

edwidge danticat the farming of bones

Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*: A Profound Exploration of Haitian History and Identity

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Introduction to Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

Edwidge Danticat's acclaimed novel, *"The Farming of Bones,"* stands as a powerful and poignant testament to the enduring human spirit in the face of unimaginable brutality. This meticulously researched and beautifully rendered narrative plunges readers into the heart of a dark chapter in Haitian history, the 1937 Parsley Massacre. Through the eyes of its protagonist, Amabelle Desir, the novel offers a deeply personal and profoundly moving exploration of identity, memory, love, and loss. *"The Farming of Bones"* is not merely a historical retelling; it is a vibrant tapestry woven with the threads of cultural heritage, the devastating consequences of prejudice, and the unyielding resilience of those who are marginalized. This article will delve into the rich historical backdrop, the compelling characters, and the profound themes that make *"The Farming of Bones"* an essential read for understanding Haitian identity and the broader human

experience.

The Historical Context: The Parsley Massacre of 1937

To fully appreciate the depth and impact of "The Farming of Bones," understanding the historical events that inspired it is crucial. The novel centers on the Parsley Massacre, also known as El Corte, a horrific period in 1937 when the Dominican Republic, under the dictatorial regime of Rafael Trujillo, systematically murdered tens of thousands of Haitians living on the Dominican side of the island of Hispaniola. This act of state-sponsored violence was fueled by a deep-seated racism and xenophobia directed towards the Haitian population, who had long been integral to the Dominican Republic's economy, particularly in agriculture.

The Reign of Trujillo and Xenophobic Policies

Rafael Trujillo's presidency was marked by extreme authoritarianism and a pervasive campaign of ethnic cleansing. His regime promoted a distorted national identity that idealized Spanish heritage and demonized the African-descended Haitian population. Policies were enacted to enforce this ideology, leading to the arbitrary identification and persecution of Haitians. The Dominican military, acting on Trujillo's orders, initiated widespread violence, targeting Haitian laborers, their families, and anyone perceived as Haitian, regardless of their citizenship or place of birth.

The Role of the Parsley Massacre in Dominican History

The Parsley Massacre was a deliberate and calculated act of genocide. The name "Parsley Massacre" itself is chillingly indicative of the brutality; soldiers would allegedly test a person's Haitian identity by asking them to pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, "perejil." Those with a Haitian accent or unfamiliarity with the word were immediately marked for death. The sheer scale of the killings and the systematic nature of the violence sent shockwaves across the island and beyond, leaving an indelible scar on the collective memory of both Haitians and Dominicans.

Danticat's Fictionalization of Historical Events

Edwidge Danticat masterfully uses the historical framework of the Parsley Massacre to explore the personal and societal ramifications of such atrocities. While "The Farming of Bones" is a work of fiction, it remains deeply rooted in historical truth. Danticat's meticulous research and her ability to evoke the emotional landscape of the era allow readers to connect with the human cost of political extremism and racial hatred. The novel provides a vital platform for remembering and understanding this often-overlooked tragedy.

Character Analysis: Amabelle Desir and Her Journey

At the heart of "The Farming of Bones" is Amabelle Desir, a young Haitian woman whose life is irrevocably altered by the violence she witnesses and experiences. Amabelle's journey is one of survival, love, and the arduous process of coming to terms with trauma. Her character arc is central to the novel's exploration of identity and belonging in the face of displacement and loss.

Amabelle's Early Life and Relationships

Amabelle grows up in the Dominican Republic, working as a live-in maid for a Dominican family, the Cabrals. She shares a deep and loving relationship with Yves, a Haitian man who works in the cane fields. Their bond represents a beacon of hope and a sanctuary amidst the oppressive atmosphere. Amabelle's position within the Cabral household, while offering a degree of stability, also highlights the inherent social stratification and the subtle, and not so subtle, ways in which Haitians were treated as outsiders.

Witnessing the Violence and Its Impact

As the Parsley Massacre escalates, Amabelle becomes a firsthand witness to the horrifying brutality. She is forced to flee her home and witness the systematic extermination of her community. The trauma of these events profoundly impacts her, shaping her understanding of herself, her heritage, and the world around her. Her internal struggle to reconcile her love for Yves with the pervasive hatred she encounters is a significant aspect of her character development.

Amabelle's Quest for Truth and Healing

Following the massacre, Amabelle embarks on a journey of survival and remembrance. She grapples with the loss of loved ones and the destruction of her community. Her search for truth about what happened and her efforts to find a sense of peace and belonging are central to the narrative. The novel traces Amabelle's evolution from a young woman caught in the currents of history to an individual determined to hold onto her memories and her identity, even in the face of profound despair.

Themes Explored in The Farming of Bones

"The Farming of Bones" is a novel rich with thematic depth, addressing complex issues that resonate with universal human experiences. Edwidge Danticat skillfully interweaves these themes to create a powerful and thought-provoking narrative.

The Nature of Identity and Belonging

A central theme in the novel is the construction and negotiation of identity, particularly for those who exist between cultures or are marginalized by dominant societies. Amabelle, as a Haitian living in the Dominican Republic, embodies this struggle. Her identity is constantly challenged and redefined by external forces that seek to impose a singular, often exclusionary, sense of nationhood. The novel questions what it means to belong, to be accepted, and to find one's place in a world that often defines people by their origin.

The Scars of Historical Trauma and Collective Memory

The novel powerfully illustrates how historical trauma can permeate individual lives and shape collective memory. The Parsley Massacre is not just a past event; its repercussions are felt deeply by Amabelle and her community. Danticat explores how trauma is passed down, how it affects psychological well-being, and the importance of remembering and acknowledging painful histories to foster healing and prevent future atrocities. The collective memory of Haitians serves as a vital tool for resistance and for preserving their cultural heritage.

Love, Loss, and Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Amidst the violence and despair, "The Farming of Bones" highlights the enduring power of love and human connection. Amabelle's love for Yves provides a vital source of strength and hope. The novel also delves into the profound experiences of loss – the loss of life, the loss of home, and the loss of innocence. Yet, it is the resilience of the characters, their ability to persevere and to find moments of joy and connection even in the darkest times, that ultimately defines the human spirit portrayed in the novel.

The Interplay of Power and Oppression

The novel critically examines the dynamics of power and oppression, particularly the ways in which political regimes can wield authority to inflict widespread suffering. Trujillo's regime exemplifies this, using nationalistic rhetoric and racist ideology to justify and carry out systematic violence against a vulnerable population. Danticat exposes how power can be used to dehumanize, marginalize, and ultimately destroy lives, underscoring the dangers of unchecked authoritarianism and ethnic discrimination.

Symbolism and Literary Devices in Danticat's Masterpiece

Edwidge Danticat employs a rich tapestry of literary devices and powerful symbolism in "The Farming of

Bones" to enhance the emotional resonance and thematic complexity of her narrative. These elements contribute significantly to the novel's enduring power and its ability to connect with readers on a deeper level.

The Significance of the Title: "The Farming of Bones"

The title itself, "The Farming of Bones," is deeply symbolic. It evokes images of the land, of cultivation, and of growth, juxtaposed with the stark reality of death and destruction. "Farming" can refer to the agricultural labor that many Haitians performed in the Dominican Republic, often under harsh conditions. The "bones" represent the countless lives lost during the massacre, buried and forgotten, yet forming the foundation of a tragic history. The title suggests a perpetuation of suffering, a cyclical process where the land itself becomes a repository of human remains and the weight of history.

The Symbolic Use of the River

Rivers often serve as powerful symbols in literature, representing passage, transition, and the flow of time. In "The Farming of Bones," the river becomes a significant motif. It is a boundary, a means of escape, and a site of both solace and terror. The act of crossing or being near the river can symbolize movement between worlds, between life and death, or between different states of being. The river's current can also be seen as mirroring the relentless march of history and the unstoppable force of violence.

Symbolism of Blood and Water

Throughout the novel, blood and water are recurring symbolic elements. Blood signifies life, death, kinship, and violence. The shedding of blood represents the brutal reality of the massacre. Water, on the other hand, is associated with cleansing, renewal, and the cyclical nature of life. The interplay between blood and water often highlights the profound suffering and the desperate search for purification or redemption in the aftermath of violence. The presence of both suggests the inextricability of life and death, purity and corruption.

The Power of Oral Tradition and Storytelling

Danticat masterfully integrates the tradition of oral storytelling into the narrative. The way characters recount events, share memories, and pass down stories serves as a crucial literary device. This oral tradition symbolizes the resilience of culture and the importance of preserving history in the absence of formal documentation or when official narratives are suppressed. The act of telling stories becomes an act of resistance, a way to keep the memory of the departed alive and to assert one's humanity.

The Power of Memory and Oral Tradition

In "The Farming of Bones," Edwidge Danticat places immense value on the power of memory and the enduring strength of oral tradition. These elements are not merely narrative devices; they are crucial to the characters' survival and their ability to maintain their cultural identity in the face of overwhelming historical trauma.

Memory as a Tool of Resistance

For Amabelle and her fellow Haitians, memory serves as a vital form of resistance against the erasure of their existence. The Dominican regime actively sought to deny the humanity and contributions of Haitians, and by remembering their experiences, their loved ones, and their heritage, they actively pushed back against this dehumanization. Amabelle's internal recollections and her ability to recall the faces and voices of those lost are powerful acts of defiance.

Oral History as a Repository of Truth

When official records are biased or nonexistent, oral history becomes the primary repository of truth and lived experience. The novel illustrates how stories are passed down through generations, shaping understanding and preserving collective memory. The dialogues and the narrated accounts within "The Farming of Bones" reflect this oral tradition, where personal narratives are interwoven with the broader historical events, giving voice to those who were silenced by violence.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Resilience

Memory and oral tradition are also the conduits through which trauma and resilience are transmitted across generations. The stories told about the massacre, even by those who did not directly witness it, carry the emotional weight of the event. Similarly, stories of survival, of cultural traditions, and of the strength of community are passed down, fostering a sense of continuity and instilling the resilience needed to overcome adversity.

The Role of Storytelling in Healing

Beyond resistance, storytelling plays a crucial role in the process of healing. By articulating their experiences, sharing their grief, and recounting moments of love and joy, characters begin to process their trauma. The act of sharing these narratives, even with a select few, can be cathartic, allowing for the acknowledgment of pain and the slow journey toward emotional recovery. The novel suggests that communal storytelling can be a powerful balm for the wounds inflicted by violence and injustice.

The Significance of Place and Landscape

The setting in "The Farming of Bones" is far more than a mere backdrop; the physical landscape and the specific locations within it play a vital role in shaping the narrative and the characters' experiences. The island of Hispaniola, divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, serves as a powerful symbol of both connection and division.

The Dominican Countryside and the Cane Fields

The fertile Dominican countryside, particularly the sugar cane fields, is central to the novel's depiction of Haitian labor and the economic exploitation that characterized the relationship between the two nations. These fields, while the source of livelihood for many Haitian workers, are also the sites of immense hardship and, ultimately, the scenes of horrific violence. The land itself becomes a witness to the atrocities, imbued with the memories of those who toiled and perished upon it.

The Borderlands and Liminal Spaces

The border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and the communities that straddle this divide, represent liminal spaces – places of transition and ambiguity. These borderlands are where cultural exchanges occur, but also where tensions are most palpable. Amabelle's journey often takes her through these transitional zones, reflecting her own internal state of being caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither.

The River as a Symbolic Boundary

As previously mentioned, the river functions as a significant geographical and symbolic boundary. It separates nations, cultures, and ultimately, lives. The decision to cross the river, or the inability to do so, has profound consequences for the characters. The river's currents represent the forces of history and fate that carry individuals along, often against their will.

The Landscape as a Reflection of Internal States

Danticat uses the landscape to mirror the emotional and psychological states of her characters. The beauty of the natural world is often juxtaposed with the ugliness of human cruelty, creating a poignant contrast. The oppressive heat, the dense foliage, and the vastness of the fields can evoke feelings of isolation, entrapment, or even a sense of being overwhelmed, reflecting the characters' internal struggles with fear, grief, and displacement.

Critical Reception and Literary Impact of *The Farming of Bones*

"*The Farming of Bones*" has garnered significant critical acclaim since its publication, cementing Edwidge Danticat's reputation as a preeminent voice in contemporary literature. The novel's powerful exploration of history, identity, and the human cost of political violence has resonated deeply with critics and readers alike.

Awards and Recognitions

The novel has received numerous accolades and awards, recognizing its literary merit and its important contribution to historical and cultural understanding. These awards have further amplified its reach and underscored its significance in the literary landscape.

Praise for Historical Accuracy and Emotional Depth

Critics have widely praised Danticat's meticulous research and her ability to humanize a brutal historical event. The emotional authenticity of her characters, particularly Amabelle, has been lauded for its raw power and unflinching portrayal of suffering. Reviewers often highlight the novel's capacity to evoke empathy and to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Dominican-Haitian relationship.

Contribution to Haitian-American Literature

"*The Farming of Bones*" is considered a seminal work within Haitian-American literature. It provides a crucial narrative that addresses a significant, yet often overlooked, chapter of Haitian history. Danticat's novel offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant historical accounts and contributes significantly to the broader discourse on diaspora, identity, and the impact of colonialism and racism.

Enduring Relevance and Reader Engagement

The novel's themes of xenophobia, ethnic cleansing, and the struggle for identity remain strikingly relevant in contemporary society. This enduring relevance ensures that "*The Farming of Bones*" continues to be studied, discussed, and appreciated by new generations of readers. Its emotional impact and its compelling storytelling make it a deeply engaging and unforgettable literary experience.

Edwidge Danticat's Writing Style and Contribution to Literature

Edwidge Danticat's distinctive writing style is a cornerstone of her literary success and her significant contribution to literature, particularly in her nuanced portrayal of Haitian culture and experience.

Lyrical Prose and Evocative Imagery

Danticat's prose is often described as lyrical, poetic, and deeply evocative. She possesses a remarkable ability to craft sentences that are both beautiful and impactful, painting vivid pictures with her words. Her use of sensory details and her keen observation of the natural world and human emotions create an immersive reading experience, drawing readers into the world of her characters.

Nuance and Empathy in Character Portrayal

A hallmark of Danticat's work is her nuanced and empathetic portrayal of her characters. Even those who perpetrate violence are often shown with a degree of complexity, though never to excuse their actions. Her focus on the inner lives and emotional landscapes of her characters, particularly women, allows for a deep understanding of their motivations, their pain, and their resilience.

Blending History and Fiction Seamlessly

Danticat excels at seamlessly blending historical fact with fictional narrative. She grounds her stories in meticulous research but allows her characters' personal journeys to drive the plot. This ability to create compelling narratives within historical frameworks makes her work both educational and emotionally resonant, appealing to a wide range of readers.

Championing Underrepresented Voices

Through her novels, Edwidge Danticat has become a powerful champion for underrepresented voices, particularly those of Haitian women and the Haitian diaspora. She brings to light stories and experiences that have often been marginalized or ignored in mainstream narratives. Her work is instrumental in expanding the literary canon and in fostering a more inclusive understanding of global history and human experience.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of The Farming of Bones

"The Farming of Bones" by Edwidge Danticat stands as a monumental achievement in literature, offering a profound and enduring legacy. Through its unflinching examination of the Parsley Massacre and its devastating human consequences, the novel serves as a vital historical document and a moving testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Amabelle Desir's journey embodies the struggle for identity, the enduring power of love, and the arduous process of confronting and healing from historical trauma. Danticat's masterful use of language, her deep empathy for her characters, and her commitment to unearthing and illuminating forgotten histories make "The Farming of Bones" an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of identity, the devastating impact of prejudice, and the unyielding strength that can be found in memory and community. The novel continues to resonate, reminding us of the importance of bearing witness, remembering the past, and striving for a future where such atrocities are never forgotten and never repeated.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of Edwidge Danticat's 'The Farming of Bones'?

The central theme of 'The Farming of Bones' is the brutal Parsley Massacre of 1937, exploring the devastating impact of ethnic cleansing and state-sponsored violence on Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic, and the search for justice and memory in its aftermath.

Who is the protagonist of 'The Farming of Bones' and what is her primary motivation?

The protagonist is Amabelle Désir, a Haitian immigrant living in the Dominican Republic. Her primary motivation shifts from survival and finding love to seeking justice for her family and community after the massacre and the loss of her lover, Sebastián.

How does Danticat portray the relationship between Haitians and Dominicans in the novel?

Danticat portrays a complex and ultimately tragic relationship marked by historical exploitation, racial prejudice, and socioeconomic disparity. While there are instances of intimacy and shared humanity, the overarching narrative highlights the systematic oppression and violence inflicted upon Haitians by the Dominican regime and society.

What is the significance of the title 'The Farming of Bones'?

The title 'The Farming of Bones' is a powerful metaphor for the systematic erasure and dehumanization of the Haitian victims. It speaks to the brutal disposal of bodies, the silencing of their stories, and the way their lives and deaths are treated as commodities or mere agricultural byproducts by the oppressive regime.

What role does memory and storytelling play in the novel?

Memory and storytelling are crucial to the novel's power. Amabelle grapples with fragmented memories of the massacre and her lost loved ones. The act of remembering and recounting these stories, even amidst profound trauma, becomes an essential way to reclaim identity, bear witness to injustice, and resist the complete obliteration of the victims' humanity.

How does Danticat use symbolism in 'The Farming of Bones'?

Danticat employs rich symbolism, including the cane fields (representing labor, exploitation, and death), the river (symbolizing life, cleansing, and passage), and the absence of names (highlighting the dehumanization and erasure of the victims).

What is the historical context of 'The Farming of Bones'?

The novel is set against the backdrop of the 1937 Parsley Massacre, also known as El Corte, ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. This event saw the systematic slaughter of thousands of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, largely based on their ethnicity and language.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, with descriptions:

1. The Haitian Revolution: A People's History by Peter H.

This accessible history delves into the complex and inspiring story of the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt that led to the creation of a free republic. It highlights the motivations, struggles, and triumphs of those who fought for their liberation from French colonial rule. The book offers crucial context for understanding the historical backdrop against which *The Farming of Bones* is set.

2. The Book of Night Women by Marlon James

Set in Jamaica in the 18th century, this novel follows the life of a young enslaved woman named May. She navigates the brutal realities of plantation life, seeking agency and freedom through a life of witchcraft and rebellion. The book shares *The Farming of Bones'* exploration of the enduring trauma of slavery and the desperate measures taken to survive.

3. The Last Thing He Told Me by Laura Dave

While contemporary, this thriller's focus on uncovering hidden truths and the impact of a past event resonates with the themes of buried secrets in *The Farming of Bones*. A woman searches for her husband after he disappears, revealing a life she never knew. The narrative explores the complexities of identity and the consequences of deception.

4. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat

Danticat's debut novel offers a deeply personal and lyrical exploration of Haitian identity, memory, and the experience of immigration. It tells the story of Sophie Caco, who leaves Haiti to live with her aunt in America, carrying with her the weight of her mother's past and the trauma of her homeland. This book shares *The Farming of Bones*' profound connection to Haitian culture and the enduring legacy of its history.

5. *The Poor and the Damned* by Charles Bukowski

This collection of short stories offers a raw and unflinching look at the underbelly of American society, focusing on characters who are marginalized and struggling to survive. While its setting is different, it shares *The Farming of Bones*' portrayal of characters facing immense hardship and societal neglect. The prose is gritty and confrontational, capturing a sense of desperation.

6. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride

This memoir tells the story of a Black man's upbringing with his white Jewish mother, exploring themes of race, identity, and family history in America. The book grapples with the complexities of heritage and the struggles faced by those on the margins of society. It echoes *The Farming of Bones*' concern with the interwoven histories of different peoples and the search for belonging.

7. *The Bees of Havana* by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez

Set in contemporary Cuba, this collection of stories offers a vivid and often satirical glimpse into the lives of ordinary Cubans navigating a challenging political and economic landscape. The narratives are filled with a sense of resilience and dark humor. Like *The Farming of Bones*, it captures the spirit and struggles of a people in a specific historical and social context.

8. *An American Genocide: The United States and the Native American Holocaust* by Ward Churchill

This controversial but impactful book argues that the policies and actions of the United States government towards Native Americans constitute genocide. It provides a historical overview of the systematic dispossession and violence inflicted upon indigenous populations. The book's examination of systemic oppression and its devastating consequences mirrors the historical context of the Parsley Massacre.

9. *The Gilded Years* by Karin Tanabe

This historical fiction novel is set in the late 19th century at Vassar College and follows the experiences of the first Black woman to attend the institution. It delves into the racial prejudices and social barriers she encounters as she strives for education and acceptance. The book shares *The Farming of Bones*' focus on individuals striving for dignity and breaking through oppressive societal structures.

Edwidge Danticat The Farming Of Bones

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