

Mother-daughter relationship in breath, eyes, memory



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Sophie Caco, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, quotes her mother, “ There’s a difference between what a person wants and what’s good for them” (72). In Edwidge Danticat’s novel, there is conflict between what Sophie wants and what her mother, Martine, believes is good for her. While Sophie wants to live in the great realm of Providence, her mother has a specific idea of what is good for her daughter—remaining pure until marriage, being the ideal, obedient daughter, and studying to become a doctor. The narrative voice in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* conveys how Sophie wholly violates her mother’s concept of what is good for her; Sophie becomes free from Martine in order to seek her Providence because she wants to finally put behind her the anguish of her mother’s horrifying past. Martine’s horrifying past is one of the things that links her to her daughter. The ultimate impression Sophie gets of her mother before a six year time lapse in the narrative is the tragic story of how she was born. Part One ends with Martine divulging to Sophie that, “ A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body” (61). Martine and Sophie are now both linked by a rapist. Although Sophie does not say it explicitly, the narrative voice connotes that she knows deep in her heart that whenever her mother sees her she is reminded of that horror of the night she was raped, making Sophie feel more and more disconnected from her mother. This extremely important revelation which Martine explains in such a calm, mollified tone shows that Martine doesn’t want her daughter to be angry or grief-stricken; instead, she wants Sophie to learn about her past and bring her closer to her. Martine’s idea of what’s good for her, knowing about her father and Martine’s own past, conflicts with Sophie’s idea of what she wants to know. Otherwise, there would not have been a six-year gap between the time she was told of

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her mother's rape to the following scene. Martine feels it necessary to tell her daughter the importance of 'testing' because as a tradition in her family the idea of keeping the child clean and pure is of utmost priority. She explains to Sophie, "When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside...The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her daughter pure" (60-61). As Sophie's mother, Martine feels it is her duty to explain the reasoning behind testing her because it is what's good for her. Again, although Sophie does not want to have this done to her, that's not important to Martine because it needs to be done. Even her Tante Atie hated it, but it was necessary. Throughout the novel, Martine tries to fit her daughter into a perfect frame and be a certain person that Sophie tries to break away from. Although this is yet another way of bringing Sophie closer to her, Martine only pushes her away even further. When Marc asks Sophie what she wants to be, she says, "I want to do dactylo, be a secretary" (56). Martine, however, insists that, "She is too young now to know. You are going to be a doctor" (56), indicating the tension between mother and daughter. Sophie and Martine are different people with different intentions. Even though Martine wants her daughter to grow up to be a doctor, Sophie never establishes the connection in which she takes into consideration being a doctor. Martine never seems to understand Sophie because she is too wrapped up in having the ideal daughter who doesn't go astray. Without explicitly saying it, it is obvious through the narrative voice that Sophie knows what she wants—she ends up being a secretary. When Sophie returns to Haiti, Louise asks her, "What do you do in America,

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Sophie? What is your profession?" (99) to which Sophie responds, " A secretary." (99). No matter how much Martine tries, she fails to make Sophie fit into the role of the Marassas twin. Martine describes, " They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same," (84) indicating how she envisions the way she and her daughter should be. Sophie, however, never viewed herself as Martine's twin prior to this description of the Marassas. When she sees a picture of Atie, her mother, and herself in Martine's house she says, " I looked like no one in my family. Not my mother. Not my Tante Atie. I did not look like them when I was a baby and I did not look like them now" (45). Not only was she not raised by her own mother, but she didn't even look like Martine. The narrative voice conveys that Sophie is observant yet unruffled; there is no sense of emotional reaction only an objective remark, indicating that it doesn't make a difference to Sophie. When Marc takes Martine and Sophie out to dinner, Sophie once again thinks about the fact that she does not look like her mother solely by the waiter's expression. She says, " He looked at us for a long time. First me, then my mother. I wanted to tell him to stop it. There was no resemblance between us. I knew it" (55). Sophie's tone of voice conveys her irritation; by now, she has accepted the fact that she and her mother look nothing like each other. There is no changing it. Sophie violates her mother's notion of being pure because she wants to break free from Martine. She likens herself to the woman who would not stop bleeding when she says, " If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being" (87), in which Sophie herself would have to break her hymen in order to " break free" from her mother's clutches. The night that she took the pestle to bed with her, though she knew it was " not good for her hymen to tear apart like so, she had felt that " there was no

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longer any reason for me to live" (87), because her mother had been doing this horrible thing of testing her. If she could be free from her mother and her testing, she would consequently be free from her mother's past because she, too, had been tested. The pestle acts as a mechanism for Sophie to free herself from her mother. When Sophie runs away from home to elope with her boyfriend Joseph, she completely goes against what her mother wanted for her. Sophie's attempts to break free from her mother has succeeded so far, because she wants to reach that Providence that she has until now unable to attain. The second part ends with Sophie departing from her mother's house and leaving for a life with Joe, once again doing what she wants to do even though in her mother's eyes it is not what is good for her. If she lives her entire life under her mother's control she would be tortured forever by her mother's past and would never be "liberated" from it. When she had lived in Haiti, she was supported by her mother's weekly supply of money. When she arrived in America she was dependent on her mother for survival. But now, as Sophie moves on and in with Joe, she no longer needs her mother and is now closer than ever to being free from Martine. The parts are structured so that the most important milestones in the story are left hanging with enormous spaces in time. This time around two years have passed between Sophie leaving for her sense of Providence and from where the story picks up again in Haiti. This type of narrative of leaving huge chunks out of an otherwise linear chronology draws attention to the fact that Sophie's life itself is so disjoint. The story takes us suddenly from America to Haiti just as suddenly as Sophie was taken from Haiti to America after one letter and plane ticket from her mother. Sophie often feels her life is empty and especially when she was growing up without her mother for twelve

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years, an enormous part of her life was missing even though she didn't know it. She says, " It took me twelve years to piece together my mother's entire story." (61). By the time Sophie has moved out of her mother's place she believes she may be free but realizes that her mother is not. When she is with her sexual phobia group, she understands that the person who has wronged her, Martine, has been unable to be free. Sophie says, " I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too" (203). She comes to the realization that there is a reason why her mother did what she did and that in order for her to be free, her mother needs to be free from her past as well. Her mother's rape had given her nightmares that she was able to " free" her mother from, but only from the nightmares themselves, not from the reality of the rape. Sophie is devastated by the fact that her mother found her own way of escaping the reality of rape—committing suicide. For the first time her mother did what she wanted to do and Sophie desired for her to do what is good for her, going to Haiti and confronting the cane field where she was raped as the psychiatrist advised. This role-reversal shows how Sophie is still in a way so connected to her mother that she is compelled to " free" herself as well as her mother by confronting the cane field. In the final scene, she says she, " ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over." The image of the bent cane stalk reflects Sophie reclaiming her mother's power and Sophie finally achieving the freedom she so desperately sought. Sophie Caco in *Breath, Eyes Memory* not only goes on a journey to free herself from her mother, but in the process allows herself to free her mother from her mother's past. Because Martine was unable to find the Providence that

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Sophie sought, Sophie was about to put her mother's rape behind her by fighting the cane stalk in the final scene of the novel.