

Womens body issues in breath, eyes, memory literature review example

[Family](#), [Mother](#)



In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the lives of several women in light of the tremendous social and cultural pressures set upon them are explored; Sophie, a young woman of Haitian descent, moves to America and back, dealing with what it means to be a Haitian woman and all the cultural baggage that comes with it. Women are given little agency in Haitian culture, and Sophie's life suffers as a result. However, she is not the only one: the patriarchal and stifling traditions of Haitian culture have dramatic effects on the outlooks of many of the women throughout the novel, particularly as it pertains to their body image. These women – Sophie, Tante Atie, Martine and Grandma Ife – face many unique challenges related to their bodies and their own perceptions of them.

Sophie, the protagonist of the novel, is in a constant battle with her inner self; her mother, her family and Haitian culture all conspire to make her feel inadequate and terrible about her womanhood at all times. She is a product of rape, and so she has a decidedly painful effect on her mother, which results in harsh treatment and harassment about her own body. One of the most traumatizing things her mother does to her is “testing,” which is when she tests the vagina to make sure that she is still a virgin. Because she is constantly violated and inspected, she is incredibly insecure about sex; it gets to the point where she has a fear of sex once she finally starts having it with her husband Joseph. Haitian culture plays a big part in this insecurity, and the practice of testing; Haitians highly value virtue and abstinence, and place a big emphasis on family values. To that end, the scrutiny that Sophie is put under as a result of these influences make her feel terrible about her body.

Sophie's body issues lead to her practicing another Haitian tradition – “doubling.” With doubling, Sophie is able to split herself in two, basically putting her mind somewhere else so she does not have to feel the guilt of the things she does. “ There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had doubled. Following in the vaudou tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives” (Danticat 155-156). She doubles when she is tested, and she doubles when she makes love with Joseph; this is her way of having to avoid physical intimacy, as she cannot handle the pressure and pain she experiences when doing these things. This behavior reinforces the Haitian culture's adoration of virtue above all else – she feels guilty about being sexual and about being violated, so she retreats elsewhere by doubling.

Tante Atie, Sophie's aunt and guardian, has quite a few things she must work through as well – she is the product of several betrayals. First, she was betrayed by her young lover Donald Augustin (who married someone else besides her after promising otherwise), and then recently her friend Louise abandoned her to move to Miami; thus, she has seen many people close to her go away. While she copes with great strength, finding the resolve to care for Sophie and Grandma Ife respectively, she starts to become more and more bitter and callous about the cards life has given her. Nonetheless, she is a great source of strength for Sophie, and manages to be loyal to everyone in her life.

Martine, Sophie's mother, is a strict, controlling woman whose issues about

her body are led primarily by her indoctrination into Haitian culture, as well as the traumatic rape that led to Sophie being born. Sophie reminds Martine every day of what happened to her, and so it is difficult to love her. She attempts to be a good mother to Sophie, while also trying to maintain a sex life with her boyfriend Marc. Martine's mother also tested her when she was a child, so she feels it necessary to do the same to Sophie. While she carries the emotional scars of her body being used and ravaged, she still loves Sophie very much. Conversely, Grandma Ife, the family matriarch, is very wise and a source of comfort for her family. She was the one who tested Martine when she was a child, thinking it to be a mother's duty and not wanting to change up cultural behaviors. To that end, she is very accepting of the treatment of women's bodies by Haitian culture, but she maintains a great deal of wisdom.

In conclusion, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* features many characters who are oppressed by cultural tradition, sexual assault, and their own anxieties about life, religion and relationships. Nonetheless, there is a powerful bond of family that runs throughout the novel as an undercurrent. Every one of these women relates to the other the way they do because they want them to be happy and good Haitian women; unfortunately, this sometimes leads to questionable and traumatic practices that do nothing but harm the woman involved.

Works Cited

Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Print.