a couple of hours, the narrator sees an entirely different side of the woman she thought was a timid loner who was only comfortable in her own home or little neighborhood. Her mother in fact flourishes in the big city, stepping proudly and confidently through the crowds.

Throughout the story is an interesting narrative device. The mother "speaks" to the narrator in text that is bolded and separated from the rest of the text, and the narrator responds. But this bolded text is in fact memories of what the mother has said to the narrator in the past. The bolded text reveals mother's personality, and the overall impression is one of a complex, contradictory character. The mother watches the lottery

and dreams of what the family could do with the lottery money, and yet the mother never buys a lottery ticket, for one example.

The fact of this bolded "memory" text and the narrator responding to it, indicates that the narrator is very close to her mother, and that they have a loving relationship, despite the usual motherly nagging. The narrator cannot seem to string two thoughts together before her mother "interjects" in her mind with a piece of advice, or a rebuttal to something she thought. Obviously the mother is a very pervasive influence in the narrator's daily life.

The specificity of some of the mother's characteristics make the character portrait very real, to the point the reader suspects it may be autobiographical or at least semi-autobiographical.

Caroline's Wedding

Caroline's Wedding Summary

The narrator is Grace. Grace, born in Haiti, has just been given her naturalization papers as an American citizen. She is excited to tell her mother (Ma), who thinks being an American can lead to "boundless possibilities." They celebrate with bone soup, a Haitian dish Grace and her American-born younger sister Caroline only tolerate. All three women live together. Caroline was born with only half of a left arm. Ma believes this deformity is due to a shot she received from a doctor to calm her nerves when she was arrested during a sweatshop immigration raid.

After dinner, Grace talks with Ma. Ma hopes her bone soup, which she believes has a healing power, will cause Caroline to realize she should not marry a Bahamian man named Eric. Caroline is currently Eric's fiance and will soon be married. Ma objects to Eric because he is not Haitian and does not do or say things the Haitian way.

Ma tells the story of how her husband (Grace and Caroline's father, Papa) proposed to her, in the proper Haitian way. Papa's father wrote out a formal proposal and delivered it in person to Ma's father in a green and pink handkerchief: pink to symbolize romance and green for luck. Ma pretended she had only a mild like of Papa, but in fact they were deeply in love. Ma's parents soon consent to a wedding. Ma admits that, had her father forbidden the marriage, she was so in love that she would have gotten married despite her father's wishes. In the end, Ma grudgingly accepts the reality that soon Caroline will be leaving the nest.

Ma and Grace attend a Sunday Mass at Saint Agnes church, which caters to Haitians. A long list of Haitians who died trying to escape to America in boats is read. A special mention is made of the pregnant woman who died after giving birth on the boat, who appears in the first story "Children of the Sea."

More is revealed about Papa. He died about ten years earlier from untreated prostate cancer. Both daughters wore black for a year and a half in mourning, and were supposed to wear red panties as a sign to their dead father that he was dead and no longer wanted, in the Haitian tradition. However, both daughters wore blank panties, instead inviting the spirit of Papa back to them, a habit they keep to the present day. Grace has a dream of Papa. He is smiling and having fun at a lavish costume party. He disappears, and Grace finds his costume mask, which is frozen into the expression of a scream.

Waking up crying, Grace calms herself by recalling things her father taught her and the tales he told. He developed a game with his daughters where he would ask a series of questions and expect memorized answers, including riddles.

The three women go to meet Eric at his home. Ma is very lukewarm to the idea. Eric cooks food, which Ma eats very little of, being a snob for Haitian cuisine. Eric fails in impressing his future mother-in-law in the slightest.

A shower is thrown for Caroline, including just a few friends from the school she teaches at, and a neighbor friend Mrs. Ruiz. Caroline gets a few needed small appliances and such. Later, privately Ma gives her own shower gift, a black teddy.

Grace speaks with Ma again that night. More about Papa is revealed. In order to get to America, he paid money to a widow to arrange a fake marriage. After a few years in America, he divorced the widow and re-married Ma. Ma has kept all the correspondence from their time apart, with Papa writing about practical things and Ma writing about how much she loved him. The hurt of that second marriage, however fake, still hurts Ma.

Caroline buys a fake robotic arm for her wedding day. She has done so on the advice of her doctor, who says it will help with the phenomenon of phantom limb pain that Caroline has been experiencing.

On the day of Caroline's wedding, she awakes in a stupor, nauseous, and in pain. Caroline is doubting the wedding. Ma was just the same way on her own wedding day. Ma attends to Caroline, running her a bath and saying soothing words. Caroline slowly improves enough to face the important day.

Caroline and Eric get married in a small civil ceremony with just a few people in attendance. Ma regrets they did not have a bigger wedding, but Caroline feels the money that would be spent on a wedding is better spent on starting their life together. Caroline is married, and Ma realizes some aspect of her daughter is lost to her forever.

Caroline and Eric fly to the Bahamas that night for the honeymoon. Caroline sends red roses to Ma from the Bahamas. At the end of the story, Grace and Ma play the same back and forth question and answer game that Papa taught Grace.

Caroline's Wedding Analysis

As with several other stories in this volume, the past is quite alive in the minds of the characters in the present. Narrator Grace is fixated on her father Papa, who has been dead for ten years. She dreams often of him, of walking or running to him and nearly touching him, but stopping just short each time. The family has kept physical reminders of Papa. Caroline and Grace have kept wearing blank panties as an invitation to the spirit of Papa to visit them. And Ma has kept Papa's original marriage proposal letter, along with other mementos and correspondence, including the correspondence Ma and Papa wrote when Papa was in America and Ma was still in Haiti. These reminders, along with (in Grace and Caroline's case) a vivid dream life, keep Papa a continuing presence in their lives.

This story also explores cultural assimilation. Ma is Haitian, through and through, and her insistence on "the Haitian way" provides both the central problem of the story—Ma's problem with Caroline's fiance Eric—and moments of levity when the daughters must suffer through their Ma's stubbornness. Papa was perhaps even more deeply steeped in Haitian culture, especially its "wanga," or voodoo magic aspects. As Grace remembers, he was a very superstitious man who believed without a doubt in spirits and their influences.

In contrast to Ma and Papa, Caroline is thoroughly American. She has little regard for the Haitian ways, as evidenced by the fact that she does not attend the Haitian Sunday Mass and the fact that she does not insist on a large wedding. Interestingly, Grace is somewhere in the middle, having been born in Haiti but raised a significant number of years in America. She displays elements of both Haitian and American cultures, having more of an understanding for Ma's insistence on Haitian Sunday Mass. Also, she has inherited a bit of her Papa's spiritualism, as revealed in her rich dream life and the importance she places on her dreams of Papa.

Epilogue: Women Like Us

Epilogue: Women Like Us Summary

The narrator recalls that, in the act of braiding her hair, she remembers looking like her mother, and in turn her mother recalled looking like her own mother, and so on.

The narrator's mother's generation had two rules: "always use your ten fingers," meaning one should become skilled at cooking and other duties in preparation of becoming a housewife, and two, that one should never have sex before marriage, and even after marriage a woman should not enjoy sex, lest her husband lose respect for her.

In this world, a woman making a living as a writer is unthinkable. Writing is an act of disrespect, of rebellion, a waste of time for a woman who should be learning cooking. The narrator compares writing to hair braiding: taking coarse, loose strands (of thought) and bringing them together in unity.

Furthermore, writers (like the narrator/author) must suffer the disappointment of their mothers, who can't see the value in writing and making stories. Writers must also face possible death by writing in an environment as dangerous as the one in Haiti, where writers are labeled "politicians" simply for expressing their thoughts.

Still, the narrator feels compelled by the spirits of all the women of Haiti, whom she calls "kitchen poets" for their skills in the kitchen, to speak for them and share their stories with the world. The past is very much alive in the narrator as writer. On a daily basis, she communes with the hundreds of women who have come before her, drawing upon their strength to tell tales.

Epilogue: Women Like Us Analysis

The epilogue, presumably written in the author's own voice, confirms the importance the author has placed on family and the past throughout the stories of the volume. The past is very much alive in the mind of the author, with things like the 1937 massacre or the later military coup remaining nearly as fresh and vivid as the day they happened. The author believes that women in Haiti have suffered many generations of oppression. This is evident in the compulsion to become homemakers and the consequent discouragement of career pursuit as described. As a result of oppression, some of the valuable stories of the past have become lost. The author has thus made it her mission to unearth this rich past and tell stories. Presumably, as so many of the stories involve the living world arriving at a peace with some element of the spirit world, in the act of writing the author is actually bridging that gap between worlds and providing some closure.

On a similar note, the author also emphasizes the cathartic and potentially therapeutic nature of writing. With the past so alive and present, with so many spirits inside of her speaking to her, the author can in a sense "exorcise" these demons in her head, much like expressing emotion in order to prevent it from building up only to erupt later. The writing method the author describes resembles the phenomenon of "automatic writing," where authors claim writing is done by the hand but not consciously by the mind. The spirits of the past are guiding the author's hand.

Characters

Grace appears in Caroline's Wedding

Grace is the narrator of "Caroline's Wedding." She was born in Haiti but raised for many years in America after her father arranged a fake wedding in order to get permission to stay in America, eventually bringing along his family. As someone born in Haiti but raised in America, Grace represents a kind of bridge between her very Haitian mother, Ma, and her younger sister, American-born Caroline. During the somewhat tumultuous time around Caroline's wedding, Grace acts as a kind of mediator between Caroline and Ma, who is objecting to Caroline's choice of husband and the lack of ceremony associated with the wedding.

Grace's father died ten years earlier from cancer. He was a powerful presence in Grace's life, and Grace dreams of him every night. Often, she dreams of seeing him in a field, but being unable to get to him because of the knee-high grass. Other times, Grace dreams of seeing her father at a lavish party, smiling with guests. And one dream has her father in a helicopter on a rope ladder rescuing Grace from a high mountain cliff. These dreams demonstrate Grace's deep sense of loss even after all these years.

At the beginning of the story, Grace receives her naturalization certificate, becoming a U.S. citizen. Becoming American has been a goal of her family. Caroline has taken her citizenship for granted, while Ma believes Grace's new American status will bring her plenty of opportunities and benefits.

Caroline appears in Caroline's Wedding

Caroline is of Haitian descent, but was born in America. She is a teacher. She meets a janitor at the school, Eric, who she befriends. He asks her on a date about a year later, and she dates him for eighteen months before they decide to marry.

Caroline was born without a left forearm. The family believes that this deformity was caused by the shot administered by a prison doctor to Caroline's mother during a sweatshop immigration raid. She has taken her disability in stride, and for example in one scene Caroline is shown manipulating cards in a game of solitaire with dexterous ease. Her deformed arm causes discomfort in people she meets, who go out of their way to try to avoid looking at it or mentioning it. But Caroline is completely comfortable with it, as is her sister Grace.

As the wedding nears, Caroline experiences phantom limb pain, a phenomenon seen in victims of amputation where amputees still "feel" their missing limb and experience severe pain. To ease this pain, she gets a prosthetic arm. However, this pain reaches a crescendo on the morning of her wedding, and Caroline starts to have doubts about the wedding. Her mother soothes Caroline to the point that Caroline finds the strength to successfully get married, after which she is content in her new life.

Ma appears in Caroline's Wedding

Ma is the mother of Grace and Caroline. She came to America about twenty-five years earlier, and is a woman of about sixty. She clings to the old ways of her native Haiti, and this stubbornness frequently conflicts with her daughter, especially in regards to the central subject of the story, her daughter's impending wedding. She believes Caroline should have chosen a proper Haitian man instead of a Bahamian.

Celianne appears in Children of the Sea

Celianne is a teenage girl on the boat with the male narrator from Haiti to America. She gives birth while on the boat, but the baby soon dies. Celianne refuses to acknowledge the death for days. Finally, she dumps the dead baby overboard and joins it, drowning to death. The rest of the boat's inhabitants soon follow in the doomed voyage.

Jacqueline appears in Nineteen Thirty-Seven

Jacqueline is an old woman who visits the narrator and informs her that her mother's death is imminent. She is joined to her mother spiritually because of the shared experience of the Parsley Massacre of 1937. She accompanies the narrator to the prison and attends the burning of the mother's body.

Lamort appears in The Missing Peace

Lamort is a young girl who acts as a guide for visiting American Emilie, when Emilie wishes to find the resting place of her mother at the churchyard. Lamort is named after the French word for death, because her mother died during childbirth. Emilie convinces Lamort she should not have such a name but instead take on the name of her mother, Marie Magdalene.

Guy appears in A Wall of Fire Rising

Guy is a poor sugar mill worker who lives in the shantytown and who can barely support his family. He becomes obsessed with the mill owner's hot-air balloon, and dreams of starting a new life in a far-off land by traveling via the balloon. He steals the balloon and takes a ride before committing suicide by jumping to his death.

Princesse appears in Seeing Things Simply

Princesse is a young inhabitant of the town of Ville Rose who poses nude for visiting painter Catherine. She has her own artistic sensibilities, and her time with Catherine allows her to develop those sensibilities.

Prostituteappears in Night Women

The unnamed narrator is a prostitute who entertains what she calls "suitors" at her one-room home. She shares the home with her son, the product of a night with one of her suitors. She loves her son deeply, and takes great pains in shielding her son from the reality of her existence.

Rose appears in Between the Pool and the Gardenias

Rose is the abandoned baby that the narrator finds near a sewer in the city of Port-au-Prince. Rose is taken and cared for by the narrator. She is praised for being a quiet baby, but the quietness is evidence of a serious medical problem. Rose soon dies, and the narrator is accused of witchcraft by the groundskeeper because of her death.

Objects/Places

The Boat appears in Children of the Sea

The male journal keeper is riding in a boat along with about two dozen other refugees trying to reach America. The boat is very dilapidated and frequently springs leaks which are patched with tar. The boat proves unable to get the people to land, and it sinks, leading to everyone drowning.

Madonna Statue appears in Nineteen Thirty-Seven

The narrator brings this statue with her to every prison visit she has with her mother. The mother takes great comfort in holding the statue. At the end of the story, the daughter comes to understand what the statue meant to her mother—the statue symbolizing Christianity and the promise of salvation—and she clutches it tightly.

The Hot-Air Balloon appears in A Wall of Fire Rising

A sugar mill owner's son owns a hot-air balloon that a mill worker, Guy, takes great interest in. Guy steals the balloon in order to realize his dream of flying. Guy then jumps to his death from the balloon, unable to face the reality of his life any longer.

Transistor Radio appears in Night Women

The prostitute narrator wishes to shield her son from her "work," and so she gives him a transistor radio (given to her by one of the men who pays her for sex). The son falls asleep listening to the radio, and so he does not hear any lovemaking sounds coming from his mother's bed.

Gardenia Garden appears in Between the Pool and the Gardenias

When Rose the baby dies, the narrator chooses to bury her in the gardenia garden in the back yard of her employer's vast mansion estate.

Purple Patchwork Quilt appears in The Missing Peace

Near the end of the story, Emilie sews together a quilt made from cloth scraps handed down from her mother. The quilt is dominated by purple, her mother's favorite color. The act of making the quilt helps Emilie to find closure with respect to her mother's tragic death.

Her Master's Boots appears in Seeing Things Simply

The painter, Catherine, states that the best lesson she learned from her recently-departed mentor involved literally wearing the man's large, worn-out boots around town. More generally, the artist must understand his or her subject completely before attempting to capture the subject's essence on canvas.

New York City appears in Various

Both "Caroline's Wedding" and "New York Day Women" take place in New York City. The Haitian women living there must balance their Haitian heritage with American culture and the possibilities inherent in being American.

Port-au-Prince appears in Various

Port-au-Prince is the capital of Haiti and its largest city. It is a place of great wealth (of the very select few) and dire poverty (of the great majority). It is also the site of much violence, being the launching pad for many past uprisings and coups. False imprisonments, death, and martial law are some features associated with the city in the various stories.

Ville Rose appears in Various

Ville Rose is a fictional town in Haiti on the ocean. It provides a gentler picture of Haiti than the frenetic, violent depictions of Port-au-Prince. Many characters in the stories either live in, come from, or have visited Ville Rose.

Themes

The Past Is Alive

As made explicit in the Epilogue, many stories of KRIK? KRAK! explore how the past has influenced the present, and how it continues to do so. The author describes herself in the Epilogue as full of the spirits of the hundreds of Haitian women who have come before her. Full of this spirit, full of these stories, she is compelled to write in order to share a forgotten history with the world.

Drawing upon the long history of spiritualism and belief in the supernatural in Haiti, the author imbues many of her characters with a rich spiritual life. Grace in "Caroline's Wedding" constantly dreams of her long-dead father, who appears just out of reach. The playful game of question and answer he played with Grace as a child gives Grace a way to communicate with her mother at the story's end. The narrator in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" is closely tied to the women of Massacre River, both those who were murdered and the daughters of the murdered. The narrator of "Between the Pool and the Gardenia" is frequently visited by her dead mother, or reminded of her in everyday people and things. And a mother's past words are constantly echoing in the head of the narrator in "New York Day Women," who "argues" with her mother's wisdom as she rediscovers her mother by trailing her around New York.

Beyond this spiritualism, there is a sense of fatalism, that one's station in life is predetermined (by the past) and that one can do little to escape it. The narrator in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" is destined never to have a child, as evidenced by her multiple miscarriages. Her brief time with a found baby and its subsequent death is just a cruel reminder of this fate. On a similar note, Guy in "A Wall of Fire Rising" is born into poverty and is frightened of becoming just like his similarly poor and struggling father, so much so that he chooses to end his life rather than enduring his destiny.

The Relationship Between Mother and Daughter

Many of the stories of KRIK? KRAK! involve daughters with close and complex relationships with mothers. Part of the resolution in these stories includes these daughters coming to terms with their mothers, whether this means finding common ground, finding a way to communicate, arriving at a certain understanding of their mothers, or summoning up the strength to find closure with their mother's death.

In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the narrator is a skeptic who cannot communicate with her mother in her trips to prison to visit her, and who does not understand the importance her mother places in the Madonna statue in their family. By the end, with her mother's death, she finds a certain closure and attains a greater appreciation of her mother, clutching the Madonna statue tightly. In "New York Day Women," a professional American woman of Haitian descent happens upon her mother wandering New York,

and is forced to view her mother in a new light. In "The Missing Peace," the title hints at Emilie's journey, an American who returns to Haiti to discover more about her mother's death and obtain closure.

The initial rift between mother and daughter can be explained by cultural differences (as with "New York Day Women,") or simple generational gaps. The rift can also be caused by traumatic events. The narrator in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" has trouble communicating because her mother's unjust imprisonment and the horror of Massacre River caused a change in her personality. And the grandmother in "The Missing Peace" resents her granddaughter and blames her for her own daughter's death, and so she calls the child Lamort, or Death.

In "Caroline's Wedding," which shows generational gaps in the dynamic between mother and daughter, it is actually the mother and not the daughter who arrives at an understanding. Ma disagrees with the thoroughly American manner in which daughter Caroline is choosing a husband and planning her wedding. Only by the end of the story does Ma surrender to the inevitable.

Death Defines Us

Death is a constant fixture in the stories of KRIK? KRAK! The author seems to imply that this is so due to the violent history of Haiti. Haiti is a country initially torn apart by colonialism, and then decimated by poverty and a series of military dictatorships. The author draws upon real events in Haitian history, such as the Parsley Massacre of 1937 for the story named after the year of that event, "Nineteen Thirty-Seven." The volume's first story, "Children of the Sea," dramatizes an all-too-common event—Haitians desperate to escape to freedom in America in boats.

Beyond these historical events, death is strongly woven into plot, as with "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" when the narrator cares for a dead baby, in "Children of the Sea" when Celianne's baby dies shortly after birth on the boat, or in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" when the mother is beaten to death in prison. This omnipresence of death is even reinforced in seemingly small details, like the cockfight taking place at the beginning of "Seeing Things Simply."

By including death and images of death so frequently, the author shows that the story of Haiti is one of strife and misery. Untimely deaths have affected every family in Haiti, to the point there is a certain numbness, as with Lili in "A Wall of Fire Rising," who is not surprised at her husband Guy's suicide considering the unhappiness he displayed. Perhaps the ubiquity of death helps to explain why so many characters are visited by the spirits of dead loved ones. One interpretation of these visitations is that they are manifestations of the visited's loneliness and need to connect with the deceased.

Style

Point of View

With the exception of half of the journal entries in "Children of the Sea" and the third-person narrative of "A Wall of Fire Rising," stories in the volume are written in the first-person with a female narrator. Half the "Children of the Sea" journal entries are written in a man's voice, the other half a woman's voice. This choice allows the author to focus on the rich inner lives of the characters, including dreams and the spirit world. One example is "Caroline's Wedding," in which narrator Grace spends significant time speaking of dreams she has nightly about her dead father. Another example is "Between the Pool and the Gardenias," in which the narrator talks about her dead mother's spirit visiting her, or her essence being reflected in random people's words or faces.

As a result, the point of view choice lends a very strong sense of subjectivity. From Grace's perspective in "Caroline's Wedding," from her perch between Haitian culture and American culture, the reader is able to appreciate both cultures. By placing the reader with the narrator daughters in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" or "New York Day Women," the author allows the reader to ride alongside them during the journey they take—in both cases, a greater appreciation and understanding of their mother. And first-person narrative helps to convey the ambivalence of the prostitute narrator in "Night Women," torn between her life as a prostitute and her yearning to be a good mother to her son and to protect him from the realities of life.

Setting

The setting of the various stories are very important and powerfully inform the narratives. Many stories—"Children of the Sea," "A Missing Peace," "Between the Pool and the Gardenias"—take place in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. In the author's conception of the capital city, Port-au-Prince is full of both fabulous wealth (as the narrator's masters and their fine mansion in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias") and desperate poverty (as with the shantytown of "A Wall of Fire Rising"). It is also the site of bloody violence and the various massacres and bloody military coups that have marred Haiti's history in the twentieth century. As such, as in "A Missing Peace," Port-Au-Prince is a ruined place full of curfews and the omnipresent threat of the military.

Somewhat contrasted with that is the fictional village of Ville Rose. This place demonstrates a gentler side of Haitian culture. It is a place with artists, a place for spiritual exploration, as with "Seeing Things Simply." Ville Rose is a kind of spiritual touchstone woven throughout the stories, and many stories refer to it.

Later stories, including "Caroline's Wedding" and "New York Day Women," take place in New York and its boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn. These stories involve Haitians

culturally assimilating into American culture. Even when they are in New York, Haitians are strongly linked to their motherland.

Language and Meaning

The author has an appreciation for the Creole dialect that is spoken in Haiti, and she sparingly uses words borrowed from this dialect throughout the stories, words like "wanga" (voodoo magic) and "manbos" (women who practice voodoo magic"). However, the author takes care to explain the meanings of these words to keep the stories accessible to a mainstream American audience while still retaining the flavor of the language. There are also some French phrases sprinkled in, as when the female lover in "Children of the Sea" writes that "Haiti est comme tu l'as laisse" ("Haiti is as you left it"). But again, as with the Creole words, these phrases are immediately translated in English for the benefit of the American reader.

In "Children of the Sea," the author uses all lower-case letters and a bold font as a way to differentiate the journal entries of the two characters. Bold font is also used in "New York Day Women" for the mother's voice in the narrator's head.

The writing style is, in general, spare and laconic, with relatively few rhetorical flourishes or literary tropes used. This, along with first-person narrative point of view, contributes to the sense that the stories are being told by real, ordinary women. However, the author does occasionally use metaphors and similes, as in "The Missing Peace," when rocks are said to "shimmer like chunks of gold" (p. 103), or in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" when a sewer is described as "as open as a hungry child's yawn" (p. 91).

Structure

There are nine distinct stories in KRIK? KRAK!, along with a brief epilogue about the nature and challenges of writing as a Haitian woman. However, the author delights in forging connections between the stories, as if the disparate stories were all pieces of a much larger narrative. For example, the narrator in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias," describes the members of her family tree, which include the mother and daughter in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" and Lili from "A Wall of Fire Rising." "Caroline's Wedding" features a Sunday Mass which makes mention of Celianne, the pregnant woman who gave birth on the boat in "Children of the Sea." By making these little connections, the author is showing how the past strongly influences the present.

"Children of the Sea" is written in epistolary form, as a series of journal entries between lovers. "New York Day Women" sets up the narrative as a kind of exchange between the narrator and her mother, even though the mother's words are just flashbacks of the narrator's.

Many stories track a character change. In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the narrator comes to understand her mother and to be convinced that they will meet again in heaven. Ma in "Caroline's Wedding" finally accepts the inevitability of her daughter Caroline growing

up and marrying who she wants to marry. Princesse finds her artistic sensibility and an ability to create by the end of "Seeing Things Simply." And Lamort in "The Missing Peace" finds the strength and self-respect to request that her grandmother call her a proper name, the name of her mother, Marie Magdalene.

Quotes

"They say the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. I have never been given very much. What was there to take away?"
"Children of the Sea," p. 7

"People are just too hopeful, and sometimes hope is the biggest weapon of all to use against us. People will believe anything. They will claim to see the Christ return and march on the cross backwards if there is enough hope."
"Children of the Sea," p. 19

"We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze."
"Nineteen Thirty-Seven," p. 41

"'You know that question I asked you before,' [Guy] said, 'how a man is remembered after he's gone? I know the answer now. I know because I remember my father, who was a very poor struggling man all his life. I remember him as a man that I would never want to be.'"
"A Wall of Fire Rising," p. 75

"Love is one of those lessons that you grow to learn, the way one learns that one shoe is made to fit a certain foot, lest it cause discomfort."
"Night Women," p. 84

"For no matter how much distance death tried to put between us, my mother would often come to visit me. Sometimes in the short sighs and whispers of somebody else's voice. Sometimes in somebody else's face. Other times in brief moments in my dreams."
"Between the Pool and the Gardenias," p. 94

"'The only regime she believes in is God's regime. She says she wants to write things down for posterity.' 'What did you tell her when she said that?' 'That I already have posterity. I was once a baby and now I am an old woman. That is posterity.'"
"The Missing Peace," pp. 107-108

"It struck Princesse that this is why she wanted to make pictures, to have something to leave behind even after she was gone, something that showed what she had observed

in a way that no one else had and no one else would after her."
"Seeing Things Simply," p. 140

"I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building."
"New York Day Women," p. 148

"Caroline liked to have her stub stroked. This was something that she had never grown out of. Yet it was the only part of her that people were afraid of. They were afraid of offending her, afraid of staring at it, even while they were stealing a glance or two."
"Caroline's wedding," p. 174

"We had all paid dearly for this piece of paper [Grace's American passport], this final assurance that I belonged in the club. It had cost my parent's marriage, my mother's spirit, my sister's arm. I felt like an indentured servant who had finally been allowed to join the family."
"Caroline's Wedding," p. 214

"When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity."
"Epilogue: Women Like Us," p. 220

Topics for Discussion

Describe a few instances in the text when the past strongly informs/influences the present.

What comparisons does the author make with writing and braiding hair in the Epilogue?

What does the narrator discover about her mother in "New York Day Women"?

What is the significant of the Madonna statue in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven"?

Why do you think the author chose journal entries as the format for "Children of the Sea"?

What does the hot-air balloon mean to Guy in "A Wall of Fire Rising"?

Why is the narrator of "The Missing Peace" called Lamort? What is the significance of her name change by the end of the story?