Maeve Losen

Dr. Magill

World Lit. 201-50

February 20th, 2016

**Trade You This for That: An Analysis of Loss of Cultural Identity**

A common theme that plays throughout history is the idea and action of change, and the effects that follow; either beneficial or harmful to societies to varying degrees. One example of a country and culture, or more specifically, an instance of people, affected by European and American influences are those from the Haitian community. Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat (1969-) lived the experiences of the shifting Haitian culture and beliefs under the influences of Western culture first-hand, as she immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve, along with the loss of her cultural identity as a Haitian. In her novel, Krik? Krak!, Danticat illustrates the Haitian loss of cultural identity at the hands of the influences of Western culture through the point of view of a multitude of Haitian characters in her short stories.

 During one story about a young family, the son, Little Guy, excitedly recites his lines of his character in a school play based on a revolutionary figure, Boukman, of their culture’s history, and regardless of the “kind of European phrasing” of the speech, the parents, Lili and Guy, are “left...with a strange feeling that they could not explain...hearing the voice of one of the forefathers of Haitian independence,” (Danticat, 56-57). The reciting of the lines instills a sense of awe into the parents, happy that one of their nation’s hero is being recognized and his messages passed on to the younger generations to continue and learn from. This displays that, though the time of revolution has passed, the ideals and desires of that time have not, and that the people still wish to practice their traditions and culture without the authority of the French and Western nations hovering over them. However, at the same time it paints a picture of the control that European authority has over the Haitians; though the speech may contain the underlying message of Boukman, the wording has “European phrasing”, suggesting that the schools and education system are under the charge of Europeans, or, at least, those like Europeans. This control acts a way to force Western ideals into children at a young age, suffocating them of the chance to learn more about their native cultures, and even depicting their own heroes with a more European allure.

In another, Danticat paints a story of a Haitian schoolgirl, an artist, and the discovery of the world through the eyes of art. The girl, Princesse, attempts to speak to the artist, Catherine in a way that makes sure to call “upon her phonetics lessons in order to sound less native and more French,” (Danticat, 128). This suggests that within Haitian society and education, the French influence the native peoples’ vernacular and accents to mirror those of European descent in order to seem more socially acceptable or of higher social standing.

During the painting’s sitting, Catherine comments on the beauty of Princesse’s body, to which the girl believes that “There was nothing so beautiful about her body...She had a body like all the others who lived here…” (Danticat, 130). When she thinks about her physical beauty and compares her own to others, she uses the word “here”, implying that Haitian beauty and attractiveness in much of her culture is seen as abnormal and less appealing than those of the French, once again adding a sense of inferiority in a certain characteristic that the native people cannot help. This notion can also be supported when Catherine mentions that “They say black absorbs all color. It blots and consumes it and gives us nothing back, (Danticat, 134); it can be assumed that “They” refers to the French who live in Haiti and other Western cultures, and that “black” is the color of Haitian natives’ skin, meaning that they lack to find beauty in the Haitian people, and those like them, thus warping those like Princesse that she should never believe that she is beautiful, nor take pride in the physical aspects of her people that she inherited.

However, Catherine contradicts this idea, explaining “That’s wrong...black skin gives so much to the canvas…” where she reassures that Haitian physical characteristics are just as beautiful as any other. She then asks Princesse “Do you ever think of how we change things and how they change us?”, to which she answers herself that “Perhaps the smaller things--like human beings...can also change and affect the bigger things in the universe,” (Danticat, 134). Catherine’s statement depicts the knowledge and understanding of the lack of appreciation for Haitian culture and its people. Catherine recognizes the shift in beliefs that the Haitian natives are forced to follow in order to be seen as acceptable and ‘refined’ in the European nature, skewing the ideals and culture that had been followed for generations, leading to abrupt and uncomfortable changes. In a way, Catherine represents an outlet to ‘show-off’ the beauty of the Haitian people, and to assure them that attractiveness comes in different forms, meaning people don’t have to follow Western ideals of style, and are allowed to follow their traditions.

Within one of the final stories in the novel, the reader learns about a family, made up of a widow and two adult daughters, and their lives stuck between two cultures and two countries. While the youngest daughter, Caroline, prepares to wed, the mother is torn between her native and American traditions and cultures. At one point, the narrator describes the reason for her mother’s dislike towards Caroline’s fiance, saying that “Ma wanted Eric to officially come and ask her permission to marry her daughter...Ma wanted a full-blown church wedding. She wanted Eric to be Haitian,” (Danticat, 169). Ma follows the ideals that she grew up with, while her daughters are torn between wanting the ‘American dream’ and ideals, and holding onto some semblance of their family’s past, regardless of living in America and being forced to adapt to what is considered the socially acceptable culture. The struggle between mother and daughter demonstrates the struggle or clash of culture, one holding onto Haitian beliefs and wanting to share it with her daughters’ futures, while the other desires to let go and accept the circumstances that times change and so must she in order to fit in, picking and choosing what to forget and embrace. To a degree, the mother represents the form of Haitian culture that is forced to let go of certain traditions and change to fit Western ideals, but at the same time, the strength to hold onto the past and continue with it, but to allow the new ideas and culture into her life as well, acting as a ‘hybrid’ character.

To a degree, each character in each short story face a loss of something, whether it’s physical, like a person or a homeland, or lose something more metaphorical, such as a thought or emotion; however, nearly all characters deal with the deficit of their Haitian cultural identity that’s taken away by social and authoritative forces. Throughout this novel, Edwidge Danticat demonstrates this loss in numerous situations that test her characters’ strength to hold on to their cultural traditions. In short, the stories act as a testament to the struggle to hold on to past traditions while under the influences of other forces, to be compelled to think and act and believe the same things as those of Western culture, but gaining the ability to maintain the practices of the two separate cultures in tandem.

**Works Cited:**

 Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!* New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1996. Print.