

Breath, eyes, memory essay sample



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BREATH, EYES, MEMORY

In the human experience, memory is essential for communicating, locating, and identifying people, places, events, and objects. Conversely, memory can be one's enemy as past horrors are revived. The evocation of these past ghosts has the potential to incapacitate, drive to insanity, and kill an individual depending on the intensity and frequency of the memory. From early in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat memorializes Haitian history by the commonly repeated question-phrase "Ou libéré?" (Are you free?)(Danticat 96). Asked by a female vendor to another, the question enquired whether she was free of the load of merchandise weighing upon her. By going back hundreds of years to the 1793 Haitian Revolution captained by Toussaint L'Overture, who succeeded in overthrowing the Spanish and French colonial powers which oppressed and enslaved, the book opens to the reader the quest of being free from mental burdens. To the contemporary Haitian, freedom is still a crucial question. Over the tumultuous political past, affairs have soured so much that the once attained glorious freedom has been well nigh forgotten; hence the uncertainty of freedom. A traumatic, past event is often relived in the form of dreams/nightmares. In this instance, the mind fishes into the depths of the unconscious and obtrudes the horrific reality into the realm of the conscious. An unfortunate event is termed as a trauma in the eyes of psychoanalysts because of its gravity and accompanying, psychological damage (Applebaum 142).

Psychoanalysts deconstruct the text usually by privileging the unconscious over the conscious since often the unconscious provides a key to decode the

mental conundrum. Freud's theory of repression is the art of "simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Mollon). Therefore, a repressed memory dictates a temporary amnesia or silence over a terrible incidence. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the psychological doubling helps characters to forget present distress thus it is a mechanism to endure pain by mentally escaping. Dandicat skillfully twins two concepts Freudian doubling and the indigenous Haitian concept of Marassa. According to Freud doubling implicates "the dividing and interchanging of the self" (Chapelle 195). Renowned psychoanalyst Otto Rank has found that characters who "double" tend to project in the mind unreal themes in order to live in another realm of existence. In doubling memory for one character is temporarily suspended and unthought-of actions are performed. The Marassa motif in the novel encapsulates doubling and doubles since in Haitian Voudoun mythology, the Marassa Jumeaux (the Marassa twins) actually are a pair of inseparable deity-twins (Oswald 27). Likewise, doubling is a way of survival for the main female characters. While testing Sophie's virginity, Martine (her mother) distracts her bodily discomfort by telling her a story of the Marassa, so she could cope better. As an adult, whenever she has painful marital relations with Joseph, her husband, Sophie secludes herself to the sanctums of her mind. "We were twins, in spirit. Marassas" (Dandicat 200).

They both try to forget a marred sexual past and endure the pain of sexual intercourse with their husbands – like a twin, Sophie empathizes with Martine. In the psychoanalysis of literature, a common trait of characters who have a double is that the twin haunts and makes life intolerably

miserable, therefore the only resolution for the protagonist is to keep fighting against it and/or kill it. While attempting to rid oneself of the persecutory double, usually one ends up murdering oneself (Chapelle 211). As in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the evil Mr. Hyde cannot be vanquished without killing the virtuous Dr. Hyde. In the same way, the consequences of doubling have proven tragic as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* ends in a suicide – a desperate action to erase a terror-filled memory. Doubling dominates in Martine's mind and body. Marc and Martine's unborn child represents two persons: the lodged rapist demon within her as the foetus apparently speaks to her in the voice of the rapist and her own person. When Martine stabs the foetus, endeavouring to silence the harassing voice, she tragically kills herself. Doubling is also inherent in Haitian Voudoun culture since dolls (likened to the real character) are used as the twinned image. Any action performed to the doll mirrors to the real person. Testing: the nightmarish experience (being torn from Tante Atie to Martine). As a girl, Sophie has a recurrent dream of her mother chasing after her in a field, and being separated from her beloved Tante Atie. Unbeknownst to her, this girlish nightmare foreshadows a future realistic nightmare which will forever scar her body and mind.

Dreams have the power to divine anticipated events which are coded messages from God/ the gods. Sophie's instilled fear in the dream equates to the fear she will feel when her mother subjects her to testing. Her separation from Tante Atie marks her growth from childhood to adolescence. The repressed memories contained in the unconscious can erupt at a moment's notice. For Martine the constant nightmares replay the rape scene when she

was violated as a teenage girl in the Haitian cane fields. She has to relive this terror every time that she falls asleep because the memory has forever altered her life. Since in the day, in order to live life she has to forget temporarily the rape – therefore the memory lurks and lies dormant, however, at night it the memory awakens and attacks her in the form of dreams. Her groans and screams while asleep attest to the painfulness of the remembrance. Sophie has to save her mother from this haunting memory by waking her up. Carl Gustav Jung explains that the psyche is divided into three parts: the ego, the personal conscious, and the collective conscious. Jung's perception of the " personal unconscious is shaped by our personal experiences" (Belanger 33). Not only does Martine suffer from nightmares in the family but also Grandme lfe. Sophie overhears Grandme lfe's moaning in her sleep, confirming the nightmarish heredity. Grandme lfe alludes briefly to a still-born birth that leaves the reader to guess that she suffers the effects of an abortive pregnancy.

For Martine and Grandme lfe, the power of unpleasant memory rears its ugly head in the unconscious. In a fit of anger and disappointment in Sophie's broken hymen, Martine's disowns her daughter and attempts to forget her by destroying all her clothes and belongings – by severing physical ties with Sophie, Martine hopes to purge her soul of her daughter. This purging of all traces and images of her daughter is an effort at forgetting her pain. In the same way, Sophie as a woman suffers from bulimia and purges her body from food – an attempt to forget. " Eating disorders like bulimia may cause memory problems because they disrupt the body's special chemicals that help keep the brain functioning normally" (Crowley). Bulimia reflects

dissatisfaction with the body's appearance but is not the root of the problem. Among women, bulimia stems from traumatic experience. To remedy her past hurts, the spiritual therapist leads the sexual phobic victims to burn paper on which were the names of their abusers. This purgative process aids in forgetting, purifying the abusers so that the abuser does not control the mind or body of the sufferer. Atie's lapse into alcoholism is another futile attempt at forgetting her past disappointment in love with Mr. Augustin, her loneliness while bereft of Sophie, and the betrayal and loss of her best friend, Louise. Alcoholism is a vice which causes the alcohol-dependent to forget momentarily inner aches and in the process, erodes the cerebral capacity for reasoning and remember