

## The Future in My Arms

Essay by Edwidge Danticat

# What does a community OWE its CHILDREN?

### COMMON CORE

**RI 2** Determine a central idea of a text; provide a summary of the text. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view.

**L 4a** Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word.

Parents, of course, have a huge commitment to their children. But what is the responsibility of a community to its young? A familiar African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." Do you agree?

**QUICKWRITE** In a small group, discuss how people in your community have influenced your life. Did someone teach you to play soccer or baseball? What about the person who always made a point of asking how you were doing? Create a concept web, as shown, with people who have helped you. Then choose one person and write a paragraph describing how he or she has made a difference in your life.

People Who  
Helped Me

Basketball Coach

taught me to be  
a team player



### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

An **author's perspective** is the lens through which a writer views a subject. This lens is made up of the writer's ideas, values, feelings, and beliefs—products of the writer's life experiences and cultural upbringing. For example, in “Math and After Math” (page 480), Lensey Namioka writes from the perspective of a Chinese-American female who has a talent for math and was raised to believe that it is “not unusual at all” for a woman to excel at mathematics. Readers learn her perspective from direct statements as well as anecdotes that illustrate her views.

As you read “The Future in My Arms,” determine Edwidge Danticat's point of view by examining the following:

- statements of opinion
- tone, or attitude
- diction, or word choice
- repeated words or ideas
- the descriptions of cultural customs
- the portrayal of her niece

### ● READING STRATEGY: MONITOR

**Monitoring** is the strategy of checking your comprehension as you read and intentionally using other strategies to improve it. For example, if as you read you realize that you are not understanding the text very well, you might decide you need to slow down your reading pace, reread, or skim the next section before reading it. With “The Future in My Arms,” the following strategies may be especially helpful:

- **Predict** what will happen later in the selection.
- **Question** the events described and their significance.
- **Reread** passages that you find confusing.
- **Summarize** what you have read by briefly restating the central ideas in your own words.

As you read, keep track of your thoughts, ideas, and questions by jotting them down.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## Edwidge Danticat

born 1969

### An Early Start

When Edwidge Danticat came to the United States from Haiti at the age of 12, she had a hard time fitting in at school. She sought refuge in writing and began a story that would develop into her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. She published the novel in 1994, when she was in her mid-20s, after earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Brown University. Other major works include *Krik? Krak!*, *The Farming of Bones*, and *The Dew Breaker*.

### One Voice in a Million

Critics have acclaimed Danticat as “the voice of Haitian Americans,” but she resists the title. Danticat says, “There are millions and millions of Haitian voices. Mine is only one. My greatest hope is that mine becomes one voice in a giant chorus that is trying to understand and express artistically what it's like to be a Haitian immigrant in the United States.”

### BACKGROUND TO THE ESSAY

#### The Haitian Diaspora

Danticat's transition into a new country and culture was eased by the support of her family and of the Haitian community in Brooklyn, New York. Many Haitians emigrate to the United States and other countries to escape the extreme poverty and political instability of their native country. This emigration of hundreds of thousands of Haitians to other countries has been called the Haitian Diaspora.

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# THE FUTURE IN

# My Arms. <sup>A</sup>

Edwidge Danticat

I had never held any living thing so tiny in my hands. Six pounds and one ounce, lighter than my smallest dumbbell was my newborn niece, her face bright pink, her eyes tightly shut, her body coiled around itself in a fetal position, still defiantly resisting the world into which she'd just been thrust. I had been awaiting her birth with feverish anticipation; I was going away for the summer, and I didn't want to leave before she was born, only to come back eight weeks later and find that she had grown accustomed to most things in the world except her only auntie on her father's side, the sole woman child in a family of men, who all her life had dreamed of having a sister. <sup>B</sup>

10 She arrived the day before I was to leave. I was at the Brooklyn Public Library researching an article when I called to check my messages. In a breathless voice, my brother Andre announced, "You are now the proud aunt of Nadira Amahs Danticat.<sup>1</sup> Her name means, 'She whom God has chosen.'"

I ran out of the library and headed toward a flower shop on Flatbush Avenue. As I approached, I heard someone call out my name. It was my brother Karl and Mia, who were expecting their own child in a few months. They, too, were heading to the hospital to see Nadira.

On the way there, I remembered a message that a girlfriend of mine, a new mother, had sent me for my thirtieth birthday a few months before. "May  
20 your arms always be a *repozwa*, a place where a child can rest her head," it said. I had told her that two of my brothers were becoming fathers, and she wanted me to share those words with them. But I'd decided to wait until both my niece and nephew were born to share this with their parents—that we had each become a *repozwa*,<sup>2</sup> the Haitian Creole<sup>3</sup> term for "sacred place," in whose shelter children would now seek rest.

## <sup>A</sup> MONITOR

Based on the essay title and the painting, what do you **predict** this essay will be about?

## <sup>B</sup> AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

What do lines 1–9 reveal about Danticat's attitude toward children, especially her niece? Cite details.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What elements of this painting suggest the idea of *repozwa* mentioned and defined in lines 22–25?

1. **Nadira Amahs Danticat** (nā-dīr'ā ā-mās' dān-tī-kā').

2. **repozwa** (rā-pōz-wā').

3. **Haitian Creole**: the French-based language spoken in Haiti.

*Mama's Cradle*, April Harrison.  
Mixed media collage on  
canvas board, 14" × 18".  
© April Harrison.



Ah.

By the time we got to the hospital, my sister-in-law, Carol, had already had a few visitors. She appeared exhausted but in good spirits as she and Andre took us down the corridor to the maternity-ward window. Which one was Nadira? Andrew wanted us to guess, to pick her out of the rows of infants  
30 like a long-lost relative in a crowd of strangers. We were aided in our task by the small pink name tag glued to her bassinet. Carol asked if we wanted to have a closer look. We went back to the room and waited for the nurse to bring her in.

We all stood up when she was carried in. I knew I was getting ahead of myself, but this made me think of a wedding where everyone immediately—and almost instinctively—rises to greet the bride. She was passed from loving hand to loving hand, but I kept her longer. I would soon have to leave, so I wanted to hold her, to cradle her in my arms, let her tiny head rest in the crook of my elbow. I wanted to watch her ever so slightly open her eyes and  
40 tighten her mouth as she battled to make sense of all the new sounds around her, all the laughter, the wild comparisons with relatives living and gone, all so very present in her face. I wanted to read her lines from Sonia Sanchez’s “Poem at Thirty”: “i am here waiting / remembering that / once as a child / i walked two / miles in my sleep. / did i know / then where i / was going? / traveling. i’m always traveling. / i want to tell / you about me . . . / here is my hand.” **C**

Nadira’s presence had already transformed the room. Her opening her eyes was like a Hollywood press conference, with all the video and picture cameras going off, trying to capture something that perhaps none of us knew how to express, that we had suddenly been allowed a closer view of one of life’s great  
50 wonders, and by being there, were an extension of a miracle that happened every second of every day in every part of the world, but had generously now granted us a turn.

That day, when we lined up for a glance, a touch, a picture, and tried to imagine a life for Nadira in a new country, we each made our own silent promises not to let her face that new world alone. We were telling her and her parents that we were her village with our offers of baby-sitting favors, our giant teddy bears, our handfuls of flowers, and the crooks of our arms and necks and laps, which we hoped that she would run to if she ever needed a refuge. **D**

Looking back on my own thirty years, having crossed many borders, loved  
60 and lost many family and friends, young and old, to time, migrations, illnesses, I couldn’t help but worry for Nadira, and for my nephew yet to be born. Are there ahead for them wars, a depression, a holocaust, a new civil-rights struggle as there were for those children born at the dawn of the last century? Will they have to face the colonization of new planets, genetic cloning, new forms of slavery, and other nightmares we have yet to imagine? Will we, their tiny village, give them enough love and assurance to help them survive, thrive, and even want to challenge those things? **E**

Before handing Nadira back to her parents, I felt torn between wanting her to grow up quickly so that her body might match the wits she’d need to face  
70 her future and at the same time wanting her to stay small so that she might be

### **C** MONITOR

Reread lines 42–45.

What significance might these lines of poetry have for Danticat?

### **D** AUTHOR’S PERSPECTIVE

What do Danticat’s promises suggest about her beliefs concerning the responsibility adults have toward children?

### **E** GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 62–67.

Notice how Danticat poses a series of rhetorical questions about the future to prompt readers to share her concern.



*Circle of Joy*, Keith Mallett. © Keith Mallett Studio, Inc./www.keithmallett.com.

easier to shield and carry along the length of our elbows to the reach of our palms. I wanted to tell her parents that though I had never held any living thing so tiny in my hands, I had never held anything so grand either, a bundle so elaborately complex and yet fragile, encompassing both our past and our future.

Though Nadira and my soon-to-arrive nephew were not created specifically with me in mind, I felt as though they were the most magical gifts that could ever have blessed my thirtieth year of life. Humbled by my responsibility to them, I silently promised their parents that for the next thirty years and the  
80 thirty after that, my heart and soul would be their children's *repozwa*, a sacred place where they would always find rest. ∞

COMMON CORE L 4a

### Language Coach

**Synonyms** Words with the same or nearly the same meaning are **synonyms**. Reread lines 72–75. Which word in this sentence is a synonym for *including* or *encircling*?

## Comprehension

- Recall** What is Danticat’s relationship to the baby she holds?
- Recall** How does Danticat regard the baby and her birth?
- Clarify** Why is the baby so special to her?
- Summarize** What role does she hope to play in the baby’s life?



**RI 2** Determine a central idea of a text; provide a summary of the text. **RI 6** Determine an author’s point of view in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view.

## Text Analysis

- Determine Central Idea** Review the questions, thoughts, and ideas you noted as you monitored your reading. Then, using this information as a guide, state the central idea, or thesis, of “The Future in My Arms.”
- Make Inferences About Author’s Perspective** What can you infer about Danticat’s values, feelings, and beliefs concerning the role of adults in children’s lives? Support your inferences with details from the text.
- Analyze Concept** Complete a concept chart like the one shown for the word *repozwa*. What is the significance of the word in this essay? Give evidence to support your answer.

<i>Repozwa</i>
Origin:
Literal Meaning:
Connotations:
Significance in Essay:

- Interpret Text** Reread lines 72–75. What does Danticat mean when she states that the baby Nadira encompasses “both our past and our future”? Support your answer with details from the essay.

## Text Criticism

- Social Context** How do your community’s views on the responsibility of adults toward children compare with those in this selection? Consider the role of institutions such as parks, schools, daycare facilities, and neighborhood-watch programs in your area. What role do neighbors and extended families have in the care of children? Cite evidence to support your evaluation.

### What does a community OWE its CHILDREN?

How should this commitment to children extend *beyond* the community?

## Language

### ◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Add Rhetorical Questions

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 496. Here, the author uses **interrogative sentences** to ask **rhetorical questions** that not only express her own concerns but also prompt similar concerns in her readers. Unlike other questions, **rhetorical questions** do not require answers; they are used for effect. For example, notice how the following rhetorical questions make this paragraph more powerful than it would be with only declarative statements:

*A community is only as strong as its members. Our community needs to reach out to all children who live in our town. What are their needs? What will help them grow strong? How can we help them become responsible citizens who will, in turn, make this a better community?*

Now study the following model. Notice how the revisions in blue make this first draft more powerful and effective.

**STUDENT MODEL**

*What is my responsibility to this child? What is our responsibility to all children in the community?*

Recently, I became an aunt to a beautiful baby girl. This joyous occasion caused me to reflect upon my role in her life. ~~I started to consider my responsibilities to her and the other children in our community.~~

### READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Increase your understanding of “The Future in My Arms” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

#### WRITING PROMPT

##### Extended Constructed Response: Letter

How might Danticat encourage a community to become a *repozwa* for its children? Drawing on ideas in her essay, write a **three- to five-paragraph letter** that Danticat might send to a local newspaper encouraging that community to examine its **responsibilities** to its children.

#### REVISING TIP

Review your letter. Does it make a strong case? Consider adding rhetorical questions to make your writing more powerful.

### COMMON CORE

**L3** Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style. **W4** Produce argumentative writing in which the style is appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.

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