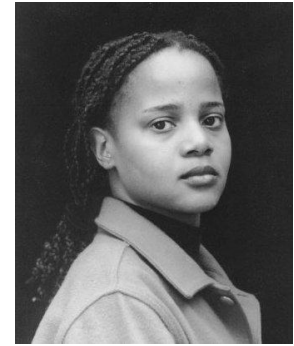


*Edwige Danticat*  
*Breath, Eyes, Memory*



Edwige Danticat, author of Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994), was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969. When she was twelve years old, she left Haiti to live in New York with her parents, who had left Haiti two years before. Her novel, Breath, Eyes, Memory, has been acclaimed by both, critics and the public.

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“At the age of twelve, Sophie Caco is sent from her impoverished village of Croix-des-Rosets to New York, to be reunited with a mother she barely remembers. There she discovers secrets that no child should ever know, and a legacy of shame that can be healed only when she returns to Haiti – to the woman who first reared her. What ensues is a passionate journey through a landscape charged with the supernatural and scarred by political violence, in a novel that bears witness to the traditions, suffering, and wisdom of an entire people.” (Back cover of the book)

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Women writers have put forward several main themes to speak out about what they went through and to help people grasp the extent of the phenomenon. This novel, written by a Haitian woman, is no exception. In addition to the themes that are usually present in women’s writing, Edwige Danticat gives us readers an overview of Haitian society at that time. This novel can be regarded as a voice for Haitian women who struggle to make it on their own, most of the time, in spite of the poverty that stands before them.

To begin with, the author emphasizes the importance of talking back through the mothers which can be seen as a way to keep in touch with the past, their roots, and avoid making the same mistakes. For instance, Sophie’s aunt, Tante Atie, tells her that they “are each going to their (sic.) mothers” (19), as the young girl learns that she will travel to New York. It is almost as if both were heading back to the womb in order to learn from their mothers’ experiences. Moreover, Tante Atie states

that “your mother is your first friend” (24), the woman with whom you have to be able to speak to about anything, with whom there should be no taboos.

Another theme present in this novel is illiteracy; “Your schooling is the only thing that will make people respect you” (43). Tante Atie is the one giving this advice as she is in a good position to, since she does not know how to read and does not want Sophie to be like her. Knowledge is power; this seems to be the idea that is brought to the fore. The young protagonist struggles to fit into this new world and says “My mother said it was important that I learn English quickly. Otherwise, the American students would make fun of me, or even worse, beat me” (51). This shows that she has a lot to do in order to adapt to her new life and deal with the prejudicial barriers that are set in front of her, for instance the idea that, “only the ‘Four Hs’ got AIDS – Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians” (51). She is an adolescent and already the world is out to get her.

These two are not the only themes that are present in this novel; they are merely an example of what the storyline deals with and how the author seems to speak for several generations all at once. Moreover, the book ends with a letter from the author to the protagonist in which she explains to Sophie that her body “is now being asked to represent a larger space than her (sic.) flesh” (236). Danticat says to Sophie, “You are being asked, I have been told, to represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love so much” (236). This sentence accounts for the belief that Sophie has been through a lot herself and perhaps, now, she can be regarded as an icon for women’s struggles through life.

by Aika Mathelier