

Eliana Liantonio

Dr. Abrams - Locklear

LIT 240

16 September 2025

### **The Burden of A Mother: Lili's Silent Narrative in "A Wall of Fire Rising"**

In "A Wall of Fire Rising" by Edwidge Danticat, the story opens with dialogue between a man named Guy, his wife Lili, and their son, who is affectionately named Little Guy. The three of them converse about how Little Guy is to be in a school play about a slave named Boukman, who began a rebellion in Haiti several centuries ago. The family lives in a Haitian shantytown where Guy is unable to find consistent work and Lili takes care of their son and home.

Early on in the text, readers are drawn to feel sympathetic for Guy's character despite the story having a limited third person narrator. Guy is unsatisfied with his life as he was unable to rise past generational poverty in his youth, causing him and his family to live a poor life with no real escape. His despondency is rife in his conversations with his family, defining the main plot of the story, and foreshadows his suicide. Lili (his wife) is sidelined as a character meant to enrich his escapist fantasy since she does not follow his existential line of thought. Yet, there are moments where Lili's selflessness as a mother shines through and exemplifies her as a hardworking, independent, and truly limitless person. If we re-center with Lili in mind, this offers an alternative reading that pays attention to her predicament as a parent who works through her family's poverty and her husband's inability to accept his station in life. Lili is then seen as a Boukman of her own life. She is a rebellious mother who looks at her husband's doubt with an upturned nose, allowing her son to live a life with unrelenting support. By replacing Guy

with Lili as a central protagonist, we are able to see her resilience and quiet defiance which makes her the true revolutionary akin to Boukman.

Lili's role is provided as being a "housewife", although we could argue that her role is so much more than that. It's seen in the text that she often "got up with the break of dawn" (Danticat 422) in order to retrieve water for the entire family. She is also largely responsible for the cooking in the family as she is seen "spreading cornmeal mush on banana leaves for their supper"(413) and makes "her special sweet water tea ... to suppress gas and kill the vermin in the stomach that made poor children hungry" (415). Since Lili takes care of their home, she does not have time to be employed elsewhere. In spite of this, the text mentions that she sometimes sells spices to help Guy when there is little work available (415). She is also constantly wondering about the state of her family's hunger: "It was never too early to start looking around, to scrape together that night's meal"(420). Judging from the text, we are able to ascertain that Lili's ability to adapt to her situation is outstanding. Without her juggling multiple roles, there would be little structure in their home and for Little Guy. This sets up the argument by telling the readers who is the most in control in the story; Lili is the main provider that fills in the gaps Guy leaves behind. However, Guy is the one keeping her in a cycle of uncertainty; this makes the parallel that Lili is actively defying his norms and continues to try everyday despite his depressive paralysis.

The day after Little Guy has been cast as Boukman in his school play, he returns home with news of being given more inspirational lines. The new monologue seems to have an adverse effect on Guy's emotions causing him to storm out of the room. Lili is left to explain how "His heart hurts" (420) to Little Guy's confusion. This scene showcases how Lili is able to shoulder the pain that Guy is going through, and also dealing with the emotional labor of simplifying her

husband's worsening depression to their son. Once she attempts to reason with Guy about his temperament before, he releases a passive-aggressive comment on how she isn't focused on him "Nothing Lili... Ask me nothing about this day I have had" (421). Instead of rationally explaining how he feels, he berates her on her hope for Little Guy's future, taunts her as a mother, and calls her dangerous (421). This would outwardly have an effect on anybody, however, Lili musters the rebellious spirit in her heart and does not give him the reaction he wants. Rather she presses him to stop talking and changes the subject to the impossibility of him piloting the hot air balloon. As readers, this scene can feel like the text is highlighting how Lili is at the tipping point. She pushes back against her husband's obvious anger towards her, their son, and their lives. Instead of submitting to a pathetic attempt at masculinity, she chooses to step back and allow the situation to diffuse. Like any true rebel, she knows it takes time to break the system.

Lili continues to show unabashed support for Little Guy in the story, and Guy continues to fall deeper in melancholy. She is able to recite lines back to Little Guy when he forgets them: "Lili tried to string together what she could remember of her son's lines" (419). Lili does not tell Little Guy to take a break or yell at him for his incessant need to memorize the lines. She wants to prove to their son and Guy that they can rise to any occasion with effort and pure will. Even when Guy mentions putting Little Guy's name anywhere near the list of permanent hires at the sugar mill, she refuses: "For a young boy to be on any list like that might influence his destiny..." (418). In this scene Lili openly and vehemently rejects Guy's notion that generational poverty will affect their son's future. Her rebellion of simply disagreeing with a norm created by her husband further the argument that she chooses to oppose Guy. After all, did she work this hard for nothing to come to fruition?

When Lili watches Guy commit suicide by jumping out of the hot air balloon she “held her breath as she watched him fall” (423). This could be read a multitude of ways, but as readers there seems to be a relief in Lili’s body. It’s almost like she anticipated this happening, which would explain the indifference she exudes from seeing him die. She only runs to him after Little Guy takes off to look, and she doesn’t even recognize him: “There was little left countenance that she had loved so much ... Lili was searching for some kind of sign ... something that reminded her of the man that she had married” (423). The ultimate act of rebellion is her chill reaction to Guy’s brutal demise; she knows that the system of doubt placed on her and Little Guy in her marriage had officially ended. Lili knew that the man she married had long disappeared well before he actually died, so she had to seed her son’s mind with acts of resistance and encouraging his education. This allows Lili to emerge as the victorious revolutionary the narrator may have intended her character to be.

Edwidge Danticat’s progression of Lili’s character in “A Wall Of Fire Rising” is incredibly important to the plot and reader’s conclusion of the story. Her subtle flair in defying Guy’s obvious misery is what truly embodies the spirit of Boukman. She outwardly demands a better life for herself and son even if her husband believes them to be a hopeless case. Guy’s obvious torment toward Lili pushes her to be the best parental figure for their son. She may not know what the future holds, but she knows that they will survive no matter what. Her actions prove this to us throughout the text. Next time you read a limited third person narrated story, try imagining it from the main female character’s point of view. It could change your entire perception of the story, and remember when there is a will there is a way to your self-respect. Just ask Lili.

## Works Cited

Danticat, Edwidge, “Edwidge Danticat A Wall of Fire Rising.” *The Norton Introduction To Literature*, Shorter 13th ed., W. W. Norton & Company, New York City, New York, 2019, pp. 413–424.