

# The Downfall of Society

How does Edwidge Danticat's use of motif, symbolism, and setting within *Claire of the Sea Light* represent the impacts of lack of environmentalism and environmental racism in society?

Some major issues that many societies face are lack of environmentalism and environmental racism. These issues focus on the care and concern for the environment and how individuals are treating it as well as the treatment of people of color and their exposure to hazardous materials such as pollution due to racism within society. Within Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*, she informs readers about these environmental issues within Haitian society through her telling of the people of Ville Rose and how the impacts of these environmental issues in a multitude of ways not only harms themselves, but their society and economy as well as they begin to realize that their actions have devastating consequences. Edwidge Danticat's utilization of motif, symbolism, and setting show the detrimental impacts that environmental racism and lack of environmental protection have on the people of Ville Rose in *Claire of the Sea Light*.

One issue caused by lack of environmentalism is global warming which impacts wildlife as the increase in temperature results in unsuitable conditions making it difficult for animals to thrive in their natural habitats. This issue is present within in the novel as the quote “. . . given his studies of the condition of the frog carcasses and the dirt and water samples he'd taken of their environment, and given the climate and blistering temperatures in Ville Rose that summer, the frogs had probably died from a fungal disease caused by the hotter-than-usual weather”, shows how the rise in temperature within Ville Rose is creating the death of many of the frogs within the town (Danticat 54). This shows the effects that the town's lack of effort for trying to be sustainable affects them and their environment due to increase in temperature from global warming, symbolizing how new diseases and environmental issues are being created which ultimately impacts the town's wildlife and leads to the extinction of frogs in the area as society's inability to preserve the environment and prevent global warming is harming living organisms.

Air pollution is another prevalent issue within the town of Ville Rose as the amount of vehicles that the town uses for transportation shows their lack of effort for finding more sustainable ways. Within the text, Danticat mentions the massive use of transportation when stating “this was, he felt, a small and unlucky town, and the narrow, mostly unpaved Pied Rose Avenue was too crowded with motorcycles, public transportation vans, and private cars”, to show the insignificance of environmentalism within the town (Danticat 14). This is a significant quote as it shows how society’s lack of environmental consciousness and the methods of different transportations that the people of Ville Rose uses ultimately, causes a rise in air pollution which leads to many global health problems that many individuals face such as lung cancer and increase in global warming. This quote also has a major relationship with the chapter *The Frogs* as well as the global warming caused by the increased air pollution is causing the frogs in Ville Rose to die which shows that air pollution is not harming people, but animals as well.

Within *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat continues in showing the motif of the effects of lack of environmental protection through the effects that overfishing has on Nozia’s livelihood as a fisherman. For instance, Danticat writes “now they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back” and “you could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself”, to display how the overuse of natural resources greatly affect individuals and their way of living (Danticat 9). These quotes show the town’s lack of environmental protection as their decision to continuously overfish and not allow the fish population to replenish, is leading to the town lacking access to natural resources as well as many fishermen losing their jobs. This greatly affects Nozias as he cannot earn a stable income to provide for him and Claire, leading him to

give her away, displaying to readers how lack of environmental consciousness results in humans being negatively affected in the end.

Danticat also mentions the aspect that environmental racism can have on some characters and their lives within the story of *Claire of the Sealight* such as Tiye who lives on the outskirts of town, Citè Pendue, where people there are more prone to violence. Danticat describes the setting of the outskirts of town “a destitute and treacherous extension of Ville Rose” (Danticat 63) as well as mentioning “the gang members were also called chimè, chimeras or ghosts, and were, for the most part, street children who couldn’t remember ever having lived in a house, boys whose parents had been murdered or had fallen to some deadly disease, leaving them alone in the world” (Danticat 65), to show how environmental racism is causing those who live in the poorer extension of the Haitian society to become more prone to violence. Danticat’s description of the setting of Citè Pendue reveals to readers how an individual’s exposure to environmental racism results in those lower class individuals such as Bernord to be predominantly exposed to violence, poverty, and homelessness. This is further enhanced with many young poor boys encountering first-hand violence and trauma that influences their decision to become gang members in order to provide for themselves and their families for survival, conveying to Danticat’s audience how environmental racism continues to harm and affect minorities as they try to make the most of what little society offers to them.

As a result of people like Bernard Dorien living in the City of Penduè, they are seen by society as “dangerous” and “gang members”. For example, after Bernard’s death is reported to the radio, the anchorwoman states “an eye for an eye. Another bandit has been erased from the face of this earth”, to display how people like Bernard who live on the more violent and poorer part of their society are seen in a negative light by more wealthier individuals in their society

(Danticat 83). This quote supports Danticat's motif of how environmental racism can impact those who are suffering from it as the society of Ville Rose view those individuals who live within Cité Pendue as criminals and bandits since the high amount of gangs and gang violence causes innocent people such as Bernard and his family who are living there to be associated as such which continues in creating a negative connotation of Cité Pendue and its residents. This causes society to not give fair treatment to those individuals as their perspectives of people like Bernard prevent them from gaining any social mobility into a higher socioeconomic class as they are being prevented from gaining jobs that could better their lives such as Bernard's desire to have his segment air on the radio which could better him and his career.

Environmental racism is another issue within the society of Ville Rose as those who live within the lower classes and live in Cité Pendue, are more susceptible to getting arrested and experience firsthand judicial corruption. In particular, after Bernard gets arrested for being framed for the murder of Laurent Lavaud, Bernard experiences first hand abuse and political corruption from police officers when Danticat describes Bernard's experience by saying how "they threw some ice water on his face and laughed some more. Panicked, he tried to ride from the chair, but someone shoved him back down", as a way to highlight how lower class individuals are more vulnerable to abuse of authority (Danticat 75). These quotes signify Danticat's motif of the impact of environmental racism on lower class individuals as due to the fact that society views them as criminals, they are then abused by the police as it is justified by their society since they are "correcting criminals". Furthermore, the quotes show the creation of a cycle of abuse between police and the "criminals" as lower class are seen as criminals and are then therefore, need to be arrested and be corrected by police by any means necessary.

*Claire of the Sea Light* provides a cautionary tale for its readers about how ignorance, greed, and racism create chaos and disparity. Through Danticat's motifs of environmental racism and lack of environmentalism within the novel, readers grasp the effects that these aspects have on Haitian society and its people. As the people of Ville Rose continue to harm their environment and exploit the lower class, they start to reap what they sow as they begin to experience the consequences of their actions of exploiting their environment and individuals. While Danticat's message was aimed towards Haitian society, her message about environmental injustices can register to all of humanity and the environmental issues that are present within their respective societies. *Claire of the Sea Light* provides a cautionary tale for its readers about how ignorance, greed, and racism create chaos and disparity.

## Work Cited

Danticat, Edwidge. *Claire of the Sea Light*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014.