

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUNOT DÍAZ

Díaz was born in the Dominican Republic but grew up in a working class family in Parlin, New Jersey. He then attended Rutgers College and began to start his career as a writer. He has written three best-selling novels: *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*. He is an active member of the Dominican Workers' Party and often speaks about issues of racial relations in the Dominican Republic and in America, as well as immigration policy. Since the publication of *Oscar Wao*, Díaz has won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the MacArthur grant in 2010. As of 2016, he is the fiction editor at *Boston Review* and the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a story of Dominican American characters in the twentieth century, the Trujillo Era in the Dominican Republic looms large over the events of the novel. Similar to many countries in Latin America in the 1900s, the Dominican Republic went through years of political upheaval in the process of anti-colonialism and modernization. Rafael Trujillo, called El Jefe, took power over the DR in 1931 through an "election" that was firmly controlled by the Dominican Army. His administration swiftly proved to be a military dictatorship that ruthlessly punished political dissenters, scholars, Haitians, and all those who resisted Trujillo's complete authority in the cultural, social, and economic life of the nation. While Trujillo's regime did improve poverty levels and general quality of life in the DR, it also brought a severe decrease in civil liberties and created a fascist state comparable to Hitler's Germany or Mussolini's Italy. The US government backed Trujillo for decades, as a stable choice against communism creeping in from Cuba, but was forced to reevaluate after Trujillo's failed attack against the Venezuelan president in 1959. The US allegedly supplied the weapons used for Trujillo's assassination in 1961. Trujillo's death restored the country to democracy but also led to years of political and economic turmoil. Dominican immigration to America grew steadily after the fall of the Trujillo regime, with the majority residing in New York, New Jersey, and Florida. Dominicans are now the fifth largest Latino group in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao takes the form of a historical biography, complete with footnotes and dates on the

chapters. However, it is also a deeply personal story dealing with issues of race and immigration in modern day America, similar to works such as Adichie's *Americanah* or Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Although it includes elements of the magical-realism often associated with Latin American literature, it is not bound by that genre. Instead, it owes many of its tropes and conventions to science fiction and fantasy novels like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Japanese anime works, and comic books like *The Fantastic Four*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
- **When Written:** 2005-2007
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, Contemporary Dominican-American Literature
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Setting:** Paterson, New Jersey; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic - 1944-1997
- **Climax:** Oscar's final return to the Dominican Republic, where he consummates his relationship with Ybón. Oscar is then killed for his love of Ybón, a prostitute with ties to the old Trujillo regime.
- **Antagonist:** Trujillo, The Capitán
- **Point of View:** First Person Narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Alter Ego. Yunior, the narrator of *Oscar Wao*, is also the main character of Díaz's previous novel *Drown* and his later collection of short stories, *This is How You Lose Her*. Díaz has called Yunior a "quasi-autobiographical figure".

A Big Deal. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and in 2015 was named one of the most important works of literature in the 20th century.



PLOT SUMMARY

The book shares the story of Oscar Wao (whose real name is Oscar de León), a Dominican American who never fits in with his communities, as he tries to assert his own identity and find love in the process. Told by Oscar's college roommate, Yunior, the book also includes flashbacks into the lives of Oscar's mother and his grandfather, as they suffered during the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic and finally came to America. Interweaved throughout, Yunior also tries to explain and

understand his own failed relationship with Oscar's sister, Lola, and the Dominican heritage that binds them all together. Yunior also adds footnotes throughout the book with humorous asides, stories of Dominican history, or quotes from other books that help illuminate Oscar's life.

The book starts by introducing Yunior, the fictional author of Oscar Wao's biography, and the curse that has shaped the events of Oscar's life. Yunior describes Oscar's childhood as a Dominican American boy in Paterson, New Jersey, and the struggles that Oscar faces as he fails to fit in with the Latino community or get a girlfriend. Oscar pursues girls, but eventually retreats into science fiction, fantasy, and role-playing games. When he and his sister Lola spend summers with their great-aunt in the Dominican Republic (DR), Oscar realizes that he wants to become an author. Back in Paterson, Oscar becomes obsessed with a girl named Ana, threatening her abusive boyfriend with a gun. Lola calms him down, and Oscar decides to wait until college to find a new love.

The novel then switches to Lola's perspective. Lola's strained relationship with her mother causes her to act out. The situation worsens when her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer and Lola decides to run away with her latest boyfriend. However, living in a trailer with her boyfriend and his father is not the escape from her mother's toxicity and illness that Lola imagined. She gets back in touch with Oscar, planning to meet him at a café, but their mother catches her there. Lola is sent to the DR to attend school and live with her great-aunt. She adapts to life as a real "dominicana" and starts to come to terms with her tangled family history.

From there, the novel goes further back in time to describe the adolescence of Lola and Oscar's mother, Beli. Beli lives with her aunt, La Inca, in Baní, a fairly poor neighborhood of Santo Domingo. With her dark skin and headstrong manner, Beli does not fit in at her prestigious private school. As she grows into a great and "terrible beauty," boy-crazy Beli begins to catch the eye of the wrong type of men. Her greatest love, known as the Gangster, works for the dictator Trujillo, and Beli soon finds herself in way over her head when she gets pregnant. The gangster reveals that he is actually married to Trujillo's sister, and that Beli will have to get rid of the child and disappear. Beli refuses, and the Gangster's wife has Beli beaten and left for dead. Beli miraculously recovers with the help of a magical **mongoose**, but loses the baby. She leaves for America in disgrace and meets the future father of Oscar and Lola on the plane to New York.

The novel then comes back to Oscar's life, during his college years when Yunior himself enters the story. While Oscar studies creative writing at Rutgers University, Yunior becomes his roommate in order to get closer to Lola, with whom he is infatuated. Yunior attempts to reform Oscar in the image of the Dominican American "player," but Oscar resists this transformation. Yunior and his friends give Oscar the nickname

"Oscar Wao" and tease him mercilessly. Disregarding these barbs, Oscar strikes up an unlikely friendship with a beautiful girl on campus, but is shattered when she continues to see other guys. Oscar falls into a deep depression and attempts suicide on the last day of the school year. He survives, and Yunior tries to help Lola pick up the pieces of her life, but mostly struggles to maintain the large network of girls he is sleeping with. Still, Yunior proves his friendship by coming back to room with Oscar for another year.

The novel returns to Lola's perspective, as she prepares to come back to the States from her year in Santo Domingo. Though Lola desperately wishes to stay in the Dominican Republic and avoid her overbearing mother a bit longer, the death of a boy she was seeing convinces her to do what is best for her family. She gives all of her savings to the boy's family and meets her mother at the airport.

Reaching back further in history, the novel brings in Abelard Cabral, Beli's father and Oscar and Lola's grandfather. A doctor and a scholar, and heir to one of the more well-off Dominican families, Abelard wants nothing to do with Trujillo. He supports the regime in order to keep his family safe, but runs out of luck when Trujillo decides he wants to seduce Abelard's beautiful oldest daughter Jacquelyn. Abelard is taken by the Trujillato (Trujillo's police) and thrown into prison for resisting Trujillo's request, though rumors say that Abelard's true crime was writing secret, slanderous books about Trujillo's connection with the "fukú" curse. Meanwhile, Abelard's wife gives birth to their third daughter but commits suicide soon after. Abelard remains in prison for the rest of his life. The three Cabral girls are split up and the older two die tragically young. The third daughter, Beli, is sold as a maid to cover family debts. In 1955, La Inca finds her and gives her a new life in Baní.

Back in the 1990s again, Oscar has graduated college but moves back with his mother in Paterson and teaches high school English rather than achieving his dream of being a writer. Depression weighs heavily on him, and his lack of social confidence keeps him more isolated than ever. Three years later, Oscar goes again to visit Santo Domingo and meets Ybón, a prostitute who lives next door to La Inca. Oscar falls hopelessly in love, despite his family's disapproval. Ybón's biggest client, the Capitán, starts to take notice of how much time Oscar and Ybón spend together, and he threatens them with violence. Oscar takes no notice and receives a harsh beating when the Capitán sees Ybón and Oscar kiss. Like his mother years before, Oscar survives and goes back to the States to heal.

However, Oscar is not done with Ybón or Santo Domingo. Rather than return to teaching high school, Oscar asks Yunior for money. Yunior gives it to him as a peace offering to Lola, with whom he is fighting again, but does not know that Oscar will use it to go back to Ybón. No one finds out about Oscar's plan until he is on the plane to the DR.

Oscar stays for a month at La Inca's house before he sees Ybón again. He writes letters back to the States, but no one can persuade him to give up his obsession with Ybón. Oscar and Ybón finally spend one weekend together, where Oscar loses his virginity and finds true intimacy with her. That peace is cruelly destroyed when the Capitán finds out that Oscar is back and shoots him in a canefield.

The book ends as Yunior, Lola, and Beli mourn Oscar. Yunior receives more letters that Oscar sent back from the DR before his death, and starts to compile Oscar's letters into a book. Lola marries a Cuban man and moves to Miami. She has a daughter, Isis, and keeps in contact with Yunior in honor of Oscar's memory. Yunior researches Oscar's life and family, revealing that the entire book was written so that Yunior could piece together his own thoughts about the Dominican American experience. Yunior decides to give the book to Lola's daughter once she is old enough to wonder about her uncle and her own Dominican heritage.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Oscar de León (Oscar Wao) – Oscar, a Dominican American man growing up in Paterson, New Jersey, is the main subject of the novel and the “Oscar Wao” of the title. He is the son of Beli, the brother of Lola, and perhaps the most “cursed” of all of his family members. His kind heart and intelligent mind are hidden beneath an “ugly” exterior that others are quick to judge. He struggles with depression and attempts to find peace with his racial and cultural heritage, as well as prove himself as a writer in the science fiction and fantasy genres he loves. Yunior, his college roommate, tries to help him find more socially acceptable love in romantic relationships, but Oscar stays true to himself and eventually falls in love with Ybón, a Dominican prostitute. Oscar dies for that love, but leaves behind a legacy of writings for Yunior to compile.

Yunior (The Narrator) – The novel's narrator as well as a character in its plot, Yunior starts as Oscar's college roommate and reluctantly becomes his best friend. Yunior initially tries to help Oscar as a way to impress Lola, whom he would like to date. Though Lola and Yunior eventually break up due to Yunior's inability to stay faithful, Yunior remains obsessed with the entire de León family. He writes the novel “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” to both memorialize Oscar's life and come to terms with the Dominican heritage that links them both. Also a writer, Yunior acts as a semi auto-biographical character for author Junot Díaz.

Lola de León – A strong, extremely intelligent woman, Lola is Oscar's sister and the “one who got away” who captures Yunior's heart. Lola has big dreams of escaping her small hometown and seeing more of the world, but her love for her

family and her sense of duty, despite her strained relationship with her mother Beli, pull her back to Paterson and Santo Domingo each time family tragedy strikes. However, she knows enough about herself and the harsh realities of the world not to fall for a player like Yunior. Lola ultimately makes a new life for herself in Miami, where she marries a Cuban man and has a daughter, Isis.

Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral – Known as Beli for most of her story, she is the mother of Oscar and Lola and the first member of the Cabral family to leave Santo Domingo and make a new life in Paterson, New Jersey. Due to the family curse, which her father Abelard brought on the Cabral family, Beli grew up in poverty but always kept the attitude of Dominican royalty. Her incredible beauty draws the attention of the wrong men and earns her a life-threatening beating by members of Trujillo's government. She leaves Santo Domingo in disgrace and grows embittered at the hardships of immigrant life in the United States. She is very strict with her children, but is also extremely proud of them. Her fight against breast cancer further strains her relationship with her children, but she eventually reconnects with her daughter Lola in the wake of Oscar's death.

Abelard Cabral – Oscar's grandfather, and the reason that the Cabral line is cursed, Abelard was a doctor and a scholar during the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. He was too cowardly to protest Trujillo's dictatorship, but brave enough not to let Trujillo take his oldest daughter Jacquelyn. Either this affront to Trujillo's pride, or a secret book about the evil supernatural roots of Trujillo's rise to power, brought Abelard to the attention of the Trujillato and led to his imprisonment and death. He was never able to meet his third daughter, Beli, but Abelard's legacy lives on in Oscar and his interest in writing.

Trujillo – A real historical figure, the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until he was assassinated in 1961, Rafael Trujillo is also an important character in the novel. His actions cause much of the heartache throughout the book, either directly, as when his thugs beat Beli and Oscar, or indirectly, as his censorship prevents the other characters from being honest about their pasts or their heritage. Yunior, who calls him “The Failed Cattle Thief,” depicts Trujillo as the worst villain of every fantasy novel, complete with a narcissistic complex and a preoccupation with sexy women. The novel points out the many flaws in the Trujillo regime, and each character works in his or her own way to overcome the damages that his administration did to the Dominican people.

La Inca – Beli's aunt and Oscar's great-aunt, La Inca took care of Beli after the death and imprisonment of her parents. La Inca owns a chain of bakeries in the Dominican Republic, and believes that Beli is worth the best education the island can offer. She offers a safe haven and support to her grandchildren Lola and Oscar when they visit, but also tries to ensure that they act like a proper Dominican family.

Ybón – An older Dominican woman who has made her living as a prostitute escorting powerful men from the Dominican Republic and countries all over Europe, Ybón lives next door to La Inca in Santo Domingo. Oscar falls in love with Ybón, and she thrives on his attention. Oscar chooses to die at the hands of Ybón's boyfriend, the Capitán, rather than renounce her love.

The Gangster – Beli's second love and the husband of Trujillo's sister. He is wealthy due to his services as a hit man for Trujillo, and offers Beli a world of luxury that he really cannot deliver. Though he can be gentle to Beli, his vanity and insecurity prevent him from understanding true love. When Beli gets pregnant, the Gangster leaves her to the punishment of his wife.

Juan Then – A Chinese immigrant in the DR who owns the Chinese restaurant where Beli works. He has a head for business, and allows the Trujillato to do whatever they wish as long as they leave him alone. Though stoic, he cares for Beli and saves her after the Trujillato beat her in the cane field.

Max Sánchez – Lola's boyfriend when she lives in the DR. He works for a theater, running film reels between locations on his motorcycle. He loves her and dreams of living in the US, but is killed in a motorcycle accident before he can leave. His death pushes Lola to leave the DR.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Capitán – Ybón's main client and "boyfriend", the Capitán took advantage of the political instability after Trujillo's death to rise to the top of the military. Capable of great acts of violence, the Capitán shoots Oscar for his relationship with Ybón.

Jenni – Oscar's crush in college. She dresses like a "goth-chick" and intimidates every other man on Rutgers campus. Oscar gains her friendship, but is deeply hurt when she continues to date other people.

Ana – Oscar's crush in high school. She and Oscar bond over writing, but her abusive boyfriend Manny forces her to cut off all contact with Oscar.

Manny – Ana's boyfriend. He is away in the military when Ana and Oscar first meet, but soon returns and demands that Oscar stop seeing Ana. His abusive behavior towards Ana leads Oscar to wait outside his house with a gun. Luckily, Oscar leaves before anyone is shot or arrested.

Maritza – One of Oscar's crushes in elementary school. She is pretty, and forces Oscar to choose her instead of Olga, but dumps him soon after.

Olga – One of Oscar's crushes in elementary school. She is not as beautiful as Maritza, and is Puerto Rican, so Oscar leaves her. He later regrets this when he has no girlfriends through the rest of his adolescence.

Jack Pujols – Beli's first love in their private high school. Jack

Pujols is the golden child of an elite Dominican family, with blue eyes and blonde hair that show his European aristocratic blood. He seduces the young Beli, but blames her completely when they are caught.

José Then – Juan's brother, José is the only reason that their Chinese restaurant stays open, as he protects it from Trujillato rioting. He helps save Beli after she is beaten.

Socorro Cabral – Abelard's wife and Beli's mother. She commits suicide months after Beli is born due to the stress of Abelard's imprisonment.

Jacquelyn Cabral – Abelard's oldest daughter and Beli's oldest sister. She is an intelligent woman ready to follow in her father's footsteps as a doctor, but her beauty catches Trujillo's eye. Abelard chooses to be thrown in jail rather than let Trujillo touch her. She dies tragically young after her mother's death.

Astrid Cabral – Abelard's second daughter. She dies tragically young after her mother's death.

Isis – Lola's daughter. She is born as the novel comes to a close, so she never meets her uncle Oscar, but Yunior hopes that she will be able to break the family curse with the knowledge that Yunior has found in Oscar's life.

Aldo – Lola's first boyfriend, a "blanquito" who lives in a trailer with his father on the Jersey Shore. Lola runs away with him at 15, but he treats her very poorly.

Karen Cepeda – Lola's friend in Paterson. She is white and dresses with a goth style that Lola admires and eventually copies.

Rocío – A scholarship girl from Los Mina and Lola's friend at the private school in the DR. She convinces Lola to join the track team and helps her fit in as Dominican.

Lydia Abenader – Abelard's mistress. She rejected his proposal of marriage when they were young, but sleeps with him now that she is a widow. She tries to convince Abelard to run to Cuba, then dies of cancer (or grief) after Abelard is imprisoned.

Marcus Román – Abelard's neighbor and best friend. Marco betrays Abelard to the secret police out of fear for himself.

Constantina – One of Beli's fellow waitresses at Juan Then's restaurant. She is the perfect Dominican party girl that Beli might have become if she had not fallen in love with the Gangster.

Clives – A taxi driver in Santo Domingo who helps Oscar, first with getting Ybón home when she is drunk and more when the Capitán starts to target Oscar.

Dorca – A mistreated servant girl in Bani, whom Beli befriends.

Arquimedes – A young student who tries to date Beli.

"La Fea" – Trujillo's sister, nicknamed "La Fea" (the ugly woman), who is married to the Gangster.

Suriyan – Yunior's girlfriend at Rutgers, who dumps him when

she discovers his cheating.

Miggs One of Oscar's only friends in high school, who is initially as nerdy as Oscar. By senior year, Miggs becomes more socially comfortable and sometimes makes fun of Oscar. They eventually lose touch.

Al One of Oscar's only friends in high school, who is initially as nerdy as Oscar. They eventually lose touch.

Rodolfo Oscar's uncle, who is a heroin addict.

Wei A Chinese girl who sits at the desk next to Beli's for a while during school.



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.



IDENTITY AND THE DOMINICAN EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, almost every character questions his or her own identity, struggling and experimenting with who they are and who they want to be. The novel also shows how such experimentation is driven and affected not just by internal factors but also by external communities. The characters struggle, in other words, not only with how to become the self they want to be, but also with how to do that while remaining true to, and fitting in with, their Dominican or Latino heritage.

On the level of the individual, the novel explores how its characters try to both be themselves and fit in with others. For many of the characters, this means developing vastly different public and private lives. Díaz shows this through the nicknames of his two main characters, Oscar and Yunior. Oscar's nickname symbolizes his inability to fit in with other Latinos as himself, while Yunior's nickname shows his desire to display the ideal Dominican man rather than risk rejection by showing his true personality. Though this separation of public and private lives is supposed to help Oscar and Yunior fit into their Latino community, it only makes it more difficult for the two to mature and lead fulfilling lives. In general, Díaz shows how many people are not just internally complex but even intrinsically contradictory, and thus it is a constant struggle for them to embrace their full identities while at the same time presenting particular identities to the world.

As in many coming-of-age novels, the characters must try to find themselves while also navigating their place in the world. *Oscar Wao* not only examines individual identity, but also investigates collective identity—particularly that of Dominicans

and other Latinos, both in their home countries and in the US. These Latino communities offer support to the characters as a source of pride in the face of racism and oppression, but also impose false restraints on the individual identities of the characters. All of the Latino characters have nuances – a love of genre fiction, a goth style of dress, or a monogamous attitude towards romance, for example – that refute the stereotypes about “typical” Dominicans or other Latinos.

The characters, then, are all shown to be more than their Dominican stereotypes—they are human, and thus complex, contradictory, and unable to be pigeonholed—but ultimately Díaz shows that these nuances do not make them any less Dominican. Identity, in turn, is presented in the novel as being both complex and fluid. It changes depending on the physical location of the characters (in the DR or New Jersey), as well as on their emotional maturity from adolescence to adulthood. By simply depicting such Dominican and Latino characters, he also shows how the Dominican and Latino cultures as a whole will be richer for accepting the many identities and idiosyncrasies of all those who belong to the nation. And, further, by writing the novel about these characters and their experiences and lives in America – lives that are usually invisible or ignored within American popular culture or history – he humanizes people that are often treated as a single minority group, a single foreign “other,” and asserts that the tapestry of America is all the richer for their presence.



ART, LIFE, AND LATINOS IN AMERICA

While telling the story of Oscar de León, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* also references many of the books or movies that the characters have read.

Díaz responds to these works and explores the influence that artistic works can have on the real world. These fictional connections then point to the ways that people use the frameworks of fantasy and art as tools to understand their own lives.

Genre fiction features prominently in the novel as an escape for characters who do not want to face some aspect of their real world. Oscar and Yunior use science fiction and fantasy novels to ease their insecurities, while Beli looks to romance novels for the love that she cannot find in the Dominican Republic. Yet, though *Oscar Wao* acknowledges that literature can provide comfort, it also asserts that it is necessary to maintain a sense of the real world. Oscar and Beli are bitterly disappointed when their fantasies do not come true, while Yunior is able to find contentment with his life only after letting go of the desire to reshape reality. The novel argues that art can supplement life, but that it cannot replace the responsibility of dealing with one's true circumstances.

Navigating fantasy and reality is further complicated for the characters of *Oscar Wao*, however, because they often cannot

find real role models that display their identities in the fiction that they love. Díaz argues that the fantasy worlds his characters have chosen for themselves are not fully satisfying because these worlds have no room for characters who look and act Dominican. Oscar and Beli only see people who look like them—that is, with darker skin—playing villains in the genres that they love, and Oscar points out that literature created by white authors often upholds racial hierarchies that benefit white people. With *Oscar Wao*, then, Díaz challenges these hierarchies, both by creating fully three-dimensional Dominican characters, and by using the tropes of historically white genres, like sci-fi and fantasy, in a Dominican story.

Díaz explores the ways that fantasy can make reality easier to handle by imbuing bleak struggles with moral significance and tying together hard experiences into a larger story where good triumphs over evil. However, he also points out how fantasy can make life more difficult for people of color when the stories they enjoy do not include characters like themselves, or lead them to unrealistic or harmful worldviews. Díaz's solution is not to firmly reject the influence of fantasy on people's real lives, but to advocate for more diversity in art and literature. With *Oscar Wao*, Díaz gives an example of the type of fiction he wants, writing a novel in which white people and people of color can all be villains or heroes.



FREE WILL AND DESTINY

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao deals with the question of free will, especially as it plays with the Dominican perspective on destiny. In Dominican

culture, as portrayed by the novel, humans have very little control over their own lives. Instead, the opposing forces of fukú (curse) and zafa (counter spell) dictate the events in a person's life. Mankind can only hope to avoid angering fukú, thereby bringing more misfortune, and attempt to lay a zafa to protect themselves and their loved ones. The de León family, Oscar especially, experience the extremes of both of these forces, suffering many incidents of fukú but also experiencing the blessing of zafa over the course of their lives.

Díaz shows both the benefits and the drawbacks of this outlook on free will and destiny, letting the readers form their own opinion. On the one hand, characters who face difficulties, either in the DR or in the United States, are not held responsible for their hardships. On the other hand, the deterministic perspective promotes apathy and resignation in some characters, and a dangerous tendency to lash out in others. Díaz also portrays a range of attitudes concerning fukú, from La Inca—who firmly believes that Trujillo used fukú to harm the Dominican people—to Lola—who tries to live as though her own merits and hard work will be enough to find success. Yunior holds the most complex opinion on fukú, refusing to believe in the supernatural elements of this worldview, but trying to give respect to these forces just in case

they are real. Díaz does not argue that the Dominican belief is either wrong or right, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether fukú and zafa are really to blame for all of the events that befall Oscar and his family, or the DR in general.

Though the novel does not argue either for or against belief in destiny, it does maintain that there are good and bad ways to respond to a lack of free will. The novel suggests that the worst choice is to try to become resigned or abusive, because this creates more pain for everyone. It argues that the best path is to accept pain if that is one's destiny, but choose to hope for blessings even in the difficult times.



STORY, HISTORY, AND WRITING

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, as a biography about the fictional Oscar de León, is a novel about history. But instead of giving a straight biography,

the novel goes on to challenge preconceived assumptions about what history is and what it can do.

One of the primary projects of the novel is teasing apart story and history. The “official history” of the Dominican Republic reverberates through the lives of the characters, both directly with characters that lived through atrocities of Trujillo's reign, and indirectly with future generations that must deal with the fallout from those events. However, the novel argues that personal stories are more important, prioritizing personal stories in the pages and relegating official history to footnotes, as well as asserting that official history is more interesting when it includes the personal stories of real people. Regardless of their relative importance, both story and history are subject to the whims of the authors who write them. Yunior's opinions of different characters and historical figures bleed into the text, and he freely admits that his own biases affect how he relates certain sections of history. Furthermore, even the starting and ending points of history become arbitrary, as Yunior jumps around from decade to decade to serve the story he wants to tell. The reader must question the accuracy of all of Yunior's information, especially when he contradicts the “official” record. The novel thus suggests that all history is really personal story, dependent on the humans who choose to write it down.

Yet despite the impossibility of writing a full and accurate history, Díaz still supports the writing of history and stories – arguing that they are necessary for people to come to terms with their pasts and move forward as more fulfilled individuals. Oscar and Lola repeat the mistakes of their family's past in part because they do not know them, and both Oscar and Yunior write as a way to heal the wounds they have experienced in the past. Yunior writes the entire biography of Oscar as a way to finally understand the cultural heritage he originally rejected. By writing stories and histories, the characters can begin to give order to the events of their lives, and pass on some of that knowledge to future generations.



DOMINICAN AMERICAN CULTURE, COLONIALISM, AND RACISM

While *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a widely applicable coming-of-age story, it is also

firmly rooted in a specific Latino experience. The entire novel is steeped in Díaz's experience of Dominican American culture, from the language that Yunior uses to the cultural traditions, family dynamics, and historical information that Díaz includes in the novel. Díaz starts by educating readers about the Dominican American experience, reaching all the way back into the colonial roots of the Dominican nation, to tell a modern day story of Dominican American life.

Díaz builds in a crash course of Dominican history for his readers, as he does not assume that his English-speaking readers will already be familiar with it. He laments the “two seconds” spent on the history of the entire island in most World History classes in America. Though the history of the island is well-known and incredibly important to the characters, Díaz recognizes that the Dominican Republic is not usually deemed significant enough to be common knowledge for the average American. Díaz includes this history, then, both because of its great emotional significance to the protagonists of the novel, and to comment on the lack of attention paid to the histories of people of color in American culture.

The novel also deals with the tensions inherent to growing up as a Dominican American child of immigrants in the 20th century. Second-generation characters like Lola and Yunior try to appear Dominican enough, yet not *too* Dominican. Other characters, like Oscar, have that choice made for them. As Oscar has very dark skin but also enjoys intellectual and genre fiction, he is deemed “too **black**” to fit in with his white peers and “too white” to fit in with his Latino peers.

Racial hierarchies are no easier to avoid in the Dominican Republic. When they are on the island, the de Leóns must deal with the reality of their privilege in living in America, even if they are treated as second-class citizens there. Díaz also points to the racial divide between Dominicans and Haitians, calling out Trujillo for the genocide committed against Haitians, the erasure of Haitian-Dominicans from official government records, and the hatred of the dark “Haitian” skin color. By comparing and contrasting the racial prejudices Oscar faces as a black-skinned man in America to the racial prejudices Haitians face in the DR, Díaz exposes colonialist mindsets in which oppressed groups of people lash out to oppress others, and he ties his novel to activist measures for improving Haitian-Dominican relations in the real world.

As Díaz himself is Dominican American, his novel offers an inside look at a specific minority experience to a wider American audience and fleshes out the racial difficulties faced by people of colonial or Dominican descent. According to interviews with the author, one of Díaz's main projects in

writing *Oscar Wao* was to start dismantling colonial hierarchies so that people of color can stop equating skin color and self-worth, as Díaz sees many Dominican Americans still do today. Though Díaz points out the ways that he sees racism embedded in popular culture, he does not offer many solutions to the racism that his characters face. By spending so much time focusing on the racial dynamics and prejudices in his novel, he instead argues that awareness of racism and fighting internalized racism is the first step towards changing these ideas. He uses *Oscar Wao* to offer hope towards a post-colonial future where cultural hybridity and diversity are celebrated rather than erased.



LOVE AND LOSS

While the novel follows many threads in Oscar's life, it is primarily concerned with love in all its varied forms. Like many coming-of-age novels,

Oscar's search for maturity takes the form of a search for romantic love, but the themes of love also go further than that in the novel.

Oscar's definition of love and his methods of finding it are shaped by the cultural expectations surrounding love and sex in the Dominican environment of the novel. According to Yunior, Dominicans detrimentally confuse sexual love and true intimacy. Due to this, some characters look for love their entire lives without finding it. Yunior expects love to be easy and to fix his insecurities, ignoring the real work and care that a healthy, intimate relationship requires on behalf of both himself and his partner. Even worse, many Dominican men use romantic love as a way to exercise power or show status, as in Trujillo's “cucocracy,” the tendency towards domestic abuse, and Yunior's casual use of women. As a response to these harmful sexual norms, Oscar's relationship with a prostitute – the lowest of the low on the Dominican social spectrum – is shown to be the truest expression of love in the novel.

Yet while these romantic relationships drive the plot, other types of love, such as friendship or family, form the foundation of the novel. Both Oscar and Lola offer Yunior a crucial alternative to romantic love, and the friendship between Oscar and Yunior proves to be the most important bond of the novel. Likewise, Oscar and Beli call upon the strength of their love for their family when the loss of romantic love leaves them near death. The more passionate displays of romantic love may receive more attention, but the quiet power of family and friendship helps the characters face hardship and tragedy.

The novel shows that loving someone also means inviting the possibility of losing them, but it also declares that the beauty of love is well worth the pain of loss. These two universal human experiences unite mankind despite any cultural differences, and offer hope to the characters despite the many harsh scenes of the novel. In a fitting end to the novel, Oscar's last letters to the States proclaim “The beauty! The beauty!” of love rather than

focusing on all the pain and loss Oscar has seen throughout his life.



SYMBOLS

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



PÁGINAS EN BLANCO (BLANK PAGES)

Blank pages recur throughout the novel, sometimes as pieces of paper that are literally blank, and sometimes as writing that has been lost or erased. While “*páginas en blanco*” is literally the name that Trujillo used for his ban on records during his regime, these “pages” also symbolize the many gaps of information or communication that the characters face. All of the second-generation Dominican American characters struggle to find out their family history, as their parents will not speak very much about their old lives in the Dominican Republic. Characters like Beli, for example, have blank pages for themselves when they refuse to speak or think about periods of their own lives. Abelard’s books are also turned into blank pages when Trujillo destroys everything Abelard ever wrote, leaving Beli clueless about her own heritage. At first, these blank pages represent the control that Trujillo had over the lives of the Dominican people, as he is able to dictate not only the government, but even how that government is spoken and written about.

However, the blank pages take on a new meaning as Oscar gains confidence as a writer. Throughout the novel, Oscar creates new worlds out of blank pages, showing the creative space and potential of a blank page. This culminates in the lost letter that Oscar sent back from the DR; though Oscar said that the letter would illuminate everything he learned about life, Yuniór never receives the message. Yuniór then has to piece together Oscar’s lessons for himself, coming to a more satisfying answer. Similarly, the inspiring words that **the Mongoose** speaks to Oscar and Beli to convince them to survive are rendered literally as blank lines in the text. Here, blank pages symbolize limitless possibility. Each character, and even the reader, then has the freedom (and the responsibility) to decide what should go on those pages. Throughout the novel, blank pages are a reminder that someone has to control your story – it could be someone else with a malicious agenda, or it could be you.



THE MONGOOSE AND THE MAN WITH NO FACE

The Man with No Face represents the “*fukú*” curse at work in the world. Many times when a character undergoes hardship or tragedy, they see a man with no face. Beli thinks she

sees a man with no face as her relationship with the Gangster falls apart, and then has nightmares of a faceless man after she is beaten by the Trujillato. Abelard’s wife dreams of a man with no face before Trujillo targets the Cabral family. Oscar too sees the man with no face as one of his attackers in the cane field, and Yuniór has nightmares of faceless men after Oscar’s death. Many characters’s faces go “blank” right before they commit an act of cruelty or violence. The man with no face is a subhuman creature that has no compassion, representing the worst side of mankind.

The Mongoose, chief agent of “*zafa*” (the blessing or counter-spell to the *fukú*), is a symbol of good at work in the world. Based on the real animal, which is culturally significant in India and much of Africa, the Mongoose represents a warrior for justice with a surprising exterior. Though the mongoose is small, it is fierce – a mongoose in the wild can easily take on a cobra. But its size is not all that is surprising about its appearance. The Mongoose’s fur is deeply, beautifully black, and therefore reclaims the power of blackness by insisting that a black being can be a hero – something usually denied by the racist culture of both America and the DR. The Mongoose appears to save both Beli and Oscar when they are on the brink of death in the cane field, helping them to realize what is truly important, to focus on their family and loved ones, and offering invaluable insight on the journey to self-actualization. The Mongoose is a natural being that is better than humanity, and represents the best that humanity has to offer.



BLACKNESS

In the racial milieu of the Dominican Republic (as in America), skin color takes on significance beyond simple melanin. Blackness represents misfortune and poverty, whereas lighter skin tones symbolize success and wealth. Characters are warned not to get a tan for fear they will look Haitian (that is, black), and be treated with the disrespect that poor Haitians are awarded. Beli and Oscar, the two darkest-skinned characters in the novel, are each taken as ill omens by their families at birth. Many of the characters that the de León family encounter pity their color, because they think that black skin will lead to unhappiness. Even in the novels and popular culture that the characters consume, black skin is reserved for villains and monsters.

Yet the de León family themselves do not buy in to this color coding. Lola and Oscar refuse to apologize for their black skin, eventually coming to terms with their Dominican heritage despite the racism they encounter. As a young woman, Beli insists that her immense beauty is because of her blackness, rather than in spite of it. This alternate reading of blackness as power is supported by the **Mongoose**, a magical creature with pitch black fur that works for good in the universe of the novel. Thus, the novel reminds the reader that all symbolic meaning,

such as the idea that black must stand for evil, is not based in reality and can be rewritten.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* published in 2008.

Book 1, Preface Quotes

☝ For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality... At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Trujillo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Yunior (the narrator) is intimately familiar with Dominican history because of his Dominican heritage, but he understands that the Dominican Republic is not a priority in most American classrooms. In the very beginning of the novel, Yunior introduces the President Trujillo with a mixture of fear and disrespect. He brings in the science fiction and fantasy genres that he loves in order to laugh at Trujillo even as he also finds him terrifying. Trujillo is worse than any science fiction dictator, as Yunior tries to assert that he is not making up any of these atrocious events. With the comment about "mandatory two seconds of Dominican history," Díaz also mocks the Eurocentric, colonialist nature of history in America even as it continues to perpetuate itself.

☝ It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions." In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Yunior starts the novel by explaining the concept of fukú, a curse that ruins the lives of most of the Dominican characters and eventually causes the death of many characters in the novel. Oscar de León, the Oscar Wao of the title, is especially vulnerable to this curse, bearing the brunt of fukú that has built up for two generations in his family. Fukú is an old Dominican concept, and most of the second-generation Dominican Americans no longer believe in it even though it has much importance on the island of the Dominican Republic. Yet Yunior insists that it doesn't matter whether the children of Dominicans cursed by fukú believe in it or not, because fukú will still shape their lives. Oscar himself does not really believe in the curse until it specifically affects him. Yunior tries to warn everyone from the beginning of the story that fukú is not something to be taken lightly, even if he never wholeheartedly declares that it is literally real. In this way he offers one explanation for the events of the novel—characters' lives aren't a result of their free will, but rather the curse of fukú.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Oscar de León (Oscar Wao)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Yunior asserts that Oscar loves genres so much because the outsider status of many of the protagonists appealed to Oscar's feelings of isolation. X-men are not normal humans, and the comic book often focuses on how they must help the humans who hate them. Oscar is not a normal Dominican boy and does not enjoy what Yunior describes as

“typical” Dominican pastimes, such as baseball or cars. Furthermore, he is not adept at the dating game that Dominican men are supposed to dominate. These “deficiencies” are noticeable on sight, from how Oscar moves and speaks—just like some X-men may have mutations that cannot be hidden. His true passions, writing, reading and other nerdy pursuits, are derided by his friends and family as if they are useless. Yet not just Oscar deals with these problems. Yuniór too knows what it feels like not to fit in with the Dominican community. Yuniór is simply better at hiding his differences.

☞ Jesus Christ, he whispered. I'm a Morlock. The next day at breakfast he asked his mother: Am I ugly? She sighed. Well, hijo, you certainly don't take after me. Dominican parents! You got to love them!

Related Characters: Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral, Oscar de León (Oscar Wao), Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

During his senior year of high school, Oscar finds out that his two best friends have found girlfriends, but they won't help him find a date. Oscar realizes that his friends, though they are also nerdy and socially awkward, are actually embarrassed of him. This causes Oscar to see himself as a sub-human villain, drawing inspiration from the species of Morlocks in the book *The Time Machine*. The morlocks are incredibly ugly and short because they live underground, and turn into cannibals that prey on the beautiful Eloi. Oscar thinks that he is irredeemably ugly and does not deserve to “prey” on beautiful women.

When Oscar tries to speak to his mother, Beli, about his insecurities, Beli dismisses him. Beli herself was thought incredibly beautiful when she was young, and is clearly disappointed that her son does not follow in her footsteps. Yuniór points out the often fraught relationship between Dominican parents and their children. Though Beli loves Oscar beyond life itself, she is not gentle with his feelings. Oscar's identity crisis is made even worse because he does not have any emotional support from his mother. Yuniór says that this type of harsh criticism is common among Dominican parents.

☞ The trip turned out to be something of a turning point for him. Instead of discouraging his writing, chasing him out of the house like his mother used to, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be. Allowed him to sit in the back of the house as long as he wanted, didn't insist that he should be “out in the world.”

Related Characters: La Inca, Oscar de León (Oscar Wao) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

When Oscar visits the Dominican Republic the year before he graduates high school, he finally gets the chance to commit to his desire to be a writer. His mother and sister are not very supportive of this goal, because they have seen how people with dark skin (like Oscar) are not successful in certain jobs in the United States. La Inca, having lived her whole life in the Dominican Republic, does not have these preconceived prejudices. Furthermore, La Inca reminds Oscar of his family heritage, telling him about his grandfather Abelard who also spent long hours writing in his study when the family was rich. La Inca understands that Oscar wants to create his own fictional worlds rather than expend more energy trying to live in a world that has rejected him time and time again.

☞ The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy.

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker), Oscar de León (Oscar Wao)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout his life, Oscar struggles to find his identity. As a Dominican American, he has trouble fitting in with both Dominican and American culture. When he goes to college at Rutgers and must try to find his way without the support of his family, Oscar realizes that both cultures find reasons

to reject him. White students see his black appearance and then refuse to engage with Oscar on an intellectual level, resorting to an “inhuman cheeriness” that makes Oscar into “the other” and keeps him at a distance. Meanwhile, the other students of color quickly realize that Oscar does not act in the stereotypically Dominican way that they expect. Oscar is not suave or sensitive, like Dominican ladies’ men are supposed to be, and his speech is heavily influenced by the science fiction and fantasy novels that he reads. This interest in historically “white” genres means that Oscar does not fit in with the students of color either. Oscar is forced to continually reassert his heritage, as Yuniór repeats “Soy Dominicano” (I am Dominican) to emphasize this point.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ You don’t know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—especially the ones that are never around. What it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave.

Related Characters: Lola de León (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

Lola tries to explain the experience of growing up as a second-generation Dominican-American girl. It is not clear who Lola is addressing when she says “You”—it might be Yuniór, the narrator of the rest of the novel and Lola’s boyfriend later in life. Traditional Dominican family structure as Lola and Yuniór experience it means that Yuniór would have no idea the amount of work that a Dominican woman is expected to do. Lola also might be addressing any white American reader, who might have no idea of the struggles that Dominican families face trying to find economic success in America. Her mother (Beli) works two jobs in order to keep the family afloat in New Jersey. This means that much of the work keeping house, putting meals on the table, and raising Oscar falls to Lola. Lola loves her mother, but can’t help but feel underappreciated and overworked. Lola and her mother butt heads because Lola cannot erase her own personality to be nothing more than the obedient daughter that her mother wants.

☝ And that’s when it hit with the force of a hurricane. The feeling. I stood straight up, the way my mother always wanted me to stand up. My abuela was sitting there, forlorn, trying to cobble together the right words and I could not move or breathe. I felt like I always did at the last seconds of a race, when I was sure that I was going to explode. She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin.

Related Characters: Lola de León (speaker), La Inca

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Lola has always had a “witchy” feeling of premonition that warns her when bad things are about to happen to her family. Here, Lola’s family heritage is particularly present, as La Inca starts to tell her about her mother’s childhood and the past that her mother never mentions. The de León and Cabral families have a difficult family history, especially as Lola’s mother never knew her real parents. Lola previously tried to run away from her family in New Jersey, a skill that she later puts into her school’s track team once she is sent to live in the Dominican Republic. Now that she is finally finding out some of the secrets of her family’s past, however, that desire to run has seemingly reached the end of the race. Lola can stop running and start building her identity on the foundations of her family. Her witchy feeling does continue to warn that not everything Lola will find out about her family is good, but knowing her history is better than not knowing.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ a girl so tall your leg bones ached just looking at her so dark it was as if the Creatrix had, in her making, blinked who, like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere.

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Yunior sets up much of Beli's character in her first description (which takes the form of a kind of poem). Beli is both incredibly dark-skinned and incredibly beautiful, flipping the stereotype of black skin being undesirable that is seen elsewhere in the novel. Yunior invokes a female deity (the Creatrix) that created Beli with a purpose, but one that she might not be able to fulfill because the Creatrix blinked and accidentally made her too dark. The sense of destiny strongly affects Beli, as she is always striving for some undetermined goal.

Beli's "yet-to-be-born daughter" Lola, who has already received her chapter on running away, is simply carrying on her mother's tradition. Both Beli and Lola share a constant restlessness, something that Yunior says they would have shared no matter where they had been born. He associates this restlessness with New Jersey. According to Yunior, people who live in Jersey naturally want to prove themselves and reach somewhere better—probably because of their proximity to the "better" and more famous New York. Notably, the family history repeats with Beli and Lola because Beli never shares the lessons that she learned with her daughter.

☝ Pujols, it seems, had promised Belicia that they would be married as soon as they'd both finished high school, and Beli had believed him, hook, line, and sinker. Hard to square her credulity with the hardnosed no-nonsense femme-matador I'd come to know, but one must remember: she was young and in love. Talk about fantasist: the girl sincerely believed that Jack would be true.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Jack Pujols, Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

When Beli is in high school, she and her high school boyfriend are caught having sex in a closet. This destroys both of their reputations, but Beli maintains that she and Jack are allowed to do whatever they like because they are already married in her mind. Beli, like her son Oscar, is adept at ignoring reality in favor of a more positive fantasy. Inspired by romance genre movies, Beli sees all her romantic relationships through the most positive light

possible. Though Jack Pujols was clearly a liar and a player, used to skating through life due to his family's elite status, Beli chooses to believe that they have found true love rather than teenage lust. Even worse, Beli continues to "be true" to Jack after he is sent to military school even though he was never true to her.

All of this is even more surprising after Beli's earlier characterization as a harsh realist. When she is introduced as Lola and Oscar's mother, Beli has no time for love stories because she has already gone through three brutal heartbreaks. She scoffs at Lola's high school boyfriend, bitterly aware of how poorly such relationships go for women – especially Dominican women. Having been burned at one extreme, Beli in her later years swung to the other extreme and became a "no-nonsense femme matador" who has experienced too much loss to really believe in love.

☝ ...you could argue that the Gangster adored our girl and that adoration was one of the greatest gifts anybody had ever given her. It felt unbelievably good to Beli, shook her to her core. (For the first time I actually felt like I owned my skin, like it was me and I was it.)

Related Characters: Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral, Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), The Gangster

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Beli's second great love is the Gangster, a man who commits awful acts for Trujillo, but treats Beli like a princess. The Gangster adores Beli, telling her from their first meeting that Beautiful is her name and worshipping her body when they are intimate. Beli has received plenty of attention for her body, but the Gangster's complete acceptance of every part of her appearance, including her extremely dark skin and the scar on her back, is a new and welcome experience. Beli's parenthetical addition to Yunior's narration makes it clear that she had never felt truly comfortable in her skin before the Gangster, but that his love helped her "own" her skin and thus own her identity as a black woman. Yet though the transformative power of love carries a lot of weight in the book, Beli's self-acceptance does not last, because it is so dependent on the validation of another person. After the Gangster leaves Beli, she loses confidence in herself and

does not celebrate her black skin when her children inherit it.

☝ All those people have families, you can tell by their faces, they have families that depend on them and that they depend on, and for some of them this is good, and for some of them this is bad. But it all amounts to the same shit because there isn't one of them who is free. They can't do what they want to do or be who they should be. I might have no one in the world, but at least I'm free. She had never heard anyone say those words. I'm free wasn't a popular refrain in the Era of Trujillo.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator), The Gangster (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Beli and the Gangster manage to have one perfect week together before it comes out that the Gangster is actually the husband of Trujillo's sister and Beli suffers horribly for her role in his affair. During that week, the Gangster and Beli speak frankly about their own lives as Dominican citizens during a time when Dominican heritage came with significant limitations. As discussed here (by both the Gangster and Yunior, mingling narration), freedom is a complicated concept in the novel. Free will is severely constrained by the forces of fukú (curse) and zafa (blessing) that determine the destiny of all of the characters in the book. With Trujillo's possible connection to fukú, every Dominican citizen had even less freedom, as contradicting Trujillo in any way meant facing the worst fukú imaginable.

Yet freedom is even further constrained by the ties of family and community in the novel. Being Dominican and belonging to a Dominican family means conforming to certain social rules, as Beli, and later her daughter Lola, find out when each woman wishes to see more of the world or express an identity that is "unnatural" for a Dominican woman. Ybón, a prostitute that Oscar later falls in love with, has a motto: Travel light. Yunior interprets this to mean that Ybón tries not to get permanently attached to anyone so that she always retains her freedom. As the Gangster says, freedom comes at the cost of having "no one in the world," a prospect that is often difficult for members of these tight-knit Dominican families.

☝ Don't laugh, mi negrita, for your world is about to be changed. Utterly. Yes: a terrible beauty is etc., etc. Take it from me. You laugh because you've been ransacked to the limit of your soul, because your lover betrayed you almost unto death, because your first son was neverborn. You laugh because you have no front teeth and you've sworn never to smile again.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After Beli is beaten by Trujillo's thugs for having an affair with the Gangster, Beli realizes that she must move to the United States in order to be safe from further harm. While Beli had always longed for change, and to be away from the Dominican Republic, these circumstances were not the situation in which she had imagined she would arrive in America. Beli had been known for her beauty, a quality that has been tarnished by the huge physical toll that her body has taken. Yunior quotes the Irish poet Yeats here, calling Beli a "terrible beauty." Yeats, a supporter of the failed Irish Easter Rebellion in 1916, when Irish nationalists tried to overthrow the control of the British government, wrote that "a terrible beauty is born"—capturing both the great beauty of these revolutionary sentiments and the terrible price of putting them into practice. Similarly, Beli celebrated her own physical attributes, but paid a terrible price because of that beauty.

Beli also had to realize that her world is "changed utterly" (borrowing more words from Yeats's poem), as her greatest love led to her greatest loss. Beli was pregnant with the Gangster's child, and then had to mourn the loss of both her lover and her miscarried son when the Gangster's wife had her beaten. It is a mark of Beli's immense strength that she is able to laugh, even sardonically, after such tragic events.

Book 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ "Wondering aloud, If we were orcs, wouldn't we, at a racial level, imagine ourselves to look like elves?"

Related Characters: Oscar de León (Oscar Wao) (speaker), Yunior (The Narrator)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Oscar tries to start many conversations about science fiction and fantasy with Yuniór when he and Yuniór room together in college. These conversations often edge into Oscar's experience as a black Dominican American man, because Oscar uses fantasy stories as a framework to understand the real world. In the fantasy series *The Lord of the Rings*, orcs are an ugly, black-skinned species that bear a murderous grudge against the beautiful, virtuous elves. Oscar points out that dark-skinned humans find only species such as orcs that look like them in fantasy novels: dark characters who are always evil.

When putting this framework on the real world, Oscar questions why dark-skinned people have to see themselves as ugly and evil, essentially making themselves the antagonists in their own story. Whiteness in the real world is still upheld as a sign of purity, beauty, and goodness. It would make more sense to Oscar if dark-skinned people saw themselves as protagonists in their own lives, and thus saw dark skin as good and beautiful. Yuniór tries not to engage with these talks, however, because he only sees the nerdy content of Oscar's musings, rather than the attempts that Oscar is making to redress the racial injustices that Oscar sees in the world and in art.

☞ These days I have to ask myself; What made me angrier? That Oscar, the fat loser, quit, or that Oscar, the fat loser, defied me? And I wonder: What hurt him more? That I was never really his friend, or that I pretended to be?

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker), Oscar de León (Oscar Wao)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

When Yuniór and Oscar roomed together in college, Yuniór tried to turn Oscar into the perfect Dominican man by giving him pointers on getting in shape and picking up girls. Oscar decides that he does not want to implement Yuniór's changes, and simply tells Yuniór that he would prefer not to. Though this is not a violent confrontation, Yuniór takes Oscar's "betrayal" very poorly and treats Oscar with contempt from that point on.

Much of the novel's narration involves Yuniór's attempts to make sense of his own past, and to fix the mistakes that he made as a younger man. Due to his own discomfort with his Dominican identity in college, Yuniór felt the need to put the "fat loser" Oscar down in order to assert his own fitness and popularity. From his vantage point years later, Yuniór tries to clarify whether he actually wanted to help Oscar, or if he just wanted to succeed at his project and got upset when Oscar destroyed that plan. Yuniór then realizes Oscar's feelings on the matter must have been just as complicated. Yuniór had no obligation to be Oscar's friend, but pretending to be Oscar's friend gave Oscar a hope that might have been even more hurtful when it was taken away. Yuniór and Oscar's friendship is very important to each boy, but Yuniór cannot admit it because he was so insecure in his own identity during the time of their relationship.

☞ A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things.

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

When Oscar finally gets attention from a girl, Yuniór feels intense jealousy rather than helping his "friend" celebrate this development. Looking back, Yuniór blames this on his affectionless childhood. Díaz uses Yuniór to point out the difficulties that many Dominican American families face, as the Dominican culture in America (as described by Yuniór) creates a toxic environment for young children of color. Yuniór never fully explains his relationship with his mother, but hints that his mother was overworked and harsh like Oscar and Lola's mother, Beli. Yuniór also subtly implies that he was nerdy and friendless as a child, due to his interest in stereotypically "white" genres like Oscar.

This early lack of any kind of affection from family and friends causes Yuniór to constantly search for affection from the romantic relationships in his life. He then becomes jealous of any other man that receives the attention he feels should belong to him. Furthermore, this finally manifests in Yuniór's inability to stay faithful to any woman, as he wants as much affection as possible. Yuniór's "terrible" heart is his fatal flaw, undermining possible affection from family and friends because he was once so starved for this love that he now does not recognize healthy relationships.

Book 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Abelard Cabral

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

When Yunior tries to find out why Abelard was arrested by Trujillo, several rumors crop up to explain why Abelard drew Trujillo's anger. Many people believed that he "slandered" Trujillo by making a joke about Trujillo hiding bodies in the back of his car. Others believed that Abelard refused to let Trujillo have his daughter. Still others think that he wrote a book that exposed Trujillo's cursed rise to power. Yunior himself seems to lean more towards the book explanation, but he clearly places the responsibility on the reader to choose which explanation makes the most sense. Due to Trujillo's "Páginas en blanco (blank pages)," no official reason was ever recorded for Abelard's arrest. As official truth in the DR depended on Trujillo's feelings that day, there is no way to tell what actually happened unless one is a first-hand witness, and even then memory and trauma can affect one's version of past events.

Yunior compares this lack of knowledge to "trawling in silences," a metaphor that suggests fishing in a deep ocean with no way of seeing what is caught in the net. Many Dominicans stay silent, refusing to speak of what they saw in the Trujillo years out of discomfort or fear that they too will be incriminated. In trying to put together a history of the DR during this time period, Yunior must simply cast his net and see what stories come up.

☞ That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

When Beli is born, her extremely dark complexion cause some of her family to say that she is the first sign of the fukú curse on the whole family. In the Dominican Republic, black skin signified low-class poverty because it was supposedly the mark of the hated Haitians from the other half of the island. Beli's dark skin, despite her family's elite social standing, was the first signal that her family was truly falling into disarray after her father Abelard's arrest. Yunior laments the hypocrisy in this part of Dominican culture. Though a large majority of Dominicans have skin just as dark as Haitians, the values of colonialism and white supremacy are still so strong that Dominicans are forced to deny that natural part of their appearance. Beli's dark skin follows her throughout her life, becoming her most prominent feature as well as a visual symbol of the curse's power in her life.

☞ In fact, I believe that, barring a couple of key moments, Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilles. And from it forged herself anew.

Related Characters: Yunior (The Narrator) (speaker), Beli (Hypatia Belicia) Cabral

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

After Beli is saved from the monstrous foster family and begins to live with La Inca, Yunior says that Beli never thought about that previous life again. This type of "amnesia," willfully forgetting painful experiences, was typical in the Dominican Republic during and after the Era of Trujillo. Trujillo himself had a policy of "blank pages," refusing to have any record of his actions during his rise to power and greatly limiting the documentation of his administration. Dominican citizens took to using this policy in their own lives, choosing not to recognize harmful history as a way to try to move past Trujillo's atrocities and giving in

to “hallucination” to rewrite those events.

Beli herself does not know that Trujillo uprooted her from her family, but she still uses the Dominican coping mechanism. Yuniór calls this the power of the “Untilles,” a play on unmaking the Antilles, the name of the Dominican Republic’s archipelago. Beli’s refusal to acknowledge her own past later negatively affects both her and her children, however, because they continue to feel the effects of the past without fully understanding why these tragedies keep happening.

Book 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

●● Oscar remembers having a dream where a mongoose was chatting with him. Except the mongoose was the Mongoose. What will it be, muchacho? it demanded. More or less? And for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain – Less! Less! Less! – but then in the back of his head he remembered his family... More, he croaked. --- --- --- said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness.

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker), Oscar de León (Oscar Wao)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

After Oscar is beaten by two police officers for being friends with the girlfriend of the police captain, he sees the Mongoose in the field and manages to survive his injuries long enough to be found and given medical attention, saving his life. Yuniór relates the conversation that Oscar had with the Mongoose, the main agent of zafa (blessing) in the characters’ lives. The mongoose allows Oscar to choose whether he wants to return to life and take “more” or give up and take “less,” a rare moment of agency despite the novel’s normally deterministic stance on destiny. Oscar at first wants less pain, and almost chooses less of everything in life, but he then realizes that he wants more of his family’s love, and that love is worth any amount of pain. He chooses to take more of both the good and the bad.

The Mongoose honors Oscar’s choice, speaking three words that presumably let Oscar stay alive and unconscious in the “darkness.” Yet Yuniór either can’t or won’t reveal what those three words are, another “blank page” moment

in a novel full of silences and gaps of communication. However, this censorship actually opens up more opportunities for the reader to creatively decide what the Mongoose said, tailoring a meaningful moment to each reader rather than leaving the reader without necessary information. The Mongoose uses this opportunity to show readers how to use silence as a force for good rather than evil.

●● He read *The Lord of the Rings* for what I’m estimating the millionth time, one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts since he’d first discovered it, back when he was nine and lost and lonely and his favorite librarian had said, Here, try this, and with one suggestion changed his life. Got through almost the whole trilogy, but then the line “and out of Far Harad black men like halftrolls” and he had to stop, his head and heart hurting too much.

Related Characters: Yuniór (The Narrator) (speaker), Oscar de León (Oscar Wao)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

As Oscar recovers from a near-fatal beating, he turns to his favorite books for comfort, as he has many times in the past. Yuniór ties the moment back to Oscar’s childhood, when a more innocent and naïve Oscar simply wanted companionship in his lonely life. At the time, *The Lord of the Rings* was the perfect solution, and Yuniór says he is able to read it millions of times to find that same comfort.

However, once Oscar grows up and experiences prejudice and racism because of his dark skin, certain elements of the fantasy novel begin to take on a painful undertone. Yuniór says that Oscar stops at the line comparing black men to half trolls, a phrase that is meant to describe the races of orcs and trills that are the villains of the books, but which strikes Oscar as another example of white men, like author JRR Tolkien, treating black men as less than human. Oscar is no longer able to use fantasy as an escape, because the racial hierarchies that punish him in the real world follow him even in his favorite novels.

Though Oscar has to put aside one of his favorite novels, this moment is also a catalyst for Oscar to finally start taking the initiative to improve his real life. Once Oscar is

well enough, he returns to the DR and fights for the woman he loves, rather than disappearing into another fantasy world.

Book 3, Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ On one of our last nights as novios (boyfriend and girlfriend) she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are.

Related Characters: Trujillo, Lola de León, Yunió (The Narrator) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

After Oscar's death, Lola and Yunió's relationship quickly sours. Yunió, like Trujillo, is completely unable to stay faithful to one woman, instead sleeping with as many beautiful women as he can possibly manage. However, Lola is so focused on tending to her mother's health when the cancer returns, that Lola doesn't break up with Yunió until a year later when her mother has also died. Most people blame the Dominican fukú curse for these tragedies, but Lola does not believe in those superstitions. She chooses to see the pain and hardship prevalent in Dominican and Dominican American lives as the outcome of an entire generation of Dominican people shaped by years of a horrible dictatorship. After living through the Trujillo years, Dominican people now recreate his actions to sabotage themselves and the people around them. To be Trujillo, in Lola's eyes, is to act with selfish disregard for others, even actively harming them if it suits your purposes – something that Yunió is very guilty of, but that Lola sees in herself, her family, and her Dominican friends as well.

Book 3, Epilogue Quotes

☝ Behold the girl: the beautiful muchachita: Lola's daughter. Dark and blindingly fast: in her great-grandmother La Inca's words: una jurona. Could have been my daughter if I'd been smart, if I'd been ---. Makes her no less precious. She climbs trees, she rubs her butt against doorjamb, she practices malapalabras when she thinks nobody is listening. Speaks Spanish and English. Neither Captain Marvel nor Billy Batson, but the lightning.

Related Characters: Yunió (The Narrator) (speaker), La

Inca, Isis

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Yunió describes Lola's daughter Isis in glowing terms, as if she were his own. Yunió will clearly always love Lola and has great tenderness for Isis, and even believes that he could have been Isis' father if only he had possessed some quality that he either won't or can't share with us. Yunió leaves one more blank space in the novel, as he still does not fully understand the Dominican heritage that keeps him from committing to an authentic relationship with Lola. Isis, on the other hand, speaks Spanish and English, suggesting hope for an identity that fuses the Dominican and American backgrounds that Yunió cannot reconcile.

Yet Isis is more symbol than girl. La Inca calls her una jurona (Spanish for ferret), an animal very similar to the Mongoose that grants zafa (blessing) when characters are about to be overcome by the fukú curse. Isis is by no means perfect, engaging in the mischievous behaviors of a spunky little girl, but she also has the dark skin and quick speed that the Mongoose had in the cane field where it saved Oscar and Beli's lives. Isis is not like Captain Marvel, a superhero who can save the world, or Billy Batson, Captain Marvel's ordinary human host, but she is the lightning, the thing that allows ordinary people to become extraordinary. Yunió believes that, through Isis, the de León family will finally be healed.

☝ If she's her family's daughter—as I suspect she is—one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers. Not now, but soon. One day when I'm least expecting, there will be a knock at my door.

Related Characters: Yunió (The Narrator) (speaker), Isis

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of the novel, when Yunió has explained how he has compiled so much of the de León family history, he finally reveals his reason for writing this book. Isis is not just

Lola's daughter, she is her "family's daughter" and therefore subject to the curse that has followed all the members of her family for generations. Though Isis is not his daughter, Yunior still loves Lola enough that he wants her daughter to live a long, happy, curse-free life. According to Yunior, the only way to break the fukú curse placed on the Cabral/de León family is to face up to how the curse was brought on Abelard and all the events that his family, Beli, Lola, and Oscar suffered through because of the curse.

This book, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is then a physical collection of zafa that Yunior hopes to give to Isis when she comes looking for answers about who she is and where she comes from. It is the first step in filling in Trujillo's "páginas en blanco" (blank pages) that have hidden the fate of the Cabral/de León children. Yet the book also becomes a zafa for Yunior himself, as he finally starts to come to terms with his own emotional issues and complicated Dominican heritage.

Book 3: The Final Letter Quotes

☝☝ So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!

Related Characters: Oscar de León (Oscar Wao) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 335

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the novel, Yunior includes excerpts of the

very last letter that Oscar wrote home from the Dominican Republic before he was killed. In it, Oscar expounds on the wonder of the love he has finally found with Ybón, an intimacy which he had searched for his whole life. While Yunior focuses on his amazement that Oscar and Ybón actually had sex, meaning that Oscar did not die a virgin, Oscar himself revels in the other details that loving Ybón brings. According to Yunior, Dominican men and women are unusually preoccupied with love and sex. Oscar's complete lack of a romantic life made him even more curious than most about the apparent excellence of this experience, and the frank nature of Dominican families meant that he heard plenty about love and sex before he saw it for himself.

When he finally gets to see love firsthand, Oscar proclaims "the beauty! The beauty!". He suggests that love might have excused all of the pain he had to go through for Ybón if only he had known how wonderful the end result would be. This phrase, the very last words in the entire novel, echoes the last words of Kurtz's report in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, where Kurtz, a European ivory trader in the wilds of Africa, exclaims "the horror! The horror!" judging everything from the natives of the continent of Africa to the Europeans who exploit them to be horrible. In contrast, Oscar's last words give a hopeful turn to the pain of the novel. Though Oscar and his family had to undergo horrific pain, emotional and physical, it was worth it for them to receive even small amounts of beautiful love. While Kurtz embodies the worst impulses of mankind, spreading all the horror that humans are capable of, Oscar upholds the best virtues of mankind, looking at all of the beauty that mankind creates.



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.

BOOK 1, PREFACE

The book begins as the narrator describes the arrival of “fukú americanus” in the Western Hemisphere. Known by many other names as well, this is a curse brought by Europeans from Africa to Hispaniola. All of the descendants of those living in the Caribbean at the time of the curse are also subject to its touch.

In the 1950s, the first generation of the novel, the curse was controlled by Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic. This explains why all those opposed to the dictator met such horrible fates. A footnote explains Trujillo’s rise to power and the markers of his regime – Haitian genocide, authoritarian control, and narcissistic government. The footnote also disparages Trujillo’s looks and personality, as well as his penchant for sleeping around, and compares him to the worst Nazis and rulers from science fiction dystopia.

The narrator speculates further about the fukú, now calling it the “Great American Doom.” He says that it killed Kennedy, and caused the American defeat in Vietnam. The narrator says that fukú can strike like lightning or it can slowly drown a person, but it always kills those it has marked. Furthermore, it doesn’t matter whether you believe in the fukú or not, because fukú believes in you.

According to the narrator, every Dominican family has a personal fukú story. He says that he received a thousand replies when he posted about fukú on an online forum, from Puerto Ricans and Haitians as well as Dominicans. His own mother has a fukú story to tell the narrator, though she never talks about anything else from her past in Santo Domingo. However, the fukú story that interests the narrator most is the story of Oscar de León. The narrator mentions that Oscar himself may not have seen his life as a fukú story, though.

The novel starts with a distinctly Dominican perspective, explaining the fukú that potentially causes all of the hardship and pain in the novel. Díaz has said in interviews that the curse is a metaphor for the damage caused by colonialism and slavery in the Caribbean.



The narrator’s irreverent criticism of Trujillo both educates the reader to potentially unknown Dominican history and shows the narrator’s complex relationship to the dictator. He loathes and laughs at Trujillo, but he can’t quite escape the fear his parents felt. The narrator’s slang and strong personal voice alert us to the fact that he is not an unbiased observer (he is later revealed to be the character of Yuniór), and he is also possibly a kind of stand-in for Díaz in the novel.



By introducing fukú as an unstoppable force, the narrator reveals the “Dominican” viewpoint on destiny as a pre-determined and unsympathetic force that controls human lives. He also ties in history that American readers will be more familiar with, ensuring that this is as much an American story as a Dominican story.



The narrator essentially gives away the tragic ending of the novel here, making it all the more surprising how hopeful Oscar is when we finally meet him. The narrator’s focus on Oscar also sets up the important relationship between Oscar and the narrator, though we will not meet the narrator (Yuniór) as a character until Chapter 4. By contrasting Oscar’s own vision of his life with the narrator’s perspective, the narrator admits that his version might not be the most accurate and that we must be careful not to trust him absolutely.



Aside from telling a fukú story, the narrator also wants to tell a story of zafa. The only way to protect yourself from fukú, he says, is through zafa – counterspell. Many things are “good luck charms” that can serve as zafa, but the author wants to use his book as his own personal zafa.

The introduction of the twin forces of fukú and zafa prepare us for the fairy-tale-esque elements of the story to come. Already, the narrator has shown that he likes to make popular references and allusions to other creative works. His purpose for this book also allows him to take further creative liberties with the story in order to fit the ending he would like.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 1: GHETTO NERD AT THE END OF THE WORLD (1974-1987)

The Golden Age. The narrator begins by describing Oscar de León. From Oscar’s childhood, it was clear that he would never live up to the stereotype of the Dominican man. The narrator presents his lack of girlfriends as the biggest evidence that Oscar is not as “Dominican” as he should be. There was only a brief period, when Oscar was seven, that he had any luck with women. The narrator compares him to a smaller version of Porfirio Rubirosa, a famous Dominican actor in the 1940s and 50s, for his charm and dance moves.

The narrator starts building the image of a typical Dominican, displaying many internalized stereotypes as he does so. He mentions Porfirio Rubirosa, who is virtually unknown in the US, to set up the unattainable ideal of the “Latin Lover.” This description is the beginning of the narrator’s preoccupation with sex in place of true intimacy, as well as Oscar’s discomfort with his Dominican identity.



This “Golden Age” (when Oscar was seven) culminates in Oscar having two girlfriends at once. Maritza, a gorgeous Peruvian girl, and Olga, a poorer Puerto Rican girl from the neighborhood, agree to share Oscar. But Maritza soon becomes jealous and demands that Oscar choose between the two girls. He rejects poor, ugly Olga for beautiful Maritza only to be kicked to the curb once Maritza holds hands with another third grade boy. From then on, Oscar swears he will never have the “game” that Dominican men are supposed to own.

Oscar’s first experience with love is unhappy, setting the tone for every romantic relationship to follow in the novel. Maritza’s beauty and popularity in the face of Olga’s ugliness and isolation also introduces the theme of racism in the book. Olga is not just undesirable because she is ugly, but the very idea of her as “ugly” partly comes from the fact that she is Puerto Rican, and has darker skin than Maritza.



Oscar feels guilty for hurting Olga, but mostly heartbroken that Maritza left him. He pinpoints this breakup as the moment his life began to get worse. As he grows older, Oscar gains weight and loses friends. His growing interests in genre fiction, like sci-fi and fantasy, further isolate him from his peers.

Though Oscar is young, he has already learned to dismiss the feelings of women, a trait Díaz sees as common in Dominican culture. His interests in genres, however, stick out as stereotypically “white” interests for a boy of color.



The narrator also shares how the breakup ruined the lives of Maritza and Olga. Olga becomes a school pariah, on par with Oscar’s unpopularity. Maritza, meanwhile, goes on to find abusive boyfriends. Oscar watches this all sadly.

Olga and Maritza are two more examples of how every Latino/a in the universe of the novel has a fukú story. In their own ways, each girl is as cursed as Oscar was.



The Moronic Inferno. Oscar starts high school at an all-boys Catholic school called Don Bosco Tech. Oscar becomes the neighborhood “pariguayo,” or someone who just watches the party. A footnote explains that this term came from American Marines who occupied the Dominican Republic from 1916-1924. The Dominicans thought the marines were strange because they never joined in Dominican parties. Oscar’s only friends are Al and Miggs, two boys who are just as nerdy as he is. Al and Miggs tease Oscar about his looks, though Oscar’s great-aunt says he is the spitting image of his grandfather who died in jail.

In high school, Oscar dives deeper into his love of genre. The narrator describes in great detail all the books and movies that Oscar devotes his time to, such as *Lord of the Rings*, the Marvel Universe, and *Dungeons and Dragons*. The narrator explains in a footnote how he too liked these genres, suggesting that the DR (Dominican Republic) is a place uniquely suited to sci-fi and fantasy. The narrator, however, was able to hide his affection for genre fiction in order to fit in. Oscar, on the other hand, can’t pass for “normal” no matter what he does. Despite his social anxiety, Oscar still wishes to have a girlfriend, and his family frequently comments on his lack of female companionship.

The narrator now introduces Oscar’s sister, Lola, as a fiercely independent and wickedly smart “dominicana.” She refuses to let anyone take advantage of her after she was sexually assaulted in the fourth grade and lived through her crazy years in high school. Lola advises Oscar to lose weight and make more of an effort to fit in at school. Oscar tries, but it has no effect. It is no help that Lola’s friends constantly hang out at the house, teasing Oscar with their beauty.

Oscar is Brave. When even Al and Miggs get girlfriends during their senior year, Oscar is struck by uncontrollable jealousy. He cannot understand why they have more luck than he has, when Al and Miggs are just as socially inept and unattractive. When he asks them if their girlfriends could find him a friend as well, Al and Miggs’ lukewarm response makes Oscar realize that they are embarrassed of him. He starts to see himself as a “Morlock” (a creature from the book [The Time Machine](#)) rather than a human. Oscar redoubles his attempts to change, dieting and acting the part of the macho Dominican, but he is not successful.

“The Moronic Inferno” alludes to Dante’s [Inferno](#). Though the narrator speaks in Latino slang, he shows that he is also highly familiar with these more “elite” types of literature. The explanation of pariguayo further educates us to the ties America has to Dominican history. Finally, Oscar’s resemblance to his grandfather foreshadows Chapter 5, which highlights Abelard Cabral’s sad demise, and sets up the idea that history is repeating itself.



The narrator scoffs at Oscar’s devotion to genre, but clearly the narrator himself is also quite familiar with the characters and themes of these books and movies. We start to see the cracks in the façade the narrator has built, as all his descriptions of how hard Oscar tried to pass for normal could also apply to the narrator’s own struggles to achieve popularity despite his geeky inclinations. The narrator seems especially critical of Oscar’s lack of a girlfriend, perhaps as a way to distance himself from that same lonely fate.



The narrator skims quickly over Lola’s life story here, though the narrative will return to her in more detail later. Lola has her own specific emotional baggage, but to the narrator these events are seen as the inevitable outcome for most Dominican girls, and thus not important enough to fully explain. Like Oscar, Lola’s first experience with sexuality (in the form of sexual assault) negatively affects her ability to choose healthy relationships in the future.



By having Oscar call himself a “Morlock,” Díaz comments on the way that representation in fictional novels can negatively impact real people’s self-conception. Oscar has only ever seen dark-skinned beings as villains in popular culture, and so he sees himself as an evil, subhuman creature rather than a human worthy of love and affection. The book argues that his internalized self-hatred is far worse than his so-called friends’ poor treatment. Furthermore, the answer is not just to put up a happy face, as Oscar tries this and fails to find happiness through a fake persona.



That summer, Oscar and Lola go to Santo Domingo, the capital of the DR. La Inca, their great aunt, lets Oscar stay inside and try to become a “real writer.” La Inca tells Oscar about their family, sharing that his mother could have followed his grandfather’s path and become a doctor if not for the curse of a boy. Bolstered by La Inca’s support, Oscar writes two book drafts, but that newfound confidence is shattered when he comes back to the United States. The moment he steps off the plane, his uncle derides his tan for making him look “Haitian” (that is, **black**).

Oscar keeps up his writing once back in the states, but his mother and his friends Al and Miggs are not as accepting as La Inca was. He maintains his friendship with Al and Miggs, but starts telling them to leave him alone when they make fun of him. Oscar spends more time writing alone, refusing to let their teasing keep him from his dreams. He tells his sister Lola that this is the one moment in his high school career where he was proud of himself.

Oscar Comes Close. Oscar’s focus on writing is disrupted when he meets Ana Obregon in an SAT prep class. Ana is the picture of the perfect Caribbean girl, but also shares Oscar’s love for weird novels. Ana tells Oscar that she started to like literature at age 13, when her 24-year-old boyfriend Manny would read her passages of Henry Miller. Though Oscar is disturbed by the age gap between Ana and her ex, she says that her parents did not mind. She and Oscar continue to build a friendship, and he is heartened by their mutual love of sci-fi.

When Oscar tells Lola about Ana’s ex-boyfriend Manny, Lola tells him that this is evidence that Dominicans really do not love their children. She also advises that he should lose weight if he wants a chance with her, telling him to “bust out some crunches, Mister.” The narrator reveals that Lola wanted her pet name for Oscar, “Mister,” to be on Oscar’s tombstone, but that no one would allow it when the time came.

Amor de Pendejo (Stupid Love). Ana and Oscar begin to spend a lot of time together, talking on the phone and hanging out after SAT class. Oscar falls for Ana as he gets to know her, an important change from his earlier infatuations based on looks alone. Ana appears at Oscar’s house, much to Lola and Oscar’s surprise, and asks Oscar to a movie. Oscar believes this is his first date, but Ana is upset after the movie and the two drive home in a silence only broken by Ana screaming at the exit to their hometown. Though Oscar has to shamefully tell Lola that he didn’t even touch Ana, he is still hopeful that he will no longer be miserable.

Returning to the DR for the summer is simply the reality for many Dominican families, but it also represents an important shift in Oscar’s life goals. In the DR, he still faces difficulties, but his skin color is not a hindrance to his life goals. Once he returns to the United States, however, he is reminded that certain jobs (like writing genre fiction) are reserved for certain people (white people).



Once again, the novel presents racism as something that can be internalized by people of color, as Al, Miggs, and Oscar’s mother all deride Oscar’s writing because it is too “white.” Oscar starts to use writing as a way to cope with the injustices he sees in the world, as well as a way to create a safe space for himself.



The book presents Ana and Manny as yet another unhealthy relationship, as Díaz continues to comment on the destructive standards he sees in Dominican relationships. Though Ana is indeed beautiful, she is also an important departure from the beautiful Dominican stereotype, as her intelligence and interest in literature give her more nuance than Oscar’s previous love interests.



Lola’s comment supports Díaz’s argument that Dominican culture and families often help perpetuate harmful romantic ideals. Yet even though Lola sees the problems with these ideas, she still gives Oscar advice that keeps him in that same vicious cycle by focusing on physical appearance rather than emotional intelligence. Díaz’s reminder of Oscar’s inevitable death, coupled with this first glimpse of a girlfriend, suggests that his death will be related to love.



The narrator’s perspective on this relationship lets the reader know from the very beginning that it will end poorly, even though Oscar is treating Ana better than he has any other girl. The book often keeps important information under the surface, and we do not know for sure why Ana does not want Oscar to touch her on their “date,” but the previous allusions to sexual assault and abuse also naturally color the scene, and it seems likely that Ana has suffered the same in her relationship with Manny.



Oscar in Love. Oscar continues to learn more about Ana, especially the physical abuse she suffered in her relationship with Manny. The narrator, however, does not focus on this new emotional intimacy and instead asks the reader to speculate whether Ana and Oscar became sexually involved. Ana keeps Oscar in the “Let’s-Be-Friends Vortex.” That April, both Oscar and Ana learn that they got into the colleges they wanted, Rutgers and Penn State. Ana also learns that Manny has returned from his deployment in the army.

With Manny back in Ana’s life, Ana starts to blow Oscar off. When they do hang out, Ana talks only of Manny, alternating between her desire for him and her complaints about how badly he treats her. Manny jealously controls how often Oscar and Ana can see each other, and Oscar tries to get Ana to break up with Manny. She refuses, but Oscar displays the “Dominican” tendency towards taking love too far and continues to see her.

Oscar’s lovesickness takes over his life, as he drives aimlessly through Paterson and loses all interest in his novels. When Miggs mocks his desire to write role-playing games, Oscar snaps and punches him in the face. One desperate night, he goes even further and steals his uncle’s gun to threaten Manny. Oscar waits outside Manny’s apartment, but luckily Manny does not come home. When Oscar tells Lola what lovesickness had forced him to do, Lola forces Oscar to swear on their ancestors that he will never pull a stunt like that again.

Oscar meets Ana at the Japanese mall and compliments her figure, confusing Ana and putting her on guard. Oscar decides to finally tell Ana about his feelings for her. She doesn’t reciprocate, but she lets him down easy. His graduation from Don Bosco is a subdued affair. Oscar’s mother is exhausted from her battle against cancer, his uncle Rodolfo is high on heroin, and only Lola really celebrates. He finds out at graduation that only he and Olga, the third grade girlfriend that he dumped, did not go to prom. His family sends him off to Rutgers with the advice to find a new girlfriend in college.

After graduation, Oscar heads to Rutgers ready for a new start. Once there, though, he finds that he does not fit in with the white kids who like the genres he loves because they only see his **black** skin. His fellow students of color, on the other hand, tell him that these “white” interests mean he can’t really be Dominican, even though Oscar insists that he is. He reverts to his old, nerdy ways and resigns himself to four years of college that are as bad as his years in high school.

The scene marks a significant distinction between intimacy and physical attraction. Oscar begins to feel both for Ana, a true sign that he is capable of real love. Yet the narrator continues to focus solely on the physical aspects of the relationship. When we find out later that the narrator is Yuniore, these comments become another example of his immaturity and inability to form authentic relationships with women.



Both Ana and Oscar hold on to a relationship that is harmful to themselves, a choice which Díaz presents as a distinctly Dominican approach to love. As we will see later with Oscar’s mother, this trait also runs in the family. Oscar repeats his mother’s mistakes by holding on to a romantic partner who does not love him back.



Writing again acts as a safety valve for Oscar; when he stops writing, he stops making rational choices. Yet while Oscar is certainly better than Manny because he is not physically abusing Ana, he is still trying to manipulate her and undermine her control over her own life by taking Manny out of her reach. His treatment of women still suffers from the Dominican (and American) culture surrounding gender roles in romantic relationships.



While another novel on the immigrant experience in America might have highlighted the high school graduation as an important achievement of Oscar’s life, Díaz chooses to bury the day underneath Oscar’s romantic failures. This choice fits the book’s focus on love and self-acceptance rather than conventional economic success.



Oscar suffers from a crisis of identity because his physical appearance does not match the cultural image of the type of person he would like to be. His first experience living in a majority-white environment is jarring, but the reaction of his fellow students of color is more hurtful in a way, because the other Latino students also have narrow ideas about what people with dark skin should be allowed to do.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 2: WILDWOOD (1982-1985)

The chapter starts the de León story over again from Lola's perspective, as she describes a defining moment of change in her life. Lola remembers the sick feeling of finding a lump in her mother's breast, even as she also resents her mother's harsh control on her life. Lola had a premonition that something bad would happen, and takes this discovery as a sign that she too will be victim to the family curse (fukú). Lola rebels against her mother's dictates to be the perfect Dominican girl, after years of putting up with her mother's foul temper. The breast cancer also means that now Lola's mother no longer has the energy to hit Lola and Oscar. When Lola is 14, she finally takes a stand and burns her mother's wig.

Lola moves further back in time to describe the events that led her to burn her mother's wig. Lola explains her strained relationship with her mother and the suffocating life under her mother's Old World Dominican control. Lola tries to tamp down the "witchy" feeling she gets before her mother gets sick, but she can't contain the wildness inside her. Lola starts to fight back against her mother, disrespecting her mother's wishes and staying out with her "goth" light-skinned friend Karen Cepeda. Lola lets Karen give her a short, spiky hairstyle. Lola's mother, who now wears a wig after losing her hair from chemo treatment, throws the wig at Lola when she sees Lola's hair that night, telling her to cover the botched cut. Lola burns the wig on the kitchen stove and slaps her mother when she tries to hit her.

Though Lola feels guilty and ungrateful for everything her mother sacrificed to raise her and Oscar, she continues to assert her own personality, despite the fact that her mother hates these markers of American culture. Their mother's rage simmers through the house, keeping Oscar trapped in his room, and pushing Lola to leave at the age of 15. Fed up with life at home, Lola runs away with her latest boyfriend Aldo.

Aldo is a 19-year-old "blanquito" (white boy) who lives with his elderly father in a trailer on a part of the Jersey Shore called Wildwood. He asks Lola to move in with him three times, but she does not agree until she and her mother reach the final breaking point. When Lola insults her mother after she announces that the doctors want to run more tests for signs of cancer, Lola and her mother have their biggest fight yet. Lola disappears the next morning and painfully loses her virginity to Aldo that night. She compares their relationship to Dominique and Roark from Ayn Rand's [The Fountainhead](#).

Lola is the only character besides the narrator (Yunior) to speak in her own voice through the book, giving her more control over how she is portrayed. We can trust Lola's character more because she only speaks for herself, unlike the narrator, who pretends to know the thoughts of other characters. The family "curse" follows Lola in America, as Díaz comments on how traumatic family events often affect children even if they did not live through the experience firsthand.



Lola's story also introduces the conflict between first and second generations in many immigrant families, as each member has to decide how much to assimilate to a new culture and how much to hold firm to their heritage. When Lola cuts her hair, she effectively rejects the cultural standards of her mother. Karen and Lola each enact a form of rebellion against the mainstream culture of their parents through their goth style, but Lola's presentation is more shocking because her skin color is the opposite of the pale goth stereotype.



Lola does not actually know what her mother has sacrificed to move to the United States, as her mother only tells her the idealized, censored version of the story. Like Trujillo in the DR, Lola's mother acts as a dictator in the house and Lola naturally resents this control despite her genuine desire to be a good daughter.



Lola seems contemptuous of Aldo's character, his living situation, and his skin color. At the same time, Lola is seemingly attracted to him for the white American values he represents, rather than for anything specific about the actual boy. The allusion to Ayn Rand cements Aldo's status as a stereotypical figurehead of American success. Rand's book focuses on her theories of "objectivism," the ultra-capitalist values that supposedly save the American Dream.



Life with Aldo is not the escape Lola dreamed of, as she is miserable and bored. Aldo's father selfishly ensures that Lola does not feel welcome, locking the refrigerator door and keeping his cat box in Aldo and Lola's tiny room. Lola hates her job selling fries on the boardwalk, and can't stand the fights between Aldo and his father. Things get even worse when she loses her job and Aldo starts to work at the garage with his father, making him even crabbiest than before. Lola worries that Oscar will be skinny now that he has no one to cook for him, and she dreams of her mother shrinking small enough to fit into her own hand. Lola wants to leave, but is too proud to admit she made a mistake by leaving her family.

However, once Aldo begins making racist remarks, Lola stands up for herself. She rejects Aldo's advances that night and calls Oscar the next morning. Oscar cries when he hears Lola's voice, and Lola realizes how much she missed him. She and Oscar arrange to meet at a coffee shop on the boardwalk, so that Oscar can give Lola some of the clothes and books she left behind and some of the money their mother hides. Lola dreams about using that money to take Oscar and run away to Dublin.

Lola walks in to the coffee shop to find that Oscar is fatter than ever, and that he told their mother about the meeting. Their mother ambushes Lola and grabs hold of her, but Lola manages to break free and start running down the boardwalk. Lola looks back at her mother just to make sure she is alright, and sees that her mother is crumpled on the sidewalk crying. Lola has sympathy for the dying woman and walks back to her mother. Once she is close enough for her mother to grab her, though, she sees that her mother had been faking her tears.

Lola is sent to Santo Domingo with La Inca for the next year, so that she can't run away. She likes school there well enough, even though her goth style sticks out much worse here than it did in New York. With her friend Rocío, Lola joins the track team, which gives her gorgeous legs, and she starts dressing like a "real Dominican girl." She also gets along much better with her great-aunt, La Inca, than with her mother. Lola starts to think about staying in the DR for another year. She even starts to miss her mother, misting up when she sees a picture of how thin her mother is now. Her mother calls to say that Lola can come home if she wants to.

Rather than a "white savior" who helps Lola rise above her childhood in poverty, Aldo actually brings Lola lower. Like Oscar, Lola cannot improve her life by forcing herself to adopt a fake persona of whiteness. Lola's worries for her family reveal how purely she loves them, as she misses Oscar's weight and her mother's domineering presence rather than hoping that those "flaws" have changed in her absence. These dreams nod to the magical-realism present in many Latino novels.



Aldo is one of few white characters in the novel, and he is also one of few characters to make overtly racist comments. Paradoxically, his comments are both worse to hear and easier to avoid than the internalized racism portrayed by characters of color. It is a sign of Lola's inner strength that she immediately looks for a way out once she encounters this type of emotional abuse. Lola's preoccupation with Dublin nods to the many allusions to Yeats, an Irish poet, in the novel.



This scene presents a small-scale version of the conflict that follows Lola all her life. She is capable of "rising above" her family's troubles and leaving them to pursue her personal dreams, but she always comes back to comfort her family in times of need. Lola's mother seems to know this, and manipulates her daughter's feelings of loyalty and caring to get what she wants.



Ironically, Lola is sent to the DR because she can't "run away" from the island, yet there she joins the track team, an activity that improves her ability to run. However, Lola runs in circles without actually getting anywhere, just as her year in the DR will not further any of her previous goals in the US. Her transformation into a "real Dominican girl" highlights the disconnect she feels between the Dominican and American halves of her identity.



Lola's peace in the DR is disturbed when the odd feeling of premonition returns. She wonders if the feeling is telling her to run away again, but she can't bring herself to leave her great-aunt, La Inca. She also starts dating a boy named Max, enamored with his job running film reels between the three theaters in Santo Domingo. Though Max is low-class according to Dominican standards, he dreams of improving his life by moving to the US. He treats Lola well and she is "fond" of him. Thinking that perhaps the premonition is about Max, she lets him make love to her. He pronounces her body a "treasure" and helps her start seeing herself in that light.

The strange feeling of change continues to bother Lola, until she can't sleep and her performance on the track team suffers. One night, she comes home from a date with Max to find her great aunt waiting for her. Lola thinks about how much she appreciates the older woman's strength and acceptance. La Inca is looking at pictures of Lola's mother. She tells Lola how beautiful her mother was, and says that they too struggled to get along when her mother was young. Lola's feeling hits her hard, and she holds her breath as she waits for La Inca to tell her more of her family history. She decides that she is "waiting to begin."

Max would rather live in a fantasy world dreaming of the US than face reality in the DR. His job reflects this desire, focusing on making the escapism of a movie more available rather than fixing the poverty rampant in the DR that prevents each theater from buying their own reels. Lola again uses a relationship as a way to escape, this time into movie fantasy. However, her connection to Max seems more genuine than previously with Aldo, because Max adores her body, skin color and all.



The similarities between Lola and her mother become more clear, particularly as the chapter ends abruptly and moves into the next section (which jumps further back to discuss Beli, presumably with information from La Inca). Luckily, Lola is in a position to prevent her mother's bitter end. Importantly, the cursed feeling that Lola associates with fukú only goes away once Lola learns more about her family, suggesting that the family curse (or at least its continuance) partly stems from a lack of information about one's own identity and heritage. As Lola prepares to learn more about her mother, she feels that she herself is only "waiting to begin."



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 3: THE THREE HEARTBREAKS OF BELICIA CABRAL (1955-1962)

Look at the Princess. The narrator returns again, going further back in the family timeline to tell the story of Oscar and Lola's mother, Hypatia Belicia Cabral. He describes her as a Dominican princess, with a beautiful body, dark skin, and the same desire to be elsewhere that her daughter had. He calls this feeling "that particular Jersey malaise."

Under the Sea. Hypatia Belicia, called Beli, lives with her aunt La Inca in Baní, one of the poorer neighborhoods of Santo Domingo. The narrator distinguishes the peaceful Baní in the 1950s from the frenzied Baní of today, but explains that the neighborhood was intolerant of **black** skin in those days. Still, Beli has it relatively easy, as La Inca owns a chain of bakeries and treats Beli with kindness. In contrast to her early childhood with a "monstrous" foster family, the narrator calls Beli's time with La Inca the "Beautiful Days." The narrator also alludes to a horrific incident that left a burn scar across Beli's entire back, but he does not reveal what specifically happened. La Inca tells Beli all about her family's elite roots, and does not beat her (unlike most Dominican parents, according to the narrator).

The narrator frames Hypatia Belicia as a princess, paving the way for her story to be heavily influenced by the genre of romance (both novels and movies). Just as her children will later experience, Hypatia Belicia's extremely dark skin becomes an obstacle to her desired life path. However, Beli's search for identity also includes class struggle, as she is born into economic and social privilege, but grows up in poverty.



"Under the Sea" recalls the motif of fairy tales, referencing *The Little Mermaid*. The mermaid Ariel also wanted an escape from the world she lived in. However, Díaz grounds this fairy-tale imagery in the real experience of a Dominican neighborhood, so that Beli is a distinctly and recognizably Dominican princess. Her name, Hypatia Belicia, connotes the high society life that was taken from her, while her nickname Beli aligns with the low-status life she is now living. Still, what is said is as important as what is unsaid. We now know more about Beli but there are still shadowy aspects of her past that remain "blank pages."



Despite how La Inca spoils her, Beli has an unquenchable thirst for change, constantly straining against the bounds of her life. The narrator says that Beli would have felt like that no matter where she grew up, and is extra unlucky to have been born on an unescapable island such as the DR in the 1950s. Beli's feelings of suffocation match the feelings of her generation, as her peers are the ones who will finally bring revolution to the DR. La Inca wants Beli to have nothing to do with revolution, reminding her that her family tradition is to be a rich doctor.

La Chica de Mi Escuela (The Girl from My School). When Beli is 13, La Inca gets her a scholarship to the best private school on the island, called El Redentor. However, Beli does not fit in there because of her dark skin and her rough upbringing with the foster family. Beli puts up a tough girl attitude to deal with the teasing, overreacting to the smallest insults until no one will so much as speak to her. The narrator compares her experience to the famous Dominican movie "In the Time of the Butterflies," saying it was nothing like that.

Beli is completely ignored at school, and forced to sit next to Wei, a Chinese girl who speaks no Spanish. The only time Wei speaks to Beli is to tell her that her skin is "**black-black**." Her time with the foster family, the "Lost Years," makes it hard for Beli to focus and her grades suffer. Though La Inca wants Beli to become a doctor, Beli cares more about boys at school than she does about the subjects she is taught. Yet Beli, ever full of upper-class arrogance, pretends to all the children in Baní that her school is a paradise. Beli spins beautiful stories for Dorca, a mistreated servant girl, where Jack Pujols, the most desirable boy in school, is her boyfriend. She makes herself out to be as good as the heroines from all the romance movies she loves.

Beli dreams of the day that Jack Pujols will whisk her off to France, like the romance actress María Montez. The narrator explains that romance movies were common in the Dominican Republic while Beli was growing up, but that she was more "boy-crazy" than any of her friends. La Inca warns her that boys will never solve problems, but Beli remains single-minded. However, no boy in her neighborhood is worthy of her attention, and no boy at her school will pay any attention to her.

Even Beli, who remains staunchly apolitical throughout the novel, cannot escape the whirlwind of change that overtook the DR during the end of the Trujillo regime. This reinforces Díaz's point that it is the ordinary people who make history interesting, and indeed that history is made by people just trying to live out what they consider to be a good life. However, Beli's personality and perhaps her cursed destiny will soon draw her into Trujillo's web despite her (and La Inca's) reluctance.



The private school experience gives Beli both a significant mark of privilege and ties her into a specific tradition of Latino and Dominican "telenovelas" (soap operas) in which school is an important rite of passage. Though Beli struggles like her son Oscar to assert her identity despite her appearance, her troubles have less to do with her skin color and ethnicity than with her class background. "In the Time of the Butterflies" also features a girl at a private school on scholarship, but the girl in the movie is befriended and ultimately accepted into upper-crust Dominican society—although this movie ends in tragedy as well.



Introducing Wei, a character outside of both the Dominican and American experiences that the novel highlights, allows Díaz to comment on the way that racism can include a hierarchy beyond "white" and "non-white." Though both Beli and Wei are marginalized for their skin color and backgrounds, they have contempt for each other instead of standing in solidarity. And though Wei might seem more out of place than Beli, as she is dealing with a language barrier as well, Wei too jeers at Beli's skin tone. To cope with her ostracism at school, Beli escapes into fantasies patterned off the movies that she watches.



Like her son Oscar will later do, Beli places romantic pursuits above school - at least according to the narrator. However, the level of exaggeration the narrator includes in this section suggests that he may be embellishing so that Beli's story better matches a romance novel's melodrama. Either way, La Inca's prophecy comes true: a boy does lead to Beli's downfall.



Kimota! Despite the difficulties facing Beli's search for love, she finds her first love.

"Kimota", the magic word that a comic-book character named Mickey Moran says in order to turn into Marvel Man, is an obscure reference to the British remake of the comic Captain Marvel. In the context of Beli's story, it simply reinforces how miraculous it was that she found love. At a character level, the fact that the narrator is familiar with this reference shows that the narrator is far nerdier than he wants to admit.



Número Uno (Number One). Jack Pujols is the son of an elite Dominican family that is in Trujillo's inner circle. Jack is nearly white skinned, and the narrator explains that he is an entitled brat who will eventually work with Balaguer, Trujillo's right-hand man and successor. A footnote delves deeper into Balaguer's character, painting him with the same demonizing brush as Trujillo. As loud-mouthed, cocky, and misguided as Jack Pujols is, he is Beli's first love and her first heartbreak. She displays her love by constantly running into him in the hallway.

Jack Pujols' white skin hearkens back to Lola's desire for a light-skinned man. Beli does not seem to truly love Jack, but instead the elite (though corrupt) status a relationship with him would promise.



Beli is completely invisible to Jack Pujols until she matures into her adult body, an experience the narrator calls the "Summer of Her Secondary Sex Characteristics." She blossoms into a "terrible beauty" with a generously curvy figure. At first, Beli is ashamed of all the attention that her curves get. However, once she sees that her figure gives her power over the males who adore her, she starts to embrace these advantages. The proof of this power comes when she convinces her dentist to meet her at a park to cheat on his wife with her. Though Beli doesn't go through with the tryst, she is giddy at the thought that she can manipulate other people that way. She decides to use these new assets to the fullest.

Beli's "terrible beauty" quotes the famous poem Yeats wrote for the 1916 Irish revolution. Yeats agreed with the sentiments of the revolution, but grieved that the revolution was unsuccessful and most of the leaders were executed. Likewise, Beli's beauty might be a worthy prize, but it could also destroy her. The explosive nature of this physical change again evokes a comic book, as the narrator's preferred genre slips into Beli's romance story again. While Beli's use of her beauty might seem like an empowering choice, the narrator makes it clear that she doesn't truly know what she is getting herself into by relishing her new status.



Hunt the Light Knight. Newly confident from the changes that had taken place that summer, Beli returns to school determined to catch Jack Pujols' eye, with a frenzy comparable to Ahab's search for the white whale in *Moby Dick*. She follows him, and even wears her shirt partially unbuttoned, but nothing works until she runs into him in the hallway again. He finally speaks to her, but gives her nothing else to fuel her romantic passion.

*By comparing Beli to Captain Ahab, Díaz both sets Beli up for a tragic fall that mirrors Ahab's death, and creates a space in a historically prestigious novel (*Moby Dick*) for a Latino character that would seem to be his polar opposite. The fact that Jack's skin is also described as "white" like the whale's gives the comparison an ironic twist.*



Though Beli mopes over Jack Pujols' lack of interest, her grades are actually better than ever and English is her best subject. A teacher asks them to write an essay about their predictions for the future, for themselves, Trujillo, and the DR. A classmate, Mauricio Ledesme, disappears because he writes about his hopes that the DR will become a true democracy without dictators, like the USA. He also accuses Trujillo of killing Galíndez, a scholar in the DR who wrote a dissertation exposing the evils of the Trujillo regime. A footnote expands on the torture and execution that Trujillo ordered for Galíndez, as well as many other writers and teachers, suggesting that writers and dictators are natural enemies because they both have the power to sway the thoughts of the population. Beli, for her part, writes only that she wants to be married to a wealthy man and work as a doctor in a hospital named for Trujillo.

That October, Jack Pujols breaks up with his previous girlfriend and stops Beli in the hallway. He calls her beautiful, and just like that they are dating. He drives her around, though he doesn't have a license. He is allowed to get away with anything because his father is the best friend of Trujillo's son. A footnote fills in the Trujillo family tree, explaining that Trujillo's son was just as violent as his father, contributing to genocide and torture until he was killed in a car crash meant to kill someone else.

Amor! (Love!). While Beli later remembers the brief romance between her and Jack through rose colored glasses, it is nothing like what she imagined. Jack is very rough with Beli when he takes her virginity, caring only for his own feelings, but Beli is too in love with him, and the conquest she has made, to mind. When they are caught having sex in a school closet, Jack Pujols renounces her completely. It is too late to save his reputation, as Beli is a "prieta," a name given to very dark-skinned girls, and the lowest level on the Dominican social ladder. His engagement to a woman of another prominent Dominican family is called off, his father begins to beat him, and he is sent to a military school in Puerto Rico. He and Beli never see each other again.

Beli feels no embarrassment at the discovery, insisting that she and Jack share true love and that Jack had promised to marry her. No one, from her teachers to La Inca, can get Beli to admit she was wrong. La Inca still can't bring herself to physically punish Beli, but she yells at her and orders her to go back to school. Beli takes an oath that she will never serve anyone's will but her own, and drops out of school. Rallied by her new decision, Beli goes to town and talks her way into a job as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant, owned by a man named Juan Then. La Inca is horrified, but thinks that Beli will give up on her own soon enough.

In this section, Beli's story takes a backseat to the narrator's (and possibly Díaz's) interest in using writing as a tool against dictators. The narrator focuses on the nobility and sacrifice involved in exposing a dictator in print. It seems likely that the narrator is hoping to add an element of that revolutionary sentiment to his own novel, though he also notes the dangerous similarities between writers and dictators. Each profession promises complete control over a particular world, speaking to a perhaps universal human desire to have control over fate.



From the start, it is clear that Jack Pujols' intentions with Beli are superficial at best. Like many other relationships in the novel, Beli and Jack's courtship presents a man taking what he wants despite how it may harm others. The theme of family inheritance and generational cycles appears here as well, as Trujillo's son continues his disreputable lifestyle and is also killed in a car.



Beli censors herself, just as she censors the stories that she tells her children about the DR. But by refusing to ever acknowledge the truth, she robs herself (and her family) of the chance to move past those events. Beli achieves her ambition, but it does not give her the happiness she wanted. Jack's character is irredeemably tarnished, and he is one of few male aggressors to immediately face consequences for his actions. This is contrary to the novel's pattern of delayed fukú consequences up to now, but supports the narrator's claim that fukú doom always strikes when it wants to.



It seems as though Beli has been telling herself romantic fantasies for so long that she cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy. The narrator seems to suggest that Beli deserved a beating, almost as a way to knock some sense into her and save her from later, greater pain. As it stands, Beli shows how headstrong she is, as well as her ability to continue to survive after a crushing blow. However, her choices do have consequences, as the only place that will offer her work is a restaurant owned by the only people even lower on the pecking order in the DR than Beli herself.



Working as a waitress is not glamorous, but 14-year-old Beli takes to it easily. The owners of the Chinese restaurant, Juan and José Then, are distant, but treat Beli with kindness. She learns compassion from gentle Juan and many practical skills from the tougher José. She enjoys her job there, garnering much affection from the male patrons. La Inca comes to the restaurant to try to shame Beli into quitting, but Beli knows this is the right choice for herself and keeps working as hard as ever.

Beli has many admirers at the restaurant, though few act on their affections for fear of José. Though she likes the attention, Beli finds out that she cannot let go of Jack Pujols. Two men in particular, a car dealer and a young revolutionary, fall in love with her, even though she refuses their advances. The car dealer is obsessed with baseball, and Arquimedes, the young student, bends Beli's ear with talk of how to improve the DR. A footnote explains how dangerous it was to be a student during Trujillo's regime, with men like Johnny Abbes García sent to murder anyone caught plotting against the dictator. Even though Beli likes the attention and ego boost from two men, she does not let anything physical happen.

In 1959, the Trujillo regime begins to crumble, worrying the Then brothers and Arquimedes that the fallout will be worse than the administration itself. Beli tells them all that their concerns are ridiculous, and the narrator reveals that Arquimedes indeed survives all of the disastrous events to come. That February, one of the waitresses has to leave to care for her mother and the new waitress Constantina takes an immediate liking to Beli. Constantina lives a wild life on the island, partying in the many clubs of Santo Domingo all night before she comes in to work. She convinces Beli to move on from pining for Jack Pujols and tells her to come out to a club with her, a choice that the narrator calls "the Decision that Changed Everything." This club will lead to all the events of Beli's life, and cause her to move to America.

El Hollywood. Beli feels out of place at the club, as it is her first time, but she soon loses herself in dancing. All night, a powerful man watches her from the corner, and the narrator tells us that this man will steal Beli's heart and send her to America. Their first meeting is an explosive fight, because Beli screams at the man not to touch her or call her "morena" (dark). She leaves the club in a huff, but thinks about this man, who's known as The Gangster, all the next week. She ignores La Inca's anger that she even went to a club, and talks about nothing but the Gangster to the car dealer, Arquimedes, Constantina, and anyone who will listen. Finally, Constantina agrees to take Beli back to El Hollywood. Beli dances with the Gangster and tells him her full name, but he renames her "Beautiful."

Contrary to expectations, Beli does not act like a spoiled princess at her job, and she even excels under the tutelage of Juan and Jose. Beli seems to let go of the prejudice she held against Chinese people when she interacted with Wei. Beli's age is a shocking reminder of how young and naïve she still is, even though she has faced far more challenging life experiences than many of her peers.



Jose steps in as a father-like figure for Beli, though he has none of the warmth that she desires from a father. Jose's chivalry now sets up his and his brother's heroic actions when Beli is truly threatened by members of Trujillo's hit squad. The two men who do fall for Beli are harmless, each presenting an alternative future for the DR. The car dealer's obsession with baseball ties him to the United States and a democratic future for the DR, while Arquimedes' passion for study ties him to the Communist revolutionaries in Latin American countries such as Cuba.



The narrator assures us of Arquimedes' safety, but says nothing of Beli's, making it look as though she will not survive this. But then the narrator goes on to explain that Beli will live – albeit in vastly different circumstances in the USA. It seems as though one possible life path for Beli has died. Constantina provides a version of the woman that Beli could have become, had she not fallen into the fukú trap.



Naming the club "El Hollywood" reinforces the frame of movies for Beli's story. Likewise, The Gangster is named for an archetype rather than given a true name, increasing the sense that he is just a character in Beli's life and not a fully complex human. Beli expects the typical night out shown in Hollywood films, and gives in to the rush of that drama by mistaking passion for love. This leads her into an exciting but destructive relationship.



The Gangster We've All Been Waiting For. It's unclear how much Beli knew of the Gangster's work, but the narrator tells us that he was one of Trujillo's best spies and hit men. Born into poverty, he soon proved his usefulness to the government and rose to become a major in a branch of the Secret Police. He is skilled at all the true gangster trades, but he gets into a mess in Cuba and has to abandon the country on a midnight plane. Still smarting from this slip-up, he looks to Beli to ease his wounded pride. The Gangster is a harsh and violent man in his work, but he treats Beli like a princess. Though he is not the ideal hero she had imagined, his finesse and culture convince her that she can love him. As she unravels the layers of this man, and find tenderness in his heart due to his past as an orphan and his discomfort with his crimes, she realizes she truly does love him.

Once Beli has decided to love the Gangster, she loves as hard as her son (Oscar) will decades later. The Gangster reciprocates and promises her a future far more beautiful than he can deliver. His adoration supports Beli, and she begins to love her own skin, and even the huge scar on her back, as much as he does. She boasts to the rest of Baní that he will take her to a beautiful house in Miami, not knowing that he is currently out of Trujillo's favor due to the mistake in Cuba. Beli focuses all her energy on the Gangster, ignoring everyone's poor opinions of him, and she is soon fired from the restaurant. She ignores every warning about Trujillo's fragile position and revels in being in love.

Reality continues despite Beli's romantic fantasy, and soon the Gangster is disappearing suddenly on business, returning late and in a foul mood. Beli hates how these weeks-long absences give the neighborhood more ammunition against the Gangster, and she comes on even stronger when the Gangster is home to take her out. During one of these absences, Beli goes to see her old boyfriends and break it off with them for good. The car dealer reacts poorly, and Beli knocks him out with a whiskey bottle in self-defense. The Secret Police stop her, but let her go due to her connection with the Gangster. Arquimedes handles the news much more calmly, simply hiding in a closet while Beli speaks.

With the Gangster's backstory filled in, he becomes even more like the ultimate mythical gangster. He is also a man who has chosen to erase his own past, following the pattern of self-censorship that follows many of the Dominican characters who lived through Trujillo's "blank pages." Because the Gangster treats Beli as she has always believed she deserved, she can ignore the less savory aspects of his character and the signs that this relationship is not everything she wants.



Though being loved makes it easier for Beli to love herself, this is not a permanent solution to her lack of self-worth. She is painstakingly building a fantasy of the Gangster, complete with the promise of a house in Miami. The narrator makes it clear that this "American Dream" will never come true for Beli, but that she willfully pins all her hopes on the Gangster instead of understanding that she can improve her life for herself.



When reality creeps in on Beli's fantasies, Beli simply doubles down on the romantic world she has built for herself. As she goes to tell her former beaux how happy she is now, there is also an element of trying to convince herself of that happiness. When the visit to the car dealer ends in violence, Beli starts to see the effects that connections to Trujillo can have on her own life, though she still sees herself as completely "ordinary" in the course of official history. Arquimedes helps illuminate the fear and helplessness that many Dominican people felt at this time, though Beli stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the danger.



A month before everything falls apart, Beli and the Gangster have one last vacation in Samaná. In a footnote, the narrator reveals that the vacation was not necessarily in Samaná, but that it fit the story best to say so. Beli and the Gangster exist in an idyllic paradise for one week, sharing all the things that Dominicans like to do on vacation. Beli tells the Gangster that she wants to be free, the way that he has shown her is possible. The fantasy is broken when a messenger on a motorcycle comes to tell the Gangster he is needed at the palacio. The Gangster leaves, abandoning Beli to find her own way home. She eventually catches a ride in an old Chevy, and thinks she sees a **man with no face** in front of one of the shacks they pass. She gets back to La Inca's house and realizes she is pregnant.

Revelation. La Inca is horrified at Beli's pregnancy, but Beli is ecstatic, thinking that a baby will ensure the wedding and future she wants. She tells Dorca, who tells the whole neighborhood. The next time the Gangster is in town, Beli dresses herself up to tell him the news.

Upon Further Reflection. Looking back, Beli knows that the Gangster told her not to have the baby. At the time, though, she only heard the happiness that she wanted to hear.

Name Game. That night, in a love motel, Beli and the Gangster argue about the baby's name. Beli wants to name him Abelard for her father, but the Gangster wants to name him Manuel for his father. Beli is hurt when the Gangster evades any more questions about his family.

Truth and Consequences 1. Beli's pregnancy and the impending fall of the Trujillo regime coincide to destroy the Gangster's world. He reveals to Beli that not only is he married, he is actually married to Trujillo's sister.

The footnote correcting the vacation spot is one of the most obvious signs that the narrator at least partly crafts the story through invention, rather than actually recording true events. It casts doubt on the rest of the novel; if the narrator chose to change this detail for aesthetic purposes, he might have changed other things as well. As for Beli, she makes the important realization that she wants to be free in a way not currently available to her in the DR, but the fukú seems to step in immediately to remind her that her life is not under her control. The Gangster shows that he does not truly love Beli, and abandons her, pushing her to see the symbolic man with no face as the curse takes over her life.



Beli continues to reject reality in favor of the more positive fantasies she has built up in her head.



The narrator reveals that Beli is aware of this disconnect between fantasy and reality as she gets older, but that she had a lot of trouble thinking rationally about consequences when she was younger. Part of this is due to her youth, while another is due to the fact that she still implicitly trusts the authority of Trujillo and those who work for him.



As Beli and the Gangster argue about names, Díaz comments on Beli's lack of knowledge about her own family history and how little Beli and the Gangster have talked about their families. This gap in communication will have horrible consequences for Beli.



Beli's pregnancy and the fall of the Trujillo regime gain speed at the same time, but the novel prioritizes Beli's story. Though a pregnancy might seem less important than overthrowing a dictator, having a child is much more important to Beli. Beli never knew that she was actually close to the Trujillo family, and that her life would intersect with "official history."



Truth and Consequences 2. Trujillo's sister, known as La Fea (the Ugly Woman) was embroiled in as many dubious pursuits as the Gangster, and met him while she was running a brothel. She cheats in all of her businesses and is generally unpleasant to everyone but her son. She is not pleased to hear that her husband has had an affair with a negra prieta (**black**, low-class girl).

Trujillo's sister, derogatorily called the ugly woman, seems to have internalized the misogynist actions practiced by her family, and now participates in the subjugation of other women – on a large scale running brothels and on a small scale blaming Beli for her husband's affair instead of holding him responsible for his own choices.



In the Shadow of the Jacaranda. At the order of la Fea, the Gangster's wife, two thugs grab Beli as she is walking in the park one day. La Fea appears out of the shadows to threaten Beli if she decides to keep the baby. Beli, terrified out of her mind, thinks that the thug holding her is a **man with no face**. It is clear that the Gangster's wife means to execute Beli. Luckily, Beli sees José Then walking through the park and whispers to him to save her. He and all her co-workers get Beli away from the thugs and she goes home. The narrator tells us that, years later, Beli will tell her daughter that her Chinese boss "saved her life."

Blaming the man with no face, the symbol of fukú working in the world, somewhat absolves Beli for her own hand in these unfortunate events by making them the natural outcome of her family's curse. Like the classic "damsel in distress," Beli cannot save herself. However, she does have some agency in her rescue. She chose to ignore the prejudice against Chinese people in the DR and grew close to the Chinese men she worked for, and José was able to give her the help she desperately needed.



Hesitation. After getting home, Beli waits to see the Gangster one last time instead of leaving Santo Domingo for good. That night, a neighbor tells Beli that her boyfriend is waiting outside the house. She rushes out to the car, only to find the thugs from the park. They cuff her and throw her in the car.

Beli's intense loyalty to the Gangster gets her into trouble even after she is rescued the first time. Like her son Oscar, Beli takes devotion too far. A neighbor tricking Beli into going outside points to the ways that no one is trustworthy in a fascist regime that pits ordinary citizens against each other.



La Inca, the Divine. When La Inca hears that Beli has been taken, she knows that the "Doom of the Cabrals" has found Beli at last. Remembering the proud lineage of the Cabrals, La Inca begins to fervently pray for Beli's survival. She is joined by the other neighborhood women, despite the contempt they previously had for Beli. The spirit fills the room and overwhelms many of the women; only three women are able to keep up the prayer all night. Just as La Inca's body is about to collapse, she feels Beli's spirit.

La Inca, in the face of incredible fukú, has enough strength to invoke zafa through her prayers. While it is men who bring fukú (seen in the man with no face, Trujillo, and later Abelard), it is women who are able to call on zafa. Throughout the book, only women have the power to redeem their families.



Choices and Consequences. The thugs drive Beli into one of the cane fields that used to be plentiful in the DR. As they beat her in the car, Beli remains defiant and confident that she will survive. The men take her out to a cane field and beat her within an inch of her life, leaving her with a huge list of injuries and an experience at "the end of language" that she will never speak of. Beli tries to keep up hope that the Gangster will save her, that La Inca will save her, that someone will come, but survives alone through sheer force of will.

Whereas the discovery of Beli's affair with the Gangster was titled "Truth and Consequences," as if the reality of this situation would inevitably lead to Beli's downfall, this section is titled "Choices and Consequences," suggesting that Beli chose to stay for the Gangster and chose to get into this car. Beli's power to choose is reversed after she is beaten; unlike the burn scar that she chooses never to speak of, Beli never shares this painful experience because she literally does not have the language to describe it.



The thugs leave Beli for dead, but the narrator says that, in the strangest part of his tale, a **Mongoose** appears to save the young girl. The Mongoose tells her that she has miscarried, but that she will live on to have a son and a daughter. Beli crawls out of the cane field and miraculously is picked up by a passing truck. The band members in the truck debate whether it is safe to be seen helping Beli. The lead singer, with the golden eyes of the Mongoose, says that they will save her. A footnote explains the important place that the Mongoose has in tales from Africa and the Caribbean.

Fukú vs. Zafa. Many in the neighborhood say the beating was proof of the fukú on Beli's family, while other say her survival, and La Inca's connections in the medical community, are proof that the family is blessed. La Inca, for her part, credits Beli's recovery to zafa. Beli is not sure what it all meant.

Back Among the Living. Beli is unconscious for five days, and the doctors remain unoptimistic that she will recover, but she pulls through. Once she is awake, Beli rails against the death of her child and the new circumstances of her life. As Beli recovers, the news spreads that Trujillo has been assassinated. A footnote gives the full story, or what is known of it, describing how Trujillo and his driver were shot on the highway by US-backed assassins.

La Inca in Decline. La Inca's own health begins to decline somewhat after all the energy she spent nursing Beli back to life. The DR is reeling from the upheaval of Trujillo's death, a situation that the narrator compares to the defeat of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*. La Inca knows that Beli is still in danger, but doesn't know what to do. She prays again, until she hears her dead husband say that Beli will only be safe from the coming political turmoil if she goes to live in New York. La Inca hates the idea of Beli in a cold, foreign city like New York, and, like Abelard before her, cannot bring herself to send her child away. When the thugs come back, though, La Inca knows it is time to get Beli out. Beli, now recovered enough to limp on her own, hates what is left to her in Santo Domingo. The narrator warns Beli that New York will be harder than she expects, but when La Inca tells Beli she must go to "Nueva York," Beli laughs.

Though the story has involved pseudo-magical elements before, the Mongoose is one of the only magical experiences that does not have an alternative explanation. Beli may be simply hallucinating the Mongoose due to her extensive injuries, but everyone agree that it is a miracle that she survived at all, and the narrator credits the mongoose for granting zafa to Beli. The mongoose also seemingly gives the ordinary citizens in the band the bravery to risk bringing Trujillo's wrath upon themselves by helping Beli. This bravery in the face of a much larger enemy matches the mythology of the mongoose as a fierce warrior who uses intelligence and trickery to bring down opponents that seem much stronger.



Though previously validating the mongoose's magical power, the narrator now gives the realistic alternate explanation for Beli's recovery. As different characters believe in the magic to different extents, we as readers can choose for ourselves whose opinion on the magical rescue to trust.



Even with potentially magical help, Beli shows incredible strength of body and mind throughout her recovery. This strength gives a more positive impression than Beli had when she was simply the stubborn mother in Lola's story and helps explain why Beli was so hard-hearted when she wanted Lola to avoid making the same mistakes by running away with a boy. The death of Trujillo, though huge in the eyes of "official history" and the fate of the DR as a whole, is nothing more than a footnote in the face of these developments in Beli's character.



The narrator brings back his love of fantasy (The Lord of the Rings has an especially significant meaning to Yunior and Oscar that will be explained in Chapter 4) and reinforces his idea that the DR follows a fantasy narrative particularly well. When La Inca chooses to send Beli to New York, Abelard's fatal error is brought up. Though the book has not yet explained how Abelard cursed his family, we do know that La Inca's hard choice here is the first step towards setting it right. Beli laughs at the idea, because she can't imagine anything worse than what she has already survived in the DR, but the narrator knows that the immigrant experience in America is not easy.



The Last Days of the Republic. In her final months of recuperation, Beli does little besides long for the Gangster and succumb to the “Darkness” as she prepares to leave Santo Domingo. She has nightmares of the thugs and leaves all travel planning to La Inca while she floats through her days. She manages to see the Gangster one last time, but all passion is gone from their relationship. He tries to joke that they will have more children, but Beli knows it is over between them. Though still lovesick for the Gangster, Beli swears she will start fresh in America. She is only sixteen when she gets on the plane, but she is already bitterly disappointed with life. The narrator describes the harsh life awaiting Beli as a factory worker in New York. He also tells us that the man she meets on the plane will become the father of her children, and her third and final heartbreak. Beli’s story ends with her snapping at this man while admiring the lights of New York city.

The narrator describes Beli’s (and later Oscar’s) bouts of depression as Darkness, giving this mental illness the guise of an ailment or curse from a fantasy novel. This is another sign that the narrator tends to see things through the lens of fiction. Beli’s decision to start over in America also echoes Oscar’s decision to start over at Rutgers, though the book has already shown that Oscar’s fresh start ended poorly. The narrator shows that Beli’s will too, as she is further ground down by her tedious days in a factory. On the plane, Beli is still a peculiar mix of hardened and naïve, toughened enough to snap at the older man next to her, but still young enough to be enraptured by the novel sight of the lights of New York.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4: SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION (1988-1992)

The book returns to “present day” as the narrator finally starts to speak about himself, describing a fukú experience of his own. During his junior year at Rutgers, the narrator was jumped by “New Brunswick townies” while walking home to his dorm late one night. He is saved by a stranger who drove by, but refuses the offer of a ride to the hospital because he doesn’t trust doctors. He goes back to his dorm room to recover, and only Lola, out of all his friends, comes to take care of him. Even though he has a girlfriend, Lola is the one who stays in the narrator’s room at night and helps bathe him.

In this chapter told from the narrator’s own perspective, there are footnotes and no section titles, as if the narrator cannot bring himself to make satirical asides on his own life. The narrator’s own episode of fukú reinforces his earlier claim that all Dominicans are cursed, and that to be Dominican is to experience violence. His beating parallels Beli’s in many ways, especially in that he is saved by a stranger in a car, but the narrator is self-aware enough to admit that his own cocky attitude probably helped cause the fight. The narrator seems to feel a lot of remorse for how he used to act, and scoffs at his old belief in his extreme popularity. It is clear that Lola’s big heart is the only thing that convinces her to help the narrator, and that he may have many acquaintances, but he does not have many true friends.



The narrator confesses that he truly cares for Lola, even though college students aren’t supposed to care about anything. Though the narrator admits that Lola is not conventionally attractive because of her **dark skin**, her intelligence, independence and integrity are second to none. The narrator starts to talk about his attempts to get Lola to date him during their freshman year, and finally reveals his name: Yuniór. Yuniór and Lola do sleep together, but Lola has a boyfriend at the time and cuts off all romantic contact after three days. Yuniór seems bitterly surprised that Lola still refuses to sleep with him when he is recovering from the mugging. She tells him “Yo soy prieta, Yuni, pero no soy bruta.” (I am a dark-skinned, low-class girl, Yuni, but I’m not a savage.)

This is the second time that the narrator (Yuniór) has described Lola, but he now delves deeper into Lola’s character, possibly because he knows her better at this stage of her life. Still, he highlights the same features of intelligence and independence, though those traits are tinged with bitterness because they are the same traits that cause her to reject him. She clearly has standards above the “player” persona that Yuniór puts on. Though Yuniór has no problem with being the side man in an affair, Lola feels guilty enough to stop things. Yuniór first reveals his name in a piece of dialogue from Lola, suggesting that he never wanted to tell us his name in the first place. Going by “Yuniór,” a Spanish inflection of “Junior,” instead of his given name allows the narrator to continue hiding many of the details of his life.



Despite Yuniór's disappointment that Lola will not sleep with him, he still "steps up" to take care of Oscar when Oscar nearly kills himself through alcohol poisoning with 151 rum. Lola wants to study abroad in Spain, but is too worried about Oscar's health to go. Yuniór agrees to be Oscar's roommate when no one else will associate with Oscar, so that Lola will feel free to leave, even though Oscar lives in Demarest, the "nerdiest" dorm on campus. Yuniór applies to the writing program so that he can live in Demarest (which is the Humanities residence hall). Yuniór later confesses that he selfishly roomed with Oscar to keep his on-campus housing, which he might have lost due to the low number he drew in the housing lottery.

As Yuniór gets to know Oscar, he finds it hard to believe that he and Lola are related, even though Lola hags out with her brother all the time. Yuniór says he has never met a Dominican like Oscar. Furthermore, Yuniór says he should have been wary of Oscar's curse, but that he was too stupid and not "old-school Dominican" enough to run away. Yuniór is incredulous at Oscar's prominent display of genre affection, especially when Oscar puts a sign with the elvish for "Speak, friend, and enter." on their room door.

The first month that the two boys room together, Yuniór has little to do with Oscar, agreeing that he is a better roommate than he has previously had, simply because Oscar will turn down the volume on his Japanese movies or move his Dungeons and Dragons games to the hall when Yuniór asks. Yuniór makes an effort to reach out to Oscar and reads one of Oscar's fantasy books. Yuniór admits that the writing is good, but refuses to read more once after Oscar over-analyzes one of Yuniór's own pieces of detective fiction.

While Yuniór and Oscar room together, Yuniór tries to give Oscar some advice on how to get girls. He tells Oscar not to act like himself, because that means he acts lame and nerdy, but Oscar replies "It is, lamentably, all I have." Still, Oscar worries that no Dominican can die while still a virgin – meaning that he would live forever. Yuniór, freshly single because his girlfriend Suriyan found out he was cheating, decides not to work on his own emotional issues and instead to focus on reforming Oscar into someone cool. Oscar is incredibly touched that Yuniór cares enough to try to change him. Among many other changes in diet and behavior, Yuniór forces Oscar to run.

Yuniór plays up the self-sacrifice he made in rooming with Oscar, as if he is still trying to convince Lola of his altruism. For her part, Lola is still stuck in the same pattern of denying herself opportunities in order to care for her family. Yuniór seems to find this admirable but insane, as he feels almost no connection to his own family. Yuniór later admits that he roomed with Oscar out of desperation for an on-campus room, but there is also a deeper level on which Yuniór actually seems to want to live in Demarest. He wastes no time in applying to the creative writing program, and all of his jokes about Demarest feel as if they are laid on too thick.



Though he definitely considers Oscar a very strange Dominican, Yuniór is one of the few people not to question whether Oscar is Dominican. Yuniór seems to understand Oscar's split-identity. Indeed, Yuniór is at least familiar with nerd culture, able to read elvish and stomach Oscar's movies. Yuniór is more shocked by the fact that Oscar is not shy about how much he loves these genres. Yuniór likes them too, but is not brave enough to say it, and so becomes extra critical of Oscar.



Oscar and Yuniór always bond over writing, one of the few things that Yuniór will admit they have in common. Yet while Oscar writes the type of book he loves (fantasy), Yuniór writes what he thinks a Dominican man is supposed to write. When Oscar tries to take this detective story seriously, Yuniór becomes defensive.



Yuniór has perfected the art of putting up a mask so that girls will like him, and cannot understand why Oscar refuses to do the same thing. Both a serial player and a serial liar, Yuniór seems to blame the girl he is cheating with for blowing his cover, rather than admitting that he was at fault for cheating. From his distance as the narrator, Yuniór later realizes that he should have taken more time to fix himself rather than insisting on "fixing" Oscar. Oscar shows his moral strength by refusing to cover up who he is.



Other students at Rutgers heckle Oscar while he runs, because the physical activity is hard for him. Demoralized by these reactions to his attempts to better himself, Oscar decides to quit. He tells Yunior, “I will run no more,” and “I’d rather not,” when Yunior continues to badger him about the exercise. Yunior is hurt that Oscar is refusing his help, and Yunior and Oscar get into a small fight that ends with Oscar shoving Yunior. Lola hears about this and calls from Spain to chew Yunior out. Though Oscar apologizes, Yunior freezes Oscar out completely.

*Oscar truly can't win, as the other students refuse to accept him even when he is trying to fit to their standards. Díaz comments on the impossibility of conforming to a society that refuses to recognize you as fully human. Oscar's refusal to run paraphrases the famous line from *Bartleby the Scrivener*: “I'd prefer not to.” There *Bartleby* opts out of a capitalist system that insists his worth is only in his ability to work. This suggests that inaction is itself a form of resistance to a social system that holds certain people down despite their best efforts.*



Now that Yunior and Oscar are no longer even friendly, much less friends, Yunior’s “cool” friends start to tease Oscar around the clock. They needle him on his weight, his nerdy interests and most of all his lack of Dominican traits. Oscar gains the nickname “Oscar Wao” when his “Doctor Who” Halloween costume reminds Yunior of Oscar Wilde. Another student mishears “Wilde” as “Wao,” and the name sticks, until Oscar actually starts to answer to it. Oscar never gets angry about the teasing, but Lola stays furious at Yunior. Looking back, Yunior himself can’t decide whether he was still mad at Oscar or whether he felt guilty for betraying their previous attempt at friendship.

Yunior's insecurity comes into sharp relief as he teases Oscar in order to gain back credibility with his other friends. It seems as though Yunior derides Oscar because he is afraid that the other students would say the same things about him. As a way to avoid feeling guilty, Yunior insists that it is Oscar's fault for letting them tease him. Only later does he admit that he should have done more to actually be Oscar's friend, instead of just pretending.



Yunior says that his contact with Oscar should have ended that year, except that Oscar decided to fall in love. This time, his crush is a girl named Jenni Muñoz, who dresses like a goth though she is Puerto Rican. Her friends call her “La Jablesse,” and every boy at Rutgers agrees that she is gorgeous but untouchable. When Yunior tries to ask her out, Jenni laughs at him, and Yunior never forgives her for the offense. Oscar follows her relentlessly, despite how callously she brushes him off, and eventually she starts to enjoy his company. Oscar and Jenni hang out all through February and March, even starting to go out to eat or to movies together. Yunior insists he doesn’t care, but he reads Oscar’s journal to get the details of every conversation Oscar and Jenni have.

*Once again, falling in love becomes a moment that changes everything, reinforcing the idea that both love and fate are forces beyond human control. Jenni Muñoz, another beautiful goth Latina, scares the male students because she does not follow the rules of courtship in which males are the initiators. Her nickname, *La Jablesse*, references a demonic woman who kills her romantic partners. Oscar, though he at least treats Jenni as human, still enacts harmful gender roles because does not take her desires into account. Rather than respecting her right to say no, he persistently follows her until she finally gives in. While all this is happening, Yunior subtly lets it slip that his obsession with Oscar has already begun. Yunior reads Oscar's journals, though pretends that he is simply looking for information about Jenni.*



Oscar's spirits rise following his friendship with Jenni, and he even starts running again as he feels more confident. Yuniór admits that he should have been happy for Oscar, and that he had no room to be a "player-hater," jealous of Oscar getting some female attention while Yuniór himself has three girlfriends as well as random hook-ups at parties. But Yuniór, blaming his lack of affection growing up, begrudges Oscar this victory. Yet Oscar's euphoria is soon over when Jenni starts talking to another boy and Oscar spins into a deep depression. Yuniór becomes worried enough that he calls Lola in Spain, and he promises to keep a close watch on Oscar.

Two weeks later, Oscar walks into Jenni's room while she and a new boy are hooking up. He freaks out and starts trashing her books, until Yuniór overhears the noise and drags Oscar out of the room before he hurts someone. Oscar has to attend counseling for anger management, but his depression worsens. Yuniór is not quite sure how to help, and begins to just look forward to the end of the year. On the last night of the term, Oscar gets very drunk and laments the turn his life has taken. Yuniór sadly compares this to the first day, when Oscar was excitedly babbling to Yuniór (calling Yuniór by his full name until Yuniór told him to stop). Yuniór then decides to go out with a girl instead of staying to keep watch on Oscar.

With Yuniór gone for their last night at Rutgers, Oscar drinks more and then walks to the New Brunswick train station. He sneaks into the station and onto the tracks, then walks to the edge of the railway bridge over the highway. The train starts to come towards Oscar, but Oscar closes his eyes. When he opens them, he sees a Golden **Mongoose** and throws himself over the side of the bridge. Yuniór describes the suicide letters that Oscar had left behind, and only then reveals that Oscar survived the fall because he landed on the divider of the highway instead of in traffic. Oscar is, of course, badly injured, and Lola returns from Spain early in order to take care of him.

Yuniór hopes to make up with Lola at the hospital while they wait for Oscar to recover, but she remains cold and blames Yuniór for not looking out for her brother. Lola and Beli take Oscar home to Paterson and Yuniór goes home, reluctantly, to his family. Yuniór calls a couple times, and Oscar tells him about the new books he is writing.

Love becomes a transformative force, providing Oscar with the will power to better himself that he lacked when he thought he was undesirable. Yuniór later seems to regret his hypocrisy in becoming a player-hater when he himself is a player, though he does not apologize for the damaging effect he had on women by being a player. Instead, he blames it on his childhood that stunted his emotional growth. This is another similarity between Oscar and Yuniór, as Oscar too shows jealousy when he refuses to let Jenni so much as talk to another boy.



It is clear that Oscar always considered Jenni as little more than a potential love interest rather than a real companion, as their friendship ends when she begins seeing another boy. Díaz comments on the dangers of prioritizing romantic attachments above other kinds of love, showing that Oscar is missing out on forming important human connections because he is hyper-focused on sexual relationships. Yuniór too avoids cultivating a friendship with Oscar (and everyone else), keeping the world at arm's length by refusing to let anyone use his real name. Though Yuniór emphasized how sad it was that Oscar started answering to a nickname, he does not see the tragedy in his own self-imposed nickname.



Once again, the mongoose saves a member of the de León family from death. This time, we do not know what caused zafa to appear, but the arrival of the mongoose shows that the curse does not have complete control over Oscar's life, even though that is all Oscar sees right now. The dramatic tension in this scene is high, because Yuniór has already revealed that Oscar will die young. While Oscar's survival was miraculous, the fatalistic tone continues because Lola is once again held back from her dreams by family tragedy.



Yuniór stays inappropriately focused on Lola, even when one of his "best friends" is in the hospital, another sign that he is not yet mature enough to have true relationships with other people. Later, Oscar starts writing again, a sure sign that the depressive episode has passed.



Yunior visits Oscar just once that summer, really hoping to see Lola. She is supremely unhappy to be stuck in Paterson once more. Right before Yunior leaves, Oscar tells him that the curse made him attempt suicide. Yunior dismisses this as old-school superstition from their parents, but Oscar emphasizes that the curse is still real for them too. Yunior leaves alone, but says that he and Lola would have gotten back together that day if the world were a fantasy novel.

Oscar further distances himself from his suicide attempt by blaming it on the curse. While Yunior dismisses this because he does not believe in the supernatural, Oscar's point speaks more to the fact that the issues and hardships of their parents have affected their lives as well. Significantly, Yunior does not deal with his disappointment over Lola by retreating into fantasy, as Beli and Oscar did. He recognizes that the world is not perfect, but faces up to it anyway.



After the summer, Yunior returns to Rutgers expecting to never see Oscar or Lola again. However, Oscar shows up at Yunior's door to talk about writing. Oscar is thinner than ever and trying to remain optimistic about their last year of college. Yunior entertains Oscar when he comes over, but never makes any effort for the friendship himself, claiming he is too busy with his studies, his job, and his girlfriend Suriyan now that she has forgiven him. Yunior even writes a story about the Dominican woman who baby-sat him and his siblings, but is disappointed when he doesn't win any creative writing prizes for it.

Oscar and Yunior are continually bound by their desire to be writers, even though Yunior hides this hope the way he hides every intimate detail about himself. He clearly wants to engage with Oscar on the topic, but can't bring himself to let go of the false image that his passion for writing will mark him as a nerd. He makes a significant breakthrough when he writes about his childhood, a topic he has conspicuously avoided, but loses hope when he does not receive the recognition for it that he thinks he deserves. For all of his supposed confidence, Yunior is still extremely dependent on the validations of others.



Near Christmas, Yunior runs into Lola while riding the bus, and she tells him that she will be teaching English in Japan next year. Yunior wonders what a Dominican would do in Japan, which offends Lola. She goes back to reading her book, but Yunior thinks about Lola for the rest of the ride. He wonders why Lola is the girl who seems to know him best, and why he is so terrified of the man he would have to be if he actually put effort into dating Lola. He makes a last ditch effort to ask her out, and, to his surprise, she accepts.

Lola shows again and again that she will never lose heart in her dreams to leave Paterson and see more of the world. Yunior reminds her of the stereotype that Dominicans do not travel, and that a person with her dark skin would be out of place in a historically isolated country like Japan. Yet Yunior is still attracted to Lola's drive and ambition, and even more ashamed to not be the person that Lola thinks he has the potential to become.



Yunior indulges himself with a memory of Lola, wondering why her face sticks with him after all these years. He says that his intentions had been pure when he asked her out, even though he confesses that he will hurt her later. As he nears the end of his story, Yunior surprises everyone (including himself) and moves back in with Oscar. He says that, as Oscar remembers it, they made up when Yunior greeted Oscar with "Mellon," the elvish word for "friend" from *The Lord of the Rings*.

In another example of foreshadowing, Yunior confesses that he will not be able to live up to Lola's trust, and that the relationship will end poorly. This becomes even more disappointing when it seems as though Yunior has finally learned how to treat Oscar with selflessness and respect. Yunior undermines this act by refusing to take credit for calling Oscar "friend" by only recalling this scene from Oscar's perspective.



Yunior goes back to reading Oscar's journal, finding out that he has started driving around aimlessly at night. He pretends he is a hero, looking for people to rescue, and even helps a young pregnant woman get back to her house. He drives to Wildwood, where Lola had run away with her high school boyfriend, and to the neighborhood where Yunior grew up. Oscar sometimes falls asleep at the wheel, but something always wakes him up – an alarm he credits to Lola.

Yunior never acknowledges that reading Oscar's journal is a strange and even malicious thing to do. Though he claims to be interested in Oscar's fukú story, it is clear that Yunior is interested in Oscar himself, and especially the ways that the two young men are incredibly similar. The entire last scene, ostensibly ripped from Oscar's journal, could also be interpreted from Yunior's perspective, as he might have driven around aimlessly that summer, dreaming of Lola.



BOOK 2, PREFACE

Book 2 of the novel begins with another preface, returning to Lola's point of view. At the end of Lola's year living with La Inca in Santo Domingo, she does not want to return to Paterson, or the United States at all. La Inca and Lola's mother order her to return anyway, and Lola feels completely betrayed, saying that "I wouldn't feel that again until I broke with you." Lola explains that she doesn't believe in curses, but she thinks that life is hard enough on its own. Disappointed, Lola begins acting out. She quits the track team, ditches school and stops talking to her friend Rocío or her boyfriend Max.

The preface starts ambiguously, only coming into view as Lola's story once Lola starts talking about her "abuela in Santo Domingo." This disorienting opening matches Lola's off-kilter feeling when she is told that she can no longer stay in the DR, the only place that has felt like home. As she addresses "you," it seems as though this is a letter written to Yunior after he has betrayed her in some way. The novel never reveals the full story of this, however, in keeping with the "blank pages" or gaps in communication that thread through the book. Lola is one of few Dominicans to not believe in supernatural curses, breaking a stereotype, but the novel makes it clear that this does not make her life any less tragic.



Lola's depression over going back to the States gets bad enough that she even decides to give in to the sexual advances of the father of one of her classmates. She has sex with him multiple times, then extorts him for two thousand dollars because he is a Dominican politician who can afford to pay Lola, but can't afford to have this affair come out. Lola feels guilty about making herself into a whore, but she feels no shame for using this man. La Inca and Oscar try to keep Lola in good spirits, but Lola only dreams about using the money from the politician to move to Japan or another beautiful island that is "nothing like Santo Domingo."

Lola's affair with her classmate's father is another example of sexual relationships that have nothing to do with love. Lola realizes this, but still doesn't quite know why she allows the affair to happen. She asks for money almost as an afterthought, as if to give the sex some purpose that it lacked before. Her desire for escape, like her mother's, intensifies, until it seems that she would rather be anywhere but the Dominican Republic.



Lola's mother comes to pick her up, and Lola is surprised by how thin and tired her mother looks due to her battle with cancer. Sickness has not softened Lola's mother at all, though, and she pronounces Lola as ugly as ever, destroying any confidence Lola built in the past year. Lola looks back on that time after she has become a mother herself and realizes that her mother didn't actually hate her, but that her personality doesn't allow her to show love for anyone but her son Oscar, whom she cries over relentlessly in the end.

The relationship between Lola and her mother is continually fraught with tension. Now that Lola knows more of Beli's background (and we have learned how Beli lost her first child), it is easier for her to be sympathetic to the older woman. Yet Lola still wants more from her relationship with her mother and seems committed to righting those wrongs in her relationship with her own daughter. Throughout the novel, family history has repeated multiple times, but Lola finally offers a glimpse of how later generations can break that cycle.



Lola explains that she would have run away again, except that she has learned that running away never ends well. She is later shocked to find out that her ex-boyfriend Max has died. Though they hadn't spoken since Lola broke up with Max, Lola feels a rush of nostalgia for the uncomplicated love that Max offered. It doesn't help that Max died because of his job (a job that Lola had found fascinating), as he was crushed between two buses while trying to deliver a film reel to another theater. Lola gives all the money she had gotten from sleeping with the politician to Max's mother to pay for the funeral.

Lola might think she has learned from her mistake of running away, but she continues to put taking care of others over taking care of herself. Though she and Max were not really that close, Lola feels responsible for taking care of his family after his death just like she feels responsible for taking care of Oscar and Yunió at other points in the novel. Max's job, which had previously represented Lola's desire to escape into fantasy, now shows how Lola's dreams were literally crushed.



Lola cries for Max as she and her mother get on the plane to New York, saying that she continued to atone for Max's death "until I met you." Lola expects her mother to be annoyed with her tears, but her mother actually defends her to another woman who tells Lola to be quiet. Another passenger thinks that Lola is crying because she will miss the DR, and tells Lola not to worry because the island will always be there, but Lola's mother just rolls her eyes.

Though Lola never says why she sent this letter to Yunió (if it is actually a letter to Yunió), it seems as though she is explaining some of the previous romantic experiences that negatively affected their relationship. It also clarifies the de Leóns' opinion of the Dominican Republic. Whereas many Dominican immigrants, such as the man on the plane, regard the island as an idyllic (or at least nostalgic) paradise, the de León family returns only because it is their homeland.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5: POOR ABELARD (1944-1946)

The Famous Doctor. Yunió takes over the narration again, offering yet another possible start to the sad tale of Oscar Wao with Oscar's maternal grandfather Abelard Cabral. A footnote explains that this is the beginning that the de Leóns always use for themselves, even though several more beginnings (going as far back as the Spanish "discovery" of America) are possible.

This is the third possible place to start the story of Oscar Wao, as Díaz again comments on the arbitrary nature of telling history. At some point, the author of the history has to make a choice where to begin, or else just keep going back to the beginning of time. Yunió argues for a longer view of history that includes the Spanish arrival, to give the de León story more context.



Abelard was a surgeon and his family was very well-to-do, living in a mansion called Casa Hatüey and enjoying the luxury of an elite social standing in the DR. Abelard's two daughters, Astrid and Jacquelyn, enjoy the summer at their ranch house on the beach, but Abelard's wife must avoid getting a tan at all costs because her skin is already so dark.

The past wealth of the Cabrals stands in stark contrast to the poverty that most of the other characters live in, especially Beli, who should have inherited everything. But this wealth does come with a cost. Unlike Beli, who embraces her dark skin, her mother must go to great lengths to deny her naturally dark coloring.



Abelard's reputation as a scholar, and his interests in studying languages, rare books, and inventions, mark him as eccentric in Dominican society. He encourages his daughters to study and holds evenings of discussion and debate in his parlor, despite the danger in appearing revolutionary during the reign of Trujillo. A footnote explains that Abelard was skilled at keeping his head down to stay out of trouble, never speaking out against any of Trujillo's atrocities and quietly helping stitch up machete victims without ever asking how these men were injured. Abelard fakes enthusiasm for Trujillo when he must and tries to stay out of his way as much as possible. Another footnote laments that Abelard could not stay away from Balaguer, Trujillo's right hand man, who always wanted to discuss theories of German racial eugenics and asked for Abelard's medical perspective.

Unfortunately for Abelard, his oldest daughter Jacquelyn blossoms into a beauty who might dangerously capture Trujillo's attention. According to Yunió, one of Trujillo's most "Dominican" qualities was that he believed all beautiful women on the island belonged to him to do with as he pleased. Abelard reacts "bravely" by not immediately handing Jacquelyn over to Trujillo, but instead locks her in the house. Trujillo's spies make it unlikely that Jacquelyn will remain unfound, but Abelard remains hopeful.

Jacquelyn (Jackie) knows none of the danger she is in and blissfully studies French with her father and their Haitian servant. Yunió compares the Cabral women to Hobbits, blissfully unaware of Sauron. Jackie starts each morning by writing out "Tarde venientibus ossa" (To the latecomers are left the bones).

Abelard shares his worries for their daughter with three people. First, he tells his wife, Socorro, who is both an incredible beauty and an intelligent nurse capable of helping Abelard with surgery. Socorro ignores the fact that Trujillo may be a problem, but keeps Jacquelyn out of sight anyway. Abelard also tells his mistress, Lydia Abenader, a woman who had previously rejected Abelard's offer of marriage but sleeps with him now that she is a widow. Finally, Abelard accidentally tells his neighbor Marcus Applegate Román, one night as they are driving home together from a presidential event. It is dangerous to tell Marcus, as no one in these times can be trusted not to go to the Secret Police with news of treason, but Marcus just tells Abelard to have uglier daughters. Lydia tells Abelard to send his daughter to Cuba, but Abelard is too scared to take any course of action.

Abelard's status as a scholar marks him as a particular target for the Trujillo regime. Recalling Yunió's previous argument about the natural animosity between writers and dictators, the novel has set Abelard up to get in trouble for his writings. Yet at least at first, it seems as though Abelard has chosen not to come into conflict with Trujillo. Abelard simply wants to keep his family safe – an even harder task for the members of his family that have darker skin, as the reference to German racial eugenics reminds us. Abelard's cautiousness reads as cowardice at some points, especially when compared to the stubborn bravery of Beli or Oscar.



Like Beli, Jacquelyn is lauded as a great beauty. This is partially due to the fact that many of these women are related, and naturally look similar, but it also seems to be a particular focus for Yunió throughout the novel. He may embellish the beauty of some of these women for his own pleasure. However, beauty in the Dominican Republic is a risk rather than an asset under Trujillo. Jacquelyn's beauty raises the stakes for Abelard.



Despite the fact that Abelard does not stand up to Trujillo, other details expose him as a progressive man. He allows his daughters free reign to study, which was rare for the gender roles of Dominican women at the time, and has a Haitian servant during a time when Haitians were almost universally despised and deported from the DR. Jackie's slogan as she studies reminds her not to slack in her work, but will later come back with more chilling repercussions.



Abelard's wife's name Socorro means "help" in Spanish, another sign that the Cabral family is headed for disaster. Abelard's companions show the range of possible responses to Trujillo's regime in general. Socorro ignores any sign of disturbance, Lydia tries to escape completely, and Marcus tries to play nice with Trujillo in order to be safe. Though Abelard may be more progressive than most Dominican men, Yunió treats the fact that Abelard has a mistress as a matter of course rather than a betrayal of his marriage or a sign of sexist double standards.



A year passes, and Abelard attends another event in honor of the president. Trujillo stops him, joking that he might become a maricón (gay man) if he doesn't bring his wife to these events. Abelard is terrified already, but Trujillo goes further, asking if the rumors of Abelard's beautiful daughter are true. Abelard thinks quickly and responds that his daughter is only beautiful if women with mustaches are considered attractive. Luckily, Trujillo laughs instead of accusing Abelard of treason. When Abelard gets home, his wife thanks God for the inspiration, but Abelard is not so sure where the impulse to lie came from.

And So? For three months, Abelard waits for Trujillo to ask about his family again. The worry affects his health, his job, his family life, and his sex life with his mistress. Another month passes and Abelard lets himself think they may be safe.

Santo Domingo Confidential. Yunió compares living in Santo Domingo during Trujillo's regime to a "Twilight Zone" episode. Each citizen must pretend that every action the president makes is good, no matter how terrible he becomes. His spy network, control over his people, and ability to isolate his country from the rest of the world—which Yunió calls the "Plátano Curtain" (plátano means banana or plantain)—were practically unparalleled. A footnote shares an anecdote about a graduate student who, on an exam, reduced all of world history to the Dominican Republic during the era of Trujillo, yet passed the exam simply because he had mentioned Trujillo. Yunió also explains the culture of secrecy among Dominicans during this age, because it was impossible to tell if anyone was a member of the Secret Police and ready to throw their neighbors into state prison for treason on a whim. All of this power is attributed to Trujillo's evil deal with fukú.

Despite the intense fear that Trujillo inspired, Yunió reminds us that there were people who resisted. Abelard, however, has no designs for revolution and simply wants to tend his patients and care for his family in peace. Whenever anyone begins talking about atrocities Trujillo is committing, Abelard politely changes the subject. Abelard predicts that they all just have to stay out of trouble for a couple decades, wait for Trujillo to die, and then help the DR become a true democracy. Yunió informs us that all of these predictions will be false, as Abelard's luck swiftly changes.

Like Hitler's Germany, Trujillo's Dominican Republic also persecuted homosexual or non-gender conforming people. Trujillo's hyper-masculinity also leads Abelard to lie about his daughter's appearance, giving her a masculine trait that Trujillo will dislike. Just like Beli later questioned what force saved her in the cane field, Abelard too is not so sure that God is in control of all of these events.



Trujillo, like the fukú, sometimes strikes quickly and sometimes waits to destroy people. Abelard is lulled into a false sense of security, but Yunió makes it clear that he isn't truly safe.



With his Twilight Zone reference, Yunió specifically compares the Dominican Republic to Peaksville, a mythical town controlled by a sociopathic boy who can control people with his mind. Trujillo thus comes even closer to a science-fiction or supernatural villain. The Plátano curtain plays on the Iron Curtain that separated the Soviet Union from the rest of the world, underscoring the fascist regime that Trujillo has created. Trujillo is especially interested in stunting free thought in school, as that is where revolution has the best chance of gaining speed. The knowledge that everyone could be a threat keeps people who might otherwise have resisted Trujillo in check.



Abelard, though arguably a good man, is conspicuously not a hero. He does nothing to save anyone outside of his family or estate, and indeed usually chooses not to act at all. This wait-and-see attitude will play a role in the family's destruction, but it is also a very real and common human response to tragedy.



The Bad Thing. In 1945, everything seems to be going well for Abelard. His daughter Jacquelyn is set to leave for a boarding school in Le Havre, France, the next year and will soon be safe from Trujillo's attention. Yet that February, Abelard receives an invitation to a Presidential Event that specifically calls for his wife and oldest daughter to come as well. He rants and raves to Marcus and Lydia, but keeps it a secret from his wife to avoid causing her panic. Marcus fatalistically advises Abelard to let Trujillo have Jacquelyn, while Lydia blames Abelard for not sending Jacquelyn away when he had the chance. Instead of smuggling his family away now, Abelard waits and worries more.

Abelard starts drinking to cope with the stress of Trujillo's invitation. Yuniór speculates that other Latin American revolutionaries might have overthrown Trujillo then and there, but that Abelard was not that kind of man. Yuniór repeats Jacquelyn's motto: *Tarde venientibus ossa* (to the latecomers are left the bones). Abelard eventually convinces himself that Trujillo is only testing his loyalty and that everything will be fine if he tells his family nothing and they all just go to the party. Jacquelyn is incredibly excited, but Socorro starts having terrible dreams of a **man with no face**.

Two days before Trujillo's party, Lydia tries to convince Abelard to leave with her for Cuba, but he refuses to leave his family. The night of the party, Abelard has an epiphany as he brings the car around and sees his daughter through the window, finally realizing that he can't deliver his daughter into Trujillo's reach. He leaves for the party without his wife and daughter. Marcus silently shakes his head as they drive there. As they go through the receiving line, Trujillo asks Abelard why Jacquelyn is not there. Abelard simply says she could not attend, and Trujillo dismisses him. No one at the party will look at him afterwards.

Chiste Apocalyptus (Apocalyptic Gossip). A month after the party, the Secret Police arrest Abelard for slander. The story is that Abelard had drinks with some friends a few days after the party, and then asked them to help him move a chest of drawers he had bought for his wife from the roof of his Packard to the trunk. When they opened the trunk, Abelard allegedly made a joke saying, "No bodies here, Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me."

In My Humble Opinion. Yuniór interjects to say that he thinks this story is completely false, but that it still cost Abelard his life.

1945, not the best year for most of the world as World War II continues to drag on, is actually a good time for Abelard. Significantly, Jacquelyn moving to France, a country reeling from Nazi occupation at this time, would actually be an improvement of her situation – showing how truly bad Trujillo's Dominican Republic is, and Jacquelyn's position in particular. Abelard chooses to keep another secret, this time from his wife, rather than trusting her to help him rescue their daughter.



Abelard's signature inaction continues, and this time Jacquelyn's motto has a darker undertone, warning Abelard that he may wait too long with life or death stakes. It is clear that Yuniór wants Abelard to be the revolutionary Yuniór himself would have (he assumes) been if he had been alive in that time. Socorro's no-face man dreams show that fukú definitely has a hand in this party invitation.



While Abelard may be too much of a coward to stand up to Trujillo, he at least has enough courage to stay with his family and face whatever is to come. He finally makes the brave but dangerous choice to go to Trujillo alone. Marcus has become noticeably less supportive of Abelard's choices, though Abelard is too focused on Trujillo's reaction to see it. Now that Abelard has fallen out of favor with Trujillo, no one wants to associate with him for fear that they will be the next target.



Abelard is arrested for slander, a crime impossible to actually prove without any sort of recording of the conversation. Abelard's "joke," though certainly out of character, is actually very applicable to Trujillo. In the early days of Trujillo's rise to power, he and his men drove Packard cars across the island with the bodies of "hurricane victims" (really enemies of Trujillo) in the trunks.



Whether Abelard made the joke or not doesn't actually matter because Trujillo himself gets to decide what is true and what is false in his country.



The Fall. Abelard spends the night after the (supposed) trunk incident with Lydia, comforting her after she mistakenly thought she was pregnant. Lydia continues to try to convince Abelard to run away with her, but Abelard will never leave his daughters or his safe, predictable life. Yet two weeks later (and two weeks after the US bombed Japan, as Yunior informs us), Socorro dreams of **the man with no face** standing over her husband, and the next night she sees him standing over their children.

Abelard in Chains. The Secret Police arrest Abelard, refusing to even let him leave a note for his wife and family. At first, the Secret Police (who Yunior calls “SIMians,” despite admitting that this nickname doesn’t actually fit the time period) are polite to Abelard, assuring him that there has been a small misunderstanding that will soon be cleared away. Abelard tries to remain calm, but cannot as he imagines his family taken and raped, and his house burned to the ground.

The Secret Police take Abelard to the Forteleza San Luis, a notorious prison in Trujillo’s regime. The officers take all of Abelard’s possessions and force him to fill out forms in an office. When Abelard tries to complain about how he has been treated, the guard punches him the mouth. When Abelard asks, “Why?” the guard punches him again in the forehead. Abelard begins to cry, and is taken to a general holding cell. The other prisoners harass him for being a gay communist, stealing his clothes and forcing him to sit near the bathroom corner of the cell. They also steal his food for three days, finally allowing him a banana on the fourth. On the fourth day, the guards take him out of the cell, ignoring all of his questions and declarations of good family reputation, and torture him with an electrical machine called the “pulpo” (octopus).

A week later, Socorro finally finds out where Abelard is being held and receives permission to see him. She waits in a latrine room, an intentional humiliation that she bears stoically, and waits to see Abelard. He looks horrific when they bring him out, covered in wounds from the guards and the other prisoners. Socorro, already an anxious woman due to her hard childhood, tries to comfort Abelard as best she can. After the visit, Socorro realizes she is pregnant with their third and final daughter. Yunior asks whether this is a sign of fukú (curse) or zafa (blessing).

Abelard’s fall, just like Beli’s and Oscar’s, leans on the Biblical “Fall of Man” from the Garden of Eden (paradise) into sin. As with Beli’s beating, Oscar’s suicide attempt from the train bridge, and now Abelard’s arrest, the Fall represents the moment that fukú took full control of their lives. Yunior reminds us that the outside world is now celebrating the end of WW II, again giving an opposite tone to Abelard’s utter desolation.



SIMians, a moniker that Yunior uses to mock the Secret Police by calling them monkeys (simians), comes from the acronym Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (Military Intelligence Service). Yunior admits that the acronym wasn’t actually in use at the time of Abelard’s arrest, but it seems that Yunior likes the joke so much that he puts it into Abelard’s story anyway. Abelard knows that the Secret Police are lying about the benign nature of their visit, as very few people detained by members of the Secret Police ever returned.



Forteleza San Luis was a key site in the War of Restoration (1863-1865) as the DR sought to regain independence from Spain, but it is ironically now used to imprison Dominican citizens. Abelard never imagined that he would be in the prison, much less subject to violence, and reacts with shock and sadness when the guards abuse him. Unfortunately, this sensitivity to violence reads as weakness to the other prisoners, and earn Abelard the contempt of both the guards and his fellow detainees. Yunior hammers home the brutality of Trujillo’s government, as Abelard is tortured for no reason at all.



Socorro, like La Inca, shows strength in the face of great pain. Dominican women in general bear injustice in silence in the book. Socorro’s pregnancy is the worst possible news for her, as she doesn’t want to bring another child into such a harsh world (subject to fukú), even though children are supposed to be the ultimate blessing (zafa). The fact that it will be another daughter, and thus another potential victim of Trujillo, and unable to carry on Abelard’s family name, is even worse.



Many people speculate whether Abelard actually said anything treasonous about Trujillo. La Inca insists that Abelard did nothing wrong, and was simply framed by enemies of the family, while others say that he probably said something in a moment of drunken stupidity. Still others say that Trujillo put a fukú on the whole family when Abelard denied access to his daughter, causing the whole mess. Yuniór remains agnostic, telling us to decide for ourselves what to believe because there are no official memoirs from Trujillo to ask for documentation. However, Yuniór does say that the story about keeping a daughter away from Trujillo is too common on the island (and a footnote explains the origin of the myth: an Indian woman named Anacaona who refused to sleep with a Spaniard and brought destruction on herself and her people), and that it too easily explains all the misfortune.

The last possible reason for Abelard's curse alleges that he wrote a book exposing the supernatural roots of Trujillo's rise to power. This angered Trujillo enough to arrest Abelard and destroy every book he ever wrote or owned. Yuniór explains that this version of Abelard's fall was Oscar's personal favorite, as it is closest to the fantasy books that Oscar loved. Yuniór also thinks it is strange that Trujillo never went after Jacquelyn, even when Abelard was in prison, and that not a single example of Abelard's handwriting remains.

The Sentence. No matter why Abelard was sent to prison, he was sentenced to 18 years in February 1946. All of Abelard's possessions are distributed to Trujillo's minions, including to Marcus – as Yuniór reveals that Marcus was one of the men who helped accuse Abelard of slander, even though Abelard considered Marcus his best friend. From then on, the curse left no one in the Cabral family line alone.

Fallout. The first sign of the curse was the birth of Abelard's third daughter, who was born with pitch-**black** skin. Socorro committed suicide two months after Beli was born, and the three Cabral daughters were sent away to relatives. Lydia, Abelard's mistress, died of either grief or cancer soon after. In 1948, Jacquelyn was found dead in her godparents' pool, having allegedly drowned herself, and her younger sister Astrid was shot in the head in a church in 1951. Abelard actually lived the longest (except for Beli), languishing in a Dominican death camp for 14 years before he died. Yuniór refuses to tell us more of Abelard's experiences, to spare us the pain. Abelard was left brain-dead by a torture called "La Corona," (the crown) and he died a few days before Trujillo was assassinated.

Again, there are many possible explanations for the events of the novel, some supernatural and some not. Yuniór always leaves it up to the reader to decide, emphasizing the audience's responsibility to examine the truth of everything they read (including Yuniór's narrative itself). Trujillo's lack of documentation (another example of "blank pages"), further confuses truth and lies, leaving only each person's interpretation and memory. Yuniór also introduces the original Dominican myth, suggesting that Abelard's story might have been based on the legend of Anacaona, the same way that Beli based her life on romance movies and Oscar based his on fantasy novels instead of facing reality.



Here, Abelard's occupation as a writer finally comes into conflict with the dictator. The book he allegedly wrote was completely destroyed, just as Oscar's last writings will also be lost. Yuniór does not explicitly support this theory, but he does provide reasons not to trust the other theories, suggesting that the book is the most likely (or at least most interesting) option to Yuniór. This makes sense, as Yuniór was also a writer who likely wants to believe in the power of a book to change the world.



The sentence literally refers to Abelard's prison sentence, but it also extends to how the rest of the Cabral family was "sentenced" to deal with a horrible curse of the rest of their lives. Marcus finally shows his true colors, willing to betray Abelard if it means keeping himself safe.



Just like nuclear fallout, the true extent of the damage to Abelard's life is unknown until much later. Beli's dark skin is "cursed" because elite families in the DR are supposed to be white—the result of a century of internalized racism after the Spanish invasion of the naturally darker native Taino peoples who originally lived on the island, as well as anti-Haitian racism intensified during Trujillo's regime. No one in Abelard's inner circle survives the fallout from his bad luck.



The Third and Final Daughter. Yunior now circles back to Beli's fate in all of this madness. Beli was left with a wet-nurse after everyone in the family refused to take a child with such dark skin. When Beli is four months old, Socorro's relatives come back to claim the baby, then pass her off to other relatives when they realize that all the Cabral fortune has vanished. Beli is then sold to another family in the poorest neighborhood of Santo Domingo as a "criada," a workhorse maid. Yunior tells in a footnote of a criada he knew when he was little, who did all the housework and was not allowed to attend school. Beli, lost and unaware of who her family is, disappears.

The Burning. In 1955, La Inca hears rumors that the last Cabral daughter is still alive. La Inca was too grief-stricken from the death of her own husband to care for Jacquelyn or Astrid when their mother died, but she has since recovered and opened up a string of bakeries in Baní. The rumor says that this last Cabral daughter was a maid for a family who didn't want her to attend school, and that her "parents" burned her back with hot oil when she continued to skip work to go to class.

Yunior describes Outer Azua, the neighborhood that Beli now lives in, as the biggest wasteland and the poorest neighborhood in all of the Dominican Republic. La Inca knows she has to rescue this child if she really is the last Cabral, and goes to check out the rumors. La Inca sees Beli's eyes and knows immediately that Beli is a Cabral. She returns with Beli and begins to raise her, making sure that Beli knows everything about her family's elite roots.

Forget-Me-Naut. Beli never speaks of the nine years she spent in Outer Azua, preferring to start anew in Baní. Yunior suspects that she never thought about that life at all, embracing the "amnesia" of the island in order to recreate herself.

Sanctuary. La Inca becomes the mother that Beli never had, and makes sure she gets a proper education and comports herself with behavior fit for the family she once belonged to. La Inca never asks about Beli's life in Outer Azua, speaking instead of the pride of Beli's ancestors and her real parents. Beli flourishes in this sanctuary, even relishing the small rural school she attends. Beli never knows what Trujillo did to her family and, at this point, she has no idea what is in store for her own life.

In many fantasy novels, three is a significant number, and the third child is destined for greatness. Yunior highlights this trope with Beli. He sets up Beli to be a Dominican Cinderella, separated from her "royal" family and forced to work as a maid, but destined to eventually find her true place in the world. Yet Beli's fate, already told in Chapter 3, is also to be destroyed by the fukú, and she certainly doesn't live "happily ever after."



La Inca's loss of her husband is another example of how love always invites the opportunity for grief. However, this death happens before the events of the novel and is specifically not part of the curse on the family, as Yunior distinguishes between regular tragedy and fukú. In contrast, Beli's hardships are completely attributed to the curse. Beli's desire to go to school seems odd, considering how little she cared about her studies at El Redentor, but it does fit with her desire to always be somewhere other than where she is.



La Inca's familial connection to Beli, though they are not closely related, is very strong. Yunior emphasizes the bond between the two women, as La Inca recognizes Beli on sight, and ties Beli back into her family heritage.



Beli censors herself, leaving blank pages in her own history. The "naut" of the title "forget-me-naut" evokes the Greek myth of the Argonauts, as Beli is also on a mission to redefine herself away from the island she was born on.



La Inca helps Beli keep the "blank pages" of her past instead of forcing her to deal with the grief that overwhelmed her young life. This discretion perhaps leaves Beli open to the manipulation she later faces at the hands of Trujillo's sister.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 6: LAND OF THE LOST (1992-1995)

The Dark Age. After graduation, Oscar moves back home with his mother and futilely looks for a job in a post-Reagan economy. He starts substitute teaching at Don Bosco, his old high school, and eventually becomes a full time teacher there. Don Bosco is still as miserable as Oscar remembers, and he has no knack for teaching. The kids tease him as much as his fellow students had at Rutgers. Oscar notices that the kids doing the most teasing are the students of color, rather than the white students, as it was when he went to Don Bosco. Oscar tries to reach out to them by supporting the kids who are bullied and starting a science-fiction and fantasy club, but the students do not respond to him at all. His only friend on the staff is a fellow teacher name Nataly, but she transfers to another suburb and stops returning his calls. Al, Miggs, Maritza, and Olga have all lost touch as well, and Oscar now has no social life whatsoever.

Oscar's family isn't doing very well either. Lola gave up on Japan to move to New York with Yuniór, Oscar's mother is still working too hard, and his uncle Rodolfo has started using heroin again. Oscar doesn't want to become bitter, but he can't see any way out of it. His depression, which he calls the Darkness, also returns full force. On his bad days, he can't get out of bed or write and he snaps at his mother.

On Oscar's good days he apologizes, and visits Lola in Washington Heights. Lola had gotten pregnant, but had an abortion when she found out that Yuniór was cheating on her. Oscar keeps Lola company and starts to plan a science-fiction fantasy quartet that will make him the next Tolkien. Sometimes he dreams about **the Mongoose**. But these high points are erased when he realizes that the new generation of nerds don't like the role-playing games he used to play.

Oscar Takes a Vacation. After Oscar has been a teacher at Don Bosco for three years, his mother decides it is time to go back to Santo Domingo, and she takes Oscar with her. Oscar is in almost high spirits; his latest diet has worked and he is excited to return to the island. Yuniór praises the virtues of summer in Santo Domingo (that extend to everyone but the poor and the Haitian), and imagines that Oscar thinks he will find true love with an Island girl.

The Dark Ages refers to the way that Oscar has stepped backward in his journey of self-discovery, returning to the high school he hated with a complete lack of a social life after the few successes he had making friends (like Yuniór) at Rutgers. Oscar's experience being teased does not make him uniquely able to help kids like his high school self; it just makes him another target for insecure bullies. *Díaz* continues to show that people of color can be just as harmful to other minorities (on an individual level, at least) as white people are. Oscar also has another crush that leads to absolutely nothing as he repeats the same mistakes he always makes with women.



Each of Oscar's family members enact a different stereotype of immigrants in the United States. Lola has given up on her ambitions to take care of her boyfriend, Oscar's mother is the over-worked laborer, and his uncle is addicted to drugs. Yet *Díaz* has made sure that we see those characters as more than just these one-dimensional notes, suggesting that stereotypes in the real world are also a limiting view of a person. Oscar's depression, taking the form of a supernatural force called the Darkness, always gets worse when Oscar can't write, as writing is how Oscar takes control of his life.



Yuniór completely glosses over the upheaval in Lola's life, even the traumatic choice to have an abortion in response to Yuniór's infidelity. Yuniór seems unwilling to explore that time in his life, perhaps feeling guilty about the situation. The mongoose appears when Oscar is writing again, connecting Oscar's writing to *zafa* (blessing) in his life. Yet Oscar is not out of his depression yet, realizing that even the nerd culture where he used to find acceptance has left him behind.



While Oscar goes on the vacation looking for a change, and has even managed to make positive steps towards controlling his own life by managing his weight, Yuniór remains completely focused on Oscar's romantic exploits. When describing the virtues of the Dominican summer, Yuniór is also sure to point out that the DR remains a classist and racist society by excluding those of lower economic status or darker skin from the annual celebration.



The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Nativeland. Oscar's mother gets dressed up for the plane ride back to the DR and acts like royalty throughout the flight. Oscar falls asleep, only waking up in confusion when everyone starts to clap as the airplane touches ground. Santo Domingo has been arising anew from the ashes of Trujillo's Era, and La Inca has done very well with her bakeries, and has decided to move to a nicer neighborhood called Mirador Norte. La Inca, showing her age though she is as fit as ever, welcomes Oscar home with a kiss and cries when she sees Beli home again at last. Oscar adjusts to the DR again, especially the abundance of beautiful women.

Evidence of a Brother's Past. Lola takes picture after picture of Oscar, all over the island. He finally looks happy, if confused, and he doesn't look fat.

Oscar Goes Native. The first week, Oscar has a lot of catching up to do – with his family as well as re-acclimating to Dominican culture and the shock of poverty everywhere. In the midst of all that, Oscar decides to extend his stay on the island rather than go back to Paterson when Lola leaves. He soon has second thoughts about this because he feels so un-Dominican, but he keeps his mind off it with his writing. Then Oscar meets a puta (prostitute) named Ybón Pimentel, and says that she is the start of his real life.

La Beba (Babygirl). Ybón, a gorgeously golden-skinned middle-aged woman, lives two houses over from La Inca, and has just returned from working in Europe. Ybón asks Oscar what he's reading, and says she recognizes him from La Inca's old pictures. Oscar finds her incredibly worldly and attractive, and nearly dies when she invites him in to her house. She pours them drinks and talks to him for hours about her life. Oscar thinks she is fascinating, if eccentric, and falls hard for her. Beli and La Inca are furious at Ybón's profession, but Oscar argues that there is more to her and her family than prostitution. La Inca and Beli try to forbid him from seeing her, but he refuses to listen.

Oscar decides, for once in his life, not to overwhelm Ybón with the strength of his crush. It drives him crazy thinking of Ybón all day, but he waits till one in the afternoon of the next day to see her again. When Oscar gets to her house, there is a red jeep there with national police plates. Oscar runs away, ashamed that he didn't realize there were other men in Ybón's life, but comes back the day after anyway. Ybón welcomes him in.

When returning to the DR, Beli remembers that her family was once elite, and she begins to dress the part. Yet while the whole plane claps upon arrival to the island, Oscar barely even notices that the plane lands. Oscar doesn't understand why everyone is so excited to return to the DR, because he has never felt truly at home here and is constantly reminded that he is not conventionally Dominican.



The pictures of Oscar on this trip to the DR show that he does actually fit in in this environment, even if he doesn't always feel like it.



As Yunior catalogues the number of things that stand out to Oscar on the island, he lists poverty multiple times, emphasizing how distressed Oscar is to notice the contrast in the quality of life between the island and the states. He copes with this change, as always, by writing out his thoughts. Then a girl arrives and offers yet another "start" to the story of Oscar Wao, as Yunior continually edits Oscar's story.



Ybón's golden skin is reminiscent of the golden eyes of the mongoose, but Ybón is not actually a symbol of zafa herself. Díaz resists the "color coding" present in many fantasy novels and gives his heroes dark skin. Though the Dominican culture (as portrayed by Yunior) is preoccupied with sex, prostitution is still frowned upon in polite society. Oscar rejects this social convention and sees Ybón as a person rather than just her profession.



It seems as though Oscar is finally loving selflessly. He gives Ybón the chance to decide for herself if she wants to see him again, a choice he has not given any of his former crushes. Unlike his jealousy over Jenni's boyfriend, Oscar allows Ybón to have other relationships in her life. The jeep with national police plates means that one of Ybón's clients is a member of the Dominican police force, a sure sign of bad things to come for Oscar.



A Note from Your Author. Yunior breaks in to address the fact that Ybón is not the stereotypical underage, drug-addicted prostitute. Yunior says he could have replaced Ybón with the quintessential Caribbean puta, but that choice would have destroyed the integrity of a “true” account of Oscar Wao’s life. He reminds us that it is our job to decide if any of this is real.

Yunior highlights his authorial privilege in the novel, but at least pretends that he is writing a totally true account even though he has explicitly admitted at other points in the book that he has changed details. Significantly, Yunior only professes to write a true account of “Oscar Wao,” the nickname he gave to Oscar de León. It is possible that Yunior has written all of this about a character loosely based on his college roommate Oscar de León, but it is impossible to know for sure.



The Girl from Sabana Iglesia (Church.) Ybón looks young, even though she is 36. She complains about the little imperfections in her body, and how hard she has to work for the body she had for free at 16. Oscar thinks she is just as beautiful now, and tells her so. Soon, Oscar stops writing and spends all his time at Ybón’s house, even when he knows she’ll be working. La Inca is still angry, but one of Oscar’s uncles is ecstatic that Oscar is finally a real Dominican man.

Though Ybón is beautiful, like the majority of the women in this novel, she focuses on the imperfections in her appearance, as Díaz comments on the unrealistic expectations set for Dominican women. Highlighting the difference in expectations between the genders, La Inca considers prostitution the worst of all possible life choices for a Dominican woman, while Oscar’s uncle sees visiting a prostitute as nothing more than the right of every Dominican man.



Ybón tells Oscar everything that has happened to her in her life, and about some of her clients (who she calls boyfriends), even though it makes Oscar uncomfortable. In turn, Oscar tells Ybón of the few life experiences he has had, including the time he attempted suicide. Ybón pours them both a drink and toasts, “To Life!” Oscar is with Ybón often enough to see her on her bad days as well. Oscar cajoles Ybón into getting out of bed, and drives her home when she inevitably drinks too much at dinner. Though Oscar doesn’t actually know his way around the island, he calls his friend Clives, a taxi-driver, to lead him home.

Unlike most of the other characters in the novel, Oscar and Ybón do not censor themselves when they talk about their pasts, giving them the chance to build a solid relationship based on mutual acceptance and trust. This relationship does not fix all of their problems, however, as both Ybón and Oscar have emotional baggage that they need to work through on their own, as seen in Ybón’s bad days. Oscar’s gaps in his knowledge of his family’s past show in his inability to navigate the island.



La Inca Speaks. La Inca gets one small paragraph of narration, to say that Oscar did not meet Ybón outside her house. He met her in a cabaret.

La Inca uses her one moment of authorship in the novel to say that Oscar and Ybón’s relationship was actually tied to Ybón’s profession as a prostitute.



Ybón, As Recorded by Oscar. Ybón says that she never wanted to come back to Santo Domingo, but that she ran out of money and options. Though she doesn’t like being back in the DR after seeing more of the world, she knows that she can get used to anything.

La Inca and Ybón both speak in their own voices very briefly, as Yunior emphasizes how truth can change depending on the person. Ybón shares how she is actually much happier being a prostitute anywhere but the DR. Both La Inca and Ybón contradict how Yunior has previously described Ybón’s circumstances.



What Never Changes. Yunior breaks in to ask whether, in all the talking, Oscar ever had a chance to be physically intimate with Ybón. Yunior says that nothing sexual happens that summer, but Oscar remains hopeful that if he comes back at Thanksgiving and Christmas Ybón will let her guard down. Oscar realizes that he is one of Ybón's few real friends, in keeping with Ybón's motto of "travel light," a theory that she extends to friends as well as furniture. Oscar knows that Ybón is having sex with other men, but he decides not to care, so that he does not repeat the mistakes he made with Ana Obregón.

As he did when Oscar was dating Ana, Yunior ignores the emotional closeness that the couple is building in favor of physical expressions of love. Like before, Oscar is content to wait until his romantic partner initiates physical intimacy, though it is unclear whether Oscar does this out of respect or out of lack of confidence. Ybón's motto "travel light" hints that she is not looking for a committed relationship with Oscar, or anyone else, so that she can always leave if necessary.



Oscar at the Rubicon. As August begins, Ybón starts to talk about her boyfriend the Capitán. Oscar insists that the Capitán won't be jealous of him, but Ybón isn't so sure. Oscar knows that he is getting too lovesick for Ybón, but he doesn't know how to stop loving her. He dreams of Ybón's naked body and knows that it is too late to try to convince himself not to love her.

The Rubicon is a famous river that Julius Caesar crossed in 49 BC, starting the Roman Civil War. Oscar is similarly poised on a potentially risky course of action as he continues to see Ybón, despite the danger of her militaristic boyfriend.



Last Chance. Two days later, Oscar's uncle shows Oscar bullet holes on the side of their house. La Inca and Beli try to get Oscar to heed the warning, and Oscar feels a strange feeling of premonition. But Oscar ignores all of this and heads over to Ybón's house anyway.

Oscar's last chance to give up on Ybón involves a premonition similar to the feeling that Lola had before she found out that Beli had cancer. This suggests that Oscar's next discoveries will also be bad news, but Oscar chooses not to pay attention to this warning.



Oscar Gets Beat. In mid-August, Oscar meets the Capitán and gets his first kiss. Yunior then steps back to explain how this all happened. Oscar follows Clives' taxi home from dinner, with Ybón passed out in the front seat, when he is pulled over by the cops. As the cops ask Oscar to get out of the car, Ybón wakes up, leans over, and kisses Oscar. Yunior admits that he has forgotten his own first kiss, but that Oscar never would. Unfortunately, the Capitán is standing behind the police officers and witnesses everything. They yank Oscar out of the car, and Ybón simply passes out in the passenger seat again.

Yunior yet again gives away the most important events before he describes how those events actually happened, which heightens the tension as we know that Oscar is headed for both a kiss and a beating, but we don't know which will happen first. Oddly, Ybón initiates the kiss, yet seems to have no agency in the moment. Yunior does not even attempt to explain why Ybón kissed Oscar, or whether she knew that a kiss would have such disastrous consequences.



The Capitán, a career military man in his 40s, was too young to help during Trujillo's regime, but found plenty of work during the Balaguer years and soon rose to the top of the ranks. He regards Oscar coolly, and a terrified Oscar blurts out that he is an American citizen. The Capitán just laughs and says that he is, too. Oscar insists that he didn't do anything wrong, and that Ybón had said that she and the Capitán were broken up. The Capitán grabs Oscar by the throat, and Yunior says that a more handsome man would have been shot on the spot. Instead, the Capitán takes pity and simply beats Oscar and hands him over to the two police officers. The Capitán then drives off with Ybón, pulling her by the hair.

The Capitán, though not actually connected to Trujillo, is as close as he can get in this new modern era of the Dominican Republic. Even after Trujillo's death, the dictator's culture of violence still manages to harm the Cabral family line, just as fukú causes harm to the descendants of people who were cursed. For once, Oscar's "undesirable" appearance saves him, as the capitán seems to think that an ugly man is less of a threat to Ybón's affections.



The two police officers, whom Yuniore calls Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd, start to drive Oscar to the cane fields. They chit chat while Oscar frantically tries to think of a way to escape in the back seat. He looks out the window and thinks he sees **a man with no face**. The police officers walk Oscar into the cane field and Oscar has an intense feeling of déjà vu, but is brought back to reality as the police officers begin to beat him with the butts of their pistols. Yuniore calls it the “beatdown to end all beatdowns,” and says he is uncertain whether the police officers were trying to scare Oscar or kill him. The officers stop when he is just shy of death, and Oscar falls unconscious.

Clives to the Rescue. Clives the taxi driver had the bravery and the kindness to follow the police officers and find Oscar after the police officers were done with him. A singing voice leads Clives to Oscar’s unconscious body, and Clives convinces some Haitian workers from a nearby batey (sugar worker town) to help him carry Oscar out of the cane field.

Close Encounters of the Caribbean Kind. Oscar remembers dreaming about **the Mongoose** while he was unconscious. The Mongoose asks Oscar if he wants less or more. Thinking of his family, and his own optimistic young self, Oscar says he wants more. The Mongoose then speaks three words that are blanked out of the text.

Dead or Alive. The doctors catalogue Oscar’s injuries and La Inca and Beli begin to pray. Each refuses to acknowledge the similarity to Beli’s past experience.

Briefing for a Descent Into Hell. Oscar lays unconscious for three days, remembering nothing but an “Aslan-like figure with golden eyes” and a man wearing a mask holding **a blank book**.

Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd are two gorilla-esque supervillains in the DC comic universe, giving both Yuniore and Oscar another chance to compare their own lives to the comic books they read. Like Beli before him, Oscar sees the symbol of fukú on his way to the cane field, and feels déjà vu because it is the exact same cane field where Beli was beaten by Trujillo’s sister’s thugs. Family history continues to repeat itself.



The singing voice presumably belongs to the mongoose, though Yuniore never attempts to explain its origin. As with the biblical story of the good Samaritan, where a Samaritan helps an injured man despite the fact that Samaritans were treated with contempt and hatred, the Haitian workers help Oscar even though many Dominicans hate Haitians.



With the title “Close encounters of the Caribbean Kind”, Yuniore references the sci-fi classic “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” but includes the supernatural mongoose unique to islands rather than the aliens of the original movie. The mongoose’s words are blanked out, just like other things are censored in the text, but this censorship is a positive quality here, one that creates endless opportunity for the reader to imagine their own words.



Although the mongoose speaks to Oscar, there is no guarantee that Oscar will live or that he will find happiness. Beli was never the same after her own beating.



Aslan, the lion that represents God in the series The Chronicles of Narnia, has the same golden eyes of the mongoose, but does not have the silky black fur that marks the mongoose as a distinctly Dominican symbol. The man in a mask is not quite a man with no face, and it’s unclear whether the blank book is a good thing or a bad thing.



Alive. As soon as Oscar is able to travel, Beli arranges a plane flight home to Paterson. Oscar insists that he wants to stay to be with Ybón. He resists all attempts to move him, despite the extra pain it causes his recovering body, and actually appreciates the beating for showing him that things really were serious between him and Ybón. He also realizes that the family curse might actually be real.

Oscar tries to get himself to Ybón's house, but sees that her car isn't there. Finally, three days after the beating, Ybón comes to visit Oscar. Beli calls Ybón a puta, but Ybón ignores Beli and goes to Oscar. She is wearing white, and has two black eyes courtesy of the Capitán. Ybón tells Oscar that they can never see each other again, and that she and the Capitán (Yunior blurs out his real name here) are getting married. Oscar finally agrees to go home to the United States.

Lola meets Beli and Oscar at the airport, crying when she sees the damage all over Oscar's face. She tells Yunior what happened, and Yunior calls Oscar. Oscar ignores Yunior's questions about the beating, too full of the news that he, Oscar, has kissed a girl. When Yunior goes to visit Oscar, Oscar starts to tell Yunior about the fukú.

Some Advice. Yunior extends Ybón's advice to the whole world. Travel light.

Paterson, Again. Oscar returns home and heals, but can't let go of his love for Ybón. He dreams of his family getting beaten in the cane field in his place, but he runs away instead of saving them. Oscar tries to watch his old favorite Japanese movies, and rereads his beloved *The Lord of the Rings* again, but he has to stop when he reaches the description of Orcs as "**black** men like half-trolls." Six weeks after his beating, Oscar dreams of the cane field again. This time he doesn't run away, but stays and listens to the sounds of the violence and the pain.

Oscar's beating significantly changes his worldview, clarifying how important Ybón is to him and cementing the perceived reality of the curse in his life.



Ybón's white dress emphasizes her purity, even if Beli makes sure to acknowledge that Ybón is not actually pure. Even though the Capitán clearly abuses Ybón, it would be more dangerous for her to try to leave him. Yunior refuses to make the Capitán sympathetic in any way, refusing to even give him a personal name.



Lola struggles with seeing damage on Oscar's face that she can do nothing to fix, as she still wants to sacrifice everything for her loved ones. Oscar does what Yunior has done throughout the book, prioritizing romantic developments over other important events. Though Oscar has told Yunior about the curse before, this is the first real evidence that may get Yunior to believe in fukú.



"Travel light" now seems to warn against making too many attachments, because it is impossible to know how much time anyone has.



Like his grandfather Abelard, Oscar worries that he will be a coward, unable to save his family when it matters most. Oscar desperately wants to see himself as a hero, but does not find many examples of dark skinned heroes in the books that he reads - hating the description of Orcs so much that he has to stop reading what used to be his favorite fantasy series. When Oscar stays to listen to the sounds of pain, Díaz suggests that sometimes bearing witness to pain is just as brave as acting to prevent pain.



BOOK 3, PREFACE

Yunior brings us to January after Oscar returns from his beating in the Dominican Republic, as Yunior and Lola are living in separate apartments in Washington Heights. Though they are technically still boyfriend and girlfriend, Yunior's inability to stay monogamous is destroying their relationship.

Oscar comes to see Yunior, still recovering but doing much better. Oscar tells Yunior that he will be returning to Don Bosco soon. Yunior notices that Oscar seems at peace, finally, and that he is nearly thin. Oscar talks about his writing, and his attempts to pare down his book collection so that he can move out of Paterson.

Oscar gets to the main reason for his visit: he needs to borrow money from Yunior. Oscar tells Yunior that he needs enough for a security deposit for an apartment in Brooklyn. Out of a guilty conscience, Yunior agrees to give Oscar anything he wants. Oscar and Yunior smoke and talk about why Yunior cannot stop cheating on Lola. Yunior insists that he doesn't know. Oscar advises Yunior to try to find out why he sleeps around so much, and then leaves, saying he has a date. That Saturday, Yunior finds out that Oscar is gone.

Lola and Yunior's romantic arc runs under the surface of the novel. Yunior never explains why he is so drawn to both de León siblings, but is at least able to name his attraction to Lola, whereas he never fully accepts his platonic affection for Oscar. Labeling his relationship to Lola does not stop him from undermining their connection, though, as he continues to cheat.



Oscar is writing again, a sure sign that his mental health is improving and his physical health is in a good place as well. Though Beli fell apart after she was beaten, Oscar actually seems to have pulled his life together. Yet this is sadly reminiscent of Abelard's supposed success before he is arrested, so Oscar is not yet safe either.



Though Yunior immediately agrees to give Oscar money for an apartment, he admits in the narration that he should have seen that Oscar was planning to use the money for something else. The narration also looks back at Yunior's habit of cheating on Lola with contempt. Yunior as the narrator clearly knows that he is dealing with his own lack of confidence and feelings of unworthiness by depending on the affection of many women, but he is not mature enough to recognize this at the time. Oscar, however, knows what he wants and takes steps to get it by returning to the DR.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 7: THE FINAL VOYAGE

Oscar touches down in Santo Domingo once more, this time clapping along with the other passengers once the plane lands. He calls Clives to pick him up and take him to Ybón's house. They wait for Ybón, and Oscar considers letting her go, but then she pulls up and Oscar knows that he still loves her.

Oscar's applause shows that Ybón has finally given him a reason to celebrate his homeland. However, the Chapter title "The Final Voyage" makes it clear that Oscar will not return. Love causes Oscar to act in irrational and uncontrollable ways. As he will not give up Ybón, we know that it is only a matter of time before the Capitán fulfills his promise to kill Oscar.



Ybón calls Oscar *mi amor* (my love) and tells him to leave immediately, but Oscar professes his immense love for her, and asks for just one week together so he can finally be happy. Ybón wavers, perhaps because she does love him, but she ultimately knows that the Capitán would never allow them to live after an offense like that. She again tells Oscar to go, but Oscar refuses and lets himself into La Inca's house to stay. La Inca is surprised to find Oscar at her house, looking through her old photographs. Oscar writes to Lola, saying that the whole situation is hard to explain.

Curse of the Caribbean. Oscar stays at La Inca's house for 27 days, researching and writing a book about his family and waiting for Ybón. He follows her around town, even though Ybón is terrified that the Capitán will punish them both. Oscar delivers love letters to Ybón, earning him nothing but death threats from the Capitán and notes from Ybón begging him to go home. Oscar writes Ybón that he is home. When Ybón tells him to go back to his real home, Oscar asks her why a person can't have two.

Nineteen days after Oscar arrives back in the DR, Ybón sneaks out on a date with him. The whole family is aghast at this development. Lola flies to the island to make Oscar come home, but Oscar tells her that she doesn't understand. La Inca tries to use some of her supernatural Power to keep Oscar away from Ybón, but Oscar resists with Power of his own. Beli flies down, two weeks after Oscar went to the DR, and tries to force Oscar to come home. Oscar simply says that he can't, and that he truly isn't trying to get himself killed. Even Yuniór flies down at Lola's request, but nothing can convince Oscar to leave.

The Last Days of Oscar Wao. Oscar writes almost 300 pages during the 27 days he waits for Ybón. He tells Yuniór to wait and see what he has found out. But on the 27th day, the two police officers break their way into Clives' cab as he is giving Oscar a ride home. The officers drive Oscar back to the cane fields, where Clives begs them to spare Oscar's life, but the officers just laugh. Oscar laughs too and tells Clives not to worry, because the officers are too late. They drive past a bus stop, and Oscar imagines he sees his whole family getting on a bus driven by **the Mongoose**, with **the man with no face** acting as bus conductor.

Once again, Oscar chooses to ignore his love interest's desires to continue pursuing what he wants. Admittedly, however, Ybón sends mixed signals. Though Ybón adamantly tells Oscar to leave, she also calls him pet names that he hears as encouragement to stay. It seems as though Oscar came back not just for Ybón, but also to find out more about his family now that he finally feels connected to his heritage.



Though Oscar writes elaborate letters of his love for Ybón, he apparently does not care enough about Ybón's fear to stop exacerbating the tense situation with the Capitán. Obviously, the Capitán is worse at fault for treating Ybón like property, but Oscar does not respect her wishes either. Still, Ybón's love has helped Oscar reconcile the two separate halves of his identity. Oscar does not to pick either American or Dominican; he wants to belong to both.



Though the de León family is not often explicit in their affection, they are strongly supportive of each other in a crisis. Oscar chooses romantic love with Ybón instead of appreciating the familial love that he already has, heightening the tragedy of his inevitable death. Yet though Oscar's choices will end in pain, he has found his own strength by learning how to fight for Ybón.



Oscar teases his groundbreaking discoveries, but leaves his book as "blank pages" again. History repeats (both familial and Oscar's personal history) as two thugs pull Oscar over and return to the cane field. But this time, it seems as though Oscar has already accomplished whatever he needed or wanted to do back on the island. His vision of the mongoose and the man with no face suggest that the de Leóns are finally in the hands of both *fukú* and *zafa*, and that blessings have as much effect on their lives as the curse.



Oscar begins sending telepathic goodbye messages to his mother, his uncle, Lola, and all the girls he had ever loved, as well as Ybón. The officers walk Oscar into the cane, and he tries to stand up bravely. Meanwhile, Clives slips away and later returns to deliver Oscar's body to his family.

Oscar begins to tell the officers in Spanish of his deep love for Ybón, and what a sin it would be to take that love out of the world. He describes the beauty, rarity, and strength of what he and Ybón share, and tells the officers that his feelings for Ybón have allowed him to place a curse on them and their families. Oscar finishes by explaining that he is now the hero he has always dreamed he would be. The officers wait politely for Oscar to finish, then tell Oscar that they'll let him go if he tells them what "fuego" means in English. Oscar can't see their faces, and he can't stop himself from saying "fire."

Oscar's final thoughts are dedicated to all the people he loved, but he saves the very last goodbye for Ybón. Oscar's last act of bravery is to accept his fate with honor. Clives, showcasing another small act of bravery, comes back for Oscar's body though he cannot prevent Oscar's death.



Oscar's last speech in Spanish, even though he was never very comfortable with that language, both upholds love as the highest good in the world and puts a curse on anyone who tries to destroy that good. Oscar cannot uproot fukú's hold on his own life, but he can try to be a hero and harness fukú to punish people whom he believes actually deserves to be punished. The officers use Oscar's American identity and mastery of English against him (essentially through a cruel joke), then turn into "men with no faces" as they pull the trigger and complete fukú's destiny for Oscar.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 8: THE END OF THE STORY

Yunior tells us that this is pretty much it for his story. He, Beli and Lola fly down to claim the body, and are the only ones at Oscar's funeral. Beli's cancer returns the next year and she lives another ten months before giving up completely. Lola tries to convince her mother that she did all she could for Oscar, but Beli only repeats that she didn't do enough. The family buries Beli next to Oscar.

The family tries to hire lawyers to get justice for Oscar's murder, but nothing happens. The American embassy and Dominican government refuse to help as well. Ybón stays in her house at Mirador Norte, but La Inca moves back to Baní. Lola swears that she will never go back to the Dominican Republic, telling Yunior shortly before they break up that "Ten million Trujillos is all we are."

As For Us. Yunior wishes that Oscar's death had brought him and Lola closer together, but he is too much of a mess and Lola is too busy taking care of her mother to pay him attention. After her mother dies, Lola finally gets fed up with Yunior sleeping around and breaks up with him for good. Yunior spends a year hating Lola, sleeping with as many women as possible, and hoping that he and Lola can get back together. That August, Yunior finds out from his mother that Lola has met and married a man from Miami and that she is pregnant. Yunior says that God gave him Lola when he was young so that he would know loss for the rest of his life.

As with the "fallout" after Abelard's arrest, the rest of Oscar's family deals with the reality of his death in stages. Beli holds herself responsible for Oscar's death, perhaps because the circumstances of his death so closely matched the experience from her life. She too seemingly falls victim to the curse.



The Dominican government does nothing to help the de León family deal with this tragedy, and their American citizenship has no effect either. Both of these failures cause Lola to turn away from her Dominican heritage, reducing the entire culture to the legacy of their dictator.



Yunior's focus returns to his relationship with Lola, something that he always put above his friendship to Oscar. Lola has enough respect for herself to break the cycle of abusive relationships that she has seen all the Dominican women around her suffer through. Yunior fails to recognize his own fault in this breakup, and then uses Lola's rejection as a lesson that colors how he thinks about relationships in the future.



On a Super Final Note. Even years later, Yunior still dreams about Oscar. At first, the dreams place him and Oscar back at Rutgers, desperately wanting to talk, but unable to speak. Five years after Oscar's death, the dream changes. Now, Yunior and Oscar are in an abandoned bailey (outer court of a castle) full of books and Oscar wears a mask that covers everything but his eyes. Oscar shows Yunior **a blank book** and his eyes are smiling. Other times, Oscar has **no face** at all and Yunior wakes up screaming.

The Dreams. Ten years after Oscar's death, Yunior finally decides to get his act together and find himself again. He tells Oscar "OK, Wao, Ok. You win."

As For Me. Now, Yunior lives in New Jersey and teaches a writing course at Middlesex Community College. It isn't a glamorous life, or the life he dreamed of, but he actually has a wife who loves him despite his many failings. He has mostly given up chasing girls, and spends his time coaching baseball and teaching when he's not with his wife. He also writes as much as possible, just like Oscar did. Yunior is finally a new man.

As For Us. Yunior stays in touch with Lola, as Lola moved back to Paterson with her husband and young daughter. Whenever Yunior sees Lola around town in New York, her daughter Isis is with her. Lola tells her daughter to say hi to her uncle's best friend. Lola and Yunior are on friendly terms, though Yunior still wishes that they could get back together. He has another dream that he and Lola sleep together again and he says the three magic words that save them. He always wakes up crying before he can say the words. When Yunior does see Lola in the real world, they never talk about their past together; they only talk about Oscar.

BOOK 3, EPILOGUE

Yunior says there are a few final things to deal with before his "cosmic duty" as a Watcher is fulfilled. The first thing is to introduce Lola's daughter. Yunior describes Isis as the daughter he could have had: dark-skinned, quick-witted, and mischievous, a girl La Inca calls a jurona (ferret). Isis wears three azabaches (amulets) around her neck for protection and has two god-mothers: Yunior's mother and La Inca.

Yunior emphatically ends the story many times before it really ends, just as he started the story in multiple spots. Díaz points out that any ending spot will not be the "real" end to the story, as the events here continue to affect the lives of Lola, Yunior, and Lola's daughter. Yunior's dreams sometimes point at this outcome, as Oscar hands Yunior a blank book that offers endless ways to fill in the pages. This dream matches Oscar's final dreams. When Oscar has no face, however, Yunior is forced to deal with the reality of fukú or tragedy in the world.



Yunior tries to avoid dealing with his own issues for years, but finally allows Oscar's lessons to sink in.



Yunior starts to focus on his own emotional baggage without blaming his problems on the people around him. Yet he says that he "mostly" stops chasing girls, as if he still can't quite imagine a world in which he stays committed in any real way. Yunior uses writing as an emotional outlet and, like Oscar, writing shows the state of his mental health.



Lola's daughter is named Isis, referencing the Egyptian goddess of health, marriage, and wisdom. These three things are suspiciously lacking from the de León family, and Isis may be their chance to bring balance back after years of the curse dictating events. Yunior finally accepts that he will not be the one to end the curse for the de León family, and his inability to speak three magic words recalls the three blanked-out words that the mongoose spoke to Oscar when the mongoose brought Oscar back to life. Oscar remains as the one link between Lola and Yunior.



Isis's description is very similar to the trickster persona of the mongoose in African and Caribbean legends, and La Inca calling her a ferret ties her even closer to the small animal. This suggests that Isis truly is the mongoose in human form, able to bring zafa into the de León family for good. Lola chooses to trust completely in the old Dominican beliefs as the way to keep her daughter safe.



Despite all the precautions that Lola has taken, Yunior knows that Isis will eventually encounter fukú in the world and dream of **the man with no face**. When that happens, Isis will come to Yunior looking for answers. Yunior predicts that she will knock on his door, introduce herself as Isis, the daughter of Dolores de León, and Yunior will tell Isis everything about her family. Yunior has preserved all of Oscar's manuscripts, papers, books, games, and photos in four refrigerators in his basement so that Isis will be able to take this past and put an end to the curse for good.

As Yunior stated in the very beginning, nothing can stop fukú from the path that it wants to take, even if Lola is doing everything she can for her daughter. Yunior here mentions Lola's full first name, Dolores (Spanish for pain), a fitting name for all the pain that Lola has faced and overcome over the course of the novel. And though the novel is preoccupied with the abundance of blank pages in history, Yunior tries to overcorrect for this by collecting as much evidence and documentation for Oscar's life as possible. This knowledge is the only way to fight against fukú.



Yet, on Yunior's bad days, he is less hopeful that Isis will be able to overcome her family's past. He looks at Oscar's copy of *Watchmen*, a 20th century comic book featuring morally gray heroes and villains, to see that Oscar has circled the last panel. In it, Dr. Manhattan says that "Nothing ever ends."

As much as Yunior wants the curse on the de León family (and every other Dominican family) to end, he is also very afraid that there is no way to end the curse. Especially in a world of people who are neither wholly good nor bad, there is no way to say whether any kind of end has come. People continue to live trying to make the right choice at the time.



BOOK 3: THE FINAL LETTER

Oscar managed to send a few posted letters and a few breezy postcards home before he died. In one to Yunior, Oscar calls Yunior "Count Fenris." In one to Lola, he calls her "My Dear Bene Gesserit Witch." Eight months after Oscar died, a package comes to his old house in Paterson. It contains more chapters of the quartet of science-fiction fantasy novels he was writing, and a long letter to Lola. The letter to Lola talks about a new book he has written based on all of his research in the Dominican Republic in his last month, saying it is "the cure to what ails us."

Oscar's letter calls Yunior Count Fenris, an obscure yet powerful character from the science fiction book [Dune](#) that Yunior has quoted at other times in the novel. Bene Gesserit Witch also comes from [Dune](#), referring to a female cult that has the power to control the whole world but uses that power for good. Oscar's idea of a cure is ambiguous, possibly meaning a cure for the de León fukú, a cure for all Dominican people after Trujillo, or a cure for the unique problems of the children of immigrants.



The magical second package with Oscar's last book never arrives, either because Oscar was killed before he could send it, or someone forgot to get it to the post office. However, the first package does contain the huge news that Oscar and Ybón actually did get a week of bliss together before Oscar was shot. In it, Oscar divulges that he and Ybón had sex, and while that was wonderful, it was the other signs of intimacy that meant more to him. He describes Ybón's beauty as she undresses, the way she sits in his lap or kisses his neck, and the secrets that they share – the small moments that he had always desired. When he laments that he had to wait so long, Ybón tells him to call the wait "life." Oscar, finally experiencing his greatest dream, ends the letter: "The beauty! The beauty!"

At the very end of the novel, Oscar finally becomes a "true" Dominican man by having sex with Ybón. Though most of the novel tries to break stereotypes, this actually supports Yunior's earlier claim that no Dominican ever dies a virgin. Yet Oscar prefers to focus on the non-sexual aspects of his relationship with Ybón, as he understands that the physical attraction is not what makes love so beautiful. His last words echo Colonel Kurz's last words "The Horror! The Horror!" from [Heart of Darkness](#), but accepts all the messiness of Dominican life rather than only seeing the tragic or harmful aspects. Oscar judges life, love, and humankind to be beautiful despite all the pain he has faced to get here. It seems that Yunior must learn to do the same.





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