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TRAUMATIC PASTS AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S  
*THE DEW BREAKER*

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to provide in-depth analysis of *The Dew Breaker*, a work of Edwidge Danticat's that has remained relatively unexplored since its publication. The thesis explores five of the core stories included in the short story selection: "The Bridal Seamstress," "The Funeral Singer," "Night Talkers," "The Book of the Dead," and the title story, "The Dew Breaker." Each of these stories deals with a character who has been traumatized at some point in his or her life by the corrupt Duvalier regime in Haiti. Each narrative describes a part of a character's journey in dealing with trauma. Whether it is through work, art, or family, the characters attempt to free themselves from the nightmarish chains that tie them to a tragic past associated with their lives in Haiti. Success is varied. These stories are representative of the larger collection, in which Danticat illustrates the varied forms of trauma experienced and coping methods employed by Haitian-Americans. The argument to follow suggests that Danticat provides a potentially confident view of a future beyond tragedy. Her narratives demonstrate that there is at least some possibility of successfully moving beyond traumatic pasts.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The writing of Edwidge Danticat stems directly from experience. Her work focuses on the struggles of Haitians and Haitian-Americans after emigration to the United States. Danticat has experienced both sides of these struggles. Born in 1969 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Danticat stayed with her aunt as she watched her parents immigrate to the United States. During this time with her aunt, she was immersed in the Haitian practice of oral storytelling, which influenced her burgeoning interest in writing. Also during this time, Danticat witnessed the reign of Haitian dictators and the remnants of pain leftover from other Haitian tragedies. She harnessed this pain as the driving force behind her writing. Later, Danticat would move to the United States with her parents and go through the process of establishing a new identity in a new nation (“Writers of the Caribbean: Edwidge Danticat”). This motif, too, she would later employ in *Krik? Krak!* (1996), *The Farming of Bones* (1998), and *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Today, Danticat’s work is recognized as among the most influential Caribbean writing. Her fiction not only relays her personal story or that of her characters, but also represents the history and struggles of the entire Haitian nation.

The process of developing an identity in a new place is vitally important to physical and psychological survival. Immigrants face this challenge regardless of where they have immigrated to or emigrated from. Yet, the problems involved in identity formation vary depending on each immigrant’s situation. Past experiences have a large role in determining the success one has at creating a new sense of self and new relations to larger communities, from familial bonds to broader citizenship. The influence of the past on identity development is central to Edwidge Danticat’s collection of short stories,

*The Dew Breaker*. Written in the style of connected short stories that form a loose narrative describing the hardships of native Haitian and Haitian-American life, a common motif across many of the stories is the attempt of Haitians, either those living in Haiti or expatriates, to confront their troubled pasts in order to establish new Haitian and Haitian-American identities. As recent and historical events make clear, Haiti has experienced much sorrow over the centuries. Danticat's earlier works, such as *Krik? Krak!*, focus on giving voice to those sorrows. In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat's short stories explore more carefully the strategies wielded by a traumatized people to create new lives. Danticat harnesses the sorrow from all aspects of Haitian culture to illustrate how these troubled people create stable identities. The murder, torture, and tyranny that have been synonymous with Haitian politics for decades have left a dark mark on the Haitian people's past. The characters of *The Dew Breaker* are used to demonstrate that Haitian-Americans can move beyond trauma into a new future in a new land and establish successful identities.

The multiple traumas of the Haitian past are analyzed compellingly in Danticat's previous collection, *Krik? Krak!*, a narrative focused upon the grisly attack on Haitian people by the Dominican Republic. Specifically, the collection looks at the shadows left by the Parsley Massacre of 1937. Haiti shares a border with the Dominican Republic and the two states have had a rocky relationship over the years. The Dominican Republic is the larger of the two states, but Haiti is more populated. The border between the two states is not definitively drawn, and families from both states have lived on the border for generations, never really knowing exactly which side of the border they resided on. In October of 1937, the leader of the Dominican Republic, dictator Rafael Trujillo,

ordered his army to murder all Haitians living on the Dominican side of the border (Turits 589). The estimate is that between 20,000 and 40,000 Haitians were massacred along the river border, which some have renamed Massacre River. The reason for the massacre is not clear, although it is often attributed to Trujillo's policy of "antihaitianismo." Trujillo blamed Haitians for crime and poor conditions in the Dominican Republic and subsequently created an anti-Haitian policy to reflect this (613). In order to identify who was Haitian, the Dominican army officers would hold up a piece of parsley and ask what it was called in Spanish. Descendants of Dominicans spoke the Spanish language of their colonizers while Haitians spoke Creole, a mixture of native African languages and French. When those being interrogated could not identify the piece of parsley in Spanish, they were executed; thus, the Parsley Massacre. Danticat attempts to capture the trauma and horror caused by this massacre in her first short story collection, *Krik? Krak!*.

The trauma voiced in *The Dew Breaker* does not stem from a single event or from outsiders to Haiti as in the Parsley Massacre. Rather, the horrors Danticat presents in this collection stem from a period of successive dictatorship caused by the Duvalier father and son, known as "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc." The first Duvalier dictatorship, that of the father François, began in 1957 and lasted until 1971, the period that Danticat's short stories originate from. Papa Doc was ostensibly democratically elected on September 22, 1957. However, his opponents claim that his control of the military at the time to "ensure a peaceful election" was just a strong-arm tactic to scare voters (*Haiti* 38-39). Nevertheless, the first Duvalier became president a month later. The "dew breakers" that are the source of the horrors in Danticat's collection were government

sponsored thugs, part of a militia directly loyal to Duvalier known as the “Tonton Macoute.” After his election, Duvalier began calling himself the “incarnation of Haiti” and used his militia to solidify his position against his many challengers (41). One of the ways the Haitian people had been protected from an all-out dictatorship in the previous decade had been the military’s removal of such dictatorial threats like Duvalier. However, Duvalier recognized this and “destroyed the military as an independent force,” making the officers directly loyal to him and not the military hierarchy (40). Thus, Duvalier was able to rule the country for almost fifteen years and ensure that his son ruled after him. The nightmarish crimes presented in *The Dew Breaker* have been well-documented and publicized over the years. During this period of horror, thousands of Haitians were murdered and thousands more fled. But there is no way to count the true number of people Duvalier’s crimes affected over the years, since the fate of individuals remains largely undocumented.

In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat uses fiction to narrate what has remained unspoken, to investigate the manner in which the past continues to haunt the present, and to explore possible strategies for coming to terms with violent pasts. The characters portrayed by Danticat reveal different degrees of the ability to move beyond the past. Success is sometimes defined as a character’s ability to thrive in the United States. Failure is demonstrated when characters are consumed by the past, never truly able to move on and find a healthy balance in life. The flight to America functions as a new start for many characters and an escape. The horrors experienced in the past by some Haitians are haunting, but the journey to accept the past, both emotionally and through the physical flight to America, helps these characters to develop new identities. A

confrontation with the past in these short stories is found to be restraining, consuming, or, in some ironic way, freeing. The first section of the following analysis examines the help of occupations in dealing with the past. The second section focuses closely on the return to Haiti as a therapeutic journey that allows characters to move on with their lives. Finally, the last section considers the trauma experienced by those who carried out the crimes in Haiti, not just the victims. This section explores how Haitian horrors extend through generations, even beyond those who experienced the suffering firsthand. Finally, each section demonstrates the necessity of community, whether through sisterhood, family, or the other, in establishing a new identity and easing the scars left by the past.

## Chapter 2: Haitian Women in the U.S.

The short story “The Bridal Seamstress” follows a young Haitian-American journalist, Aline, as she interviews another Haitian-American woman, Beatrice, who is retiring from her career of making wedding dresses. Beatrice is the character who demonstrates how a troubled Haitian past affects a new American identity. Immediately the reader recognizes a conflict between the two characters, one being young and American, the other older and experienced in the history of their native country. The reader learns that, in Haiti, a jailer whose romantic advances she had spurned tortured Beatrice. She believes that her torturer follows her wherever she goes, and even goes so far as to tell Aline, through whom the story is focalized, that he lives in a house down the street. After a basic investigation, Aline finds the house Beatrice points out to be empty and to have been so for some time. Beatrice’s past torment clearly continues to haunt her current life in the United States.

Beatrice’s work as a bridal seamstress performs some service beyond giving her economic security: it enables her to develop a separate identity from the scars she received in Haiti. Specifically, the life of a bridal seamstress is something that has come to define her life after Haiti. When asked how long she had been making dresses, Beatrice defines the length of time as “I’ve been making these dresses since Haiti” (126). This is not an actual timeframe like Aline wants to hear, but it is an important representation of Beatrice’s life. By stating that she has been making dresses since Haiti, Beatrice creates a clear divide in her life. There is Haiti and then there is after Haiti. Beatrice willingly separates her own life, acknowledging the divide. This shows how important leaving Haiti was for her. It promised a new beginning.

The profession also enables Beatrice to establish relationships with her clients, affectionate relationships, which she lacks in her personal life. Beatrice refers to her clients as “my girls” and has them call her “Mother” (126). This formalizes a maternal relationship between Beatrice and her clients, which provides companionship and fills a void in her life. When Aline asks her if she had been married, Beatrice replies, “You never ask a woman my age a question like that” (127). This short answer emphasizes the touchiness of the subject because of wounds that may be hidden. An older woman who lives alone either may never have had a husband or may have lost him along the way. Beyond that, though, due to her Haitian past, Beatrice’s love life was likely violently traumatic, and especially so because one of the unstated possibilities of the story is that her torturer may have raped her in Haiti. Beatrice also mentions a boyfriend when she talks about the motive behind her torture, but never describes what happens to him. What is clear is that the violence in Haiti shaped her life as a woman, affecting her potential as a wife, and, in all likelihood, keeping her from becoming a mother. Through her work as a bridal seamstress, Beatrice is able to recover some of her losses by establishing a maternal connection with her clients, partially substituting for the opportunities she was never given.

The dresses themselves are also important to Beatrice because they function as an embodiment of her soul, her sense of individuality, and her perception of self-worth (127). She triumphs every single time people admire her dresses, almost as if the positive feelings for the dress were directed at her. By identifying with the dresses, Beatrice separates from her earlier identity. She no longer is the person who went through horrible experiences in the past. Instead, she is something beautiful and pure: a

wedding dress. The dresses provide a temporary release from the horrors Beatrice keeps locked inside.

Beatrice's ability to escape her past through her work is limited, however, because she connects her art to her torturer. Even though her work gives her relationships she needs in her personal life, Beatrice believes her work also gives her tormentor the means of finding her. At the beginning of the interview, Beatrice says she is retiring because she is tired (126). However, considering her troubled past, Beatrice's proposed reason for retiring is unlikely. Beatrice believes that she finds her torturer "wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him, living on my street" (132). This paranoia is the result of torture. Beatrice has regularly used flight to escape the horrors of her past. First, she originally left Haiti, her home, to avoid experiencing the horrible treatment she had already suffered another time. Beyond this, she admits to moving multiple times in the United States. Beatrice is convinced her tormentor finds her because she sends notes to all her "girls" when she moves (137). She feels the need to maintain the connections she has made with the girls who bought her dresses, but is conflicted by the belief that these connections lead her tormentor to her. Fear is the driving force behind many of Beatrice's actions. It is enough to cause her to abandon households she has set up and begin again. However, Beatrice is never completely able to abandon the relationships she has created, those with her girls and their dresses. Over time, Beatrice's past taints her profession. Beatrice tires of making the wedding dresses because she is tired of the constant fear. The fatigue may be the justification for her retiring, but it is more likely that Beatrice has finally succumbed to her past terror.

Though Beatrice has moved on to become outwardly successful in the United States, her past has not been left behind.

Beatrice's characterization reveals the depth of damage the past inflicts upon her current life. Aline notes of Beatrice early in the story, "In spite of her size she had a loud commanding voice, like someone who was accustomed to giving orders" (122). Beatrice is portrayed as tiny, but that does not mean she is passive. She is an assertive individual, a trait that plays out in her interview with Aline because she dictates how the interview progresses. Beatrice herself admits that she has "[n]ever had anyone helping me. Never could stand having anyone in my house for too long" (126). She is a strong individual who takes pride in living on her own. This speaks to her strength in a foreign environment surrounded by strangers. This characterization also speaks to the power her past life in Haiti has on her present life in the United States. Even though Beatrice is powerful enough to live on her own as an elderly woman in New York City, her past is still strong enough to tear her from the occupation she loves. The past can be crippling even to the strong.

Danticat's short story, "The Funeral Singer" also considers the manner in which the past complicates immigrants' attempts to establish new identities in an adopted country. The story follows three Haitian-American immigrants as they complete a class to gain their GED's. Although the narrative is focalized through the personal journal of one of the three girls, the emphasis in the story is upon the healing power of communal responses to trauma. The women are able to survive and succeed in a challenging situation by establishing a ritual of sharing their pasts, building on their shared Haitian nationality. Rézia, Mariselle, and the unnamed narrator use their troubled pasts to come

together in a manner that enables them to thrive in their present studies. The narrator is the first to reveal the torment she experienced in Haiti. The Haitian government had arrested her father. When he was released, he set to sea in his boat and was never seen again. This started the narrator's career as a funeral singer, a career she pursued to connect with her father until the government requested she perform at the national palace ("The Funeral Singer" 173). After she refused this request, she had to leave Haiti or else face the consequences, which would likely be brutal, effectively ending her funeral singing career.

The narrator's decision to stop funeral singing demonstrates a tendency toward repression in order to cope with her troubled past. The Haitian government caused her to lose her family and home after she had to leave her and come to the United States. The narrator believed that singing allowed her to communicate with her father after his disappearance. She says, "This is when I began to sing. So he could hear me singing his songs from the crest of that wave" (173). While it helped her communicate with her father, singing also brought the narrator solace. The funeral singer found comfort in performing her father's songs at other funerals and thereby continuing his legacy. The performance functioned as a dedication to her father, another way of remembering him. It also gave voice to a communal bond, and expressed a shared sense of loss for the Haitian people. Her father's songs were not just for her; they were for all Haitians who experienced loss. The Haitian government took all of these bonds away from her. As the narrator explains her flight from Haiti, "I was asked to leave the country by my mother because I wouldn't accept an invitation to sing at the national palace" (172). Her mother asked the narrator to leave the country because she knew a refusal to sing for the regime

put her daughter in danger. The daughter did not choose to flee by her own volition; however, her decision to abandon funeral singing was her choice. Unlike Beatrice, the narrator is not running from her horrors, but suppressing them by abandoning the activity which she associates with her past. The government caused her to flee, just as it caused her father to set sail. Her singing is transformed into a negative feature in the narrator's life, taking away one of her few consolations. At the time of her emigration, singing was no longer a form of remembrance for a lost father. It had become the cause of her own loss: the loss of her home.

The maturation and coping process for the narrator is more promising than that found in "The Bridal Seamstress," however. In the previous story, Danticat showed how Beatrice finally succumbs to the horrors of her past by giving up what she loved, her work as a seamstress. In "The Funeral Singer," the narrator initially gives up what she loves, her singing, but is able to return to it in the end. The narrative follows the funeral singer from Week 1 of her GED course all the way to Week 14. In this story, time eventually becomes a healing factor for the narrator. The journal form of the story not only represents the narrator's progression through the GED course chronologically, but also her progression in dealing with her past. As the weeks pass, the funeral singer's growth, from reserved to more outgoing, can be traced through the entries in her journal. Her interaction with other Haitian-American immigrants is central to this progression. As the narrator reflects upon her motivation for opening up to the others, "I thought exposing a few details of my life would inspire them to do the same and slowly we'd parcel out our sorrows, each walking out with fewer than we'd carried in" (170). The fostering of positive relationships is the catalyst that forces the funeral singer

to mature to the point where she is able to deal with her past. The three women come to identify with one another and the tortured pasts they share, and, through this understanding, to provide support for one another as they each establish new lives. At the beginning, Mariselle kept her distance from the other women, “pull[ing] her chair away, putting a few inches” between herself and the others (170). This divide goes beyond the physical. The bond that formed after the women learned of each other’s past does not yet exist. It did form, though. It is Mariselle who says to the funeral singer, “You have so much time ahead to redo these things, retake these tests, reshape your whole life” (174). As with many of Danticat’s carefully crafted quotes, these words speak about more than just the literal opportunity of passing the GED. Mariselle is also speaking about the future and trying to get the funeral singer to see that she can move beyond her past. In the “sole” Haitian restaurant on the west side of Manhattan, these three women are able to ease each other’s burdens and begin healing the scars they received in their native country (165).

It is interesting to note that the title of this short story, “The Funeral Singer,” is the only identity the narrator is given. For the reader, she *is* a funeral singer. At the beginning of the story the narrator wishes she could “sing to introduce myself” but she does not (166). This fits with her coping mechanism for dealing with her troubles, which is to repress them. Instead of embracing her singing when asked what she does, the funeral singer wants to respond with, “I do nothing” (167). She would rather have no identity or sense of purpose than acknowledge a painful aspect of the life she lived in Haiti. One interesting aspect of the narrative’s structure is the mixing of accounts of the funeral singer’s current situation and the circumstances of her past that led her to this

point. There is pain attached with accepting her past. At some level, though, she admits that singing is an important part of her identity. It is the sole mechanism that she wishes to use for her own introduction. Singing is the face she wants the world to see. By suppressing the singing, she is not only denying a part of her past but also a part of herself. By the end of the story, the funeral singer's new friends have gotten her to "sing her own funeral song" (181). This is a momentous event for the narrator. The singing is no longer only a reminder of her life in Haiti, but a part of her new life in the United States. Singing her own funeral song represents the death of her past life, a way to move beyond those horrors.

Clearly, the narrator of "The Funeral Singer" is more successful at embracing a new identity beyond her past than is Beatrice. The funeral singer's initial suppression of singing when the story commences is her first step in developing a new sense of self. She detached herself from the thing that reminded her of her father and caused her to leave her mother. This type of repression is probably not healthy; however, her willingness to reveal her past to her friends eventually led to her music resurfacing. The narrator was able to find two companions who understand her past and the life she had led. It is these meaningful relationships that allow her to establish a new identity. Without understanding friends, it is unlikely she would have been able to give her own funeral song. In the Week 14 portion of the journal, the narrator says "We won't know for some time if we passed" (179). Literally, this comment refers to the GED exam the three women just took. However, it also refers to the tests of life they have experienced. Even though she will not know for some time whether or not she will successfully shed the chains of her past, the funeral singer is certainly taking steps in the right direction.

These two short stories, “The Bridal Seamstress” and “The Funeral Singer,” showcase one of the ways through which Danticat suggests a person can move beyond a traumatic past. Each of these stories focuses on a woman whose identity is based almost entirely on her occupation. While Beatrice is named, the story itself stresses her identity as a bridal seamstress, just as the second story identifies the funeral singer by occupation. The two stories portray two paths that can be taken with regards to work: one where the work is abandoned and the other where it is embraced. Beatrice is retiring, abandoning that which gives her an independent identity and provides her with companionship. The end of the story does not suggest that Beatrice’s pain will end after her retirement. The last remark from Beatrice is a paranoid outburst about how her tormentor finds her through her girls and their dresses (“The Bridal Seamstress” 137). There is no hint that she will be able to conquer her fears. In fact, Aline subsequently recognizes Beatrice as one of the many people “whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space of their lives” (137). This evaluation does not leave much room for hope.

The same cannot be said for the funeral singer. The narrative concludes with the acknowledgement that the times ahead are “uncertain ones,” but even uncertainty is a separation from the “terrible days” behind the Haitian-Americans (“The Funeral Singer” 181). The funeral singer’s future is full of potential. Danticat suggests that by embracing her occupation, the funeral singer frees herself to look to the future. The funeral singer even commits to “going back...to join a militia and return to fight” (180). She feels empowered by her newfound voice. It is difficult to know how likely her return to Haiti is since her announcement is followed by laughter from the other two women. But even if she never sings again or returns to Haiti to fight, for a time, the funeral singer is once

again a funeral singer. Returning to the profession required struggle. This may be the reason Beatrice cannot experience the same sort of success. At twenty-two, the funeral singer is young. Beatrice is an older woman and, as she herself admits, tired. It may be easier for her to continue to cope with her past as she has been for years, and run once again. However, Danticat proposes that this strategy will not work: traumatic pasts must be faced directly and accepted if there is to be any hope for a better future.

### Chapter 3: A Return to Haiti

The short story “Night Talkers” presents the reader with two distinct characters, Dany and Claude, who each demonstrate a different response to trauma in their pasts. Dany, who left Haiti for New York City, comes back to visit his aunt after ten years abroad in order to inform her that he has found the man who murdered his parents: his landlord. Years before, this landlord, then a dew breaker, started a fire that killed Dany’s parents in Haiti, leaving only Dany and his aunt alive. When Dany returns to Haiti to reveal the discovery of their tormentor to his aunt she is not receptive. She is more concerned with having him meet Claude, another “American” as she puts it (“Night Talkers” 96). Originally, Dany only talks to Claude to appease his aunt, but after her unexpected death, he communicates with Claude. For Dany, past trauma becomes the sole driving force in his life; whereas for Claude, although he has spent time in jail for patricide, the past does not come to dominate his present.

As with the two previously discussed stories, the title here suggests the identity of the story’s protagonist. Both Dany and his aunt are night talkers or “people who wet their beds, not with urine but with words” (98). The torments of their past are repressed to such a degree that they only come out at night in uncontrollable speech. This commonality strengthens the bond between Dany and his aunt. The only immediate family Dany has left, his aunt and Dany share a distinguishing characteristic, which is one reason Dany returns to Haiti to see her. The ‘night talker’ identity also suggests the mechanism through which Dany deals with hardship. He cannot deal with problems in the daytime, which is to say, in the open. The only time he can speak about his troubles is when he is in an unconscious state. The darkness of night enables his problems to

come forth, but he is never able to address them completely. Dany can “remember only the very last words he spoke” during these night sessions but always “has a lingering sensation that he had been talking, laughing, and at times crying all night long” (99). This explains why Dany can never make progress. He talks extensively in his sleep, but he does not remember what he talks about. He engages in a cycle of repeated conversations that reach no conclusions.

The past trauma Dany has to deal with continues to consume part of his life, like the fire that ravaged his parents’ bodies. It is clearly detrimental that his landlord is the man who killed his parents. However, he did not have to place himself in that position. Dany makes the statement that he “had lost his parents to the dictatorship twenty-five years before” (88). It is safe to assume that much has happened since then, but Dany’s past still controls his life. His focus on the past is apparent in his need to discuss his landlord with his aunt, regardless of her resistance to the subject. The first time Dany raises the subject, she allows the conversation to be interrupted. The second time she acts “as if protesting the question.” Finally, she dies before Dany can bring up the subject again (97, 109). Even when near death, Dany’s aunt still looks to the future. When Dany first tells her that he has something to say, his aunt hopes that it is news of an impending marriage (97). This is about as far from the truth as she could have wanted. Instead of having happy tidings, Dany is trying to engage his aunt in a conversation that will remind her of a nightmarish past. He thinks that she will be able to guide him to the appropriate action after he learns the identity of his parents’ killer. But his aunt has moved on from the night that continues to torment Dany. He implies his aunt’s progress when he notes that although “[b]oth her hands had been burned during the fire... over

the years the burn marks had smoothed into her skin and were now barely visible” (97). The physical scars left on her hands disappeared over the years. This imagery suggests that her mental scars similarly disappeared. Dany’s aunt was willing to move on and search for happiness, as getting married would achieve for Dany. She moved on, but Dany obviously has not.

Dany is never able to fully integrate into the American society, a stagnation for which he is partially responsible. Dany chose the apartment in his landlord’s basement fully knowing that he was the same man who killed his parents (105). It is difficult to comprehend why he would do such a thing, since by doing so Dany is giving the landlord authority over his life. The dew breaker already controls Dany’s past. He was single-handedly responsible for the most influential night of Dany’s childhood, and, yet, Dany gave him even more authority by taking a room in his basement apartment. Not only was Dany figuratively under the man’s influence because of his past, but now he was also physically and legally beneath the man who killed his parents. Beyond this, Dany places himself at the mercy of the landlord in the barbershop scene: he allows his landlord, who is also his barber, to cut his hair and “never turned down the shaves, for he thought it would give the barber a chance . . . to remember him” (106). Dany wants the barber to remember the horrors he caused in the past and the impact they had on his life. The problem is that the landlord does not recognize him, and it is only Dany who is reacting to the situations he is placing himself in. In fact, these events are hindering Dany’s recovery from his past. He acknowledges that he “couldn’t sleep for months, spending his weekends in nightclubs to pass the time” (106). It is significant that Dany is not going to the clubs for enjoyment. He was not sleeping, so he was using the clubs as to

kill time. Dany is unable to proceed with his life on his own and cannot fall into a healthy routine.

Dany's confusion about how to continue his life is evinced quite eloquently in the first lines of the story. As he traveled to his aunt's village, "[h]e thought that the mountain would kill him, that he would never see the other side" (87). Literally, he is completing a strenuous climb over rough terrain without water. Figuratively, he is confronting an obstacle in his life, an obstacle that harkens back to the horrific murder of his parents. While reflecting on the current situation he had placed himself in, Dany realizes that his aunt would have sent him help and "advised" him had she known he was coming (88). And that is exactly what he is looking for in all aspects of his life, not just the current physical exertion. At one point, Dany attempts to take his aunt's hand and "trie[s] to guide her, but found himself an obstacle in her path and let her go" (95). Dany is not meant to guide his aunt; rather, as his elder, she should guide him. Dany realizes this, which is why he comes back to Haiti.

While it is impossible to suggest that Dany would be wrong in harboring a strong hatred toward the murderer of his parents, it is possible to question why Dany finally decides to return home after living alongside the murderer for ten years. The likely answer is that Dany does not know how to deal with the situation himself. This is illustrated through his lack of action when he sneaks into the murderer's bedroom. Dany realizes that he is not able to kill the murderer because of "the dread of being wrong, of harming the wrong man" (107). A concern for justice leads to his delay. Dany is not completely convinced that his landlord is the right man, so he still returns to Haiti to tell his aunt in the hope that she could help him. He is looking for an answer; however, the

answer may not be the one he wants. In the middle of the night, Dany's aunt says, "It's like walking up these mountains and losing something precious halfway. For you, it would be no problem walking back to find it because you're still young and strong, but for me it would take a lot more time and effort" (109). Once again, the imagery used by Danticat suggests that life is a climb, one easier to make when younger. Dany's aunt is also suggesting that life has its obstacles that need to be surmounted. Reaching a summit would be like moving past one of those obstacles, but Dany has not been able to do that. For ten years, he has been brooding on the same mountain and not making any progress. He's still young enough and strong enough to make the climb, but he is in some sense refusing to do so.

The people of the Haitian village continue to identify Dany as the boy whose parents were killed in a fire and not the man he has grown to be. This is appropriate because Dany has never moved on and matured past that night. Old Zo, the first old man of the village Dany comes across, says about the fire that killed Dany's parents, "Only the boy came out whole" (92). But this judgment is inaccurate. Like anyone who deals with a traumatic event, like most of the Haitians Danticat writes about, Dany is not truly whole. He is scarred deeply and weakened. The events of that night forever change him. However, the people of the village do not recognize the extent of his scarring. They expect Dany to take advantage of the opportunities given him in America and to succeed. As one nameless villager says, "We were not so lucky as you" (94). Yes, he had experienced suffering, but that is far from unheard of in Haiti. He was given a chance that not many others of the village had received and he failed to make the most of that

opportunity. In that refusal to act on his opportunities as well as his fixation with the past, Dany proves himself to still be a boy.

Claude's past is filled with nightmares, just as Dany's is. In an obvious parallel to Dany, Claude also failed at establishing an identity in the United States, missing his opportunities. Given their shared backgrounds, age, and failures, Danticat is obviously using the two characters to foil one another. The most significant difference between Claude and Dany's characterizations is the open quality displayed by Claude. He does not hide his troubles like Dany, but wears them on his sleeve, quite literally. Claude is first described as "a short, muscular boy...with tattoos from his elbows down to his wrists" (100). This image cuts an intimidating figure for Dany, but the same passage describes Claude's "restrained smile." Dany seems put off by Claude's appearance, but the smile gentles Claude for the reader. Claude wears his past as he does his tattoos. Unlike Dany who hides his scars, Claude's are in the open for everyone to see. This is never more apparent than when Dany forthrightly accosts Claude about killing his own father. Claude does not hide from the truth, but explains how it happened and how it changed his life (119). For him, the past is not something to hide from.

Claude may have failed at building an identity in American society, but he is doing much better in the countryside of Haiti. This fact is interesting because it would seem that Claude has no way of integrating seamlessly into the Haitian society. Dany's aunt tells him "Claude understands Creole and is learning to speak bit by bit" (100). He is relatively voiceless in a village that is unfamiliar to him, but this does not hinder his development. Unlike Dany, Claude has no direct way of communicating his problems. Yet, he is more successful than Dany at dealing with them. This suggests that talking is

not the only thing necessary to move on from a troubled past. For Claude, it is listening that has proven most helpful. When talking about living in this remote village he says, "I'm the puzzle and these people are putting me back together, telling me things about myself and my family I never knew" (102). By listening and learning, Claude is able to blend into the Haitian society in a way that Dany, a native to the village cannot. After his aunt's death, the men of the village talk "about [Dany] as though he couldn't understand, as if he were solely an English speaker, like Claude" (112). Dany may understand the Creole language, but he is no longer Haitian. He is American in a way that Claude is not. Dany is back in Haiti by his own volition, unlike Claude who has nowhere else to go.

In "Night Talkers," Danticat presents two people with troubled pasts who have the opportunity to create new identities, but who go about it different ways. Dany does not take the opportunity given him, but rather obsesses over his past. He does not try to move on in the way his aunt has. Instead, he allows the memories to fester and infect his new life in the United States with the presence of the man who was responsible for his terrible past. Claude, conversely, fails in America. He is "expatriated twice, from both his native country and his adopted land" (100). Yet, he does not give up. He is able to create a new identity because he realizes that he has "done something really bad that makes [him] want to live [his] life like a fucking angel now" (119). He has been given a second chance and wants to capitalize on it. Dany represents someone who is brooding on his past, but never finds any answers as to how he should carry on. Claude has learned to look to the future. He fully accepts the past and moves on to build a new life. Ironically Claude, who is responsible for the trauma in his own life, is able to succeed at creating a new identity, unlike Dany, the victim.

#### Chapter 4: The Dew Breaker's Trauma

Danticat, interestingly, chooses to focus her collection of short stories not only on the victims of Haiti, but also on the man who scarred so many of her characters' lives.

*The Dew Breaker* collection is framed by two stories that deal directly with the very dew breaker who tortured many of the Haitians in the collection. The first story of the text, "The Book of the Dead," focuses upon the Dew Breaker's daughter and the effect that her discovery of father's past has on her life. The last story of the collection, which bears the same name as the collection itself, brings together many of the plot lines, themes, and cultural dilemmas introduced in Danticat's other stories. Here, the reader sees how the Dew Breaker meets his wife and how they begin their own journey to the United States.

The placement of these stories at the beginning and the end of the collection is purposeful, allowing for the progressive maturation of readers. Upon learning that the man who is first introduced as a loving Haitian-American father was actually a dew breaker in Haiti, and then reading about some of atrocities he and other paramilitary forces committed, readers react exactly like his daughter, Ka: with disbelief and disgust. Yet, as these stories unfold, "The Book of the Dead" and "The Dew Breaker" gradually demonstrate to the reader that the victims depicted throughout the collection were not the only ones to suffer in Haiti, nor were they the only ones to bear scars into their futures. The Dew Breaker, who carried out many senseless acts of violence, was also scarred and, to some degree, more burdened, because of what his hidden past could do to his daughter and family if discovered. Danticat uses these two stories to show that the detrimental effect of the past as experienced by the victims of crime is also felt, if for different reasons, by those who carry out the crimes. By introducing the Dew Breaker as

a father before revealing him to be a former torturer, the collection develops in the reader some sympathy for the criminal, which, in turn, breeds confusion, similar to the confusion felt by these Haitian-Americans. In order to deal with the burdens of the past, Ka and her father, the Dew Breaker, both pursue distractions like those used by the Dew Breaker's victims. Like the victims, this family who is now on the other side of the horror, tries to move beyond the past and to develop new identities.

The collection opens with "The Book of the Dead," a short story that centers around Ka and her father setting off on a trip to Florida in order for Ka to sell a carving she had made to a Haitian-American television star, Gabrielle Fonteneau. The narrative begins the morning before the delivery, when Ka wakes up to find her father and the carving gone. When the police interview Ka, she notes, "I had never tried to tell my father's story in words before," but she has attempted to tell that story through the carving. For Ka, the statue symbolizes "the way I had imagined him in prison." Ka has been under the impression that her father had been one of the countless prisoner's tortured under the harsh Haitian regime, but this story narrates her discovery that he was in fact a dew breaker ("The Book of the Dead" 6). Upon his return, Ka's father takes her to the lake in which he threw her beloved carving. It is there that he tells her he was never in prison (21), that he was never one of the prisoner's her statue portrayed. Rather, he was the opposite of a victim: a dew breaker, one of those who would "come before the dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and . . . take you away" ("The Bridal Seamstress" 131). This story is set apart from the rest of the stories in the collection by the distinctive form Ka's trauma takes: her trauma does not come from the actions of a torturer in Haiti, but from the man who is her father, which in some ways

could be a more damaging source of trauma than an anonymous torturer. Another unique aspect of Ka's trauma is that its roots are in America. This is not true for Danticat's other characters, who may find that their troubles follow them to the United States, but who are ultimately haunted by ghosts from Haiti. This revelation is instantaneously crushing for Ka, partly because her own identity has been defined by what she believed to be her father's traumatic past as a victim. In Ka's mind, she is not simply an artist but "an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject thus far – my father" ("The Book of the Dead" 4). Even when on the verge of her first major sale, one to a television actress of some apparent note, Ka cannot remove herself from her father's influence. She has never been given the chance to establish a Haitian-American identity on her own and is not aware of her true ancestral narrative. When the police officer asks where she is from, she does not reply with the name of her hometown of New York, but instead says, "Haiti," because, even though she has never been there, "it is one more thing I've always longed to have in common with my parents" (4). Ka does not identify herself as an artist or an American. She identifies herself as a Haitian, but her only ties to that nation are from her parents. Her father's revelation that he was a dew breaker cuts off that tenuous tie. Instead of being foreign refugees, Ka now views her parents as liars. As she loses the only ancestral narrative she has ever known, her identity is shattered. At the beginning of the story, Ka says, "My father is gone" (3). Although Ka is telling the police that her father is missing, her words anticipate the fact that she will soon lose the father she has always known, as well as her own identity.

The physical disappearance of Ka's father has detrimental effects on Ka's well being, which foreshadow those that the psychological disappearance will lead to. At first,

Ka denies that her father left the hotel for any reason out of the ordinary. For two hours, she justifies his absence by thinking that he simply went to get breakfast (8). After speaking to the policeman and admitting that her father is missing for some reason other than breakfast, Ka attempts to connect with him and lies “in [her] father’s unmade bed. The sheets smell like his cologne, an odd mix of lavender and lime that [she’s] always though too pungent, but that he likes nonetheless” (8). In the hotel room, there are two beds: Ka’s and her father’s. Yet, she forgoes her own for the comfort provided by the intimacy of her father’s. Her father’s absence also seems to distract Ka from her surroundings. When she calls the actress to talk about the sculpture delivery, Ka notes that Fonteneau “sounds like she’s in a place with cicadas, waterfalls, palm trees, and citronella candles ... I realize that I too am in such a place, but I’m not able to enjoy it” (11). Ka is not able to fully appreciate the lush Florida environment she is in, so different from her native New York, because she is too worried about her father. These narrative elements suggest that after Ka’s discovery of her father’s true past, she will be even more lost. Although her father eventually returns, the father Ka knew before this trip will never return: the prisoner-father is forever gone and in his place stands a stranger, the torturer

The pain of learning exactly what her father was in Haiti also extends into Ka’s sculpting life. Her only subject, Ka’s father can be understood to be her muse. Ka admits that she had attempted rendering her father multiple times (6). She uses woodcarving much the same way the funeral singing uses her singing: to connect to her father, to form a bond that would otherwise be nonexistent. Her father, however, refuses to be seen in any type of artistic light because the artistic presentation of him is an

embodiment of the web of lies he has created in the United States. Ka's work as an artist is in some form transcendental and captures more than just her father's image. Ka tries to explain the source of her artistic ability when she is on the phone with her mother by saying, "this feeling comes over me that I sometimes have when I'm carving, this sensation that my hands don't belong to me at all...something bigger and stronger than myself, an invisible puppetmaster" (25). Ka is not herself when she is carving, but is part of something larger, with access to feelings that she does not usually have in a normal state. Learning the truth about her father therefore naturally leads her to doubt her connection to something larger, both in a family and in an artistic sense. Outside of Ka's art, the Dew Breaker's character is a mystery. The family has few pictures of him and the ones they had are "awkward shots" with "his hand covering his scar," a scar he received during his torture sessions in Haiti (5). Even on their trip to Florida, Ka's father refused to have his picture taken, which Ka attributed to his embarrassment over his scar. Yet, when Ka carved him, she captured, or believed that she captured, some of his presence in an artistic form, something not even a camera could do. This gave Ka a special connection to her father, a connection no one else could claim. As her father said, "when I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it, to take it with me into the other world" (17). This is the ultimate compliment from Ka's father because it showed that he viewed the statue as something that could help him in the afterlife. Perhaps Ka was able to capture more of her father in that sculpture than she realized. She was able to portray her real father, a man she did not even know yet, in the truest form.

Like many of the other stories in the collection, Danticat offers hope for the future of Ka and her father's relationship, even given the nature of her father's crimes. When

telling Ka about his true past, the Dew Breaker confesses that he “was the hunter, he was not the prey” (21). The dew breaker’s definition of his role in Haiti creates a black and white dichotomy. There was hunter or prey, criminal or victim. He suggests that he was a strong individual who preyed on the weak. But his explanation of the past offers more than these two alternatives. The Dew Breaker hints at a futility in his position as hunter. He claims that he “did not want to hurt anyone” (20). This suggests that even if he did not want to hurt anyone, he had to, which, although it does not exonerate his deeds, certainly provides a third option to the hunter/prey theory: agent. Since Haiti, the Dew Breaker has led a completely different and honorable life. Danticat raises the possibility of moving on from past transgressions, even great ones, in pursuit of something better, like the Dew Breaker’s family. Ka notices this possibility. She sees a fragile side to her father. She is sensitive to the “nightmares [he was] always having” because of what he did to others (23). This suggests a certain level of remorse and that the Dew Breaker suffers from his own trauma. As the Dew Breaker suggests, “Ka, no matter what, I’m still your father . . . I would never do these things now” (24). Like all the other victims who fled Haiti, the Dew Breaker is looking for a new beginning, a new identity. He tries to establish this identity through his daughter and family. Ka sees the efforts her father has made and believes that her “father was wrong in his own representation of his former life, that maybe his past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey” (24). Ka sees, even if her father does not, that he is not defined solely by his past. He is also defined by the things he has done in America, the business he has built, and the family he has raised. His hope is that his reformed life will count for something, even if the future for Ka and her father is unclear.

The post-Haiti Dew Breaker is characterized in this story in a much different light than the one the reader sees him for most of the other stories in the collection. He is presented as someone who regrets the actions of his past and wants to move on. Rather than continuing to live the lie that he told his daughter, the Dew Breaker finally rejects it. He throws the representation of him as a prisoner into the lake. Yet, he does not realize that the man in the sculpture may also be a true representation of his life in America. The Dew Breaker's actions in Haiti have chained him to his past; similar to way they scarred his victims. The possibility of being connected to his past is the reason he never returned to Haiti and why he and his wife always changed the location of their hometown on the island (27-28). The Dew Breaker wants to avoid the past just as much as his victims and perhaps more, not only because he fears the repercussions of being discovered but also because he has his own scars.

To deal with the demons of his past, the Dew Breaker seeks new ways to cope with the complexity of his past. In addition to the shelter he finds in his family, the Dew Breaker looks to the teachings of ancient Egyptians he discovers in his trips to New York museums. (The story is named after one of the best known Egyptian religious texts.) He calls upon these teachings for support when telling his daughter that the past she believes about him is a lie. At her birth, the Dew Breaker insisted that his daughter be named "Ka" "because in the Egyptian world ... a ka is a double of the body," one which the dew breaker views as a "good angel" (17). The dual meaning of Ka's name reveals complexities in the Dew Breaker's relationship with his daughter. First, he shares the same deep connection that she wishes to share with him. They are connected as more than father and daughter. He wants them to be mirrors of the same soul. The Dew

Breaker sees her as his hope for salvation, and Ka's birth functions as the catalyst for his effort to come to terms with his past. When Ka asks if her mother knows about his past, the Dew Breaker replies, "Yes I explained, after you were born" (23). Ka's coming into this world was the reason the Dew Breaker finally opened up to his wife. Second, for Ka to be defined as the "good" angel there must have been a bad one. The Dew Breaker recognizes that his actions in Haiti were not just and perceives himself as being bad, thus requiring the help of someone who is good for redemption. The Dew Breaker is hoping to add something moral and worthwhile to the world through his daughter.

Through the Dew Breaker and Ka, Danticat further complicates the idea that family and communication can be used to overcome traumatic pasts. As seen in "The Funeral Singer" and "Night Talkers," victims never really come to terms with the past until they reveal the true depth of their trauma to someone. This same idea is present in "The Dew Breaker," but from a different angle. The Dew Breaker is never able to move on from his past so long as he is lying to his daughter, which is why the carving causes him so much pain. The Dew Breaker specifically says, "I don't deserve a statue," at least not like the one that his daughter carved, because, like the statues of ancient Egypt he sees in the museum, there "were pieces missing...eyes, noses, legs, sometimes even heads" (19). The Dew Breaker believes that he was not truly whole because of the things he did in his past. The carving struck him as an inappropriate representation because it portrayed a tortured but still whole man. However, he also said that Ka "always noticed more what was not there than what was," which could explain why she believed that even though her carving was made in ignorance, it still represented her father as he could become. Before the Dew Breaker revealed his true past to his daughter, Ka

remembers him reading a passage from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* which states: “I am not a violent man...I have done no evil” (22-23). The passage is called “The Negative Confession,” and it is easy to see why the Dew Breaker would read it often. He wanted to assuage his guilt over what he did in Haiti through denial. But the Dew Breaker, regardless of how many times he tries to repress his transgressions, was still haunted by the nightmares of those he harmed. It took his daughter and communication with her to find some hope for a brighter future. His daughter’s representation of him as a prisoner pushed the Dew Breaker into revealing his true past.

The positioning of “The Book of the Dead” in Danticat’s collection is significant. Out of all the stories of the collection, this one presents the Dew Breaker at his weakest moment. He is never more vulnerable than at the time he tells his daughter about his past. To reveal that she has been living a lie all while trying to portray her father as she saw him would be difficult for the Dew Breaker since he knew how much sculpting meant to his daughter. By placing this story first in the collection, Danticat instills in the reader some sympathy for the Dew Breaker, an uncomfortable feeling to have for a torturer. This awkwardness is exacerbated by the following stories that reveal how sadistic the Dew Breaker has been in his past. However, in the end, the narrative functions to reveal that even torturers faced trauma. Danticat wants readers to consider the difficult question of guilt and redemption as they contemplate the crimes the Dew Breaker carried out in Haiti. The Dew Breaker faced many of the same challenges his victims did in creating a new identity, even if those challenges arose because of his own actions.

Placed in opposition to “The Book of the Dead,” Danticat uses the final story of her collection to explain the catalyst for the Dew Breaker’s flight to America to start a new life. The title story, “The Dew Breaker,” is set in the time of horrors in Haiti, when many of the other characters in the collection experienced the trauma that shaped their lives. It is told from three different points of view: those of the Dew Breaker, Anne (his future wife and Ka’s mother), and a preacher. The preacher is fated to be the Dew Breaker’s final victim. He was a dissenter, speaking out against the governmental regime before and after it poisoned his wife in an effort to silence him. He was also Anne’s brother, adding another tangle to the relationships of hunter and prey, because Anne continues to love the man who not only tortured countless people but also murdered her own brother. Before his murder, the preacher manages to scar his torturer, the scar the Dew Breaker attempts to hide in pictures. The preacher successfully scars the Dew Breaker’s body and soul, forever changing the personality of the man. The preacher’s attack was enough to make the Dew Breaker abandon his position of authority. As he fled the prison that had been his seat of power, Anne finds the Dew Breaker bloodied in the street. Perhaps because she identifies him with the brother she knows has been taken captive, it is Anne who takes care of the Dew Breaker in his time of need and, after learning of the death of her brother, leaves with him for America.

Danticat’s use of multiple points of view in this final story is mandated by the collection’s larger perspective of how much the Dew Breaker has changed since Haiti. Not only are the Dew Breaker and the preacher on opposite sides of a conflict, but they are also embodiments of opposing moral codes. The preacher speaks for the people, but the Dew Breaker is only speaking for himself. The preacher does not imagine a future for

himself, while the Dew Breaker is constantly saving for that escape. The preacher loses his wife, while the Dew Breaker is able gain one. The differences between these two characters surpass these surface facts, however. The story begins from the Dew Breaker's viewpoint and also begins quite bluntly with the fact that he "came to kill the preacher" ("The Dew Breaker" 183). There is no misdirection to this beginning. The Dew Breaker is characterized as a murderer and one who is willing to kill a holy man. Immediately, the reader is encouraged to relate to the other characters in the story and view the man with disgust. Due to the placement of the stories, the positive light that the Dew Breaker is painted with in America is almost forgotten. Even more damning is the fact that the Dew Breaker took delight in the physical and mental tortures he put his victims through (197-198). He was not someone forced to carry out unspeakable actions. He was someone who tried to find a way to make those unspeakable actions more efficient and took pleasure in that pursuit. The revelation of the Dew Breaker's depravity immediately nullifies the possibility that he was forced to carry out the tortures, a possibility Danticat suggests in "The Book of the Dead."

The Dew Breaker, as presented in this short story, is a despicable character. However, when compared to the preacher, he becomes even more reprehensible. The actions the preacher undertakes to liberate his people entail an inevitable self-sacrifice. On the night when he is eventually taken into custody, he tries to protect his deacons, saying, "I don't think you three should walk with me to the church tonight. I'll walk alone" (201). Even though he is aware that the governmental forces are likely coming for him, he carries on with his sermons and services. Although he does not run and hide, the preacher does not want others to face the consequences for his dissent. His narration

makes clear that he does not fear taking responsibility for his actions, but wants to be the only one held liable. Just like all the other characters in this collection, the preacher has faced traumatic events. Similar to other characters, as well, the preacher deals with his past through acts of communication. The radio show produced by the preacher “called on the ghosts of brave men and women in the *Bible* who’d fought tyrants and nearly died” (185). Putting his own life in danger by speaking out, the preacher attempts to inspire the common people of Haiti to save themselves, to rise up against their devils who “aren’t imagined, they’re real” (186). The preacher seals his fate by speaking out against a tyrannical government, but he does so willingly. Then, on the night of his impending imprisonment, the preacher talks directly about his personal horror: the death of his wife, for which the preacher feels responsible because of his dissent. After hearing about her sister-in-law’s death, Anne “couldn’t help but blame him” too (215). While the preacher tried to deal with the nightmares that stemmed from the government by speaking to the people, he ended up assuming a much more personal nightmare for himself.

The Dew Breaker and the preacher do share at least one quality: transparency. The preacher was transparent in his disapproval of the Haitian government, and this led to his death. The Dew Breaker was similarly transparent about his role in the government. The power the Dew Breaker derived from his position functioned as his way of dealing with his own prior victimization. When the first Duvalier took power, a few of his officers confiscated the land the Dew Breaker’s family lived on. The family fell apart, his father becoming mad and his mother running away (191). Ultimately, it was this action that led the Dew Breaker into his violent life. The implication is that

Duvaliers' reign led to a cycle of violence, folding Haitian youth into the same violent gangs that had harmed them in their childhoods. The Dew Breaker used his newfound power and governmental position to move past his youth. He used his new position for clothes, food, sex, lodging, and even to return his mad father back to their family home (196-197). Empowered by his position, the Dew Breaker used it to make up for the weakness of his youth. According to the Dew Breaker, there were many ways to exercise the power of a dew breaker:

“Some of his colleagues tried to go as far from the neighborhoods where they grew up as possible when doing a task like this. Others relished returning to the people in their home areas, people who'd refused cough syrup for a mother or sister as she sat up the night coughing blood. Some would rather 'disappear' the schoolteachers who'd told them that they had heads like mules and would never learn to read or write.” (187)

The Dew Breaker provides several examples of the manner in which his associates used their positions to remedy past transgressions. Ironically, their way of dealing with this trauma, by perpetuating the violence to an even greater degree, is more harmful to the Haitian community than the original violence itself. Many of the dew breakers use their positions for revenge, but the Dew Breaker does not. Instead, he uses it for power. The Dew Breaker knows that there is not “anything subtle about his job” and exercises his power to increase his esteem throughout the Haitian community, which is how he copes with a past of dispossession (186).

The characterization of the Dew Breaker is not so simple as that of a man trying to drown his past in newfound power, however. He does display some forms of gentleness. For example the Dew Breaker tips a boy who brings him cigarettes “in honor of a past he couldn’t deny” (191). Though he used his position to take advantage of others, he also used it to help a young boy who reminded him of his blighted childhood. Beyond the monetary tip, the Dew Breaker took some form of special interest in the boy. He asked about the boy’s studies and wondered at how good of a student the boy was (194). The Dew Breaker, while his profession was a horrific pursuit, looked at other parts of society beyond political dissention. He cared, even if only some small bit, about the future of Haiti as he questioned the young boy. At one point, the Dew Breaker acknowledges “there was a part of him that wished he could buy that child a future . . . Perhaps not the future he would have himself...but another kind of destiny” (194). Not only does the Dew Breaker want to help the child, but he here also admits that his future is not the one he would want for a child. Another example of the Dew Breaker’s potentially positive nature is the manner in which he deals with Anne. Upon hearing about her brother’s arrest, Anne wants to get him out of jail. Rather than allow her to enter a place where the Dew Breaker knew “the men would make her all kinds of false promises, then have their way with her,” he managed to convince Anne to go with him (232). The Dew Breaker protected Anne from harm.

The protective nature shown through these two interactions would seem to be out of character for the man presented as the hunter in many of the other stories in the collection. However, the Dew Breaker provides some explanation for the tortures that create his hunter identity. The Dew Breaker does not pursue his profession vindictively

or for revenge; instead, when undertaking an interrogation assignment he “liked to work on people he didn’t know, people around whom he could create all sorts of evil tales” (187). In his mind, the Dew Breaker attempts to rationalize his horrific actions by identifying his victims as evil; however, from the characterization of the preacher and the other victims seen throughout the collection, this is seen to be a sham. The Dew Breaker creates “tales” to make himself believe that he is doing a good thing for the Haitian people by torturing dissidents. For example, his justification for capturing the preacher was the preacher’s Protestant faith (188). In his mind, the Dew Breaker was saving the souls of the Haitians who were being beguiled into leaving the Catholic faith. These types of rationalizations, along with the power of his position, enable him to continue being a dew breaker and to validate the occupation as patriotic. The Dew Breaker is hiding from the true horror of his actions by repressing his conscience and creating fictions to justify torture.

The short story “The Dew Breaker” provides a microcosm of the conflicting representations of the character of the Dew Breaker throughout the collection. The Dew Breaker kills an innocent man and, yet, offsets some of that guilt by saving that same man’s sister. Not only does he stop her from entering the prison and facing those horrors, but also he takes her to America to start a new life. Considering the political upheaval in Haiti at the time, that is a lifesaving act. The same complication can be seen between the stories that show the Dew Breaker as a family man and the stories of his victims who paint their own nightmares for the reader. This dichotomy, embodied within one character, is used by Danticat to help make visceral Ka’s reaction upon learning of her father’s past in “The Book of the Dead.” The reader is taken through the

same process as Ka: originally seeing a family man and then seeing the horrors he accomplished in his past life. The Dew Breaker planned on leaving his life as a torturer even before his encounter with the preacher. Yet, he was not able to leave until he was scarred, both body and soul, by his last prisoner. The preacher's attack was the catalyst that changed the deepest level of the Dew Breaker's identity. Before the incident, he imagined himself living in the Haitian hubs of America "to keep an eye on the movements that were fueling the expatriate invasions at the borders" (189). In some ways, he was planning on continuing his service to the regime while living safely in a prospering nation. That did not happen. Instead, the Dew Breaker spent the rest of his life living in anonymity, hiding his past even from his own daughter. The Dew Breaker in America was a man living in constant dread of being discovered for who he used to be. His life in hiding is far from the "art galleries" and "coffee shops" he pictured himself visiting. The change in the Dew Breaker's nature does not absolve him of his actions. Rather, it adds to that confusing feeling created in readers by "The Book of the Dead": sympathy.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Haitian people have experienced horrors that go far beyond that of most nations in this world. In the country's youth, slavery and colonialism handicapped any sort of economic development for the island's people. The conflict with the Dominican Republic instilled terror throughout the border region, and that terror spread throughout the nation. The Duvaliers, through their tyranny, deepened the economic burdens of Haiti's youth and took the nation's terror to a level far and above that caused by the Parsley Massacre. The rule of the Duvalier family was devastating to Haiti's future and its effects are visible today. Even now, after a devastating earthquake has added to Haiti's hardships, many people around the world question the destination of the international aid funds. The cycle of trauma continues, as evinced by Ka's personal trauma in "The Book of the Dead." Haitian people have struggled for decades to end this disturbing series of calamities. At times, as reflected in some of Danticat's earlier fiction, their efforts seemed hopeless. Even Beatrice of "The Bridal Seamstress" fails to leave her past behind in Danticat's more recent work. The Dew Breaker may have embraced a new lifestyle in the United States, but his past actions continue to haunt those he harmed. However, in *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat also provides some hope for individuals who strive to establish new identities at home and abroad. Claude demonstrates to Dany in "Night Talkers" the need for communication and community in starting over from a traumatic past, a message mirrored by the women of "The Funeral Singer." The Dew Breaker, as seen in the first and last stories of the collection, exists in America after his flight, but never truly lives because he remains a stranger to those around him. However, even though Ka faces her own trauma, her willingness to communicate with her parents

suggests a brighter future. Danticat's only representations of healthy Haitian-Americans are those who open up to others with their troubles. In Danticat's most recent collection of short stories, the difficult task of giving voice to terror promises an escape from horrible pasts: a hope for a new life.

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