

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao Study Guide

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz

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Plot Summary

A family curse, mysteriously missing manuscripts and one man's love trials are the focus of the novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" by Junot Diaz. Three generations of the Cabral family have been afflicted with a curse believed to have been put on them by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. The story — narrated by Lola, the sister of the main character, and Yuniors, his best friend — is full of street corner slang, Spanish phrases and references to modern culture. Through the novel, Lola, Yuniors and Oscar try in their own ways to understand the cause of the Cabral family's bad luck and find some way to put an end to it.

The family curse begins with Abelard Cabral, a wealthy surgeon with two beautiful daughters. During the reign of the Trujillo, it was common practice for the dictator to demand sexual relations with any woman he chose, and it appears he has his eye on Jacquelyn, Abelard's oldest daughter. One common explanation for why Abelard was jailed for slander was because he loved his daughter enough to try to keep her out of the Trujillo's hands. It is believed the Trujillo put a curse on the family because he couldn't get Jacquelyn. With the exception of Beli, all members of the Cabral family, including the head servant and Abelard's mistress, are mysteriously killed.

Beli seems to take on the curse from her father. When she is finally found by her cousin, La Inca, who adopts Beli as her own daughter, Beli has been treated as a servant and badly burned because she insisted on going to school. La Inca takes her in and tries her best to raise the girl in a way that pays honor to Beli's parents, but Beli suffers with a bad case of love sickness. Her first disastrous affair gets her kicked out of the prestigious school in which her adoptive mother managed to secure her a place. Her second lands her in direct opposition with the Trujillo as she becomes pregnant by the husband of the dictator's sister. When she refuses to cooperate and have an abortion, she is taken to a canefield and nearly beaten to death. The only thing that keeps her alive is an unusual golden mongoose promising her that she will have a daughter and a son.

Beli seems to pass the curse along to her son, Oscar, who is described as an overweight nerd. Despite his unattractiveness, Oscar dreams of love. He finally finds his great love in Ybon, a prostitute who lives down the street from La Inca. Ybon, however, has a lover who is a police captain. The captain does not take kindly to Oscar. He threatens Oscar, then has him beaten in an attempt to keep him away from Ybon. Oscar decides his love is worth the chance he might die and travels to Santo Domingo not only to try to romance Ybon but also to research and write about the family's curse. Oscar is killed at the captain's orders because of his love for Ybon. In a letter to his sister, Oscar claims to have found a cure for the family curse but the manuscript he says he has written never arrives.



Part I, Chapter One

Summary

A family curse, mysteriously missing manuscripts and one man's love trials are the focus of the novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" by Junot Diaz. Three generations of the Cabral family have been afflicted with a curse believed to have been put on them by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. The story — narrated by Lola, the sister of the main character, and Yuniors, his best friend — is full of street corner slang, Spanish phrases and references to modern culture. Through the novel, Lola, Yuniors and Oscar try in their own ways to understand the cause of the Cabral family's bad luck and find some way to put an end to it.

Oscar, the hero of the novel, has one brief spell of luck with females when he is seven. He dates both Maritza Chacon and Olga Polanco at the same time. After a week, Maritza finds out about Olga and insists that he break up with her. Oscar later wonders if his insensitive break-up with Olga led to the overweight freak she turns out to be in the future. Just a few days later, however, Maritza breaks up with him. He believes it is at this point his life makes a turn for the worse. Oscar begins gaining weight. He's afflicted with a severe case of acne. He becomes known as a weird, nerdy kid who uses big words.

The section entitled "The Moronic Inferno" describes Oscar's opinion of his high school atmosphere. He attends an all-boys Catholic high school that is torturous to him. Comics, books and movies about monsters or spaceships are the only things that keep him company, as he has few friends. He isn't good at video games, but loves role-playing games. Although he can't cover his nerdiness, Oscar falls in love often and deeply. Oscar's sister, Lola, is more practical. She tells Oscar to get rid of his glasses, exercise and lose weight. Oscar's dream at that time is that he will save Maritza from a pack of irradiated ghouls after civilization is wiped out by a nuclear bomb.

In the following section, "Oscar is Brave," Oscar learns his friends, Al and Miggs, have gotten girlfriends. When Oscar asks, these boys, who are as nerdy as he is, tell him they don't think their girls have any friends. It is at this point that Oscar realizes even his friends are embarrassed by him. He has his hair cut and buys contacts to replace his glasses, but the quick fixes don't have much of an effect. Oscar's mother and sister send him to Santo Domingo for the summer. While there, he decides to be a writer, a decision his grandmother doesn't discourage. His grandmother tells him that his mother could have been a doctor like her father, but a man got in the way. Although he hears about the family curse, again, he doesn't feel the need to write about it. When he comes back from Santo Domingo he still sees Al and Miggs, but not as often as he did before his trip. He focuses on his writing. Even Lola is proud of Oscar for not going back to his friends after they hurt his feelings so badly.



In the section, “Oscar Comes Close,” Oscar develops a deep friendship with a girl in his SAT prep class. Ana Obregon shares with him a book she’s reading, one he likes as well. She tells him she dated a 24-year-old cocaine addict when she was only 13. Oscar discusses this with his sister, who complains because colored people don’t really love their children like they say they do.

In the section “Amor de Pendejo” Oscar and Ana’s friendship continues. She is the first girl with whom he has had a real conversation. Lola is ecstatic when Ana shows up at their house, inviting Oscar to a movie. Although he doesn’t make any progress with Ana, the next morning, he wakes up feeling as if he has been set free from himself.

In the final section of the first chapter, Oscar gets a 1020 on his SAT and is accepted to Rutgers. Ana is on her way to Penn State. His friendship with Ana is over when her ex-boyfriend, Manny, returns. She starts waiting days to return his phone calls. When he and Ana do talk, she tells Oscar about all the bad things Manny does to her. She comes to Oscar’s house one day with a bruise and torn clothes. Oscar waits outside Manny’s apartment that night with a gun, but, luckily, Manny never comes home. One day, Oscar takes Ana out and tells her how he feels about her. She turns him down, telling him that she has a boyfriend. Oscar hopes college will be better, girlfriend wise, but he is disappointed.

Analysis

The first aspect of this novel that jumps out is the unconventional use of street corner slang and raucous Spanish. The characters are of Dominican descent, which explains the use of Spanish. Many of the Spanish phrases are sexual in nature, suggestive or contain curse words. Although the reader can get an idea of what the narrator is trying to get across in his use of these Spanish phrases, a Spanish-to-English translator which can be found on the Internet can come in handy if one wants to know the exact translation of these phrases. It is later learned that this first chapter of the novel is narrated by one of Lola’s exboyfriends, Yunior. The excessive use of slang characterizes Yunior’s speech patterns and helps to form the voice and personality of his character.

This first chapter covers the years 1974-1987, the years that Oscar was in primary and high school. He is introduced as the hero of the novel, but not a hero in the typical sense of a Dominican man as these men pride themselves in their excellence in sports or the wooing women. Oscar appears to be more of what is referred to in literature a romantic hero. Regardless of the implication of the use of the word “romantic,” this hero is not necessarily one that is good with the girls. A romantic hero — as described by literary terms — is one that is unusual in that he is rejected by society. Oscar fits this description, as his obesity, fascination with science fiction and love of using big words make even his own nerdy friends uncomfortable around him. For all of his physical weakness, however, Oscar exhibits a strong character when he discovers how his friends really feel about him. Instead of going back for more abuse, Oscar devotes himself to the pursuit of writing, a move that even his sister commends.



A family curse is a theme that will become increasingly important as this novel progresses. When Oscar is in Santo Domingo visiting his grandmother, she tells him again about the family curse. No details are given about this “curse” and it is indicated in the novel that Oscar doesn’t even see it as important enough to write about. In another section of the novel it is indicated that neither Olga nor Maritza avoid the “curse.” Olga gets fat and unattractive, like Oscar, while Maritza picks up the habit of dating older men who like to abuse her.

Another theme that runs through the novel is the idea that Oscar will die young. As the narrator talks about the word “mister” Lola’s nickname for Oscar, he mentions that Lola wanted to put this word on Oscar’s gravestone. As the narrator chides himself for not allowing her to do so, he is obviously narrating the story at a point in time after Oscar’s death.

Although it may seem to be only a phase through which Oscar will pass when he gets older, his struggles with love in grade school remain important throughout the novel. Remember also his tendency to fall deeply in love as well as the devotion he holds for the women with whom he falls in love. When he learns Ana is being abused by her boyfriend, he is so upset that he waits outside the boyfriend’s apartment with a gun. Nothing happens because the boyfriend does not return home that night, but the limit to which Oscar demonstrates he will go to protect Ana is obvious. Keep in mind that Oscar seems completely lacking in the capacity for violence.

Discussion Question 1

Where do Oscar and Ana meet? How does their relationship develop?

Discussion Question 2

What makes Oscar different from other Dominican males? With what issues does he struggle?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the language in the novel, particularly the author’s use of slang and Spanish. How does the language influence the tone of the novel?

Vocabulary

merengue, nascent, purportedly, apotheosis, pretense, morose, diabolical, synonymous, karma, patrimony, tutelage, blithely, furies, pantheon, dyspeptic, coup, tumescent, raucous, askance, vertiginous, anatomical, ectomorphic, emaciated, voracious



Part I, Chapter Two

Summary

As a twelve-year-old, Lola remembers having a feeling that her life is about to change when her mother calls her into the bathroom to feel a lump in her breast. She says she began to change that day, turning into what she describes as a “punk chick.” The other kids make fun of her and her mother gets angry with her when she shaves off her hair. Her mother calls her “fea,” the Spanish word for ugly. She remembers hitting her mother’s hand as a reflex after her mother threw a wig at her that she wants her to wear to cover the shaved head. Lola holds the wig over the stove and lights the burner, making the wig catch fire.

Finally, Lola runs away with a boy, Aldo. Her mother had announced at dinner her doctor wanted to run more tests. Lola’s response was to ask for the salt and her mother slapped her across the face. When Lola’s mother finally let her out of her room, Lola ran away to stay with Aldo. Looking back, she believes it was the stupidest thing she ever did. But at the time she remembers being happy. After she loses her virginity to Aldo, Lola says all the feelings she had that told her what to do next were gone. She becomes angry with Aldo and wishes her family would come looking for her. Lola finally is so unhappy and lonely that she calls home. She asks Oscar to meet her at a coffee shop. He meets her as agreed but also brings their mother, aunt and uncle. She runs from the coffee shop but notices her mother has fallen trying to chase her. She feels pity and goes back only to realize her mother has tricked her.

After this incident, Lola is sent away to live in Santo Domingo with her grandmother. She is still tormented because she dresses in the Goth fashion, but she joins the track team and becomes one of the school’s best runners. Her friend Rosio additionally gets Lola out of her Goth stage and looking like a Dominican girl again. Although Lola admits she is improving, the feeling that something is about to change comes back. She is unable to sleep because of the feeling and begins losing races. One night, she comes home to find her grandmother looking at old photos. One is of Lola’s mother. Her grandmother surprises her by telling her she and Lola’s mother didn’t get along when she was Lola’s age. It is when her grandmother is about to tell Lola about Lola mother’s father, that Lola feels like the coming change is about to cause her to explode.

Analysis

This second chapter of the novel is narrated from the view point of Oscar’s sister, Lola. Notice the way the language in this section of the novel has significantly less slang and is more grammatically proper than Yuniór’s narration. In this chapter, Lola details her rebellious years. She indicates that she breaks out of her role as the dutiful daughter when she learns that her mother has breast cancer. It is almost as if Lola discovers that her mother does have a weak spot, and she takes advantage of this discovery. Lola



additionally seems to be dealing with a great deal of pent up anger and frustration. Being without a husband, Lola's mother has been responsible for taking care of her two children. For this reason, she's had two jobs for most of Lola's life. Lola has been left responsible for cleaning, cooking, and taking care of herself and Oscar. She's been looking forward to the point in her life where she can go to college and break free from her responsibilities as a dutiful Dominican daughter but doesn't seem to be able to hold out any longer when her mother gets sick.

Compounding Lola's frustration with her mother is her mother's habit of being degrading and hateful in her dealings with her daughter. Lola writes that she is never encouraging or complimentary. Her mother's attitude gets worse when Lola decides to rebel. Finally, Lola has come to the point that she runs away from home to live with a boy she barely knows, believing this life is better than her life with her mother.

The idea that Lola can sense when her life is about to change is a major theme in this section of the novel. Lola first gets this feeling when her mother discovers the lump in her breast and asks Lola if she can feel it as well. The feeling comes again when Lola's grandmother is talking about her mother and the relationship they had. The chapter stops abruptly as Lola describes the feeling of being overwhelmed by what might be coming next.

Discussion Question 1

The language in chapters one and two of the novel are very different. Describe these differences. Why are they significant?

Discussion Question 2

Although Lola's mother had been an absentee mother and cruel to Lola, does she deserve the treatment that Lola gives her?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Lola learns that she and her mother were similar in their rebellion against their mothers?

Vocabulary

putrid, deluded, musculature



Part I, Chapter Three, Look at the Princess - Kimoda!

Summary

Beginning in 1951 Lola and Oscar's mother, Hypatica Belicia Cabral goes to live with her cousin, La Inca, in Bani in the Dominican Republic. She helps in the family bakery and, like Lola, has dreams of escaping. At the time, the country is ruled by the dictator Trujillato, who is rumored to have killed Beli's family and taken their home. La Inca reminds Belicia that her father was a doctor and her mother a nurse, and expects her to carry on the family's good name.

When Belicia is thirteen, her grandmother gets her a spot in El Redentor, a high-class school, believing it will help remove some of Belicia's rough edges. Instead, Belicia feels exposed and vulnerable. Instead of trying to fit in, she is aggressive and over-reacts to even the smallest slights. Her grades are even worse than those of Wei, a Chinese girl who does not learn Spanish. Beli does learn to speak properly, often putting on airs, especially to Dorca, the daughter of the woman who cleaned Beli and La Inca's home. She is also boy crazy, imagining herself the girlfriend of Jack Pujos, the most handsome boy in her school. She finally manages to attract the interest of a boy.

Analysis

An unidentified narrator tells the story of Oscar and Lola's mother, referred to in the story as Beli. The language definitely does not sound like Yunió with his slang, but does not sound like Lola either. The time period specifically covered in this section begins when her aunt La Inca, finds her at the age of six until Beli is about fourteen. La Inca tries to smooth out Beli's rough edges and make her into the respectable girl she believes Beli should be. She reminds Beli regularly that she is the daughter of an influential doctor and nurse. However, the mystery of how Beli became separated from her family, or how they died is not addressed. It is suggested that Beli received a bad burn on her back, which is referenced in the previous chapter, during the time before her aunt adopted her.

What is addressed in this section of the novel is Beli's desire to escape from her life and her tendency to be boy crazy. Although she lives with an aunt who idolizes her, Beli wants something different from life. She doesn't know quite what she is looking for but seems to believe it will involve some attractive, rich man sweeping her off of her feet. Because of the darkness of her skin, it is indicated it is very unlikely the kind of man that Beli desires will be attracted to her. She is particularly enamored by Jack Pujos, a popular boy at her school. While at home, she tells the daughter of the lady who cleans their house that Jack is her boyfriend, though in reality he will have nothing to do with her.



An entirely different side of Beli is described in this chapter. Where she was the overworked, sick mother in Chapter Two, Beli is a teen in this chapter. She is scorned at school because of the blackness of her skin. She handles the negative attention by being aggressive and overreacting to even the slightest wrong. She torments the daughter of the lady who cleans La Inca's house by telling her about her popularity at school and her handsome boyfriends, even though these stories are far from the truth. La Inca hopes the girl will live up to the prestige her parents enjoyed before they came to an end.

What exactly happened to Beli's parents is still a mystery. Hints have been given up to this point that something very terrible happened to Beli's parents and her sisters. Hints have also been given that something bad happened to Beli as well. References have been made to a burn scar covering most of her back. It is also known that Beli did not go to live with La Inca until she was nearly seven, but no information has been given yet as to where she was or what happened to her prior to this time.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Lola and Belicia's feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives.

Discussion Question 2

Describe Beli's personality. What type person is she?

Discussion Question 3

Based on information given thus far in the novel, what was Beli's life like before she was "found" by her aunt? Why do you think more of this story is not detailed?

Vocabulary

nostalgic, enumerate, irascible, asphyxiating, unperturbed, lineage, milieu, impediment, reciprocate



Part I, Chapter Three, Numero Uno - The Gangster We're All Looking For

Summary

In the section "Numero Uno" it is described that Beli's first encounters with Jack Pujos, the most popular boy at her school, took place only when she pretended not to see him and slammed into him. During the summer of her sophomore year of high school Beli blossoms into a woman's body, developing the 35DDD breasts for which she becomes known. At first, Beli is frustrated and embarrassed by her body, but soon comes to realize that men are now attracted to her.

In the section "Hunt the Light Knight" Beli throws herself at Jack when the new school year begins. It is not until October when he breaks up with his girlfriend that he stops Beli in the hall, telling her that she is beautiful. Without much romance, Jack soon has Beli in the closet, having sex with her. They sneak around for about a month having sex in various places in the school until they are caught by a teacher. Jack blames Beli for his behavior, saying that she seduced him. His family sends him to military school. Beli refuses to admit she's done anything wrong. She sincerely believed Jack's claim they'd be married as soon as they finished high school. La Inca doesn't beat Beli as some Dominican parents would have done, but does give her a verbal berating. Instead of attending a different school, as La Inca had hoped, Beli gets a job as a waitress. Beli excels at her job. Through the first eighteen months Beli works at the restaurant, she remains true to Jack.

In the section "El Hollywood," a new waitress, Constantina, talks Beli into going to a club with her. She attracts the attention of others with her dancing including a man known as the Gangster. He offers to buy her a drink. When she turns away he grabs her arm and Beli attacks him. She throws everything in sight at him. Despite La Inca's warning to Beli that if she ever stays out that late again she'll have to find someplace else to stay, Beli and Constantina return to the club the following Friday. She finds the Gangster and asks him to dance with her.

In the section "The Gangster We're All Looking For," the narrator explains that the Gangster actually is working for the Trujillo. He has dealt in forgery, theft, extortion, money laundering and perhaps even murder. He operates a string of brothels, has businesses in three countries and is said to have killed a man at a bar for pronouncing Trujillo's mother's name incorrectly. He was recovering from a bad trip during which Johnny Ables was almost killed that he comes onto Beli. He treats her tenderly and romantically. He promises to buy her houses in Miami and Havana. He is the first person to make her feel beautiful and wanted. The changes make La Inca believe the girl is, indeed, cursed. Her bosses at the restaurant fire her because of the way she's changed. The Gangster has her rehired but the Chinese brothers give her the silent treatment and she eventually stops going to work.



The Gangster eventually develops the habit of disappearing and being gone days and weeks at a time. Before their relationship ends, the Gangster takes her on a trip to Samana. She plays housewife and asks the Gangster once if he misses having a family. He tells her that he doesn't and enjoys being free. The trip ends with a visit by a policeman telling the Gangster he is needed in the Palacio. He promises to send a car for her but the car never comes. She hitches a ride back to La Inca's house. During the drive, she believes she sees a man with no face. At home, she is vomiting daily. La Inca tells her she is pregnant.

Analysis

Beli is finally able to attract the boys she wants when she becomes endowed with a huge chest and womanly beauty. She has already set her sights on Jack Pujos so she goes after him with all her abilities. Although she doesn't know any better, she allows Jack to treat her badly. He hurts her during sex and does not show her any affection. Beli, in her innocence, believes that Jack truly loves her and intends to marry her. Even after they are discovered having sex in the school and Jack blames the affair on her, she still believes that he loved her. She waits eighteen months before she allows herself to be attracted to another man. It seems that this deep and long lasting love is a characteristic that Beli shares with her son, Oscar.

The family curse that La Inca had told Oliver about is mentioned again in this section of the novel. In her unhappiness with her adopted daughter's behavior, La Inca comments that perhaps the girl is cursed. Beli, however, does not believe in this curse. She says perhaps it is La Inca who is cursed because she has to put up with such an ungrateful child.

Important in this part of the novel is the rule of the dictator Trujillo in Santo Domingo. He is all-powerful. His subjects fear him. A teacher in Beli's school encourages students to write about what changes they'd like to see in the country. One student writes he wants a democracy, like in the United States. Both the teacher and the student disappear and are never heard from again. Note there are hints that there has been bad blood between Beli's family and the Trujillo in the past. It is indicated that the Trujillo had an attraction for Beli's dead sister.

Important in this section is that Beli has fallen in love not just with any man when she falls in love with the Gangster, she falls in love with a man who is an important player in the Trujillo's army. Beli never considers the Gangster is not an appropriate lover for her or that he could mean trouble for her. As an omen for what is coming, Beli believes she sees a man with no face when she hitches a ride back to La Inca's house. At the conclusion of this section, Beli starts being sick on a daily basis. La Inca suspects she is pregnant.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Beli's relationships with Jack and with the Gangster. How are they different? What things do the men have in common?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of the Trujillo?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the reference to Strom Thurmond in connection with Jack and Beli. What different aspects of their relationship make it so distasteful to those who find out about it?

Vocabulary

ibis, implausibly, fetid, morose, tenure, convoke, excoriating, prerogatives, turbidity, precursor, maligned, guttural, enigmatic, mendacity, staid, opulent, corpulent, fusillade, bourgeois, perfidy, dalliance, predilection, ignominious, dolorous, modicum, primavera



Part I, Chapter Three, Revelation - The Last Days of the Republic

Summary

In the section "Revelation," Beli learns she is, indeed, pregnant. She believes that she has officially purchased her way into the life she'd always dreamed of living. In the section "Upon Further Reflection," Beli realized years later the Gangster had told her to have an abortion even though he didn't say it directly. In the sections "Truth and Consequences 1 and 2," it is learned that the Gangster is married to the Trujillo's sister. The Gangster's wife makes a move in the section "In the Shadow of the Jacaranda." She has two officers search Beli out and bring Beli to her. She tells Beli her officers are going to take her to a doctor for an abortion. They try to drag her into a car being driven by a cop with no face. She screams and is heard by Jose and Juan. They come to her rescue.

Unfortunately, Beli head for La Inca's home in the section "Hesitation." A few hours later, a neighbor calls out that the Gangster is outside. Beli believes the call and runs out, only to be captured by the officers. In the section "La Inca, The Divine" Beli's adoptive mother sets up a prayer vigil for Beli. The officers drive Beli to a cane field, punching her as they drive. She refuses to show the fear she feels. She pulls her knees over her stomach, trying to protect the baby. When they stop the car, they take her into a field, beating her with a nightstick. It is when she realizes that she has been tricked by the Gangster that Beli gets angry enough she develops the will to live.

As Beli lies in the cane, a mongoose comes to her telling her she must get up. It tells her that she will have a son and a daughter, and then leads her out of the cane. She reaches the road just as a truck full of musicians drives by. A woman, who looks and speaks like the mongoose, instructs those in her party that they will rescue her even though Beli has told them that it was the Trujillo that has beaten her.

"Fuku Vs. Zafa" discusses the divide in community opinion about Beli's attack. Some say it is a sign she is cursed while some say she is fortunate because she survived the beating. In the section "Back Among the Living" Beli mourns her lost baby and her own injuries. One night she wakes to cries of grief and funeral songs. She believes she has died, but learns it is instead the Trujillo that has been shot.

Even with the Trujillo gone, the danger still exists for Beli. In the section "La Inca, In Decline," La Inca prays and fasts, trying to determine what she should suggest to Beli to do for her safety. It is suggested she send the girl to New York, a move she does not decide in favor of until the cops who beat Beli start visiting their house again. When La Inca tells Beli she must leave the country, Beli laughs.



In the section “The Last Days of the Republic” during her last days in Santo Domingo Beli has nightmares of the men who beat her, as well as the one without a face. La Inca calms her. She prepares Beli for her trip to the Bronx but Beli pays little attention. She has seen the Gangster once since her beating. He tells her only that they were betrayed and does not share her grief for her dead baby. She dreams he will come with her when she leaves the country but he does not do so. Although Beli is not aware, she sits next to the man who will become her husband on the plane. He wakes her up to show her the lights of New York City in the distance before they land.

Analysis

Fuku, a curse, or zafa, which appears to be a term for a blessing in disguise, becomes a major topic for this section. It is community belief that Beli’s family has been cursed. The origin of this curse has not been discussed yet but it seems to have something to do with what happened to Beli’s family. When Beli is beaten after she is unfortunate enough to get pregnant by Trujillo’s sister’s husband, some of the community members assume that the beating is the result of the curse. Some, however, believe that Beli is actually fortunate because she survives the beating.

A second important image emerges in this section of the novel. This image, described as a golden mongoose, seems to be a harbinger of hope. As Beli is laying in the canfield, she hears the mongoose singing in the voice of a woman. The woman tells Beli she has lost her baby by the Gangster but that she will have a son and a daughter. The mongoose tells her she must get herself out of the canefield in order to see these children. It is by the encouragement of the mongoose that Beli gets to the roadway where she encounters a truck full of band members on their way home. It is a lady who looks, and sounds, like the mongoose who tells the band members that they will help Beli despite their hesitation.

Ironically it is as Beli is healing and mourning the loss of her baby that Trujillo is killed. She is still in a haze of pain and grief when she hears the wailing of the mourners and believes at first that it is she who has died. Instead, it is the Dominican dictator who is being mourned. This timing is great for Beli as it gives La Inca the opportunity to get the girl out of the country and away from the threat of more abuse.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe Beli is cursed or fortunate? Give reasons that support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the officers did not kill Beli?



Discussion Question 3

Do you think La Inca's decision to send Beli out of the country is best for her? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

kleptocracy, penchant, vortex, photonic, serendipities, covertly, numinous, minions, armature



Part I, Chapter Four

Summary

The narrator, Yunió, returns to Oscar's story in this part of the novel. He tells of an instance where he got jumped. Lola takes care of him, nursing him back to health and helping to restore his courage. He and Lola met in college, having a fling during their sophomore year. When Oscar almost kills himself over a girl, Yunió agrees to take care of him and be his roommate the coming year in hopes of earning good favor with Lola.

Looking back, Yunió realizes when Oscar told him he was cursed, he should have run, but at the time it didn't seem to matter. He doesn't see much of Oscar their first few months together. Yunió admits Oscar was a considerate roommate and says he was a good writer. He even tries to give Oscar dating advice but Oscar won't follow his advice, saying his way is all he has. One night, Oscar shares his fear that he will be the first Dominican man to die a virgin.

After Yunió girlfriend breaks up with him for sleeping around on her, he decides to turn his attention to fixing Oscar's life. He encourages Oscar to eat right and stop talking negatively about himself. He even manages to get him to run, for a few days. People make hateful comments when they see Oscar out trying to lose weight. He finally refuses to run anymore. Yunió gets mad at him, finally putting his hands on Oscar one day to try to convince him to keep up the exercise. When Oscar tells Yunió to leave him alone, Yunió pushes him into the wall. Lola calls him two days later, angry. Yunió gives up. He begins allowing others to pick on Oscar and even joins them. From a Halloween costume that Yunió believes makes Oscar look like Oscar Wilde, Oscar gets tagged with the nickname Oscar Wao.

Yunió writes this should have been the end of his connection with Oscar but then, Oscar fell in love, connecting the two for the rest of their lives. The girl is Jenni Muñoz, a hardcore Goth, but also an attractive Puerto Rican. Yunió tries to hit on her and she laughs at him. It follows that Yunió can't believe it when he sees Oscar and Jenni hanging out together in public. Yunió notices a change in Oscar. He even starts running again. Instead of encouraging Oscar, Yunió is angry with Oscar for what appears to be his good fortune. Then, one day Jenni breaks off the relationship. For two weeks Oscar lies in bed. He doesn't even write. Yunió finally calls Lola. She asks only that Yunió watch Oscar for her. Two weeks later Oscar walks in on Jenni with another man and goes berserk, destroying her room. Yunió has to put him in a headlock to make him stop.

For their next year in college, Yunió gets a single dorm room and tells Oscar they won't be rooming together anymore. Their last night together, Oscar drinks three bottles of Cisco and jumps from a train bridge. He doesn't die, only breaks both his legs and dislocates his shoulder. Lola comes to the hospital from Spain. After Oscar is released from the hospital, Yunió calls him twice a week to check on him but visits in person only



once. During that visit, Oscar tells Yunior it was the curse that made him try to kill himself.

Although he hadn't planned on it, Yunior moves back in with Oscar at the beginning of the spring semester. He learns how dark the fall had been for Oscar. He'd often gone for long drives after dark, sometimes falling asleep at the wheel, waking up just in time to keep from crashing.

Analysis

What is significant in this section of the novel is the way that Yunior becomes acquainted with Oscar and their initial interactions. Although Yunior has a habit of womanizing, he hopes that by agreeing to watch Oscar, he will earn points with Lola, Oscar's sister. The two have dated in the past and Yunior blew the relationship by sleeping around on her. After he gets beat up and Lola takes care of him, he realizes how much he still wants her as a girlfriend. It appears at the beginning, Yunior doesn't like Oscar at all. Oscar is the type of person to which a cool college student with lots of girlfriends wouldn't pay much attention to, normally. Even though they are both writers, Oscar seems to be just too nerdy for Yunior to really be able to relate to. One case in point is Oscar's first greeting to Yunior when he first moves in which Oscar. Oscar refers to Yunior as "Dog of God," a reference that Yunior says it takes him a week to figure out.

Although Yunior chalks up his bad attitude toward Oscar as being dislike, Yunior almost seems jealous of Oscar. He admits that Oscar is a better writer than he and that he is a polite roommate. The jealousy becomes even more apparent when Oscar befriends Jenni, a girl who would not give Yunior the time of day. Just before Oscar's new friendship, Yunior had gone on a crusade, trying to get Oscar to eat better and exercise. Even though he notices how Oscar is treated and hears the snide comments being made in Oscar's hearing range as he's trying to run, Yunior takes no pity on him. In fact, he gets angry with Oscar when Oscar refuses to run any longer. Oscar's new friendship with the girl Yunior wanted is just the icing on the cake. Yunior stops trying to protect Oscar from the bullies and stops trying to give him any advice about girls or his physical fitness. In fact, Yunior begins tormenting and picking on Oscar with the others. It is during one of these sessions that Yunior gives Oscar the nickname Oscar Wao, a name others begin using as well.

Also significant in this section of the novel is Oscar's encounter with the mongoose. It appears while he's on the train track at New Brunswick that he sees the same mongoose that helped his mother out of the canefield years earlier. While Yunior notes that Oscar had always wanted to live a life where he saw visions like the one he saw that night, he didn't pay any attention to the encounter and jumped from the bridge anyway. In Yunior's description of the encounter, it seems as if he believes the mongoose was sent to help Oscar change his mind about what he was going to do, but that Oscar did not react as he was supposed to.



Discussion Question 1

What is the basis for Yuniór's relationship with Oscar? Do you think he really likes Oscar? Why or why not? Give reasons for your answer.

Discussion Question 2

At this point, Oscar tells Yuniór it was the curse that made him try to kill himself. Do you think Oscar really believe in the curse at this point? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Oscar's encounter with the mongoose. Why does he still jump from the bridge even after seeing this strange creature? What is the connection with the animal appearing to him and to his mother?

Vocabulary

philanthropy, ameliorative, ultimatum, snarked, askance, copacetic, placid, reprieve, plethora



Part II, Chapter Five, Introduction - The Famous Doctor

Summary

When Lola learns it is time for her to leave Santo Domingo, she admits to running away again. She quits the track team, breaks up with Max and has sex with the father of one of her classmates. She asks the man for two thousand dollars for the sex. When her mother comes to pick her up, she tells Lola she is ugly, putting the girl right back where she was before her time away. Lola says she would have run away again, but instead gives the money to Max's brother when she learns of Max's death. She begins crying on the plane on the way back to America.

In the section "The Famous Doctor" Abelard is not only a surgeon, but he has also inherited two supermarkets, a cement factory and several farms from his father. They were a fortunate family. He prepares his daughters, Jacquelyn and Astrid to follow him in a medical profession. Abelard tries to maintain a positive relationship with the Trujillo but to have as little to do with the ruthless leader as possible. What seems to bring him to the Trujillo's attention is that he does not abide with the custom of bringing his wife and daughters to the Trujillo's parties with him. As the Trujillo is known for searching out choice ladies, it is almost a matter of treason for Abelard to keep Jacquelyn out of the dictator's sights. He seeks advice from his wife, his lover and his best friend, none of which can give him any good options. In the section "The Bad Thing" when Abelard next receives an invitation to a presidential party, it is specified that his wife and daughter come along as well. Abelard starts to comply, but at the last minute decides to leave his family behind.

Analysis

The introduction to this section of the novel is narrated by Lola while the story of Abelard appears to be narrated by Yunior. Notice in this section the author's like for making up words. For instance, he refers to Trujillo's reign as being a culocracy, or a government focused on the desire for sexual relations. The author additionally has a habit of capitalizing certain words for emphasis. For instance the section about Abelard mentions the Bad Thing Abelard is supposed to have said about the Trujillo. The capitalization emphasizes and almost personifies this thing that Abelard might have done. Other phrases in the novel, like that Brave Thing, are also capitalized for emphasis.

Note in this section that it seems Abelard's one goal in life is to stay out of Trujillo's sights. He tries to keep a check on his tongue and his opinions and lay low so he won't get noticed by the ruthless dictator. Unfortunately for Abelard, the Trujillo is a womanizer. When he hears that one of Abelard's young daughters is very attractive, he



insists on getting a look at her. Abelard, like any other father, wants only to protect his daughter from the man who has a reputation of raping and using any woman he likes.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the author's use of capitalization for certain words and phrases. Why is this significant?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the Trujillo's style of leadership.

Discussion Question 3

What stops Lola from running away from home again?

Vocabulary

precipitous, atoning, eclectic, billeted, avuncular, indefatigably, prodigious, arcane, homoerotic, tantamount, febrile, bilious, ursine, circumlocution, fatalism, mendacity, epiphanies, porcine



Part II, Chapter Five, Chiste Apocalyptus - Sanctuary

Summary

In the section “Chiste Apocalyptus” Abelard is arrested within four weeks of the party. The story is told Abelard’s arrest had to do with a joke he told about a body being in his trunk. Although Abelard denies it, it is said he joked the Trujillo must have cleaned the body out when nothing is found in the trunk. The narrator’s opinion is that this story is a cover up for the real reason Abelard was arrested.

In the section “Abelard in Chains” Abelard is taken to Fortaleza San Luis to begin what will become a nine-year imprisonment. Abelard is told he is only going for questioning, but he is strip searched, questioned, hit, and then put in a cell with other prisoners who are told Abelard is a homosexual and a Communist. Four days into his imprisonment he is tortured by the guards with some sort of electrical device. It is not until five days into his imprisonment that his wife is allowed to see him. She is shocked to see that Abelard looks destroyed. It is shortly after this visit that Socorro realizes she is pregnant with Beli.

Yunior writes no one has yet discovered the truth behind the reason for Abelard’s imprisonment. The family even disagrees if Abelard really said anything bad about the Trujillo or if that is only a cover story. It is suspected that because Trujillo was unable to get to Abelard’s daughter, he put the curse on the family that has continued to haunt its members. Yunior suggests another explanation for Abelard’s imprisonment. He tells of a rumor that Abelard had been writing a story of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo reign. No evidence of this book was ever found. In fact, Yunior writes that every piece of paper bearing Abelard’s handwriting had been destroyed by Trujillo. He notes that it is odd that the Trujillo never went after Jacquelyn even after he had arrested Abelard but took such pains to destroy his writing.

In “The Sentence,” Abelard is sentenced to 18 years in jail for his supposed crimes. All of the family’s property is confiscated by the Trujillo. Yunior reports it was at this point fate took a downturn for the family. This first sign of this downturn reported in “The Fallout” was how dark Beli was when she was born. Next, Socorro is killed when she steps in front of a speeding truck. Jackie and Astrid are sent to live with relatives. The family’s main servant is stabbed to death, his attackers never found. It is said Lydia died of cancer but she was dead for months before she was found. About two years after her father’s conviction, Jackie drowns in her godparents’ pool which had been drained of all but two feet of water. Three years later, Astrid is killed when she is hit in the back of the head by a stray bullet while she is praying at a church. The remaining members of Abelard’s family are told he was killed in 1953 but he actually lived in prison until just before Trujillo’s death in 1961.



In the section “The Third and Final Daughter” none of Beli’s family will take her because she is so dark skinned. A darkskinned woman named Zolia gives Beli some of her breast milk and cares for her, helping the baby gain her strength. At the end of four months, however, some of Socorro’s family members take Beli from Zolia. When they don’t get the monetary reward they’re hoping for, they apparently pass Beli along to other relatives who then sell her to complete strangers.

La Inca hears a rumor that Abelard’s youngest daughter is still alive in the section “The Running.” She had done nothing when she’d heard that Abelard was in trouble with the Trujillo because she was in mourning for her husband who’d just died. She hears the story of a girl whose male caregiver poured a pan of hot oil on the girl’s back because she insisted on going to school even though her caregivers didn’t want her to go. Two days later, La Inca brings the girl back to her home. In the section “Forget-me-naut” Beli never speaks of the time before La Inca adopted her. All that is ever known about it is what La Inca learned on the day she rescued the child. The section “Sanctuary” describes La Inca’s first years with Beli as she works to provide the background and instruction that Beli had missed.

Analysis

Again, the question of fuku or zafa, curse or blessing, is raised when Socorro learns that she is pregnant with Beli. The pregnancy could be considered a curse, as Socorro now has an infant to deal with on top of her husband being in jail. On the other hand, the pregnancy could be considered a blessing as it means Socorro will have another of Abelard’s offspring to help keep his legacy and story alive.

Omens are important in the novel. Two evil omens appear in this section of the novel. The first is the man with no face who haunts Socorro’s dreams just before Abelard is arrested. The man will later be seen by Beli on her way back to La Inca’s house after she has spent time alone with the Gangster. The appearance of this evil apparition, apparently the opposite of the mongoose, strengthens the idea that life is about to take a bad turn for Abelard and his family. The next evil omen that is included in this section is the darkness of Beli’s skin. Yunior writes that Beli was born so black that even her family members refused to take her in. Yunior says a baby born with extremely black skin was considered to be an evil omen.

Again, in this section, the author seems to make up words. When Yunior interjects his opinion of Abelard’s charges in the section “In My Humble Opinion.” Yunior states that he believes the claim that Abelard said something bad about Trujillo is a “load of jiringonza.” The slang term seems to indicate that Yunior did not believe that particular rumor.

In this section of the novel, the reader learns not only what happened to Beli’s family and their riches, but also to Beli. After her mother died, or was killed, the infant changed hands several times until she was sold as a servant. The man with whom she lived poured hot oil on her back because he was angry with her for going to school when he



had told her not to go. It is at this point that La Inca realizes that one of Abelard's children is still alive and goes to find her.

Yunior puts a new spin on Abelard's arrest by reporting that there are rumors that Abelard was writing a tell-all book about the supernatural aspects of Trujillo's rule. It makes sense that Abelard would be arrested if he were indeed writing this type of book. No one, however, seems to know if the book actually existed or not. Yunior says that Oscar researched the real reason why his grandfather was arrested, but never told anyone what he discovered.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the real reason that Abelard was put in jail?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Socorro's pregnancy is a blessing or a curse? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Beli is burned by her guardian because she insists on going to school. Years later, however, when La Inca tries to set the girl up in a good school, Beli does not succeed. What makes the difference?

Vocabulary

disheveled, reprobates, taxonomize, stoically, truncheons, jurisprudence, clandestine, imbecile



Part II, Chapter Six, The Dark Age - A Note from Your Author

Summary

In the section “The Dark Age,” Oscar graduates college and returns to Paterson where he winds up in a teaching job at the same high school he attended as a student. The kids still make fun of him because he is overweight, and he watches as other kids are bullied just as he was. He tries to reach out to them by starting a science fiction club but no one attends. He befriends one faculty member named Nataly about whom he has sexual fantasies. His home life is about the same as always. Desperation sets in as he sees himself becoming an old bitter dork. On some days he suffers meltdowns where he curses his mother and throws students out of his class for no reason. Sometimes he’d hold his uncle’s revolver to his head and think about killing himself. He visits his sister and Yunion. He dreams about the mongoose. His world is changed when he learns nerds have moved from role-playing games to Magic cards.

After three years of this life, Oscar’s mom insists that he go to Santo Domingo for the summer in “Oscar Takes a Vacation.” Prior to the trip, Oscar lost nearly twenty pounds when he started a diet and exercise program that he actually stuck with. Oscar tells his mother his “elder spirits” have convinced him to go on the trip, a move so unusual that even Lola questions him.

In the section “The Condensed Notebook of a Return to the Nativeland” La Inca has moved her operations from Bani to La Capital. Although her hair is white, she’s still spry and proud. Oscar writes he’d forgotten how beautiful Dominican women were. His cousin makes fun of him when Oscar tells him he believes he’s in heaven.

In the section “Oscar Goes Native,” he decides to stay in Santo Domingo the rest of the summer instead of flying back to Paterson with Lola as had been planned at first. While he is trying to determine what to do with the rest of his summer, he falls in love with a semiretired prostitute named Ybon Pimentel. In the section “La Beba” Ybon smiled at Oscar the first two times she saw him in their neighborhood, then the third time sat down at his table at the café and asked him about the book he was reading. Another time she invites him into her house for a drink. It is not until he has listened to her talking for several hours that he realizes she is a prostitute.

La Inca and Beli are angry with Oscar when he comes home, asking if he knows Ybon is a prostitute. Although they tell him to leave her alone, he does not listen. The next time he tries to visit her house, there is a red Jeep with a national police plate on it, and his optimism begins to fade. It is several days before he catches her at home again, and she wearing exercise clothes. She screams excitedly when she sees him. In the section “A Note from Your Author,” Yunion suggests his reader might be thinking that Ybon is not a good example of a prostitute, but says that what he relates is true.



Analysis

Although Oscar seems to settle back into his old high school routine after he graduates college, change is on the way for him. The first change he encounters is not a good one. It seems that even the nerds have moved on without him. Oscar loves role playing games but the nerds are now into Magic cards. Oscar tries the game but hates it because he believes it takes all of the narrative out of the game, leaving only mechanics.

A positive change is in store for Oscar when he allows himself to be talked into visiting Santo Domingo. Before his trip, Oscar even starts a new diet and exercise routine that seems to work for him. He loses nearly twenty pounds before he begins his vacation. While in Santo Domingo, Oscar meets Ybon, whom Oscar believes is destiny's last ditch effort to keep him from being a complete loser. Right from the start, however, there are a variety of signs that should point Oscar away from Ybon. First, she is a prostitute. Oscar's mother and grandmother both warn Oscar that he should not spend time with her for that reason alone. Second, Ybon appears to be involved with a man who is an officer with the Dominican police force. As an officer, this man would have the power to make Oscar's life miserable if so desired.

Interesting in the section is the way the author incorporates references from modern culture into his writing. In this case, Yunion makes a reference to the reader needing to choose between the red pill and the blue pill, indicating the reader could either believe Yunion's description of Ybon or choose to pretend this description isn't accurate. Yunion additionally refers to the return to the Matrix, a reference from a series of movies "The Matrix."

Discussion Question 1

What is life like for Oscar after he graduates college? Discuss his return to Don Bosco as a teacher. What has changed? What has stayed the same?

Discussion Question 2

Does Oscar still consider suicide during this portion of the book? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What signs should steer Oscar away from Ybon?

Vocabulary

absconded, svelte, resurgent, evocative, succumb, surreal, volubly, quintessential



Part II, Chapter Six, The Girl from Sabona Iglesia - Patterson, Again

Summary

In the section “The Girl from Sabona Iglesia,” Ybon shows Oscar all her photo albums of herself in her younger days during one of their next visits. From that time on, the two spend much time together. They go to the movies, they eat out, when she drinks too much and passes out. Oscar calls a cabbie he knows to help him find his way back home. In “La Inca Speaks,” she adds that Oscar had seen Ybon first at a cabaret where his cousins took him, not on the street.

In the section “Ybon, As Recorded by Oscar,” Ybon tells Oscar how she came back to Santo Domingo because her mother was sick. In the next section “What Never Changes” Yunior writes that it is obvious that Ybon likes Oscar, but seems sad when he tells her that he has plans to come back to Santo Domingo for Thanksgiving then again for Christmas. In the section “Oscar at the Rubicon” Ybon tells Oscar that her boyfriend has heard about Oscar and wants to meet him. Although Oscar wakes one night and realizes he is on the wrong track with Ybon, he knows that he doesn’t plan to do any differently.

In the section “Last Chance,” Oscar’s uncle notices a bullet hole near their house’s front door. La Inca looks at Oscar when she agrees it wasn’t lucky they weren’t hurt. Oscar doesn’t take the hint, he instead goes to see Ybon as they had planned. In the section “Oscar Gets Beat,” it is as Oscar is driving home a drunk Ybon after one of their dates that he is stopped by the police. When he stops, Ybon wakes up, giving him his first real kiss. Although he’s ecstatic, Oscar also realizes he’s being watched by Ybon’s boyfriend. Yunior knows the man and describes some of his heinous actions. Because Oscar is homely, Yunior says the Capitan is content to only punch him a few times. He threatens Oscar and when Oscar insists the Capitan is Ybon’s ex, and the two officers with the Capitan put him in their car. They take Oscar to the canefields. Oscar sees a man with no face sitting in a rocking chair in front of his house. In the field, the men beat Oscar with their pistols. At one point, Oscar believes there is a faceless man beating him as well.

After the beating is finished, Clives retrieves Oscar from the field in the section “Clives to the Rescue.” Clives followed the officers, then looks for Oscar after they leave. He is guided by the voice of someone singing. Oscar is unconscious and Clives has to get help to pull him from the cane field. In the section “Close Encounters of the Caribbean Kind,” Oscar dreams he is chatting with a mongoose. He wants to die until he thinks about his family. In the section “Dead or Alive,” Oscar’s injuries are substantial but he is alive. La Inca and Beli don’t comment about the similarities between his treatment and Beli’s treatment years earlier.



In the section “Briefing for a Descent into Hell,” Oscar is unconscious for three days. When he wakes, all he can remember is some impression of the mongoose. Yunion indicates the Oscar remembered one of his dreams from during this time period in which a man wearing a mask holds out a book for him to read but the pages are blank. Oscar’s mother insists that he go home in the section “Alive.” Oscar tries to refuse to go and instead asks for Yunion. One day he realizes that the family curse he’s heard about so much might be a real thing. After he is home for three days, Yunion finally comes to see him. The Capitan has beaten her, too. She tells Oscar they can’t see each other again. Oscar’s mom makes him go back to the United States. When Yunion sees Oscar, he is shocked. Oscar tells him the family curse is worse than the way he looks.

In the section, “Patterson, Again,” Oscar heals but he also misses Yunion. He dreams of himself running away while his mother and sister are beaten. Six weeks later, though, he dreams of the beatings and instead of running away, he stays and listens.

Analysis

Oscar continues to pursue Yunion and spend time with her even though he continues to receive suggestions he should leave her alone. Even Yunion suggests to Oscar that he should stay away from her. She shows concern that her boyfriend, who is a member of the Dominican police force will do him harm. Oscar believes that when the boyfriend sees him, that he will understand that Oscar holds no threat. This doesn’t work as planned for Oscar, as the boyfriend has Oscar beaten badly for his friendship with Yunion.

Yunion’s actions are confusing as up to the point when her boyfriend and his hit men stopped her vehicle, she had not made any moves on Oscar in terms of a physical relationship. With her boyfriend watching, however, she decides it’s time to kiss Oscar on the lips. Yunion seems to truly care for Oscar and enjoy his company. She additionally warns Oscar that her boyfriend might intend to do him harm. Her choice of the time that she chooses to share her affection with Oscar is very bad as she kisses him while her boyfriend is watching. She passes out again after the kiss so it is very possible she is so drunk she doesn’t even realize her boyfriend is watching. Her timing, however, is terrible.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think the mongoose might have said to Oscar? Why do you think the author blanks out this comment?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the meaning of Oscar’s dreams. Who or what does the man with no face symbolize? What about the book with the blank pages? Why does Oscar dream of the mongoose?



Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast what has happened to Oscar to what had happened to Beli. How are these situations similar? How are they different?

Vocabulary

notorious, lapidary, acerbically, amiably, batey, egregious



Part III, Chapters Seven - Eight, and The Final Letter

Summary

Oscar pays a last visit to Yunior, telling him he's going back to Don Bosco. Yunior thinks he looks happy because he's decided to live. Oscar also tells Yunior he's planning to move from Paterson and is trying to take only the necessities with him. He asks Yunior for money for a deposit on an apartment. He suggests Yunior try to find out why he keeps cheating on Lola. He tells Yunior he has to leave because he has a date.

In Chapter Seven, The Final Voyage, Oscar flies to Santo Domingo. Clives picks him up from the airport and they sit in front of Ybon's house seven hours waiting for her to come home. He tells her he wants only a week with her. She won't go, and instead calls the Capitan. Oscar lets himself into his grandmother's house. Once inside he begins going through her photos. He's writing when she comes home. In the section "Curse of the Caribbean" Oscar spends the next 27 days researching, writing and chasing Ybon. Ybon is first scared of Oscar, and then only looks miserable when she sees him. He gets death threats from the Capitan and his friends, which he passes along to the American Embassy. On the nineteenth night she picks him up in her truck. Nothing much is said. Lola tries to convince Oscar to come home. His mother and Yunior fly down as well, but nothing convinces Oscar to give up.

In the section "The Last Days of Oscar Wao," Oscar writes almost 300 pages during the 27 days he follows Ybon. One night while he and Clives are driving, the two men who beat Oscar get into the back of Clives' cab. They beat him inside the cab, the drive him back to the canefields. On the way there, Oscar tells the men they are too late. He imagines he sees his whole family getting on a bus. The mongoose is driving it while the man without a face serves as the fare collector.

When the two men take Oscar into the canefield, they leave Clive in the cab. He manages to escape. Oscar tells the men they should not do what they are about to do because they will be taking a great love out of the world. He adds he will be waiting for them and their children after their deaths where he will be an avenger. They suggest they will let him go if he tells them what fuego means in English. Oscar gives the answer, unable to stop himself.

In chapter eight, "The End of the Story," Yunior, Lola and Beli are the only ones to fly down for Oscar's funeral. Beli's cancer comes back and she gives in to it, dying ten months later. The family hires lawyers and seeks help from the government, but no charges are ever filed. La Inca moves back to Bani. In the section "As For Us" Yunior describes the end of his relationship with Lola. After about a year, he learns Lola is pregnant and getting married. He tries to call but she hangs up on him.



The section “On a Super Final Note,” Yunior writes that years and years after Oscar’s death, he begins to have dreams where he and Oscar are in a bailey, Oscar is wearing a mask and holding out a book for him to read. The pages of the book are blank. Sometimes Oscar’s eyes are smiling and sometimes he has no face. In the section “The Dreams,” Yunior finally decides to get himself together after ten years of wandering. Yunior becomes a creative writing teacher, he writes in the section “As For Me.” He is married and has stopped running around. He’s also writing.

He says that he and Lola still see each other in the section “As For Us.” He describes her daughter who has hair like Beli and eyes like Oscar. They talk about Oscar. Yunior never mentions their past or asks if Lola’s daughter has begun having dreams. Yunior says that Lola’s daughter wears three black stones on a string around her neck. One is Oscar’s, one is Lola’s and one is Beli’s as protection. La Inca and Yunior’s mother are the girl’s godmothers. Yunior believes, however, that one day this circle of protection will fall. He believes she will hear of the family curse and will dream of the man with no face and will come looking for answers. He believes the girl will come to him. He already has prepared a light, desk and cot in the basement where he stores all of Oscar’s things in four refrigerators. He hopes she will be able to use what Oscar has put together to put and end to the curse.

In “The Final Letter,” eight months after Oscar’s death, Yunior gets a package from Oscar. In it is his last letter to Lola and more chapters to the four-book opus he had planned. Oscar claims in his letter he is sending another package that will contain the things he’s written since he’d been in Santo Domingo the final time. He believes it is the cure to what ails his family. However, that package never comes. Lola and Yunior do learn, however, that during his final 27 days, Ybon and Oscar do spend a weekend together. He is no longer a virgin. What touches him most is the small intimacies he never expected. He still can’t believe he’s had to wait this long to experience what everyone else has been talking about.

Analysis

The ending of the novel seems to leave the reader with as many questions as in the beginning. Although Oscar researched and wrote about the cause and cure for the family curse, his manuscript is somehow lost in the mail. This could mean the package was intercepted by some Dominican official who didn’t want something that Oscar had discovered to become public knowledge. In this way, the disappearance of Oscar’s manuscript is similar to the disappearance of the book it was said that Abelard was writing. Yunior, however, collects all of Oscar’s work that he can find and stores it safely for Lola’s daughter to use. He believes that she holds the key to ending the family’s curse. Like both he and her uncle, Yunior believes Lola will begin having dreams about the man with no face and the book with blank pages. He believes she will somehow know to come to him to try to find answers.

One image to note in this section is the vision that Oscar has of his family riding a bus. He sees this image as the capitan’s hit men are taking him to the canefield to kill him. In



this vision, he sees the members of his family, including his dead grandmother and grandfather, which would be Abelard and Socorro, boarding a bus. The mongoose, who seems to represent the counter curse and who has been a symbol of hope, is driving the bus. This seems to indicate that the mongoose, the one who helped Clives locate Oscar after Oscar was beaten in the canefield and who encouraged Beli to walk out of the canefield after her own beating, is in charge of the family's future. The man with no face is taking bus fare from the family members as if his purpose is to collect some debt or obligation owed by them.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Yunior begins having the same dreams as Oscar did?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Yunior believe it will be Lola's daughter who will discover the cure for the family curse? Why is she never referred to by name in the book?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss what you think might have happened to Oscar's manuscript. How might the disappearance be related to the manuscript that Abelard is rumored to have written about Trujillo?

Vocabulary

plinth, defaced, emphatic



Characters

Oscar de Leon

Oscar de Leon is the hero of the novel. He is not a hero in the traditional sense, but instead a romantic hero. Oscar qualifies as a romantic hero because he goes against the social norm. Instead of being a manly, handsome Dominican, Oscar is fat and nerdy. He spends much time by himself, reading and writing. He dreams of a romantic relationship but his personality and body type repel the women to which he is attracted.

The high point in Oscar's life occurs when Oscar dates two girls at once when he is only seven years old. After his seventh year, Oscar begins to gain weight, then gets a bad case of acne. He has few friends in high school. He entertains himself reading science fiction novels and participating in role-playing games. In college, things don't get better for him. In fact, he tries to kill himself after one girl breaks up with him.

After college Oscar gets a job back at his old high school. He watches as the unpopular kids are picked on and tormented as he was. He tries to help these kids feel like they belong by starting a science fiction club but no one attends. Although he's been told many times about the family curse, Oscar doesn't really believe that it is legitimate. He uses it as an excuse for having tried to commit suicide, but his heart really doesn't seem to be in his belief.

It is not until Oscar meets the prostitute Ybon that he really begins to consider that there really is a curse. Ybon approaches Oscar as he reads a book at a coffee shop during a visit to Santo Domingo. The two strike up a friendship and Oscar falls in love, as is his habit. The problem for Oscar is that Ybon already has a boyfriend. This man is a jealous Dominican police captain who orders Oscar beaten because of Oscar's relationship with Ybon. It is after this beating that Oscar considers the family curse might be a legitimate curse and that he may have fallen prey to it.

After Oscar heals from his beating, he visits Yunion and asks to borrow money, saying it is for a deposit fee for an apartment. In reality, Oscar buys a plane ticket to fly back to Santo Domingo, a trip he calls his Last Voyage. Oscar spends 27 days wooing Ybon and researching and writing about the family curse. At the end of these days, he is again kidnapped by the Capitan's hit men, taken to the sugarcane fields and burned to death. During this time, he manages to spend a weekend with Ybon. The two have intimate relations, so Oscar does not die a virgin, as he had feared he would. He additionally sends a letter to his family saying that he has figured out a cure for the family curse. This manuscript, which he claims to have sent in a different package, however, never arrives. In the end, Oscar is a hero as he dies for what he believes in. He thinks that if love is strong enough, it is worth putting one's all into.



Hypatia Belicia Cabral

Hypatia Belicia Cabral, or Beli as she is called in the novel, is referred to as The Third and Final Daughter of Abelard Cabral. She is the mother of Oscar and Lola. Beli's mother, Socorro, realizes she is pregnant with Beli after her husband has been arrested on false charges by the Trujillo. Socorro is killed when Beli is only a few months old. Beli is first cared for by a stranger before she is taken by family members who believe they will be paid a reward for taking care of the girl. When they don't the family members pass the girl along to strangers who sell her as a servant. La Inca rescues the girl after she hears that a daughter of Abelard is still alive. Beli has just been burned with hot oil by her male guardian because she wanted to go to school. La Inca tries to make Beli into a lady worthy of the Cabral name. La Inca gets Beli enrolled in a first-rate school but Beli is an outcast at the school and does not take to classroom learning. Instead, she becomes boy crazy and when she develops her womanly figure enjoys enticing men. She first attracts Jack Pujos, the most popular boy in school. She is kicked out of the school when she and Jack are found having sex on school property.

Instead of returning to school like La Inca wants her to, Beli gets a job and meets the Gangster. She dates the Gangster and eventually becomes pregnant by him. It is at this point that she learns the Gangster is also the husband of Trujillo's sister. The sister, La Fea, arranges for Beli to have an abortion, but when Beli is rescued by some friends, Trujillo's men later beat her almost to death instead. La Inca arranges for Beli to go to the United States where Beli has two children, Oscar and Lola.

Abelard Cabral

Abelard Cabral is the father of Beli and grandfather of Oscar and Lola. Abelard dies in prison after he is found guilty of slander against Trujillo. Before his imprisonment, Abelard worked as a surgeon, owned a string of grocery stores and a nice home. He was a prosperous and influential member of society. On the surface, Abelard kept to himself and did not give any opinion of Trujillo. He is described as just wanting to be able to go about his business and be left alone. This works for Abelard until word gets to Trujillo that Abelard's oldest daughter is very beautiful. The Trujillo, who is known for womanizing, insists that Abelard bring his daughter to the next presidential party but Abelard goes against the dictator's wishes. Just about a month later, Abelard is arrested on charges of slander. Some rumor has it that Abelard said bad about the dictator that caused him to be arrested. Others believe Abelard was arrested because he refused to let Trujillo have his way with Jacquelyn. A third rumor suggests Abelard was writing a tell all book about the supernatural forces at work in Trujillo's reign. Regardless of the story one believes, it is said that it was at this point that Trujillo put a fuku on the Cabral family that has been passed down through the generations.



Yunior

Yunior becomes involved in Oscar's story because he wants to date Oscar's sister, Lola. In the hopes of gaining favor with Lola, Yunior agrees to be Oscar's roommate at college. It is under Yunior's watch that Oscar falls in love with Jenni, then is heartbroken when Jenni breaks up with him. On their last night together Oscar tries to kill himself. Yunior tries to distance himself from Oscar and does not live with him during the fall semester, but is drawn back to him and moves back in with him for the spring semester. By the end of Oscar's life, Yunior is considered Oscar's best friend. He is the last person that Oscar visits before he goes to Santo Domingo to visit Ybon one final time. After Oscar's life is finished, it is Yunior who collects and stores all of Oscar's notebook and writings in the hopes that Lola's daughter will be able to use them to determine a cause and cure for the curse. Yunior is the narrator for the biggest part of the novel. He narrates his portions of the story in a voice that is very relaxed using a combination of street corner slang and Spanis.

Nena Inca aka La Inca

Nena Inca, most often referred to as La Inca, was Abelard Cabral's favorite cousin. During the time that Abelard is being imprisoned, tried and sentenced, La Inca is dealing with the death of her husband and does nothing to help her family. She later feels guilty because of her lack of action and goes on a search for Beli when she hears Abelard's third daughter is still alive. La Inca adopts Beli as her own daughter and goes on a mission of turning the girl into a worthy representation of her cousin's family. When Beli is captured and beaten by the Trujillo's men, it is believed that La Inca's prayers are what keeps Beli alive. Later in the novel, La Inca cares for Lola after Lola runs away from her home in Paterson. Oscar also spends a summer with La Inca during high school. It is during this summer that Oscar discovers his passion for writing. Oscar returns to La Inca's home for a visit one summer while he is working as a teacher. It is during this time that he meets Ybon.

Ybon Pimentel

Ybon Pimentel is Oscar's great love. She catches his attention the first time when she smiles at him when she meets him during one of his walks. Later, she strikes up a conversation with him about a book he is reading. To the dismay of Oscar's family, Ybon is a semi-retired prostitute. She seems to care for Oscar. The two spend a good deal of time together eating out, watching movies and driving. The problem is that Ybon's boyfriend is a captain in the Dominican police force. Although the Capitan has his hit men beat Oscar badly, Oscar decides that his love for Ybon is worth what these men might do to him. Before he is killed, Ybon spends a weekend with him. It is during this weekend that Oscar learns the joys of an intimate relationship with a woman, putting an end to his fear that he would die a virgin.



Socorro Cabral

Socorro Cabral is the wife of Abelard and mother of Beli, Jacquelyn and Astrid. Socorro was below Abelard's class when they married but she was beautiful and the best nurse practitioner with whom Abelard had worked. A week before the party to which Abelard is supposed to take his wife and eldest daughter, Socorro begins having nightmares about the man with no face. Socorro learns she is pregnant just after Abelard is arrested. She gives birth to Beli soon after Abelard is found guilty of his crimes. When Beli is only two months old, Socorro steps in front of a speeding ammunition truck and is killed. It is uncertain if she intended to kill herself or if her death was ordered by the Trujillo.

Jacquelyn Cabral

Jacquelyn Cabral is the oldest daughter of Abelard and Socorro Cabral. It is suspected that the Trujillo takes a dislike to Abelard because he keeps Jacquelyn, who has developed a woman's body even though she is still a child, away from the dictator. Abelard believes the Trujillo only wants to rape his daughter. However, Trujillo does not come after Jacquelyn after her father is jailed. It is unusual that just a few years after her mother's death and her father's imprisonment that Jacquelyn is found drowned in her godparents' pool even though it had been drained of all but two feet of water.

Max Sanchez

Max Sanchez was Lola's boyfriend when she lived in Santo Domingo with La Inca. Lola broke up with Max when she learned that her mother was insisting she go back to Paterson. Lola learns shortly after she broke up with Max he was killed in a traffic accident when he tried to slip his motorcycle between two vehicles while carrying a film reel. In honor of Max's death, Lola gave his family the two thousand dollars she extorted from a man from whom she'd had sex. She'd intended to use the money to run away again.

Dionisio "The Gangster"

Beli meets Dionisio, who is most often referred to simply as The Gangster, at a bar. When he first tries to make an advance on her, she attacks him. After several days of being able to do nothing but think about him, Beli returns to the club where she first met him and asks him to dance with her. The two have an extended affair which Beli believes will end in marriage, especially after she becomes pregnant with The Gangster's baby. The Gangster, however, did not tell her that he was married to Trujillo's sister. He disappears when his wife, La Fea, threatens Beli and tries to make her have an abortion.



Clives

Clives is the taxi driver whom Oscar befriends. When Ybon passes out during her outings with Oscar, Clives will meet up with Oscar to lead him back home. Clives is with Ybon and Oscar when the Capitan's hit men first take Oscar into the canefield to beat him. Clives is the one who finds Oscar and takes him for medical help. Clives is with Oscar again when the Capitan's hit men take Oscar back to the cane field to kill him. Clives finds Oscar's remains and returns them to the family.

Jenni Munoz

Jenni Munoz is the girl with whom Oscar falls in love during his years at Rutgers. She is described as being a Puerto Rican goth. Yunion says she is beautiful, so much that even he tries to hit on her but she turns him down. Oscar, however, develops a friendship with the girl. The two hang out but never have any sexual action. It is when Oscar catches Jenni with another boy that he goes crazy. He later tries to kill himself by jumping off the New Brunswick train bridge because of his distress over losing Jenni.

The Elvises

The Elvises are the two Trujillo men who try to kidnap Beli and force her to have an abortion. Later, they trick her by having a neighbor tell her that the Gangster has come to see her. She runs out to find it is the Elvises. They take her to a canefield where they beat her badly enough that she miscarries the baby. They torment and stalk La Inca and Beli until La Inca arranges for Beli to go to the United States.

Rafael Trujillo

Rafael Trujillo is the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until 1961. He is a cruel and ruthless leader who takes advantage of his people, rapes the women, imprisons people for little or no reason and confiscates their belongings. It is said that Trujillo took a liking to Abelard Cabral's daughter, Jacquelyn. Because Abelard would not allow the Trujillo near his daughter, it is rumored that Trujillo placed a fuku on the Cabral family.

Jack Pujos

Jack Pujos is the most popular and most handsome boy at the school that Beli attends. Beli lusts after Jack for at least a year at school before he becomes interested in her. Beli loses her virginity to Jack but when they are caught by school officials Jack blames the affair on Beli. Jack had given Beli a false promises that he and Beli would get married but when his parents learn about the affair, they send Jack to military school.



The Capitan

The Capitan is Ybon's boyfriend. He is a powerful member of Santo Domingo's police force. When he learns that Oscar is making friends with Ybon, he begins threatening him. Oscar refuses to stop seeing Ybon so the Capitan has Oscar beaten badly. When Oscar continues to make moves on Ybon, the Capitan has Oscar burnt to death.

Lola de Leon

Lola is Oscar's sister. She is the narrator of part of the novel. The parts of the novel narrated by Lola mostly discuss Beli's cancer and the relationship between Beli and Lola. Lola doesn't necessarily believe the family has been cursed, she believes the bad luck that comes their way is just a matter of everyday life.

Miggs and Al

Miggs and Al are two of Oscar's closest friends. Oscar, however, is disappointed when he realizes that even these two nerdy friends are embarrassed by him. After Oscar realizes how his friends feel about him, he does not spend as much time with them as before. Miggs and Al do not even attend Oscar's funeral.

Ana Obregon

Ana Obregon is the girl that Oscar befriends during his SAT preparation class. Ana and Oscar spend much time together until her boyfriend, Manny, comes back. Oscar tells Ana he loves her and tries to get her to date him instead but she refuses.

Zoila

Zoila is the dark-skinned woman who shares her baby's breastmilk with Beli after the death of Socorro. It is probably this woman who is responsible for Beli's survival as the child was born skinny and weak.

Jose and Juan Then

Jose and Juan Then are Chinese brothers that own the restaurant at which Beli works. These brothers also protect Beli from the Trujillo hit men when they first try to kidnap Beli in order to force her to have an abortion.



Gorilla Grod and Soloman Grundy

Gorilla Grod and Soloman Grundy are the hit men for the Capitan who first beat Oscar, then kill him at the Capitan's command.

La Fea

La Fea is the Gangster's wife and Trujillo's sister. She is the one who suggests to Beli that she needs to abort the baby she is expecting.



Symbols and Symbolism

Mister

Mister is Lola's pet name for Oscar. She uses it when she's angry with him or feeling particularly affectionate. Although she'd wanted to put the name on his tombstone, no one — not even Yunior — would allow it.

Trujillo

The Trujillo is both a character and a symbol in the novel. He is the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until 1961. It is during his reign that Abelard is imprisoned on false charges and Beli is beaten because she becomes pregnant with the Gangster's child. The Trujillo is a symbol of great but cruel power. He represents the enemy of the common man.

The Part in Lola and La Inca's Hair

Both Lola and her grandmother, La Inca, have the same ragged, lightning-like part in their hair.

Casa Hatuey

Casa Hatuey is the name of the villa in which Beli's parents lived. The house was taken over by the Trujillo when Abelard was imprisoned.

Bottles of Cisco

Oscar drinks three bottles of Cisco, a flavored wine, before he tries to kill himself by jumping off the train bridge near the New Brunswick Train Station.

Golden Mongoose

The golden mongoose appears to both Oscar and his mother Beli after they have been beaten in the canefields. For both Oscar and Beli it is the mongoose that encourages them to keep living. Oscar additionally sees the mongoose just before he tries to kill himself before jumping off a train bridge. He also dreams about the animal. The mongoose seems to be an omen of good fortune or a sign of zafu, or a blessing.



Man With No Face

The man with no face appears often in the novel, seen in both dreams and hallucinations. This man seems to be an omen of bad fortune. Both Beli and Oscar see this man prior to their beatings by the officials. Yunion often dreams of a man with no face whom he confuses with Oscar. Yunion believes it will be dreams of this man with no face that will bring Lola's daughter to him with questions about her uncle. Socorro additionally has dreams that the faceless man is standing over Abelard's bed and the beds of her daughters just before Abelard is arrested.

Two Thousand Dollars

Lola takes this money from a man with whom she has sex, intending to use it to run away. Instead, she gives it to Max's family after she learns Max has been killed.

Invitation to a Presidential Event

Abelard is terrified when he receives an invitation to a presidential event that instructs him to bring his wife and daughter. He believes the Trujillos has his eye on Jacquelyn and intends to rape her.

Watchmen

The novel Watchmen is among the items that Yunion prepares for Lola's daughter when she comes to him to find out about Oscar. It is one of the few things Oscar took with him on his Final Voyage that was recovered.

Final Voyage

The Final Voyage is what Oscar calls his last trip to Santo Domingo. It appears that he knows he will be killed but is willing to take the chance for the woman he loves.

Oscar's Final Letter

Oscar writes to his sister and Yunion just prior to his death telling her that he has sent her a second letter telling her how to overcome the Fuku. This letter, however, never arrives. Oscar does tell them that he and Ybon have had sexual relations.



Abelard's Manuscript

Although it is rumored that Abelard was writing a tell-all book about Trujillo, this manuscript was never found. In support of this rumor, all paper with Abelard's writing on it is destroyed by Trujillo officials.

The Brave Thing

Abelard tries to keep his daughter, Jacquelyn, out of the Trujillo's sight because she is beautiful, but still a child. This act is considered a brave thing by the narrator because the Trujillo believes he has the right to all pretty girls in the country, despite their age.

Blank Pages

A book with blank pages is a recurring image in many dreams recorded in this novel.



Settings

Don Bosco Tech

Don Bosco Tech is the high school that Oscar attends as a student, then later returns to work as a substitute teacher.

Paterson

Paterson is a town in New Jersey. It is the place where Oscar and Lola grew up. It is the town that Oscar returns to after he finishes his college years at Rutgers.

Santo Domingo

Santo Domingo is the capital city of the Dominican Republic, the home country of Beli's family. Lola visits her grandmother in that city after she runs away from her mother in Paterson. Oscar also visits his grandmother in Santo Domingo one summer during his high school years. He returns to Santo Domingo where he falls in love with the prostitute Ybon. During his final trip to Santo Domingo he is killed because of his affair with her.

Wildwood

Wildwood is the city in New Jersey to which Lola runs away with her boyfriend Aldo.

El Redentor

El Redentor is the private school to which La Inca gets Beli a scholarship to attend. Although La Inca believes this is her daughter's opportunity to re-establish her family's prominent name, Beli instead gets in trouble for having sex with Jack Pujos, the most handsome, whitest boy in school.

Palacio Peking

The Palacio Peking is the Chinese restaurant at which Beli gets a job as a waitress after she is kicked out of El Redentor. She says it is in this restaurant that she came of age.

El Hollywood

El Hollywood is the club to which Constantina takes Beli to dance. It is at this club that Beli meets the Gangster.



Demarest

Demarest is the name of the dorm at Rutgers where Oscar and Yunion room together.

Rutgers

Rutgers is the college that Oscar attends.

New Brunswick Train Station

Oscar jumps off the train bridge near the New Brunswick Train Station in his despair after Jenni breaks up with him.

Club Santiago

It is after a night of drinking at Club Santiago that Abelard says “The Bad Thing” that some believe got him in trouble with the Trujillo.

Fortaleza San Luis

When Abelard is arrested by Trujillo forces, he is taken to the Fortaleza San Luis, a prison.

The Canefields

Both Beli and Oscar are taken to the canefields when they are beaten. Oscar is taken to these same fields again when the police burn him to death.

Bani

Bani is the city in the Dominican Republic in which La Inca lives when Beli first comes to stay with her. She moves back to Bani after Oscar is killed.

A Beach in Barahona

Before Oscar is killed, he and Ybon manage to spend a romantic weekend together at a beach in Barahona.



Themes and Motifs

Fuku vs. Zafa

A major theme in the novel deals with the question: Are the things that happen to the various members of the Cabral family and its descendants the result of fuku, a curse, or zafa, a blessing or counterspell? It is a common belief in Santo Domingo that Abelard brought the curse upon the family when he refused to let Trujillo have his way with his daughter, Jacquelyn. The people of that time believed that if he put his mind to it Trujillo could put a curse on a family that could last through as many as seven generations. The question remains whether the things that happen to the family are because of this supposed curse.

Although Oscar has heard about the family curse and even uses it as the excuse for why he tried to kill himself while he was in college, he doesn't really seem to believe in the strength of the curse. It is not until after he has been beaten by the capitan's hit men that Oscar tells Yuniór that he has fallen prey to the fuku. It is at this point that he begins researching and tracing the curse through his family. After his death, Yuniór gets a letter from Oscar telling him that he has figured out the origin of the curse and the cure. The manuscript that Oscar says he is sending in another package never arrives.

One of the major instances where the reader is asked if they believe a circumstance is fuku or zafa in Beli's beating. Some believe Beli's beating is proof the family is suffering a curse. Some, however, believe that Beli was actually blessed with some sort of counter curse protection because she survived the beating. Some even believe it was La Inca's dedicated prayer that produced the counter curse.

Another instance where the reader is asked if a circumstance was the result of a curse or a counter curse was Socorro's final pregnancy. The pregnancy could be considered the result of the curse because Abelard has just been arrested by the Trujillo, leaving Socorro alone. Bringing a new baby into this situation could be considered the result of bad luck or a curse. This pregnancy could also be seen as a counter curse as it gives Abelard another descendant. It is ironic, however, that this child that was born to Socorro after Abelard's imprisonment, that some thought was the result of the fuku is the only family member who survived past the end of Trujillo's reign.

Recurring Images

Throughout the novel, there are some interesting dreams and images that recur throughout. Several members of the Cabral family experience the same dreams and images through the years. These images include a mongoose, a man with no face and a book with blank pages. All seem to have a significant meaning in the course of the characters' lives.



The mongoose is first seen by Beli after she has been beaten by Trujillo's men. The mongoose seems to carry with it a promise of good things to come. For Beli, the mongoose makes her understand that her baby is dead, but it tells her that she will have two children in the future, a son and a daughter. It uses this promise of future children to get Beli to gather the strength she needs to get herself out of the canefield where she was attacked to a place where she can get help. The mongoose is also seen by Oscar, just before he attempts suicide by jumping off a train bridge. Oscar believes the creature does not seem to be judging or reproaching him for what he is about to do. Although Oscar still jumps from the bridge, he is not killed as he had hoped. Oscar has another encounter with the Mongoose when he is first beat up by the capitan's hit men. The mongoose asks Oscar if he wants to continue to live, then sends him back into life when Oscar says he wants more life. Just before he is killed, Oscar again has a vision of the Mongoose. In this vision, the mongoose is driving a bus on which his family is riding.

A blank book is another image that recurs throughout the novel. One of the first references to the book with the blank pages takes place when Oscar is gaining consciousness after his beating by the capitan's hit men. He has a dream of an old man wearing a mask, perhaps Abelard, who is holding out a book for him to read. Unfortunately, the pages of the book are blank. The blank pages seem to deal with the way there is really little known about the original cause of the family "curse" or what can be done to overcome it. After Oscar's death, Yuniór has similar dreams except he believes the man in the mask holding out the blank book is Oscar. In other portions of the book, these blank pages are referred to by the Spanish phrase *paginas en blanco*. The time in Beli's life before she came to live with La Inca as well as her time with the Gangster are both referred to as *paginas en blanco* because so little information is known about these times.

A final image that recurs in the novel is that of a man with no face. This man appears to be an omen of bad things to come. Beli is one character in the novel who encounters the man with no face on several occasions. She first sees this man with no face when she is on the way back home from her vacation with the Gangster just before she realizes she is pregnant. She again sees the faceless man in the form of a cop sitting in the car when the two Elvises try to kidnap her to make her have an abortion. She has nightmares about this man with no face while she is healing from the beating these Elvises give her. Socorro dreams of a man with no face standing over the beds of her husband and her daughters just before her husband is jailed on false charges. Oscar additionally sees the man with no face when he is being taken to the canefields by the capitan's hit men. As he is being beaten, Oscar occasionally believes he sees this faceless man join the other two in the beating. When Oscar has his vision of his family riding a bus just before he is killed, the man with no face serves as the man who is taking the tickets. It is almost as if he symbolizes life's way of collecting from the family what it owes. Finally, Yuniór believes it will be dreams of the man with no face that will cause Lola's daughter to come to him for information about Oscar and the family curse.



Love

One common denominator in the three members of the Cabral family who are cursed is a deep love. Although their love might be ill advised in two of the cases, the strength of the love felt by all three of these characters ultimately leads to their downfalls. The three characters who fall prey to love are Abelard Cabral, Hypatia Belicia Cabral and Oscar de Leon.

In Abelard's case, his love is for his daughter. Abelard fears that the dictator Trujillo wants to have sexual relations with his daughter. Although she is very beautiful, Jacquelyn is only in her early teens. Abelard does not want Jacquelyn to be abused or hurt in any way by the dictator although some fathers have willingly given up their daughters in order to please the country's ruler. Abelard receives an invitation from Trujillo stressing that he is to bring his daughter to a presidential party. Abelard, however, refuses to take Jacquelyn to the party. Shortly after he goes against the Trujillo's wishes, Abelard is put in jail. It is believed Trujillo put a curse on Abelard because Abelard wouldn't let Trujillo have his way with Jacquelyn.

The second person in the family who seems "cursed" with love is Beli. She loves deeply and faithfully, even when the object of her affection doesn't necessarily deserve her loyalty. For Beli, her great love is the Gangster. The Gangster, however, doesn't tell Beli he is married to the sister of the Trujillo. When Beli gets pregnant by the Gangster, she is punished by the Trujillo. She refuses to abort the baby, so the Trujillo's hit men attack her, beating her so severely that she miscarries the baby. Beli seems to mourn the loss of her unborn baby as much as she does the loss of the Gangster.

Oscar is additionally cursed with his capacity to love deeply. Because he is overweight and nerdy, most girls seem to be repulsed by him. Ybon, a partially retired prostitute, however, seems to enjoy Oscar's company. He listens while she talks and tells the stories of the life she has led. She doesn't seem to mind his personality quirks. However, Ybon is dating a captain in the Dominican police force. Although she tries to protect Oscar by pushing him away, the capitan demands to meet Oscar, then has Oscar beaten when he refuses to stay away from Ybon. Despite the fact Oscar is nearly beaten to death, he does not give up on Ybon. He returns to Santo Domingo after he has healed from his injuries. He knows the trip will probably be his last as he calls it his Last Voyage. Oscar spends 27 days in his homeland wooing Ybon. He is ultimately burned to death by the capitan's hit men. Before he was killed, however, he and Ybon manage to spend a weekend together during which they have sexual relations. Oscar dies for his great love. It is never known for certain if Ybon cared for Oscar as much as Oscar did for her, but that didn't seem to matter to Oscar. He made his sacrifice based on his devotion to Ybon.



Styles

Point of View

There are two narrators in this story. The main narrator appears to be a boy named Yunior. Yunior became friends with Oscar, the hero of the novel, after he lived with him in college. Yunior's voice is distinguishable because he uses a good deal of slang, Spanish and curse words. Yunior's point of view on the story is important as he entered Oscar's life as a disinterested third party. He was most interested in getting into a relationship with Lola, Oscar's sister, so he attempted to use Oscar as a means to this end. Yunior is significant as a narrator because he is a third person observer of what is happening to Oscar's family. He becomes friends with Oscar, and dates Lola intermittedly, but is otherwise not involved in the family's story. For this reason, he is able to give a more unbiased account than another of the characters might.

There are two sections of the novel that are narrated by Lola. These sections detail things that Yunior probably doesn't know about her. She tells about the fear she feels when her mother realizes she has breast cancer. Lola feels her life is about to change dramatically and rebels against her mother who has always been demanding and opinionated. These first person views by Lola underscore the way Beli's rebellion as a teenager is being mirrored in her own daughter's behavior.

Language and Meaning

The language that Diaz uses in his novel is one of its most unique aspects. His narrators — Oscar's sister Lola and her boyfriend, Yunior — present the story in a mixture of street corner slang and Spanish. The language is also rich with references from modern culture and folklore.

Yunior uses language that could be considered quite strong at times. Some may even be offended at his use of the term "nigger," but he uses it not as a detrimental description of a person but rather as if he is saying "man" or "friend." He often uses the bad grammar associated with slang "the little guy loved himself the females" but this manner of speaking characterizes who Yunior is and how much he is different from Oscar. The few times Oscar is directly quoted his language is very stilted and proper. "I wish to know if you could do me a favor," he poses to Yunior when he asks for money to go back to Santo Domingo. Along with the changes in language styles, the text additionally often includes Spanish phrases. Some of the characters, like Ybon in her greeting to Oscar when he returns to her home "Mi amor, you have to leave right now," combine Spanish and English words in the same sentences. Sometimes the Spanish phrases can be translated based on context but sometimes a Spanish-English dictionary can be helpful.



Modern culture references include things like the red pill, blue pill option Yunion gives the reader at the end of the section “A Note from Your Author” in Chapter Six. The reference indicates the reader can either choose the reality that Yunion is describing to them or can choose to believe Yunion is giving a false version of the truth. As Oscar is a science fiction and fantasy fan, there are additionally a variety of references to books and movies from this genre. One section titled “Oscar at the Rubicon” seems to play on the act of Julius Ceasar crossing the Rubicon River. Ceasar’s act had more far-reaching consequences than Oscar’s choice to continue seeing Ybon even though she had begun stressing to him how jealous her boyfriend was getting. This example additionally shows the author’s use of hyperbole in which he compares something that is happening in Oscar’s life to something more far reaching.

The author’s descriptive language is additionally intriguing. He enjoys comparing two completely different things in his descriptions. For instance, he says the knot in Beli’s breast is as “tight and secretive as a plot,” comparing her breast cancer to a murder mystery. He also describes Beli’s anger as if it were a person “her anger was just as tall. It pincerd you in its long arms...” Another example of the author’s unique descriptions is used to describe Oscar’s uncle’s gun. It is said to be “heavier than bad luck and twice as ugly.” Although bad luck has neither weight nor a physical appearance, the author characterizes bad luck as being like this gun.

Structure

The structure of this novel is complex as it not only bounces back and forth through time but also switches narrators. The story is divided into three main parts. The first part is the longest, taking up nearly 60 percent of the story. Part I has four chapters. The first is narrated by Yunion, though his identity is not known at this point in the book because he never introduces himself. It tells of Oscar’s early years beginning in 1974 through his first years at college in 1987. Lola, Oscar’s sister is the narrator for the second chapter, which covers the three years between 1982-85 in which Lola’s mother learns she has breast cancer and Lola revolts, eventually running away to live with a boyfriend. It is uncertain who the narrator is for this third chapter but it appears it could be Yunion’s voice. It goes back in time to 1955-1962, Beli’s time as a preteen and teenager living with La Inca in Bani. The final chapter in the first part of the novel picks up Oscar’s story in 1988 through 1992. This chapter is narrated by Yunion.

Part II of the novel counts for approximately 30 percent of the text. It picks up with Lola’s story when she learns she must leave her grandmother’s home and return to Paterson with her mother. Lola narrates an interlude section at the beginning of this part of the book. When Chapter five, the first of two chapters in this part begins, it appears the narration switches back to Yunion. The time period of the novel additionally rewinds again all the way back to 1944 to tell the story of Abelard, Beli’s father. Yunion continues to narrate Chapter Six, which tells of Oscar’s life between the years of 1992 and 1995 when he worked as a substitute teacher at his old high school.



Part III of the novel is the shortest, covering just less than 10 percent of the novel. An interlude, before Chapter Seven, tells of Oscar's last visit with Yuni6r. It is narrated by Yuni6r. No specific time is given for the setting of Chapter Seven, but it appears to be the most recent of the chapters thus far. It, along with the remainder of the novel, is narrated by Yuni6r. He tells of Oscar's last trip to Santo Domingo and the daughter that Lola now has. He hopes she will find the cure for the family's curse. A final section of the novel tells about Oscar's last letter to his family. Note also that within each of the chapters, the text is divided into sections by label heads that sum up each section. Some of these sections are several pages long while some are as short as just a sentence or two. The novel additionally includes nine footnotes in which the narrator gives more information about specific people that are mentioned in the novel.



Quotes

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about — he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter One, The Golden Age paragraph 1)

Importance: Yunior starts the novel with a description of how non-Dominican Oscar is. This is significant because it sets up the idea of how unusual Oscar was in comparison to other Dominicans and how he stood out in comparison to them.

It truly was a Golden Age for Oscar, one that reached its apotheosis in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only ménage à trois. With Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco.

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter One, The Golden Age paragraph 7)

Importance: As an adult Oscar is afraid that he will die a virgin. As a young boy, however, he actually had two girlfriends at one time, the high point of his love life.

It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him — Shazam! — his life started going down the tubes.

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter One, The Golden Age paragraph 18)

Importance: Oscar, who does not believe in the family curse at this point, thinks that it was Maritza's act of dumping him that initiated the beginning of the his back luck, at least in the category of women.

And right there he learned something about his friends he'd never known (or at least never admitted to himself). Right there he had an epiphany that echoed through his fat self. He realized his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by him.

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter One, Oscar is Brave paragraph 3)

Importance: Oscar comes to the sad realization that even the people whom he considers friends are embarrassed by him.

That's white people for you. They lose a cat and it's an all-points bulletin, but we Dominicans, we lose a daughter and we might not even cancel our appointment at the salon.

-- Lola (Part I, Chapter Two paragraph 52)

Importance: After Lola runs away from her family, she entertains the idea that her family might be looking for her. She indicates here that missing daughters among the Dominicans weren't generally a big deal, white people often looked harder for a missing pet than a Dominican family did for a missing daughter.



But that's not what I wanted to tell you. It's about that crazy feeling that started this whole mess, the bruja feeling that comes singing out of my bones, that takes hold of me the way blood seizes cotton. The feeling that tells me that everything in my life is about to change. It's come back.

-- Lola (Part I, Chapter Two paragraph 90)

Importance: Just before she learns her mother has breast cancer, and again before her grandmother is about to tell the story of her mother's teenage years, Lola gets a feeling that her life is about to change.

Orphan or not, Beli was the Third and Final Daughter of one of the Cibao's finest families, and a proper education was not only her due, it was her birthright.

-- Yuniur (Part I, Chapter Three, La Chica De Mi Escuela paragraph 1)

Importance: When Beli becomes a teenager, La Inca gets her a scholarship to attend El Redentor, one of the best schools in the area. Although Beli doesn't have the same plans, La Inca hopes the girl will follow in the footsteps of her parents who not only worked in the medical profession but also were members of an esteemed family.

Beli at thirteen believed in love like a seventy-year-old widow who's been abandoned by family, husband, children, and fortune believes in God.

-- Yuniur (Part I, Chapter Three, La Chica De Mi Escuela paragraph 14)

Importance: Just as an elderly widow who has nothing else to cling to believes in God, Beli clings to the idea that she can be saved by a great love.

Telling Beli not to flaunt those curves would have been like asking the persecuted fat kid not to use his recently discovered mutant abilities. With great power comes great responsibility... bullshit. Our girl ran into the future that her new body represented and never ever looked back.

-- Yuniur (Part I, Chapter Three, Numero Uno paragraph 16)

Importance: When Beli develops her womanly figure, she decides to take full advantage of the affect that she has on men.

But folks always underestimate what the promise of a lifetime of starvation, powerlessness, and humiliation can provoke in a young person's character.

-- Yuniur (Part I, Chapter Three, The Gangster We're All Looking For paragraph 4)

Importance: Although he was originally poor and powerless, the Gangster has turned into a powerful, merciless killer, traits that some credit to the poverty of his early years.

La Inca didn't know what to do with her anymore; all her neighbors advised her to beat the girl into a blood clot (You might even have to kill her, they said regretfully), but La Inca couldn't explain what it had meant to find the burnt girl locked in a chicken coop all those years ago, how that sight had stepped into her and rearranged everything so that now she found she didn't have the strength to raise her hand against the girl. She never



stopped trying to talk sense into her, though.

-- Narrator (Part I, Chapter Three, The Gangster We're All Looking For paragraph 23)

Importance: Although a beating is a common punishment among Dominican women, La Inca is never able to bring herself to hit Beli, especially since she saw how badly the girl had been physically hurt in her early years.

It's not like she had a number for the Gangster, or even an address (bad sign number one, girls), and he was in the habit of disappearing for days without warning (bad sign number two), and now that Trujillo's war against the world was reaching its bitter crescendo (and now that he had Beli on lock), the days could become weeks, and when he reappeared from 'his business' he would smell of cigarettes and old fear and want only to fuck, and afterward he would drink whiskey and mutter to himself by the love-motel window.

-- Narrator (Part I, Chapter Three, The Gangster We're All Looking For paragraph 39)

Importance: In her innocence, Beli does not recognize the signs that would indicate to another more experienced woman that the Gangster had things in his life, like perhaps a wife, that he wanted to keep secret from her.

There are still many, on and off the Island, who offer Beli's near-fatal beating as irrefutable proof that the House Cabral was indeed victim of a high-level fukú, the local version of House Atreus Two Trujilíos in one lifetime — what in carajo else could it be?

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter Three, Fuku vs. Zafa paragraph 1)

Importance: For some, it is Beli's beating that confirms for some that the family has, indeed, been cursed by the Trujillo.

Point is: when her brother lapsed into that killer depression at the end of sophomore year — drank two bottles of 151 because some girl dissed him — almost fucking killing himself and his sick mother in the process, who do you think stepped up?

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 10)

Importance: Yunior admits that he agreed to live with Oscar because he wanted to get points with Oscar's sister, Lola.

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?

-- Yunior (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 92)

Importance: When he looks back on the first semester he lived in the dorms with Oscar, Yunior still cannot decide exactly why he was angry with Oscar. He acknowledges, however, that he was not trying to get Oscar to lose weight because he was really concerned about him.



In my universe, when a dork like Oscar pushes up on a girl like Jenni, he usually gets bounced faster than your tía Daisy's rent checks, but Jenni must have had brain damage or been really into fat loser nerdbos, because by the end of February she was actually treating him all civil and shit.

-- Yuniór (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 105)

Importance: Yuniór cannot contain his surprise that the same Jenni that rejected his advances has become friends with the fat, nerdy Oscar.

But it wasn't like always. I knew something was wrong when he stopped writing — Oscar never stopped writing — loved writing the way I loved cheating — just lay in bed and stared at the SDF-1.

-- Yuniór (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 122)

Importance: After Jenni breaks up with Oscar, Yuniór knows Oscar is in trouble when he stops writing.

If he'd landed on Route 18, as planned, it would have been lights out forever. But in his drunken confusion he must have miscalculated, or maybe, as his mother claims, he was being watched from up on high, because the dude missed 18 proper and landed on the divider!

-- Yuniór (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 156)

Importance: Yuniór explains how Oscar managed to survive his suicide attempt.

It was the curse that made me do it, you know.

-- Oscar (Part I, Chapter Four paragraph 176)

Importance: After he tries to commit suicide, Oscar uses the excuse that it was the family curse that was responsible for his actions.

That's life for you. All the happiness you gather to yourself, it will sweep away like it's nothing. If you ask me I don't think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That's enough.

-- Lola (Part II paragraph 6)

Importance: While the other members of her family think they have been cursed, Lola believes it is only the difficulties and cruelties of life that haunt the family.

But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that's what I guess these stories are all about.

-- Lola (Part II paragraph 34)

Importance: As Lola has matured, she has realized she cannot run away from her problems. This book and the stories told in it are products of Lola's attempts to work through her family's problems by delving into them.



Not four weeks after the party, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral was arrested by the Secret Police. The charge? 'Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President.
-- Narrator (Part II, Chapter Five, Chiste Apocalyptus paragraph 1)

Importance: In a rush of bravery, Abelard decides not to allow his daughter to attend a party to which the Trujillo had specifically invited her. Just a few weeks later, he is arrested, leading some to believe his charges are connected with his refusal to let Trujillo see Jacquelyn.

They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard's daughter, but when he couldn't snatch her, out of spite he put a fukú on the family's ass.
-- Yunior (Part II, Chapter Five, Abelard in Chains paragraph 17)

Importance: Yunior records a variety of supposed reasons for Abelard's imprisonment and the family's misfortunes. He writes the story that credits the Trujillo with putting a curse on the family is the one that most people prefer.

Every day he watched the 'cool' kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay — and in every one of these clashes he saw himself.

-- Yunior (Part II, Chapter Six, The Dark Age paragraph 3)

Importance: As a teacher at his old high school, Oscar watches as his past is relived as the popular kids continue to make the lives of those who are different from them in any way miserable.

He never stopped to consider the fact that when a Dominican cop says he wants to meet you he ain't exactly talking about bringing you flowers.

-- Yunior (Part II, Chapter 6, Oscar at the Rubicon paragraph 3)

Importance: Although Ybon's boyfriend wants to meet Oscar, Oscar does not seem to think the capitan poses any threat to him. Oscar assumes when the boyfriend sees him, he will realize Oscar is no threat to him, just as others in the past have.

If they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it.

-- Yunior (Part II, Chapter 6, Dead or Alive paragraph 5)

Importance: When La Inca and Beli first learn about Oscar's beating, they do not acknowledge that there are any similarities between what happened to Beli and what happened to Oscar.

One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be true.

-- Yunior (Part II, Chapter 6, Alive paragraph 5)

Importance: After Oscar is beaten by the Capitan's hit men, he begins to wonder if all



he has really heard about the family curse is really true. This realization sparks Oscar's attempt to figure out the cause and cure for the curse.

And for the first time she will hear the word fukú. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man. Not now, but soon.

-- Yuniór (Part III, Chapter 8, As For Us paragraph 21)

Importance: Yuniór believes Lola's daughter will hear about the Cabral family curse, and then begin having dreams of the man with no face. He believes these circumstances will cause Lola's daughter to come to him, looking for an explanation.

And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it.

-- Yuniór (Part III, Chapter 8, As For Us paragraph 31)

Importance: Yuniór suggests that Lola's daughter can put an end to the curse that has followed three generations of her family.