

The deconstruction of
opportunity: danticat's
narrative of
disempowerment in
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The narrative of disempowerment is one that is woven extensively through Edwidge Danticat's postcolonial novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Placing great emphasis on the politics of the domestic sphere and the stories told between women, the novel spans the childhood and young adulthood of Edwidge's main protagonist Sophie Caco, highlighting the ways in which Sophie experiences social and cultural limitations. What is perhaps most striking throughout the text are the ways in which Sophie is presented with a plethora of opportunity only to be consistently limited in her ability for true change. Sophie's changing familial relationships—with both her mother and her husband—in particular highlight this illusion of opportunity. Her unsuccessful movement across these relationships conveys the ways in which cultural norms entrap Sophie, as marriage—something commonly portrayed as an idealized and cherished opportunity—instead aggravates Sophie's sexual phobia, edifying her disillusionment with her own body and ultimately, her identity. Throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Danticat portrays the illusion of opportunity through her construction of Sophie's parallel relationships with both Joseph and Martine in order to explicate her disempowerment and entrapment within the constructs of ideal Haitian womanhood.

In her construction of what first appears to be an ideal opportunistic narrative, Danticat highlights Sophie's infatuation with Joseph, particularly the ways in which it stems from her desire to escape living with her mother. In Sophie's earliest encounters with Joseph, he repeatedly compliments her, declaring, "you're such a beautiful woman" (Danticat 75), only to have Sophie question back, "You think I am a woman? You are the first person

that has called me that" (Danticat 75). This repetition of " woman" denotes a change in the way Sophie is perceived—no longer a child but a woman. Thus, in this moment she is presented with the opportunity to move beyond her status as a young girl and further into adulthood, something traditionally perceived as freeing. Sophie's echoing of the term also illustrates her infatuation with the declaration, as it enables her to see herself as something she has never been referred to before, constructing a new ideal for her maturity. By outlining her potential to move from girl to woman, Joseph presents Sophie with opportunity and aspiration to occupy a more mature title of grown femininity and adulthood. This change in the way she is perceived epitomizes the opportunity that Sophie sees in being with Joseph, particularly compared to the confining relationship she maintains with her mother.

Furthermore, the employment of the diction " first" also aids in the construction of an opportunistic declaration. By utilizing this diction, Danticat is able to edify a feeling of newness and change, highlighting the opportunity Sophie sees in a relationship with Joseph. The scene of opportunity is additionally highlighted through Danticat's use of light imagery, as she writes, " we watched the morning sky lighten" (Danticat 75). Enlisting the personal pronoun " we" crafts a sense of unity between Sophie and Joseph, while the imagery of a lightening sky depicts a scene of vast opportunity in order to construct a traditionally opportunistic narrative. Thus, Sophie's initial interactions with Joseph follow the rhetoric of a traditional opportunistic narrative in order to express her desire to establish a new relationship.

However, Danticat begins to deconstruct this narrative of opportunity through the parallels she draws between Joseph and Sophie's mother, Martine. Through these characters' similarities, the reader begins to see the progression of Sophie's disempowerment as well as her disillusionment with her relationships. When speaking with her grandmother, Sophie's depiction of her relationship with Joseph is consistently paralleled to that with her mother, merging intimacy with her husband with her mother's practice of testing. The need for escape from her husband is what denotes the failed narrative of opportunity, as Sophie proclaims that leaving her husband "is just a short vacation" (Danticat 122). The image of a vacation denotes her desire for isolation and escape—a sharp dichotomy from the previous closeness she first felt with Joseph.

Furthermore, Danticat's use of negative diction to portray the failure of the marriage highlights the disintegration of opportunity. While marriage to Joseph was initially portrayed as ideal and freeing, Sophie now faces the restraints and troubles of her "marital duties" (Danticat 122). The depiction of these "duties" highlights Sophie's disdain for her role as a wife—and particularly a sexual partner—as this harsh depiction denotes feelings of responsibility and obligation rather than love. Furthermore, Sophie's description of "the night" (Danticat 122) with Joseph is lined with dark and fearful imagery. Describing to her grandmother how she "cannot perform" and her "trouble with the night," (Danticat 122) she proclaims "It is very painful for me... I have no desire. I feel like it is an evil thing to do" (Danticat 122). These projections of pain act as a physical limitation to Sophie's opportunity, as she is held back by her own husband, and even more

significantly, her own body. These restrictions on her freedom convey that while marriage appeared opportunistic, Sophie was only given an illusion, as her marriage—like her mother's previous testing—garners extensive pain and grief. The image of Sophie's sexuality as something that is inherently "evil," (Danticat 122) allows for the continuity of social ideals—particularly those surrounding womanhood—that testing conveys. By portraying and defining female value and honor as concepts dependent on purity, Sophie is restricted even within the sexuality of her own marriage by the overarching cultural limitations placed upon her through testing—a practice she was subject to long before even meeting her husband.

Perhaps what is most striking in Danticat's destruction of Sophie's perceived opportunity is the way in which she crafts continuity between her protagonist's situations with both her husband and her mother. As Sophie speaks to her grandmother tirelessly over the strains of her marriage, and its subsequent sexual obligations, she is immediately followed with a question of testing. After her declaration of the evils she affiliates with sex, her grandmother questions, "Your mother? Did she ever test you?" (Danticat 123). By immediately following a discussion of sex and intimacy with an inquiry of testing, Danticat demonstrates the ways in which this construct is so deeply intertwined with the notion of female sexuality and womanhood. The intermingling of present and past narratives through this question further demonstrates Sophie's entrapment within the circumstances of these social norms. Her grandmother begs the question about past testing as if it is intrinsically related to her current sexual behaviors, demonstrating the ways

in which these rather confining, disempowering standards stem across both time and relationships.

Sophie's relationships with both Joseph and Martine are further paralleled through her depiction of the pain testing brought her. Responding to her grandmother's inquiry, Sophie declares, " I call it humiliation" (Danticat 123). This denouncement of the practice not only epitomizes Sophie's own detest for testing but also demonstrates the ways in which it was carried out across the course of her life. Within the narrative structure, this notion of humiliation immediately follows the painful and abhorrent imagery employed to summarize sex with her husband, explicating a further similarity between the two. By placing the two instances directly next to one another, Danticat is able to draw a distinct similarity between Sophie's testing from Martine and her sexual relationship with Joseph. Thus, by highlighting the extensive similarities across the two relationships, Danticat is also able to disassemble the narrative of opportunity presented through Sophie's marriage to Joseph. While it may first appear that her marriage allows for the change and opportunity to escape Martine's testing, Sophie is in fact left entrapped and disempowered within the confines of the same circumstance—only this time with her husband instead of her mother. The parallels between Sophie's mother and husband are continued when she elaborates; " I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, even my husband" (Danticat 123). This contempt for her own body conveys the restrictions Sophie feels in her own existence; thus, it becomes clear that the ideals of chastity and purity instilled in her through the practice of testing greatly damaged Sophie's perception of herself and loom over her marriage. Furthermore, the notion of

shame demonstrates Sophie's extensive disempowerment. Despite the opportunity to end the testing and marry Joseph, Sophie is still entrapped within her own shame for her sexuality. Thus, this degenerative and shame-filled sentiment conveys Sophie's inability to move past the confines of her own—culturally influenced—sexuality, further paralleling the narratives of her relationships with Joseph and Martine and deconstructing the notion of opportunity.

Throughout the novel, the narrative of opportunity begins to fade as parallels are drawn between Sophie's relationships with both her mother and her husband. Sophie initially desires to end living with Martine—and thus end her testing—and idealizes her opportunity to wed Joseph. However, throughout the progression of her marriage, Sophie becomes disillusioned, merely finding herself in the same situation of sexual shame and humiliation. The dark and fearful imagery used to describe her sexual relationship with Joseph conveys the destruction of Sophie's opportunity, instead upholding the same abhorrent limitations she faced from her mother's testing. Thus, in the face of opportunity, Danticat conveys that Sophie is continuously entrapped within her relationships due to the long upheld notions of female sexuality and value, constructing a narrative of disempowerment—not opportunity.