

## **HAITIAN CREOLE POETRY, *Open Gate*, 1-30**

### **Reading poetry and interpreting it.**

- Read your poem to your *new* partner. Choose a reader.
- Develop a short, 2 minute summary of the poem.
- What is it about? What are key ideas and terms in the poem?
- Does the poem rhyme (in Haitian Creole?)
- Does the poem express ideological positions or influences?
- How does the poem *open a gate* to understanding Haiti?
- What is the structure of the poem?

### **Morisseau-Leroy**

1. Shooshoon
2. Zonbies
3. Down with all candidates
4. Sometimes I'm not myself
5. Testament

### **Fouché**

6. What did they think they did?

### **Innocent**

7. The poor man's life

### **Laraque**

8. Rainbow
9. Exile is stale bread
10. Madigra

### **A few terms about poetry...**

Blank verse is a type of poetry, distinguished by having a regular meter, but no rhyme. In English, the meter most commonly used with blank verse has been iambic pentameter.

The units of poetic meter, like rhyme, vary from language to language and between poetic traditions. They can involve arrangements of syllables into repeated patterns called feet within a line. English meter is traditionally conceived as being founded on the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Free verse (also at times referred to as *vers libre*) is a term describing various styles of poetry that are not written using strict meter or rhyme, but that still are recognizable as poetry by virtue of complex patterns of one sort or another that readers will perceive to be part of a coherent whole.

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### **Open Gate, 30-60. Questions for discussion.**

1. Describe Kastera's view of death in *I have a comrade* (31) & *Cemetery gate* (33).
2. What are some of the primal or basic poetic images of Haiti given by Kastera in *Zilch mouvement* (35)?
3. What type of social movements are called for in *Both yesterday and today* (37-39)?
4. In *A 16 year-old girl who's standing*, why do you think she is standing?
5. In *A Clay Pot Broken* why does the author curse Christopher Columbus, Apollo 13, Pétionville and automobiles? (49)
6. In *Haiti Tomorrow*, what is the tone? What elements are identified for Haiti's progress? (51)
7. How does the poem *Hooker* treat the matter of prostitution? (53)
8. What are Haitian attitudes toward prostitution? What about your attitudes?
9. What is a *vyewo/viejo*? (57)
10. What themes are addressed in this poem?

## Open Gate pages 60 – 90

1. Women of my country
2. Zombie
3. They're leaving with a bridle around the neck
4. With your assigned poem and friend
5. Speech/Caribbean Islands
6. Woman
7. Wongòl
8. Liberty

1. Determine the type of poem
  - i. How is it organized and structured?
  - ii. Is there rhyme? As far as you can tell, is there meter?  
(e.g. patterns in the syllables within lines).
2. What is the message of the poem?
3. What metaphors are used in the poem?
4. Are the images obvious or obscure?
5. Why use one or the other?
6. Are there references that are unique to Haiti and Haitian Creole?
7. As the reader, what insight, if any, can we gain into Haiti?
8. What is your favorite line or verse? Why?

**HAT 3503, Haitian Literature. Identify the poem/author with the extracts given below [2 pts each].**

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Coumbite/Hilario Batista Felix

Zombies arise/Alexander Akao

Refugees/Patrick Sylvain

I'm rooted/René Philoctete

Georgina/Cauvin L. Paul

Tenebrae/Suze Baron

Snowcone Vendor/Josaphat Robert Large

A Philosophy/Jean R. Désiré

The poet/Clotaire Saint-Natus

The walls of bois-de-chene shacks/Carlo Résil

1.

At Krome Concentration Camp in Miami  
they sit and wait looking ahead”

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2.  
“Atop a pile of stinking trash  
They see a dead body laughing  
They’re laughing over that as well  
So they don’t end up losing a taste for life”

---

3.  
“They knocked  
nonstop  
they knocked until  
the Good God  
above  
heard them”

---

4.  
“The cart was circulating under the moon  
turning rolling rushing through Post Marchand streets”

---

5.  
“But this morning I wake up  
With salt on my tongue”

---

6.  
“I’m tired on sing hymns  
Tired of burying the dead  
All the ribs of Haiti are showing  
From cutting trees to make coffins...”

---

7.  
“Altagrace  
in a whirling dance  
seeking life, wow!  
her toe-kick gets stuck in  
the eye of Brigitte Bardot”

---

8.  
“Still I stay  
because there’s a tree I love on the road to Grand’ Anse

---

9.  
“Two whaps on the Assotor  
to spread the news to the 4 corners  
of the world”

---

10. “We’re going to create a collective  
I’d love for all of us to go to”

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## Open Gate, 90-125

### Questions for pair work & discussion

1. What are the themes in “Wongòl Poem” (91)?
2. Who are the people addressed in “I’m writing a poem” (97). Why address a poem to these people?
3. In “Changes,” what is meant by the *boujwazi reyaksyonnè*, “the reactionary bourgeoisie? What is the poet’s goal?
4. What kind of philosophy is expressed in “A philosophy” (113). What do you think of cripples’ philosophy? Does the poem rhyme? How?
5. In the poem “Dream”, what *is* the dream?
6. What is “Snowcone vendor” *really* about? (119) What are some of the aspects of Haitian culture reflected in the poem?

### Interpret the following lines of poetry:

“Lightning streaks and passes  
Weapons are drawn and fired  
Ancestors rise and stand up  
A ruckus breaks out at Ayida’s...” (Eugene 91)

“...with a revolutionary society  
where all will be united as one.” (Wainwright 103)

“For a piece of democracy (107 Dede)  
Washington is teasing Haiti  
How stingy Washington is, papa!

...It's the big name kills the little doggy  
servant of Washington..."

### **Ethnic Haitian Literature**

See Arthur & Dash, 1999, 289-293

Boisrond Tonnerre, 1804

### **Early 19<sup>th</sup> century preoccupations**

Historic defeat of Napoleon's army

Nationhood

Haiti's redemptive mission

Haiti's literature as **light** in context of  
French barbarity and primitivism

Oswald Durand, *Choucoune*, 1880 (early Creole poetry)

Late 19<sup>th</sup> century

Realistic depictions, see Frédéric Marcelin

Political prose, see Antoine Innocent

### **Early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

*La Ronde*, literary group that criticizes celebratory, nationalistic verse

Haiti's political instability from 1910-1915 (i.e. 7 presidents)

Neo-colonial nature of U.S. Occupation

New wave of nationalism



1929 strikes at the School of Agriculture  
*Indigenisme* in the 1920s;  
*La Trouée, La revue indigène*

### 1930s and 1940s

*Noirisme* = belief in the essential Africanness of Haiti's national identity.  
Louis Diaquoi, Lorimer Denis, François Duvalier  
*Les Griots* = black nationalism, Vodou mysticism

Communism: Roumain's "visionary marxism"

The new community built on archaic culture, the divisive past  
Rewriting the peasant novel

Political ascendancy of *noirisme* (see also *négritude*)

Dissident writers:

Jacques Stéphane Alexis = killed by Tonton Macoutes

René Depestre = national poetics *not* racial poetics; lived in exile

Duvalierism: xenophobia, racial mystification, militarism and authoritarianism as  
an extreme Haitian *négritude*.

*Oeuvres essentielles*, François Duvalier

*Spiralisme*, Franketienne

Radical formal experimentation

Never overtly political, avoided censorship

*Dezafi* (1975)

Critiques of dictatorship

Depestre, *Festival of the Greasy Pole*

Marie Chauvet, *Love, Anger, Madness*

Emergence of a supra-national sense of identity in the diaspora.

Dany Lafférière *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985)

Questioning of the pieties of Haitian nationalism

The blind parochialism of cultural authenticity

Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)

***Open Gate, 180 - 219***

1. Kout poud desounen ~ Zaps of zombifying powder

Who is the *they* in this poem?

2. What does Gary Daniel mean when he says:

“Makes me sad seeing  
Bouki and Malis lost  
In the house of Donald Duck” (191)

3. Explain:

“With the Creole garden cursed  
Under the bower of the zobop jinxes” (193)

4. Explain, interpret:

“White men create a black calvary,  
Our hands on our jaws  
Because of the dictators” (195)

“Graft those tiny buds  
Of knowledge, to make  
Tomorrow glow with victory.”

*Open Gate*, 202-219

1. How does *Spring* by Simidor (203) stick out from the other poems?

What do these lines make you think about?

2. The title of the poem “Slippery Ground” makes reference to what?

Explain these stanzas....

3. What has power over “demons” in the poem “Autozobop” on p. 211?

6. What sentiment is expressed in “We pass through a foreigner’s house” (215)? What does the “the dove” symbolize? Is it effective? Convincing? Is the poem xenophobic (fear/hate of foreigners?)

7. How does Ms. Boadiba represent women in power in “Madam President”

“For my birthday I want...  
...and windmills  
And the sun’s kilowatts...” (217)

## *Open Gate*

1. Discuss the issue of LIBERATION from the poem *Coumbite*. Who gets liberation? Is the concept of LIBERATION broad enough?

“...come with portraits of Jesus Christ, Bolívar, Toussaint and Martí, Dessalines and Ché.  
Because in this coumbite we’re going to finish,  
finish the task of LIBERATION...”

Whether you’re white or black  
Woman or man...

What about controversial LIBERATION issues such as gay rights or gay marriage? Does the Haitian understanding of LIBERATION exclude this human rights issue?

2. Interpret *How*:

“...How could young men and women  
full of hope in the future  
produce fake tin-cans  
rubber trash bags and dolls of kings  
in a military cap factory in Brooklyn?”

3. What are the three main themes of the poem *How*?

4. The poem *Go There* wants us to go *where*?

5. Select a favorite poem and tell you partner why you like it. Be ready to share your ideas with the class.

6. What words would you use to describe the Haitian Creole poetry in *Open Gates*. Can you find any descriptors that capture common themes/concerns?

7. Why do you suppose Haiti has not yet produced epic poetry when it has an epic history and epic heroes?

## *The Dew Breaker*, “The Book of the Dead”

1. What are some of the ethnic groups in this story? Why is the author so attentive to race? accent? culture?
2. The narrator, born in Flatbush, NYC, says she’s from Haiti... why?
3. Who is the narrator? What kind of woman? Her habits?
4. Who is the narrator’s father? Why does she lack photos of him?
5. Who is Garbrielle Fonteneau?
6. How does the Cuban cleaning worker remind the narrator of her mother?
7. What aspect of Egyptian culture obsesses the narrator’s father?
8. What happened to the narrator’s sculpture?
9. Explain, “Ordinary anger is useless.” (p. 16)
10. Explain the link between the Egyptian concept *ka* and the Haitian concept of *ti bonnanj*.
11. What painful story has Ka’s father been hiding from his children?
12. Explain: “...Like all parents, they were a society of two, sharing a series of private codes and associations, a past that even if I’d been born in the country of their birth, I still wouldn’t have known...thoroughly” (25)
13. Describe how things go with the Fonteneau family.
14. Why would the “unfamiliar” of the U.S. be so comforting to Ka’s father?
15. Explain: “Why are his wife and daughter “his kas, his good angels, his masks against his own face.”
16. How is this story different from *Open Gates* or *Masters of the Dew*?

Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, “Seven”

1. What is the importance of the number 7 in this story and in folklore, religion and numerology?
2. Describe *his* living arrangements.
3. Who is his landlady? What kind of a relationship does he have with her? What kind of social class/race discourse emerges on page 37?
4. How does he get his roommates ready for his wife’s arrival? What kind of things does he do/change to prepare for her arrival?
5. Who is Abner Louima?
6. What are his two jobs? How many hours does he work at both? And what is the significance of this?
7. What happens to his wife at the airport in NYC?
8. What is the meaning of his wife’s trimmed chicken feathers?
9. Did he and his wife enjoy a long marriage before his departure for the U.S.?
10. What were his strategies for staying in the U.S.?
11. Why does Danticat tell us the ethnicity of his grocer? What is it?
12. Who is Patrick Dorismond?
13. Where will his wife have to work? Why? (p. 46)
14. Explain their mutual infidelities after he left for NYC.
15. What does Carnival have to do with this story?
16. Explain: “...a temporary silence, unlike the one that had come over them now” (52).

## Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, “Water Child”

1. What is the place of the epistolary segments in this story?
2. Who is Nadine? Where does she work? What are some of the departments nearby?
3. What is the underlying pain that Nadine is dealing with?
4. What are some examples of Creole in her speech? Why does she pepper her English with Creole? Do you know anyone who does this?
5. What early indications does the author give us about the mental instability of the protagonist, Nadine?
6. How is the theme of *silence* brought out in several ways?
7. What happened to Nadine? How has this impacted her life?
8. Describe Nadine’s relationship with her parents.
9. How is Nadine seen at work?
10. Who is Ms. Hinds? How is she a different patient from the others?
11. Who is Eric? How does he resemble the male character in “Seven”?
12. Is Nadine “the guarded” or the “guardian” for her parents?
13. Describe Nadine’s phone conversation with her parents.
14. Describe Nadine’s alter. What does she put on it?
15. How does the number 7 reappear in this story?
16. How does Danticat end this story? How does the ending resemble the end of “Seven”?



Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, *The Book of Miracles*

1. Why the title *The Book of Miracles*?
  2. How does Anne perceive her daughter?
  3. How does this story link up with *The Book of the Dead*?
  4. Does it link up with any other stories so far?
  5. What happened to Anne's brother?
  6. Explain: "many unexplained aspects of her parents' life, was connected to 'some event that happened in Haiti.'"
  7. What kind of miracle
  8. What stands out about the decorations in the Catholic church?
  9. How does Anne's husband shroud his identity in the U.S.?
  10. Who does Anne's daughter think she sees at the Church?
  11. Why is this ironic?
  12. Why is the daughter's 'righteous displeasure' about Constant problematic?
  13. How is condemnation of others a "freedom" Anne doesn't enjoy?
  14. What does Anne's daughter want to do at the end of Mass?
  15. Explain: "...her life was a pendulum between forgiveness and regret, but when the anger dissipated she considered it a small miracle..."
- (86)

*Night Talkers ~ The Dew Breaker, Danticat*

1. Who has Dany lost?
2. Why is Dany back in Haiti?
3. Describe Dany's trip back to his family's village.
4. Who is Old Zo?
5. Who is Estina Estème? Her work? Her health?
6. Describe the natural setting around Estina's home.
7. What connection does the U.S. have with this mountain village?
8. Describe Claude. What's his story? Why does Danticat include him in the story?
9. How was Claude received in Beau Jour?
10. Explain the story of Dany's discovery. Why does he not confront this person? Why doesn't he avenge his family? What would you do?
11. Who is Ti Fanm?
12. How does the community plan for the funeral of Estina?
13. What do we learn about Estina at her wake? What do we learn about the Haitian wake itself?
14. What do you think Dany is going to do with his knowledge? Why did he have to tell his aunt, Estina?

*The Bridal Seamstress, 121-138. Edwidge Danticat*

1. How does *The Bridal Seamstress* fit in with the other stories we have read so far?

2. Who is Beatrice Saint Fort? What painful story torments her?
3. Who is Aline Cajuste? What is she doing at the home of Beatrice?
4. How does Danticat show us the age of Beatrice?
5. Who are the neighbors of Beatrice?
6. What kind of man was Beatrice's neighbor? (Creole term)
7. What does Aline find out about the neighbor?
8. Read the bottom of page 137 – 138. How do the last 2 pages make you feel?
9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this story from a technical point of view (character development, style, dialogue, plot evolution, believability, images, metaphors [figure of speech used in place of another], etc.)

**Identify/explain in 1 sentence.**

1. Far Rockaway, Queens
2. “Dolly Rodriguez”
3. Beatrice Saint Fort
4. Aline Cajuste
5. Somerville, Massachusetts
6. Marjorie Voltaire
7. Choukèt lawoze [*lawouze*]

Edwidge Danticat, "Monkey Tails," 139-164

1. How does this story begin? What year is it in Haiti? Why are the dates of this story so important?
2. Who is Rosie? Describe the *restavèk* in Haiti. How does Rosie typify this category of person. What types of tasks must Rosie undertake?
3. Who is Romain? What is he to the male narrator?
4. Can you think of any typically Haitian metaphors in the story?
5. How was the tomb of François Duvalier desecrated?
6. Describe the business of Romain's mother.
7. Who is Regulus?
8. Why do the narrator and Romain go to a lavish hotel?
9. What do we learn about the narrator's father, Christophe?
10. How does Regulus' life come to an end?
11. Why the title *Monkey Tails*?

## The Dew Breaker, *The Funeral Singer*, 165-183

1. What are some of settings in which this story takes place? What are their significance?
2. Who is Brother Timonie?
3. Why is the story named *The Funeral Singer*?
4. What reflections of President Duvalier do we find in this story?
5. How does the torturer theme of this book return in this story?  
Describe the demise of the narrator's father.
6. What is Casernes Dessalines?
7. Why does Freda abandon Haiti? What are her reasons?
8. Explain: "we raise our glasses to the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead."

## EXAM REVIEW

- |                          |                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Book of the Dead      |                               |
| 2. Seven                 | Main characters               |
| 3. Water Child           | Main events/actions           |
| 4. The Book of Miracles  | The meaning of the story      |
| 5. Night Talkers         | Connection with other stories |
| 6. The Bridal Seamstress | Uniquely Haitian attributes   |
| 7. Monkey Tails          | Deep insights into life       |

## The Dew Breaker – Questions for review

How does this story take us full circle?

Is it plausible that these two marry? Why is this part of the story so difficult to believe? Describe their first encounter.

How does the story portray the Duvalier dictatorship?

Terms: Miliciens/Volunteers/Fillette Lalo/Tonton Macoutes

Describe the confrontation between the torturer and the preacher