

# Drown



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUNOT DÍAZ

Junot Díaz is a Dominican American novelist and professor of creative writing. Born in the Dominican Republic and raised in New Jersey, Díaz completed his BA at Rutgers University where he was involved in Demerest Hall, a residential house dedicated to creative writing. After graduating from Rutgers, Díaz applied to various MFA programs. For his applications, he created an autobiographical character, “Yunior,” whom he intended to write several novels about. Yunior became the protagonist in much of Díaz’s published work including his first published anthology of short stories, *Drown* and his 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel [The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#). Díaz currently lives in Massachusetts, serving as a professor of creative writing at MIT and the fiction editor of the *Boston Review*.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout his career, Díaz’s work has been influenced by trends in both legal and illegal immigration that affect Dominican and Latin American immigrants across America and the world. At the time of *Drown*’s publication in 1996, America was once again facing a critical conversation about legal immigration following the Immigration Act of 1990, which limited the number of visas allotted to the extended families of legal immigrants, while controversially extending non-immigrant visas to “highly skilled workers.” Díaz’s discussions of success and the personal “inertia” needed to transcend and escape his neighborhood in *Drown* carry the weight of the evolving discussion of US immigration, which increasingly viewed citizenship as a merit and skill-based right, and sought to cast undocumented immigrants as “unskilled” or “lazy”.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When working on his first short story collection, *Drown*, Díaz explained that he was largely influenced by writers like Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros, whose work is concerned with narratives of immigrants and displaced communities. Much like *Drown*, Cisneros’ [The House on Mango Street](#) follows a Latina-American immigrant growing up and expanding her worldview in a Chicago suburb, and Morrison’s work, including [Beloved](#) and [Song of Solomon](#), grapples not only with questions of race in the American landscape, but also the confining and highly-gendered nature of home and family environments. As Díaz’s first published work, *Drown* was in many ways a prequel to both his 2006 novel [The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#) (which

tracks much of Yunior’s adolescence) and his 2012 short story collection *This is How You Lose Her* (which focuses specifically on the adult Yunior’s past romantic relationships).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Drown”
- **When Written:** 1995
- **Where Written:** Ithaca, New York (at Cornell University)
- **When Published:** 1996
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Short Story, Autobiographical Fiction
- **Setting:** An urban neighborhood in New Jersey.
- **Climax:** Yunior’s revelation that Beto sexually assaulted him when they were teenagers.
- **Antagonist:** Yunior’s inability to make peace with the way his friendship with Beto ended
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**From the bottom up.** Junot Díaz paid his way through Rutgers by working odd jobs as a dishwasher, a deliver boy, and at a steel company. He notes that he has “seen the US from the bottom up,” achieving success both in spite and because of personal hard work and familial hardship.

**Activism.** Throughout his career, Díaz has been an active in pro-Dominican and Latinx organizations, both at home and abroad. Most notably, Díaz cofounded the Voices of Our Nations Workshop, a California-based writer’s workshop aimed to nurture and support emerging writers of color.



## PLOT SUMMARY

When Yunior’s mother tells Yunior that his childhood best friend Beto is home from college for a visit, Yunior keeps watching **television** and pretends not to hear her. While he and Beto used to be like brothers, they have not spoken in over two years, ever since Beto went away to college and came out as gay. Beto always saw their neighborhood as a kind of prison, and he went to college farther down the Raritan River in New Jersey. Yunior on the other hand, stayed behind to finish high school, now living at home with his mother and selling drugs to the younger siblings of his former high school classmates.

Yunior recalls the summer before Beto left for college in which the two boys spent most of their time playing stickball, shoplifting, and terrorizing their older neighbors. At night, to

beat the heat, they would hop the fence at the local **pool** and swim until the neighbors chased them all home. In spite of himself, Yuniør walks past Beto's house to see if he is home. When he doesn't find Beto, Yuniør once again hops the pool fence (though it is harder since he has aged) in hopes of finding his former friend. Beto is not there, but Yuniør still dives into the water, spending several minutes submerged under the surface, cherishing the silence and clarity that the water offers him. Yuniør notices that he is the oldest person at the pool by several years, but he still recognizes the same types of youthful mischief that he and Beto used to get up to. He notices an old sign, "No Running, No Defecating, No Urinating, No Expectorating" and remembers that Beto was very angry with him because he knew the definition of the word "expectorating" while Beto did not. Despite encouraging Yuniør to leave New Jersey and think more of himself, Beto hated when Yuniør knew things that he didn't.

Yuniør explains that he and his mother still live alone in the same small apartment in which he grew up. Despite their close quarters, Yuniør's mother spends most of her days in silence, except when Yuniør watches her soap operas with her in the evenings. Yuniør's father now lives in Florida with one of his many girlfriends, calling his mother whenever he needs more money. Yuniør resents his father for his infidelity and violence during Yuniør's childhood, and he is unhappy that his mother still takes his father's phone calls.

Yuniør's mother, on the other hand, thinks that her relationship with Yuniør's father is healthy, and she doesn't understand why Yuniør and Beto aren't able to have a similarly civil relationship. Yuniør deflects her questions about Beto and continues to watch TV. On Saturday, Yuniør's mother asks him to take her to the mall. Though Saturday is the best day to deal drugs, Yuniør agrees, believing it to be part of his duty as a son. While his mother shops for bargains, Yuniør remembers his youthful history of shoplifting with Beto, gleefully stealing bags full of merchandise from the same mall. Although Yuniør's mother never suspected that he was stealing, Beto's recklessness eventually got the two boys caught and chased from the mall by a security guard. Yuniør recalls that Beto was always much more suave and nonchalant when it came to stealing than Yuniør could ever be.

Without Beto's friendship, Yuniør's social and daily routines have become stagnant and unfulfilling. At night, he drinks in college bars with his friends Alex and Danny, starting fights and harassing young women to pass the time. In the mornings, he goes for runs behind his apartment, keeping an eye out for an army recruiter who once asked Yuniør to enlist when he was younger. Yuniør secretly hopes that the recruiter will return and give him a reason to leave New Jersey, since, unlike Beto, he never had much ambition to succeed in school, so college wasn't an option. He often decided to skip classes even as he stood in line for the bus in the morning, and spent the day

watching videos at the library or reading old magazines. Beto on the other hand, was always expanding his horizons, spending his evenings outside of New Jersey, and making friends who moved in different circles than Yuniør, including gay men in Manhattan who were involved in the Club Kid scene of the eighties.

Now, Yuniør often spends his evenings with Alex and Danny harassing men at the gay bar that they pass on their way home from the college bars. Angered by the bar patrons, Alex often pulls his car over to shout homophobic slurs at the patrons or to point fake guns at them just to terrify them. For Yuniør, homosexuality is contrary to the ideals of strength and masculinity that are deeply important to him, revealing a weakness and effeminacy that he cannot abide. Spurred by the memories of Alex's violent taunts, Yuniør reveals that Beto sexually assaulted Yuniør the summer before he left for college, but that Yuniør did not fight back (and indeed allowed the event to recur) because of his bond with and allegiance to Beto. In addition to ending their friendship, Beto's unwanted sexual advances made Yuniør worry that Beto had made Yuniør himself gay, or turned him unnatural in some way. Instead of sharing his sense of betrayal with Beto, Yuniør allowed him to leave for college, never opened the book Beto bought him as a going away present, and broke off all contact with him.

Back from his run, Yuniør cleans his sneakers in his bathroom and remembers a time when his high school class watched the space shuttle launch. One of his teachers compared the students in his class to the shuttle, in that only a few would have the personal momentum necessary to make it to space, and the rest would simply fall back to earth. Yuniør explains that in that moment, he could already feel his momentum lag. When he finishes washing up, Yuniør spends the evening watching a dramatic Spanish movie with his mother. They hold hands and Yuniør's mother falls asleep halfway through. Yuniør lets her sleep until the film is over and then goes to check the windows before going to sleep.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Yuniør** – The protagonist and narrator of *Drown*, Yuniør is several years out of high school and still living with his mother in the small apartment in Edison, New Jersey in which he grew up. Yuniør is on the cusp of adulthood, but he hasn't taken on many adult responsibilities: he sells pot to pay the utility bill, parties with his friends, and his mother still cooks for him, does his laundry, and pays the rent. Yuniør feels trapped in this life, but he notes that he never had much academic potential, so college didn't seem like an option. While he would consider joining the army to escape his hometown, he hasn't seen the army recruiter around in quite a while. Into his meditations on

his stagnant life, Yunior weaves recollections of his adolescence, telling the story of the dissolution of his friendship with his best friend Beto, an academically-gifted, charismatic, and ambitious boy from the same apartment complex. Yunior used to look up to Beto's suave confidence, but after Beto sexually assaulted Yunior twice during the summer before Beto left for college, their friendship fell apart. Through telling the story of this friendship, Yunior reveals that even though his life seems stagnant, he is grappling with crucial adult issues: his sense of betrayal, his confusion over what it means to be masculine, and his inability to imagine a life that is both possible and desirable, especially when what he knows is safe and comfortable.

**Yunior's Mother** – Yunior and his mother live together in a small apartment in Edison, New Jersey. Since Yunior's father has been absent for much of his life, Yunior's mother is the center of his world. Although the two live in close quarters and take care of one another, they are somewhat distant: Yunior keeps his work selling drugs and his personal life private from his mother, while she mostly moves quietly through her own routines, spending much of her time alone in her own room, cooking, or searching for bargains on home goods. For Yunior, she is an emblem of the "old world," a relic of the Dominican Republic that both comforts and annoys him. In addition, Yunior's mother requires Yunior to perform many of the tasks that his father used to (from driving her to the mall to making sure all the windows are locked at night). In doing so, she inadvertently stifles Yunior's ability to become his own person by forcing him to define himself in relation to her and his father instead of figuring out who he actually wants to be.

**Beto** – Yunior's childhood best friend and early partner in crime. Beto is a natural leader whose swagger, strength, and risk-taking made him one of Yunior's earliest male role models. He and Yunior spent lots of time together swimming, shoplifting, or watching TV, but Beto always had a life beyond Yunior: Beto was an adept and ambitious student who always planned to escape their hometown and attend college, and he had many friends Yunior didn't know, particularly in the New York club scene. Despite this, both Yunior and Yunior's Mother once considered Beto to be a member of their family, and Beto always tried to push Yunior to want more from his life and to set himself up to leave their town. Beto is now a college graduate on his way to business school, and he and Yunior no longer speak, an estrangement that stems from two unwanted sexual encounters that Beto forced on Yunior the summer before Beto left for college. While Yunior's trauma, sense of betrayal, and ingrained homophobia led him to cut off their friendship, by the end of the story it seems that Yunior is curious about the possibility of reconciling with his old friend.

**Yunior's Father** – After leaving Yunior and his mother, Yunior's father now lives in Florida with one of his many girlfriends. He is a complex source of resentment for Yunior, who spent much

of his childhood terrified of his father's physical abuse, but also convinced that this behavior was normal and shared by all Dominican fathers. Although Yunior's father was his only male role model growing up other than Beto, Yunior resented his father's temper, infidelity, and unreliability, and it seems that the two of them have a strained relationship now that his father is gone. Yunior's father often calls Yunior's mother and tells her that he will leave his girlfriend if she moves to Florida to be with him, but Yunior knows this is an empty promise and urges his mother not to take the calls.

**The Teacher** – One of Yunior's teachers in high school who made the class watch space shuttle launches. The teacher would explain to the students that their own success as children was much like that of the shuttle: only some would have the momentum necessary to reach their goal, while the majority would simply burn out. Yunior explains that this early lack of confidence in him made him imagine that his momentum was already lost.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Alex** – One of Yunior's present-day friends. A violent and habitual drunk, Alex often purposefully antagonizes and bullies gay men at the local gay bar after a night of drinking with Yunior and Danny.

**The Recruiter** – the crass, red-headed military recruiter who sometimes watches Yunior run behind his apartment. Although Yunior once turned the recruiter down, he silently wishes that the recruiter would return and give Yunior the opportunity to leave New Jersey once and for all.

**Danny** – Yunior's other present-day friend.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### INTIMACY AND ESTRANGEMENT

In "Drown," Junot Díaz suggests that intimacy can be both protective and limiting. While Yunior's close and often codependent relationships with his mother and Beto at first provide him with stability and structure for his life, they sour as he grows. His relationship to his mother limits his growth by keeping him in his childhood role, and the intimacy of his friendship with Beto betrays him when Beto sexually violates Yunior. Furthermore, his close relationships with Beto and with his mother allow him to continuously think of himself as his mother's son or Beto's

friend, instead of realizing that he is in control of his own life.

Despite the fact that Yunior is an adult, his life is still just as intertwined with his mother's as it was when he was a child: they live together, she cooks for him and does his laundry, and they watch **TV** together and chat, showing their emotional intimacy. However, Yunior is not simply a child in their home—he also takes care of his mother, in many ways filling his absent father's role. For example, Yunior takes his mother to the mall and gives her money to hunt through the bargain bins in the same way that his father used to do before he left.

Despite the hassle of a long bus ride to the mall, Yunior explains that “as a son, I owe her that much.” Yunior's intimacy with his mother, then, makes him simultaneously a child and an adult.

However, their relationship seems to prevent Yunior from becoming an adult on *his own terms* instead of as a substitute for his father. For example, Yunior and his mother's close relationship and the routines of their domestic life mean that Yunior must continuously conceal the way he spends his free time (in particular, he must hide the fact that he pays their shared bills through dealing drugs). As a result, Yunior is often silent or secretive with his mother so that he can maintain the illusion that his life is innocent and simple, preferring to appear childlike rather than admitting to (and grappling with) his complex adult reality. Furthermore, the comfort of living at home in a familiar apartment with a woman who loves him and takes care of him seems to stunt Yunior's ability to imagine a different future for himself. He has a nice life at his mother's house, even if that life resembles his childhood, which leaves him stuck.

Much like Yunior's relationship to his mother, his friendship with Beto is by turns intimate, supportive, and damaging. For much of their childhood, Beto and Yunior are so close that Beto is practically a member of Yunior's family. At first, it seems that Yunior's intimacy with Beto is a positive influence since, unlike Yunior's mother, Beto pushes Yunior to leave New Jersey and ask more of his own future. However, this seems somewhat disingenuous. Beto pushes Yunior to challenge himself academically and socially, but since Beto prides himself on being the better-educated one of the two of them, he can't accept it when Yunior knows something Beto doesn't, such as the meaning of the word “expectorate.” This demonstrates that Beto pushes for Yunior's success only to the extent that Beto still remains the more knowledgeable and successful one, which complicates the value of their friendship.

Furthermore, the fact that Yunior's reverence for and trust in Beto is so absolute makes Beto's unwanted sexual advance all the more confusing and destructive. Yunior explains that he allowed the sexual encounter with Beto to continue and recur solely because Beto was “his best friend, and that mattered more than anything to me at one point.” Once the second encounter concludes, however, the two boys are immediately estranged from one another, and Yunior can't bear to share

space with Beto or even hear his voice. Beto's betrayal of the terms of their intimacy creates feelings of confusion and trauma that last well into Yunior's adult life, which is perhaps one reason that Yunior, at the end of the story, is still so embedded in the comforting, stable, trustworthy home his mother has created. In this way, Beto's betrayal of his intimacy with Yunior perhaps stunts Yunior's growth more than living in his mother's house does.

Through Beto's betrayal and Yunior's mother's failure to push her son, Díaz seems to imply that intimacy has the potential to damage or limit someone, as intimacy makes Yunior think of himself in relation to others instead of focusing on his own future. However, both of Yunior's intimate relationships also provide essential foundations to his life—his mother's stability, kindness, and trustworthiness ground him, comfort him, and help him recover from Beto's betrayal. And while Beto's betrayal leaves Yunior feeling, in the short-term, that perhaps straying from the life he knows might make him unsafe, Beto's years-long influence on Yunior's life seems to still have a hold on him, since by the end of the story, Yunior appears to be contemplating seeing his friend again and leaving their New Jersey town to seek a new life.



## SEXUALITY AND MASCULINITY

As a young man, Yunior learns by example. He often compares himself to both his father and Beto, highlighting the masculine traits of theirs that he most admires and even fears. The lessons he learns from his everyday interactions with these two men show that Yunior has a somewhat inflexible, performative, and often destructive concept of what it means to be a man.

For example, Yunior avidly describes his and Beto's early shoplifting days as “raging” and crazy,” saying they would often go out of their way to start fights and anger people just because they could. Yunior particularly admires Beto's suave confidence when they're shoplifting, seeing it as evidence that Beto is naturally masculine. However, while Yunior longs to be more like Beto, he sees his father's masculine traits as less positive. Yunior describes his father as “a charmer” and “a real asshole” because of his violent tendencies and infidelity, although Yunior seems to believe that these traits are shared by all men. For example, Yunior is anxious about shoplifting in part because he knows that if he gets caught the cops will “hand you over to your old man,” which would mean his getting beaten. When Beto says his father does not hit him in the same way that Yunior's father does, Yunior is surprised, because he assumes that violence is a trait shared among all Dominican fathers. While the fact that Beto's dad isn't violent perhaps explains Beto's easy confidence about shoplifting (the consequences for him wouldn't be physical), Yunior seems unable to make this connection, which suggests that he's unable to truly internalize that Beto's dad is a man who isn't violent.

Despite that Yunior admires or accepts as inevitable the masculine traits that Beto and his father embody, Yunior still sometimes resents them for displaying these traits. This suggests that Yunior is conflicted about the kind of man he will become—he hates certain aspects of masculinity, even as he strives to embody those aspects himself. For example, Yunior chides his mother for continuing to speak to his father, even though his father is continuously unfaithful and unfair to her. However, by telling her what to do and by mistreating other women (spending his weekends drunkenly preying on local college girls with his friends), he is falling into the same patterns as his father. Similarly, Yunior is angry when Beto punishes Yunior for knowing a word he doesn't know by holding Yunior's head under the water until he can't breathe, but Yunior finds it funny when Alex threatens to shoot local gay men with a plastic pistol even though it is a similarly disproportionate and violent response to Alex's discomfort.

Indeed, Yunior's own conflicted understanding of masculinity comes to a head when he learns—through an experience of sexual violation—that Beto is gay. Yunior has always obsessively focused on the appearance of masculinity and strength, and he has seen Beto as a masculine role model. However, Yunior considers Beto's homosexuality as a betrayal of one of the central tenets of manliness: heterosexuality. Learning of Beto's sexuality therefore threatens not only Yunior's sense of his own masculinity (because it involved him in a gay act), but also Yunior's general sense of what men are supposed to be. Yunior says Beto is “a *pato* now but we used to be friends,” which suggests that Beto's sexuality—and not his violation of Yunior—ended their friendship. This could mean that Beto's transgression of a masculine norm carries more weight with Yunior than his interpersonal betrayal. However, this statement could also be a ruse—it's possible that Yunior is too ashamed about the pall that he believes their sexual encounter casts on his own masculinity (he's terrified that he will end up “abnormal” as a result) to be fully honest about why they're no longer friends.

Beyond making Yunior feel that his own masculinity is threatened, learning that a man whom he saw as a role model is gay upends Yunior's masculine ideals. Learning of Beto's sexuality leaves Yunior with two choices: he can change his definition of masculinity so that it includes his otherwise masculine friend, or he can decide that his idolization of Beto was false and double down on the standards of masculinity with which he grew up. Yunior appears to choose the latter—he shuns Beto and becomes outwardly homophobic, as he and his friends often park near the neighborhood gay bar and shout violent slurs at the bar patrons. Yunior's inability to reevaluate his rigid and homophobic definitions of traditional masculinity speaks to the profound power of these ideas. Instead of entertaining more complex ideas about men and learning to accept his friend's sexuality, Yunior emphatically embraces

traditional masculinity, even though it means taking on characteristics—violence and cruelty—that he hates in other men.



## ESCAPE AND BELONGING

In “Drown,” home is both a place to belong to and to escape from. Yunior and Beto both live in New Jersey and are the sons of working-class

Dominican immigrants. Their bonds with their families and communities are indelible, and yet both boys struggle with a desire to escape and excel beyond the circumstances of their upbringing. Ultimately, however, Beto's sexuality forces him to think beyond his community and gives him the momentum to leave it, while Yunior has both the burden and privilege of fitting into his community and therefore getting trapped within it.

Although Yunior and Beto come from much the same circumstances, their comfort levels within their community are vastly different. While Yunior does not particularly like remaining in his childhood routines, they suit him well and offer him a sense of stability. Indeed, Yunior is deeply woven into the fabric of his community. Everyone knows him and he knows multiple generations of the same families, even if it is because he “sells them their shitty weed.” Furthermore, Yunior tells Beto that, unlike Beto, he has no “promises” beyond those offered to him by the neighborhood. He hasn't set himself up for more than a high school diploma—and besides, his mother needs him.

In contrast, Beto's homosexuality means that he cannot fully belong to his community and so he has no choice but to build a life outside of it by excelling in school and seeking out opportunities and social situations in which he might be accepted. Yunior explains that Beto “knew a lot of kids I didn't” and he points out that some of Beto's more “worldly” friends were other gay men in the club scene in New York, examples of early attempts to stretch his social horizons beyond his community. Beto is also “delirious” at the thought of leaving for college because it means “nobody can touch [him].” This suggests that (though Yunior may be unaware of it) Beto has suffered violence and confinement as a result of his sexuality. While Beto urged Yunior to “learn how to walk the world” as a method of expanding his horizons, Yunior clearly never felt the need to expand his horizons, since he was comfortable enough where he was.

While Beto's sexuality is clearly a factor in his ability to escape his community, his natural ambition and the fact that others recognized talent in him at a young age are also important. Beto was always encouraged and praised in school, which led him to be confident in his ability to direct his own life, while Yunior believes that he lacks the ability to control his fate. Yunior describes a formative experience of a teacher comparing him and his classmates to the space shuttle. The teacher explained

that “a few of you are going to make it, but the majority of you are just going to burn out.” In that moment, Yuniór “already saw himself losing altitude,” as if his fate were already sealed at a young age. By contrast, Beto always excelled in school, so he expected to escape no matter what. He explains to Yuniór that, regardless of whether or not he was about to leave for college, he would just “choose a job anywhere and go” if it meant finally being free of his neighborhood. Yuniór could also find a job somewhere else, but he prefers to stay home dealing drugs. He notes that while many of the younger kids he deals to have part-time jobs in addition to their schoolwork, he never had one himself, and he spends most of his free time drinking and fighting with his friends. Therefore, he seems to have fallen into exactly the life that he believed others expected of him, undercutting his sense of personal agency.

Due to their differing abilities to belong to their community and their contrasting ideas about fate and agency, the concept of escape comes to mean fundamentally different things for Yuniór and Beto. Beto escapes by permanently leaving a community that does not accept him and making a life in which he can be himself. To Yuniór, escape means only temporary reprieve from a life that suits him but which he doesn’t want. For example, he submerges himself in the **pool** just to surround himself with silence and stillness. “While everything above is loud and bright,” he says, “everything below is silence.” This might bring temporary emotional relief, but it doesn’t fundamentally change the circumstances of his life—it just enables him to bear his hardships. Even when Yuniór does contemplate more permanent escape in the form of joining the army, he doesn’t take the concrete steps that Beto took to get out. Instead, Yuniór seems to see himself as being at the mercy of others, going running in spots where he thinks he might encounter an army recruiter and saying, “These days my gut feels loose and cold and I want to be away from here. [The recruiter] just needs to name the place and I’ll listen.” This demonstrates that, even in contemplating a major life change, Yuniór does not see himself as being in charge of his own fate.

Throughout the story, both Yuniór and Beto learn from their surroundings. They inherit their bad language, standoffishness, and aggressive behavior from their friends and family members, but they also inherit a sense where they fit into the world and expectations about how and if they will succeed. Although Yuniór fulfills the low expectations of his teachers, he also fits within his community. In contrast, Beto is driven to succeed and leave his neighborhood precisely because his sexuality prevents him from fully fitting into his community. Without the belonging that Yuniór feels, Beto’s only option is to carve space for himself elsewhere and to have enough ambition to fuel his escape.



## PAST VS. PRESENT

“Drown” travels frequently (and often jarringly) between past and present narration. Disillusioned with his adult friends, job, and living situation,

Yuniór uses his memories to gain strength from his younger self, whom he views as stronger, funnier, and less bothered by his lack of ambition or direction. However, despite his best efforts, Yuniór cannot draw a clean line between his past and present selves, largely because Beto’s friendship and painful betrayal were critical parts of his past that therefore define his present and future.

Beto’s friendship was one of the central parts of Yuniór’s life from a young age. Beto is the person from whom Yuniór learned how to be a man and how to carry himself in the world. Throughout the story, therefore, Yuniór longs to reconnect with his positive memories of Beto, but finds himself unable to do so without also bringing up residual trauma from Beto’s betrayal and assault. For example, Yuniór lovingly recalls the “raging” and “crazy” summer that he spent with Beto before he left for college because it was a time that he felt free and uninhibited. However, even in the midst of positive memories of that summer, Yuniór cannot help but include distinctly negative aspects of Beto’s personality. In describing their youthful days of mischief at the **pool**, for example, he points out that Beto began to drown Yuniór when Yuniór knew something Beto didn’t.

Beto’s influence also extends to how Yuniór both views and remembers his neighborhood. At first, Yuniór paints a tender portrait of summer nights in his neighborhood. He describes the “Abuelas with their night hair swirled around spikey rollers” punishing boys who were caught in the pool after hours, the “families arranged on their porches” illuminated by their glowing **televisions**, and the heavy smell of pear trees in the hot air, which all contribute to a fundamentally sweet and positive memory of his home and community. However, as the story progresses, Yuniór’s observations about his neighborhood become linked to negative memories—either memories of Beto’s own disdain for the neighborhood, or memories of the trauma that Yuniór experienced in his neighborhood at Beto’s hands.

It’s clear that Yuniór has been profoundly influenced by the fact that Beto “hated everything about the neighborhood, the break-apart buildings, the little strips of grass, the piles of garbage around the cans, and the dump, especially the dump.” For Beto, the neighborhood represented failure, decrepitude, and decay. In the present, Yuniór notes the same “sickly fuzz” on top of the dump that Beto hated so much, which shows the extent to which Yuniór is still seeing the neighborhood he once loved through his estranged friend’s eyes (this is also apparent in Yuniór’s increasing urgency to escape from the neighborhood like Beto did himself and also encouraged Yuniór to do). Indeed, as Yuniór divulges more of Beto’s negative

attributes to his readers, his memories of his neighborhood are each clearly linked with a memory of Beto that continues to haunt him.

This is particularly true because the neighborhood is the site of Beto's assault, and all the places that used to give Yunior joy become painful reminders of how their friendship ended. For example, because Beto's assaults took place after the two boys swam together, Yunior no longer views the pool as a site of youthful freedom, but instead uses the water to escape his problems. All in all, despite Yunior's attempt to use positive memories to distract from the ways that Beto altered the course of Yunior's life, it becomes clear throughout the story that Yunior is fundamentally unable to remember a positive past without linking it to a negative memory of Beto. As a result, far from being strengthened by memories of his younger self, Yunior appears at the end of the story to be trapped within destructive patterns that are largely influenced by Beto.



### PHYSICAL ABILITY

Within the *machismo* culture in which Yunior grew up, there is an immense amount of importance placed on physical prowess. Yunior's strength and physical fitness are how he measures up to and distinguishes himself from men like Beto and his father. In addition, in the absence of strong intellectual ability, ambition, or a college education, physical ability is the single attribute that Yunior could use to leave New Jersey, since it could enable him to join the army. Therefore, Yunior's physique is the personal characteristic in which he takes the most pride and finds the most hope. And yet, throughout the story, both Yunior and the men he looks up to lose their perceived strength in various ways. Yunior begins to lose his physical prowess to age, while Yunior's father's violent temperament and Beto's homosexuality cause Yunior to see them as weak. This loss of strength—both in himself and in his perception of his role models—is devastating, as it signals to Yunior that he has not only lost the people that matter to him, but also the ability to escape his circumstances.

Because Yunior learned how to be a man from watching and spending time with Beto, he came to recognize physical strength as the primary way to both impress Beto and see himself as equal to Beto. As such, Yunior is preoccupied with making clear how strong he and Beto were when they were younger. For example, Yunior explains that he and Beto used to eagerly await summer nights so that they could jump the fence into the **pool** and mess around with the other neighborhood teenagers. Jumping the fence is, by definition, an act that requires a large amount of upper body strength, but the two boys manage it without issue. Similarly, although Yunior's relationship with his father is complicated by his father's cruelty and violence, he still sees his father as an example of a physically strong man and a role model. Indeed, Yunior's

father's strength and violent temper are the reasons that Yunior continues to respect him, joking to Beto that his father's beatings are equivalent to serving jail time. Indeed, far from questioning the severity of his father's punishments, Yunior sees them as an integral part of masculinity.

Yunior also views physical strength as one of the few youthful attributes that could have allowed him to leave New Jersey. Since he is not a good student and has very little ambition to get him away from home, Yunior views his physical prowess as his only possible route out of his neighborhood. For example, Yunior explains that when he was younger, an Army recruiter used to watch him run and often tried to get him to enlist. As a young man, Yunior didn't feel the need to accept the recruiter's proposition, but the fact that the recruiter tried many times to get Yunior to join up demonstrated that he had options. In addition, Yunior continually draws attention to how strong he *still* is. He notes that he "runs three miles easy, could have pushed a fourth if I were in the mood." He also explains while swimming that he "can still swim far without coming up." These callbacks to his youthful strength prove that, as he gets older and his life gets more unfulfilling, Yunior is all the more keen to remind himself that his strength still belongs to him.

Ultimately however, Yunior is surrounded by lost strength, both in himself and in the men that he used to view as the paragons of physical and emotional strength in his life. For example, when Yunior goes to the pool to look for Beto, he finds that the fence that he used to climb easily is now uncomfortably hard to scale and he is mocked by neighborhood children when he falls on his face after climbing over. In addition, as a young man, Yunior explains that he didn't need the "discipline" and "loyalty" that the Army recruiter tried to sell him, but as he ages, and his "gut feels loose and cold," he becomes more frantic to spot the recruiter again, sensing that he might have a waning chance of ever making it out of New Jersey if his strength fades completely.

Critically, Yunior's concept of strength doesn't just affect the way he sees himself—it also alters the way he thinks about Beto. While Yunior goes out of his way throughout the story to praise Beto's charisma, stature, and physical prowess, he immediately contradicts these impressions after Beto sexually assaults him. For example, when he goes to find Beto the night after the assault, he notes that Beto's body looked "pale and flabby under the water." Because Yunior is disgusted both by Beto's sexuality and his betrayal, he is also disgusted by any signs of his friend's physical weakness. In addition, Yunior explains that, as he aged, his tacit respect for his father's strength was replaced with full repulsion and resentment for his violent temper and the way he used it to terrorize Yunior and his mother. For example, Yunior bitterly recalls that his father gave him a brutal beating when he talked back to his mother in the aftermath of Beto's assault. Already reeling from Beto's betrayal, this second bastardization of physical strength

made Yunior feel even more angry and alone.

All in all, Yunior's attachment to physical strength as a marker of both successful manhood and lifelong fulfillment ultimately betrays him. Although he strives to be physically fit to measure up to Beto and stand up to his father, he eventually calls both men's physical strength into question, and with it, everything that strength had come to mean to him: masculinity, virility, and purpose. Therefore, Yunior is left only with the idea of his own past strength, which he holds on to like a promise, reasserting his physical ability to excel beyond his circumstances even as his emotional and mental ability to do so is almost extinguished.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE POOL

As the title would suggest, "Drown" uses water to symbolize how the pleasures of Yunior's youth—including swimming—contribute to a growing sense of confinement as he ages. Yunior's narrative revolves around his neighborhood pool, which is initially the fun destination of his adolescent summer nights with Beto. Surrounded by a plastic fence that is (increasingly) hard to climb, the pool is a sacred space of adolescent freedom where Yunior and Beto are able to establish their brotherhood and where Yunior can go in his later years to find the stillness, quiet, and solitude that he cannot get at home. However, throughout the story, the pool takes on a more negative cast. It is an intimate and sometimes scarily exposed space: Yunior and Beto watch neighborhood boys pull off a teenage girl's bikini top, undressing her without her consent. Similarly, Both of Beto's sexual advances happen after the two boys have been swimming, so they are already in intimate proximity and in various stages of undress both physically and emotionally. As the pool becomes associated with the difficulties of adulthood, rather than their carefree childhood romps, it parallels the other aspects of Yunior's life that were once comfortable and are now perhaps stifling: living in his mother's house, for example, or shoplifting once the legal consequences become clear. Despite the pool's growing negative associations, Yunior can't seem to shake free of it: the water still provides him solace and comfort, even if it is through adult solitude instead of youthful companionship.



### TELEVISION

"Drown" is a story in which characters rarely talk to one another about the things that matter most. Instead of talking directly about important subjects, they watch television together and remain in silence. Television, then, is a

proxy for human interaction: it can be a barrier to communication, a bonding force in relationships where there isn't much to be said, or a way to avoid dealing with uncomfortable issues. Yunior's mother tells him Beto is home, for instance, Yunior does not answer because he is watching television, and when Yunior leaves Beto's apartment after their second sexual encounter Beto keeps his eyes on the TV and doesn't acknowledge Yunior's departure (or the sexual violation that has just taken place). On the one hand, television is the primary way that Yunior and his mother interact and express affection, watching telenovelas together to create a safe and silent space to share each other's company without the added pressure of speech or explanation. However, this same protective silence is inverted in Yunior's relationship with Beto, in which the TV both facilitates and masks Beto's unwanted sexual advances. Yunior keeps his eyes on the TV primarily to ignore what is being done to his body without his consent. In addition, Yunior spends most of his time watching television, and it often allows him to escape from the problems of his own life, immersing himself instead in the "violence" of the Spanish language news or a documentary at the local library.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *Drown* published in 1996.

### Drown Quotes

☝ He's a pato now but two years ago we were friends and he would walk into the apartment without knocking, his heavy voice rousing my mother from the Spanish of her room and drawing me up from the basement, a voice that crackled and made you think of uncles or grandfathers.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), Yunior's Mother, Beto

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 91

#### Explanation and Analysis

When Yunior finds out that his former best friend Beto is home for college, he offers a preliminary description of Beto to his audience. It is a contradictory portrait. On one hand, *pato* is the Spanish equivalent of "faggot," a derogatory slur that indicates that Yunior has little respect for Beto. Yet Yunior also explains that their friendship used to be so close that it was almost familial. By addressing Beto's sexuality first, however, Yunior indicates that Beto's homosexuality is

the primary reason that their friendship ended. In addition, he makes sure to contrast Beto's sexuality with the more "normal" masculine role that Beto used to occupy in Yunior's life, which was akin to an uncle or grandfather. In addition, by placing Yunior's friendship with Beto in the past tense, Díaz establishes that Yunior is a character that lives both in past and present, and that his relationship with Beto has a complex and lasting history.

☝ The heat in the apartments was like something heavy that had come inside to die. Families arranged on their porches, the glow from their TVs washing blue against the brick. From my family apartment, you could smell the pear trees that had been planted years ago...

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Yunior offers a description of what his neighborhood was like in the summers when he was growing up. Although it is a somewhat negative image (of claustrophobia, heat, and sweat), the memory still remains incredibly vivid to Yunior and he takes care to describe it in an almost loving way. In contrast to Beto's overwhelmingly negative opinions of their home and his eagerness to escape it, Yunior's description shows his level of familiarity with and acceptance of his environment, even if he doesn't like it that much. This proves that while Yunior may not like his neighborhood, he at least feels as if he fits within it, whereas Beto felt the neighborhood was a place where he was forced to live and that constrained him.

☝ I can still go far without coming up. While everything above is loud and bright, everything below is whispers.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

When Yunior returns to the pool years later, he does not find Beto, but he jumps in nonetheless. While the pool used to represent youthful freedom and escape from the heat of his apartment, the water has come to mean different things to Yunior as he ages. Firstly, he makes sure to stress that he still has the physical ability to swim long distances without coming up for air, which makes him feel better about being one of the older people at the pool. In addition, while he used to come to the pool to be surrounded by the clatter and mischief of his peers, he now submerges himself in the water as a way to escape the noise and clutter of his life, seeking a reprieve from a life he belongs to but does not particularly want. Therefore, the pool used to be a marker of his community and virility, while now it's a nostalgic reminder of what has passed, as well as an escape from his mediocre present.

☝ He hated when I knew something he didn't. He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me under. He was wearing a cross and cutoff jeans. He was stronger than me and held me down until water flooded my nose and throat. Even then I didn't tell him; he thought I didn't read, not even dictionaries.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), Beto

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

When Yunior knows the meaning of the word "Expectorating" on the pool rules sign, Beto pushes Yunior's head under the water until he explains how he learned the word. This encounter shows the power dynamic in the boys' relationship. While Beto is the one that constantly encourages Yunior to think more of himself and expand his worldview, Beto becomes threatened if Yunior does so in a way that Beto sees as a challenge to his own intellectual authority. In addition, Beto is both the physical and emotional alpha in their relationship, since Yunior is unable to get out of Beto's grip and begins to choke as a result. Although Yunior passes this instance off as typical brotherly roughhousing, it indicates that Yunior is fully aware that Beto is more powerful than he is, and he is willing to take a subordinate role to the man whom he considers to be his big brother and role model.

In addition, Yunior's observation that Beto didn't think he read "even the dictionary" is another example of the way that Beto created a view of Yunior that inherently limited him. As a result of Beto's assumptions, Yunior was only able to grow and distinguish himself in relation to Beto's understanding and expectations of him. This insight largely explains why Yunior's relationship with Beto maintains such a powerful hold over him even as an adult.

☝ She has discovered the secret to silence: pouring café without a splash, walking between rooms as if gliding on a cushion of felt, crying without a sound. You have traveled to the East and learned many secret things, I've told her. You're like a shadow warrior.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), Yunior's Mother

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

Yunior explains that, although he lives alone with his mother in a tiny apartment, they often negotiate their shared space in silence, something that his mother is particularly good at. This observation shows that despite their close proximity and largely codependent relationship, Yunior is mostly unaware of the way his mother spends her days and views her as someone who has "secrets," which she keeps and develops in silence. However, his playful jibe that she is like a "shadow warrior" shows that they have a fundamentally intimate relationship that, although it often involves secrets and silence, is built on love. Indeed, Yunior explains that his mother is the main reason he is staying in New Jersey, because he sees a duty to care for and support her.

☝ Both of us had seen bad shoplifters at work. All grab and run, nothing smooth about them. Not us. We idled out of the stores slow, like a fat seventies car.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), Beto

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

While Yunior's mother shops for bargains at the mall, Yunior

traces the route of stores where he used to shoplift with Beto. Yunior views his shoplifting days as a fundamentally positive time in his life, where he was able to use ingenuity, gall and "street smarts" to see himself as Beto's partner in crime. In the absence of Beto's intellectual ability, wit and nerve become an important way that Yunior distinguishes himself and tries to measure up to Beto. Despite the fact that shoplifting is a crime, Yunior is barely able to contain his joy and pride at their skill, boastfully comparing himself and Beto to a kitted-out seventies car. The analogy also indicates that Yunior views shoplifting as an enviably masculine skill, which (like an unnecessarily flashy automobile) demonstrates the *machismo* that he so admires in Beto.

☝ "They don't send you to jail for shoplifting. They just turn you over to your old man."

**Related Characters:** Beto (speaker), Yunior's Father, Yunior

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

When Yunior expresses fear that Beto's reckless shoplifting tactics will land them both in jail, Beto tells him not to worry, since the only punishment will be decided by their fathers. This observation indicates that, for Yunior and Beto (as for many boys), their fathers are both the heads of the household and the primary source of discipline. Yunior is not calmed by Beto's observation, as his father is incredibly strong and has a very violent temper. However, Yunior is surprised when Beto does not seem overly worried about being punished by his own father, since Yunior assumes violence is a primary characteristic that is shared by all Dominican fathers. However, Beto's father does not seem to hit Beto. If Yunior assumes violence to be a fundamental characteristic of fathers, then it is also something he considers to be a fundamental masculine trait. Indeed, despite the fact that Yunior resents his father for his violence and temper, he eventually models the same kind of violent and angry behavior when he spends time with Alex and Danny fighting at local bars.

☛ These days my guts feel loose and cold and I want to be away from here. He won't have to show me his Desert Eagle, or flash the photos of skinny Filipino girls sucking dick. He'll only have to smile and name the place and I'll listen.

**Related Characters:** Yuniór (speaker), The Recruiter

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

Yuniór explains that he goes running every day behind his apartment. He is still able to run three or four miles at a time, and each time he runs he keeps an eye out for an Army recruiter who used to approach him about joining the army. Yuniór explains that, while he used to refuse the recruiter's eager pitch, he now is hoping that the opportunity to enlist will reappear so that he can finally leave New Jersey. This shows that Yuniór believes that his physical prowess is his main attribute and, in the absence of school smarts, Yuniór comforts himself that he is still strong enough to leave New Jersey. Crucially however, his desire to leave does not show an increase in ambition or momentum from his youth—indeed, he wants the recruiter to find him, rescuing him from his situation in the most passive way possible since he is still fundamentally comfortable in his current life, just no longer satisfied. Also, his observation about his gut feeling “looser” shows that he is eager to join the army before his physical strength is gone.

☛ He knew a lot of folks I didn't—a messed-up black kid from Madison Park, two brothers who were into that N.Y. club scene, who spent money on platform shoes and leather backpacks. I'd leave a message with his parents and then watch some more TV. The next day he'd be out at the bus stop, too busy smoking a cigarette to say much about the day before.

**Related Characters:** Yuniór (speaker), Beto

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 102

### Explanation and Analysis

Yuniór explains that, despite their closeness, Beto also sometimes spent his time in New York with boys that Yuniór didn't know. Yuniór is curious about this element of Beto's

life, which is the only one that he keeps purposefully separate and private. Yuniór's reference to the “club scene” likely refers to the New York “club kids,” young gay men who frequented queer clubs during the 1980s and were known for eccentric and flamboyant fashion choices and overt sexuality. Both Beto's involvement with club kids, and his unwillingness to tell Yuniór much about how and where he spent his evenings, indicates that even as a young man, Beto was finding ways to escape from his prescriptive and judgmental neighborhood to experiment with his sexuality and come into himself as a gay man. While Yuniór is obviously hurt that his best friend is keeping elements of his life from him, he has a sense of the “club scene” Beto is involved in, and that his friend with “platform shoes” is likely gay. Crucially, however, he does not interrogate Beto further on the subject, choosing instead to let Beto keep that part of his life separate so as not to challenge any aspect of their youthful friendship. In addition, Yuniór mentions that he spent the majority of his time watching TV, a recurring symbol of Yuniór's attempts to cope and escape throughout the story.

☛ Mostly I stayed in the basement, terrified that I would end up abnormal, a fucking *pato*, but he was my best friend and back then that mattered to me more than anything.

**Related Characters:** Yuniór (speaker), Beto

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

Yuniór's memories of his emotional state after his first sexual encounter with Beto are very indicative of how he views Beto's sexuality and how he feels about their friendship. Having grown up within the hyper-masculine Dominican culture, heterosexuality is a central part of what it means to be a man. By being gay, therefore, Beto has betrayed a central tenet of masculinity. Because Beto is also Yuniór's central role model in all aspects of “manliness,” Yuniór is now implicated in Beto's “unnaturalness,” not only because of their sexual contact, but also because of how deeply Beto has influenced Yuniór's identity. And yet, even in the depth of his disgust for Beto, Yuniór is also pained and confused by the level of his love for Beto, since their friendship matters more to him than anything else. Ultimately, this memory indicates that Yuniór felt immensely betrayed by Beto's actions because they

changed and upended the nature of their friendship and made Yunior question his understanding of the deepest parts of himself.

In addition, because Yunior says that his friendship with Beto mattered more than anything to him “back then,” he is indicating that he made a definitive decision to cut Beto out of his life because of his actions. Accepting Beto after their sexual contact would mean that Yunior would have had to amend his definition of masculinity to include Beto’s sexuality. He was not able to do that, choosing instead to reaffirm his own masculinity, heterosexuality, and strength by spending time with men like Alex and Danny.

☛ After I was done, he laid his head in my lap. I wasn’t asleep or awake but caught somewhere in between, rocking slowly back and forth the way surf holds junk against the shore, rolling it over and over.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), Beto

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

In the minutes following their second sexual encounter, both Yunior and Beto are simultaneously incredibly intimate and functionally estranged from each other. Yunior, who is unable to separate his desire to please Beto from his own sense of discomfort, allows Beto to sexually assault him a second time. Confronted again with the betrayal of his closest friend, Yunior dissociates from his surroundings, stuck instead in a liminal space between sleeping and waking, trying to understand what has just happened. Beto on the other hand is completely unaware of Yunior’s feelings of discomfort, lost instead in a desire to be close to Yunior. Indeed, by laying his head in Yunior’s lap, Beto embraces their encounter as intimate and consensual. In this way, the boys become more and more distanced from each other, a severing of their incredible intimacy that deeply effects Yunior up to the present day.

☛ One teacher, whose family had two grammar schools named after it, compared us to the shuttles. A few of you are going to make it. Those are the orbiters. But the majority of you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand onto the desk. I could already see myself losing altitude, fading, the earth spread out beneath me, hard and bright.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker), The Teacher

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 106

### Explanation and Analysis

Yunior recounts this memory directly following his second sexual encounter with Beto. Confronted with Beto’s betrayal, he thinks back to another time in his youth where he felt let down by someone who had power over him, this time a high school teacher. Already uncomfortable with his classes and school work, Yunior’s teacher’s observation can be seen as all the more cruel and unkind. For one thing, Yunior makes it clear that the teacher came from a wealthy family and a legacy of education, and yet he was going out of his way to lecture inner city Latino youth on their lack of motivation to transcend their circumstances. In addition, Yunior makes it clear that, at the moment that his teacher demonstrated that he had little faith in his class’s ability to succeed, Yunior himself felt that his fate was already sealed. In addition to providing crucial background to Yunior’s uneasy sense of “belonging” within his neighborhood, Junot Díaz indicates the way in which inner city public school systems largely fail underrepresented youth, purely by unfairly categorizing and burdening them with assumptions about their potential. For Díaz, who works passionately with young writers in underrepresented communities of color, this negligence on the part of educators makes an enormous difference on the futures of their students who, like Yunior, have no one else to tell them to have big dreams and expand their views of themselves.

☛ The actors throw themselves around, passionate, but their words are plain and deliberate. It’s hard to imagine anybody going through life this way.

**Related Characters:** Yunior (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 107

### Explanation and Analysis

Yunior reflects on the acting style in a classic Spanish movie that he is watching with his mother. As always, television is the primary way that they spend time together, and it also provides Yunior with a way to look at his life and the world

around him. In this case, he notes that the overdramatic way that telenovela actors behave does not seem to be truthful to him. Importantly, however, it is their immense passion coupled with strong, deliberate speech that he finds hard to believe. For Yuniors, trapped in a listless job in a neighborhood that offers him little challenge or excitement,

passion is not something he is used to feeling in himself or recognizing in those around him. In addition, both passion and deliberation are qualities of ambition, the fire to succeed coupled with a deliberate way of going about achieving your goals.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## DROWN

When Yunior is home watching **television**, Yunior's mother tells him that his old friend Beto is home from college. When his mother is asleep, Yunior puts on his jacket and goes to see if Beto is home. Yunior notes that Beto is a *pato* (faggot) now, but that they used to be close enough that both he and his mother considered Beto to be a member of their family.

Yunior remembers that the summer before Beto went to college, the two boys were "raging": stealing everything they could, breaking windows, and challenging people to come out and fight with them just because they felt invincible.

Yunior explains that Beto was "delirious" at the thought of leaving for college because he hated everything about their neighborhood and wanted to leave as soon as he was able. As a result, Beto never understood why Yunior did not have the same drive to leave their hometown. Yunior told Beto that, unlike him, he still has a year of high school left and no opportunities anywhere else.

As he makes his way towards Beto's apartment, Yunior remembers the ways that the two boys used to spend their summers together. During the days, the pair would go to the mall or play stickball in a local parking lot, but at night they would eagerly hop the plastic fence at the local **pool** to swim with the rest of the neighborhood children. This was the most effective way of beating the "heavy" summer heat, splashing and goofing off until the neighborhood adults yelled at them to go home to their own apartments.

When he arrives at Beto's apartment, Yunior is stirred from his memory. He puts his ear to the door, but only hears the sound of Beto's air conditioner. He explains that he has not even decided if he wants to speak to Beto at all since the two have not seen each other for two years.

*Díaz immediately establishes Yunior's close relationship with his mother, and also the ways in which he conceals his emotions from her. In addition, Yunior immediately places his relationship with Beto in the past tense and seemingly points to Beto's sexuality as the reason the two are no longer friends.*



*Presenting "rage" as a positive quality indicates that the two boys' friendship was largely characterized by a shared emphasis on masculinity, power, violence and strength. Notably, these are traits Yunior sees more in his past self than his present self.*



*The two boys had different relationships to their neighborhood. Beto sees it as a place to escape from, while Yunior indelibly belongs to it, bound by his relationship with his mother and to his final year of school. In addition, Yunior does not see himself as having the ambition that Beto has to leave.*



*Confronted with the possibility of seeing Beto again, Yunior remembers the pool: a positive space to be surrounded by his community and peers. In addition, because the pool is surrounded by a fence, swimming is a reward for physical strength and breaking the rules, as it is clearly not something the children are allowed to do.*



*Arriving at Beto's apartment Yunior is confronted with a familiar space that now makes him feel like a stranger. Much like Beto himself, the apartment is alien and unwelcoming.*



In spite of himself, Yuniór makes his way towards the familiar racket at the local **pool**, assuming that Beto will be there. As he has gotten older, it has become much harder for him to hop the fence, and a neighborhood teenager mocks him as he falls over the top.

When Yuniór straightens up, he notices that he is one of the oldest people at the **pool**, surrounded mostly by the younger siblings of his high school classmates, who recognize him primarily as the guy who “sells them their shitty dope.”

Only mildly daunted by his relative age, Yuniór dives into the water. Still a talented swimmer, he glides underwater for a long time without making a splash. He takes refuge in the “whispers” that he finds under the surface, a welcome contrast to the loud brightness above. He notes that, when they were younger, there was always a risk of coming up for air and finding the cops yelling at them to get out of the **pool** and go home.

When Yuniór comes up for air, he is comforted by the familiar signs of teenage mischief around him. He notices an old sign that says “No Running, No Defecating, No Urinating, No Expectorating,” to which someone has added “No Fat Chiks.” When they were younger, Yuniór recalls that Beto became upset with him when Yuniór knew what “expectorating” meant and Beto did not. When Yuniór would not tell Beto where he learned the word, Beto held Yuniór’s head under water for a long time until he began to choke. Beto, Yuniór recalls, did not like it when Yuniór knew something that he didn’t.

Yuniór explains that he still lives alone with his mother, and though she still pays the rent and utilities, he makes enough to cover the phone bill. Despite their close quarters, Yuniór’s mother is so quiet that Yuniór is often startled to find her in the apartment. He explains that she has “discovered the secret to silence,” walking, cooking and crying without making any noise.

Returning from the **pool**, Yuniór finds that his mother is still awake and he watches **television** with her. They settle on the Spanish language news because it provides violence for Yuniór to watch and drama for his mother. They watch the story of a baby that survived a seven-story fall out of a window.

*Yuniór returns to the pool, trying to find memories of Beto and childhood again but he finds that everything has changed. Not only is Beto not there, but the fence is much harder to climb since he’s older now and he is mocked by the pool’s current patrons.*



*Surrounded by siblings of his former classmates, Yuniór is somehow out of phase. Despite the fact that his classmates have moved on, he is still trying to fit in in childhood spaces to which he no longer belongs.*



*Yuniór’s obsession with physical strength is Díaz’s commentary on the machismo culture that he grew up in. Exaggerating strength is also the way Yuniór attempts to prove that he is still young and still belongs at the pool. However, while he used to swim to be surrounded by his community, swimming is now his way to escape from the parts of his life that give him stress.*



*Beto pushes Yuniór to grow as long as it conforms to his terms, becoming threatened if Yuniór excels in a way he cannot. When Yuniór knows a word Beto doesn’t Beto responds by asserting his physical and emotional power over Yuniór. Yuniór both resents and admires this behavior, since Beto is his model of both masculinity and physical strength.*



*Yuniór’s relationship with his mother prevents him from fully growing up in many ways. Though she still protects and nurtures him by paying his rent and cooking for him, they also interact like strangers, spending most of their time in silence, unaware how the other spends their days.*



*Television is a critical part of Yuniór and his mother’s relationship, as it allows them to spend silent time together that is still emotionally connected. Their choice in programming also shows that Yuniór is familiar with what his mother needs and he compromises to please her.*



Yunior's mother is disappointed that he wasn't able to find Beto, thinking that it is a shame that the two don't talk anymore. Yunior's mother tells him that Beto is doing well and is about to start business school in the fall.

*By bragging to Yunior about Beto's successes in school, Yunior's mother is still viewing Beto as a member of their family, proving how disconnected she is from Yunior's feelings about Beto.*



When Yunior's mother tells Yunior that Beto also asked how he was doing, Yunior is angry and embarrassed that she didn't lie and tell Beto that Yunior had his own apartment. Yunior's mother doesn't understand why the two men don't speak anymore, and she counsels Yunior that they should make up the way she and Yunior's father have: they were once very angry at each other but are now able to be civil. Yunior ignores her and continues to watch the **television**.

*When confronted with Beto's success, Yunior is angry with his unimpressive lifestyle (even though he is also comforted by his mother's care). He clearly still cares deeply about what Beto thinks of him. He is also angry that she tries to compare their relationship to her relationship with Yunior's father. He does not bring his feelings up, however, retreating back into his silence instead.*



Over the weekend, Yunior's mother asks him to take her to the mall. Yunior agrees, explaining that he sees it as one of his duties as a son, despite the fact that they have to walk two miles through "red neck territory" to catch the bus.

*Here, Díaz provides insight into Yunior's routines with his mother. His compromise shows that he is bound by a "duty" to make her happy.*



Before they can go out, however, Yunior's mother makes Yunior check every window latch in their house. Despite the fact that they never open their windows, Yunior's mother is paranoid that intruders will break in when she is out and hold her hostage, which happened to one of her friends when she was "lazy" and didn't lock her windows.

*Yunior's mother physically cannot lock the windows by herself because she is too short. Therefore, Yunior helps his mother with something important to her but which Yunior also knows is unnecessary. This makes clear that, in the absence of his father, Yunior is the man of the house.*



Yunior notes that it is a special occasion when his mother decides to go out, and she always gets dressed up and puts on makeup. As a result, Yunior cannot resent taking her to the mall even though he often sells the bulk of his drugs on Saturdays, so the mall trips interrupt his work.

*Yunior's life is so intertwined with his mother's that he is totally familiar with her rituals. His comment also shows that he is aware that they do not lead a particularly adventurous or outgoing life if the main reason she has to get dressed up is to hunt for bargains.*



Yunior recognizes most of the kids on the bus to be teenagers that he sells to. He prays he will not be recognized, but his mother seems not to notice.

*Yunior's mother's obliviousness proves how little she knows about his life, complicating the reader's understanding of their closeness.*



At the mall, Yunior gives his mother fifty-dollars to spend. He explains that, when he was younger, his father would give her one hundred dollars to spend at the beginning of the summer for Yunior's new clothes. She would take over a week to spend it all, hunting carefully through the various bargain bins. Yunior hates to think of his mother bargain hunting.

*Although Yunior is not the financial provider in their relationship, he has fully stepped into his father's role in their life, a role that he strives to do well. Yet, he is embarrassed with her bargain hunting (which he sees as an emblem of their poverty) though he does nothing himself to ease their financial strain.*



While his mother shops, Yunior tracks the same route through the mall that he and Beto used to at the height of their shoplifting. He recalls the way that they finessed their routine, taking time to stop and browse through merchandise instead of just pulling a “grab and run.” Of the two of them, Beto was better at being smooth, often asking cashiers for directions or asking Yunior what he thought of a particular item even as his bag was full of stolen goods.

Beto’s recklessness always made Yunior uneasy, worrying that the two might go to jail. Beto made fun of Yunior’s worry, explaining that there is no jail time for shoplifting and the police just let your father discipline you. For Beto, this is not much of a punishment because his father has arthritis. Yunior is startled when Beto tells him that his father doesn’t hit him, assuming that his own father’s violent temper and history of physical abuse is shared by all fathers.

Yunior recalls that his mother never suspected that he was shoplifting, even though he brought home large quantities of new clothes. Yunior’s father, however, saw exactly how his son was spending his time and cautioned him that he would get caught eventually.

Indeed, one day when shoplifting from the book store, Yunior and Beto get stopped by the store security guard asking to check their bag. Yunior tries to walk past her, but Beto stops and hits her in the face with his bag. The two boys try to run from the cops, but are found by store security hiding under a car across from the bus stop, having been too scared to take the bus. Yunior notes that they held hands when they were found.

Without Beto’s friendship, Yunior now spends his evenings with his friends Alex and Danny, drinking at a sleepy bar full of “washouts and sucias.” The men drink too much and fight with each other, scaring the wait staff and other patrons. On the way home from the bar, Yunior notices the Raritan River in the distance, noting that it is the same river that Beto goes to school on.

*To distract himself from his current errand, Yunior remembers happier times with Beto. Because shoplifting requires criminal instead of intellectual finesse, it is the one realm in which Yunior can be Beto’s equal. Yet, as in all things, Beto is still the superior shoplifter, and Yunior is happy to learn from his skills.*



*Yunior’s assumption that all fathers are violent proves that he believes violence to be a large part of what it means to be a man. Also, by equating his father’s beatings with jail time, it is clear that Yunior is terrified of his father’s temper and strength, since it is as strong a motivator to stay out of trouble as prison would be.*



*Yunior’s mother has clearly been selectively ignoring Yunior’s activities for a long time. Like his drug dealing, shoplifting is an illegal activity that she would rather not confront.*



*In the presence of a threat, Beto’s immediate impulse is to become violent in an effort to save himself and also protect Yunior, showing both his great tenderness and volatility. Indeed, Beto even holds Yunior’s hand when they get caught, which indicates their strong brotherly connection and that Yunior views Beto as his protector.*



*Yunior responds to the loss of Beto’s friendship by finding friends that are Beto’s opposite. Indeed, instead of inspiring him to be better, Alex and Danny reinforce Yunior’s negative traits and model the kind of false, strong, and violent masculinity that Yunior resented in his father. Nor do these new friends help Yunior to forget Beto; the observation about the Raritan shows that Beto is still top of mind no matter how much Yunior does to forget him.*



In the mornings, Yunior explains that he always goes for a run behind his apartment. When he runs, Yunior looks for an army recruiter who has stopped him before and asked him to enlist. Back when the recruiter stopped Yunior, he explained that the army gave him “loyalty” and “discipline.” Although Yunior turned him down at the time, he notes that he would now easily take the recruiter’s offer because he “just wants to be anywhere else.”

When Yunior returns from his run, he finds his mother whispering on the phone. She is on the phone with Yunior’s father, who lives in Florida with a girlfriend. Yunior explains that he often calls his mother to beg for money, lying that he will leave his current girlfriend if she moves to Florida herself. Yunior’s mother knows that Yunior disapproves of their phone calls, so she leaves the refrigerator door open in hopes that its hum will mask the sound of her voice.

Yunior remembers that he often skipped classes when he and Beto were in high school. Because he didn’t have a car, Yunior would spend the day watching TV or watching old documentaries at the library, making his way back to the neighborhood at night to see Beto. Sometimes, however, Beto was not around because he was visiting other neighborhoods or spending the evening in Manhattan instead. Yunior notes that Beto had friends that Yunior didn’t know, some of whom were active in the New York club scene. Despite Yunior’s questions, Beto rarely told him about what he did on his nights out, although he did always encourage Yunior to expand his horizons and meet new people.

Some nights, Yunior explains that he drives with Alex and Danny to New Brunswick to drink at bars with college girls. The young women don’t dance with them, but Yunior and his friends get adrenaline even from being refused. After the clubs close, they speed through the empty streets, keeping the windows open so that Alex will not fall asleep and wreck his third car.

The men always drive past a gay bar on the way home, and Alex will often pull into the parking lot and pretend to ask for directions. When one of the men comes over to help him, Alex points a plastic pistol at the men outside the bar “to see if they will run or shit their pants.”

*In the absence of Beto’s grades and ambition, Yunior’s physical ability was always the only thing that could help him escape New Jersey. However, though his desire to leave increases as he ages (and his strength leaves him) he still has absolutely no ambition to plot his own escape, hoping instead that the recruiter will passively rescue him.*



*Yunior’s mother’s rare moment of secrecy shows the way the two hide significant parts of their lives from each other. Yunior’s mother hides her phone call because Yunior truly hates his father. Critically, however, he hates his father for his violence and bad treatment of women, the same behavior Yunior exhibits with Alex and Danny.*



*Here, Yunior overpraises his younger self’s street smarts and ingenuity to make himself seem more equal to Beto’s intellect. In addition, he notes that Beto had friends Yunior didn’t know, proving that Beto was actively expanding his social circles in a way that Yunior could not. However, Beto was seeking out other gay men in New York’s club scene, a world that Yunior cannot access partly because he is privileged enough not to have to.*



*This anecdote is another example of the ways Alex and Danny further trap Yunior. Firstly, by drinking in college bars, he is taking refuge in an idea of his own youth and virility that is unrealistic. In addition, he is forced to be negatively masculine to compensate for his discomfort.*



*Alex attempts to be overtly strong and violent to mask his discomfort with gay men. Likewise, Yunior uses terms like “pato” to justify and support the violence his friends inflict.*



Spurred by this, Yunior explains that the nature of his relationship with Beto abruptly changed the summer before he left for college. One day, the two boys were in his apartment after going swimming, watching one of Beto's father's porn videos. Yunior notes that Beto's father often watched porn in the middle of the day, even as Beto's mother cooked in the kitchen. Often Beto would watch porn with his father in silence.

As the two boys watched the video, Beto reached into Yunior's pants and began to give him a hand job. He continued despite Yunior's protest and confusion. Yunior recalls that he ejaculated immediately out of fear and then left as soon as he could. Beto said nothing as Yunior left to go home; he just kept watching **TV**.

The day after Beto's sexual advance, Yunior refuses to spend time with Beto, spending the day in the basement instead, terrified that he will end up "abnormal." When his mother tries to find out what is wrong, Yunior snaps at her, causing his father, who is visiting from Florida, to slap him.

Despite his feelings of hurt and confusion, Yunior still goes to the **pool** that night because Beto is still his best friend. After they swim in silence, Beto takes Yunior back to his house and gives him a hand job again. Beto offers to stop, but Yunior is afraid to say anything. After Beto is done, he lies his head in Yunior's lap, oblivious to Yunior's discomfort.

Confronted with the reality of Beto leaving for college, Yunior thinks back to a time when his high school teachers made his class watch the space shuttle launch from Florida. The teacher compared each student to the shuttle, explaining that only some would have the emotional momentum to ascend, while the rest would merely burn out. Yunior remembers feeling, in that moment, as if he himself was already losing altitude.

After the second sexual encounter, Yunior sits in silence on Beto's couch for a long time. Soon, he hears the hallway door burst open. He jumps up, terrified, but Beto is unfazed, explaining that it is only his neighbor. Nevertheless, Yunior puts his clothes back on and leaves Beto's apartment.

*Díaz interrupts the description of Alex's violence towards gay men by evoking a memory that Yunior would rather not recall. In addition, the fact that the two boys watched porn together proves that there was already a level of comfort with shared individual sexuality in their relationship, but that it was treated casually.*



*By reaching over and beginning to give Yunior a handjob, Beto is crossing a line in their relationship. Importantly, Yunior views watching porn together as a normal, heterosexual act, but giving or receiving sexual pleasure during it enters a realm of perverted, unmanly behavior.*



*Since Beto is his primary masculine role model, Beto's unwanted advance not only challenges the nature of their friendship, but also Yunior's concept of masculinity itself. Indeed, Yunior allows his father to beat him for talking back to his mother potentially to be assured of a "normal" violent, masculine response.*



*Yunior's ability to allow the assault to recur shows that he has no concept of his life without the structure that Beto provides, but also that he does not have the ability to say no to Beto. Therefore, the two men experience the event in opposite ways. Yunior, retreats further into himself out of trauma. Beto, mistaking Yunior's silence for consent, experiences the event as tender.*



*In the midst of his assault, Yunior is confronted with his own lack of ambition and personal momentum to transcend his circumstances. Indeed, since Beto betrayed their friendship, Yunior feels doubly lost. Beto is not only his best friend, but also his role model for ambition and masculinity, a model that has now betrayed him.*



*Beto's behavior after their encounter shows the way in which the two men have become alienated from each other. Previously inseparable, Beto is now unable (or refuses to) recognize or validate Yunior's discomfort and fear.*



The narrative returns to the present, weeks after Yunior went looking for Beto at the **pool**. Yunior explains that he believes he saw Beto driving in his father's car, but he assumes that Beto is already back at school. Yunior is still dealing drugs in his neighborhood, but the teenagers he deals to now have part-time jobs of their own.

When Yunior gets home, he finds his mother cooking dinner. She shows him new t-shirts that she bought for him on two-for-one special. Despite their tight fit, Yunior is grateful to her and thanks her for the new clothes.

The two sit down to watch a classic Spanish movie on **TV** and Yunior gives his mother the money that he earned for the day. She chastises him for crumpling the bills and smooths them out herself.

As they watch the movie, Yunior's mother takes his hand in hers. Near the end of the film, she falls asleep and he imagines that she is dreaming of walking in Boca Raton with his father. When the movie ends, Yunior shakes his mother awake and she asks him to check the windows before they go to sleep. He promises that he will.

*Having remembered Beto's past betrayal, Yunior is no longer able to present a nonchalant picture of his present. He notes that his drug dealing is stale and ineffective and even his young patrons have more sense of their personal direction than he does.*



*Despite his unhappiness with his life, Yunior still takes refuge in the stability and care that his mother provides him and is eager to validate her and everything she does for him.*



*This exchange shows that Yunior has a childlike inability to respect his money and that his mother reinforces this quality by continuing to do everything for him.*



*A parallel moment to Beto's assault (which also takes place in front of a TV), this opposite, tender encounter shows Yunior choosing the safety and stability of his mother's home over his complex and challenging feelings about Beto. Like his sleeping mother however, Yunior will eventually have to wake up and face the complexity of his life.*





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