

# **Drown Study Guide**

**Drown by Junot Díaz**

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# Plot Summary

*Drown* is written by Junot Diaz, a Pulitzer prize-winning author. In this collection of short stories, Diaz explores the struggle of Dominican Republic immigrants in the United States to achieve the American Dream. Each story is related, but is a separate vignette, each with its own title. The novel does not follow a traditional story arc but rather each story captures a moment in time. *Drown* is narrated by an educated adult, and set mostly in the 1980s, with much of the narrative occurring in the narrator's childhood.

Yunior, the narrator, tells the story of his family's immigration to the United States from the Dominican Republic. The story begins when Yunior and Rafa, his brother, are eight and twelve, and are sent to live with their uncle for the summer so their mother can work. Their father abandoned them when Yunior was 4 and their family lives in poverty, sometimes having to forgo food for clothes and other necessities. Their mother works long hours, sometimes fourteen-hour shifts, at a local chocolate factory while their grandfather watches them.

At 9-years-old, five years after Yunior's father leaves, he returns from the United States to bring them back. They live in an apartment and establish a new community in New Jersey. Although they still live in poverty, they do not want for food or other basic necessities. The stories then jump forward many years to when Yunior is in high school and living with his mother. He works and helps pay the rent and other bills while she works as a housekeeper.

The last stories chronicle Yunior's father's experience as he tries to succeed in the United States. The father, Ramon, is ambitious and hardworking, but still struggles to provide for himself and his family. While he is away from the Dominican Republic, Ramon marries a U.S. Citizen, also from the Dominican Republic, in order to gain citizenship. He lives with her for many years and she bears him a son. Eventually, however, he leaves her and goes to reclaim his family that is still in the Dominican Republic. He leaves New York after getting a tip from a friend that a new apartment complex in New Jersey is looking for supers and is offering a salary and free rent. This is where he brings his family to live. The reality of Ramon's situation, contrasted with his illustrious dreams of the United States, is stark.



# Chapter 1 “Ysrael”

## Summary

When Yunior is 8 years old, his mother sends him and his older brother, Rafa to live with their uncle for the summer. During this time they are allowed to do as they please. One afternoon Rafa wants to travel to Ochoa to see his (friend? cousin? nephew? since the writer doesn't list Ysrael in the “characters” section, I could not double check this. I couldn't find on Google, either.) Ysrael, nicknamed “No Face.” The rumor is that Ysrael, who wears a mask, was attacked by a hungry pig as a baby and one side of his face is missing. Rafa's plan is to somehow get Ysrael to take his mask off.

The boys take a bus to Ochoa tricking the driver into thinking they had paid for the fare. They find Ysrael and he tells the boys how he is going to American doctors to get his face fixed. Rafa hits Ysrael on the head with a coke bottle and knocks him out. He rips off the face mask. Yunior and Rafa are both horrified and intrigued.

## Analysis

Despite living in difficult circumstance due to poverty and the abandonment of his father, Yunior is still very naïve. His brother Rafa, however, is not. Although he is only twelve, Rafa is street smart: he knows how to manipulate people, lie, and steal to get what he wants and needs. His attitude and demeanor, his knowledge of sex and his cruelty toward Ysrael seem like that of a much older, more jaded person. Rafa has the hardness of a child rearing himself and looking after younger siblings. Readers see Rafa's vulnerability in the moment that he rips of Ysrael's mask. Even though he has knocked Ysrael out to see his face, he gingerly uses two fingers to look at him and turn his face from side to side, eventually looking away in embarrassment, both for himself and the boy.

Yunior, at 9, does not yet understand all that his brother talks about. He knows that his brother is talking about sex and other things with girls, but still is not sure exactly what this means. He follows his brother obediently, never really sure of what Rafa is doing or what he will do next. Mainly, he doesn't question Rafa's judgment because of Rafa's unpredictability and the fact that he both fears and respects his brother.

Yunior does not see anything wrong with traveling to visit Ysrael but once he is there and he meets him, he is interested in his story. When Ysrael says that American doctors are going to help him fix his face, he is hopeful for him, whereas Rafa says that it will never happen. Yunior is taken aback when Rafa hits Ysrael on the head with a Coke bottle and concerned about his well-being. Even after they leave, he still worries about whether the doctors are going to help Ysrael or not, and hopes that they will.



## Vocabulary

Colmado, campo, mists, brucal, blazed, pods, trembling, zinc, fuselage, yukking, taunting, emerged, brambled, scheming, industriously, marrow, crescent, spooled, scroll.



## Chapter 2 “Fiesta, 1980”

### Summary

In this story, Yunior and his family are getting ready for a party. They are now living in New Jersey. Though it does not explicitly say how old Yunior is in this section, based on reference to other characters and events, he is around twelve or thirteen. Yunior lives with his father, mother, Rafa, and his younger sister. Mami's sister has finally made it to the United States and another member of the family is having a party for them. When Papi arrives home from work he is angry that Mami has allowed Yunior to eat, since he gets carsick. Papi smacks Yunior around for eating before they get in the car. His mother sympathizes with him but does not stand up for Yunior.

At the party, Rafa and Yunior are watching their mother closely. They have both just learned that their father has a Puerto Rican mistress that their mother doesn't yet know about, but they suspect that other family members might. Yunior thinks that at any moment someone in the family will out him and call him a cheater in front of anybody. But nothing happens; the adults just dance and drink and have a good time.

### Analysis

Yunior's father is an intolerant (though this likely makes him intolerable! :) ) man. This is demonstrated by his attitude toward Yunior's carsickness. Yunior is blamed, as if he has control over whether or not he gets sick. Papi doesn't care, he just doesn't want Yunior to get sick in his Volkswagen bus. To him, getting sick represents a weakness and Ramon wants nothing to do with it. When Yunior eats before the party, his father boxes him on the ears. Papi is an impatient and unreasonable man and uses violence to get his way—both with his children and wife.

Yunior's mother, however, is the opposite. As violent and rash as her husband is, she is calm and quiet and loving. She understands that her son gets carsick and does what she can to help him in his discomfort. Later, when his family is at the party and he is watching his mother, he feels a surge of love for her and she smiles back at him. Yunior is very protective of his mother and harbors resentment against his father, not only for leaving them in the Dominican Republic all those years but also for cheating on his mother now with the Puerto Rican woman.

Yunior keeps expecting someone at the party to blow up at his father and say, You're a cheater, but nobody does. Yunior's disappointment at the lack of drama at the party is partly due to keeping the secret from his mother and wanting to see his father have to pay for what he is doing. He is young enough yet that he doesn't understand why the others won't tell her, even if they know what is going on.

## Vocabulary

Dope, lounging, lousy, anxious, dispassionate, clatter, surly, scalded, collateral, immaculate, tuning, recognition, contradictory, solemnly, cardinal, suspected, intrinsic, turnpike, concoctions, guru, stalactite, incredulously, argumentative, cursory, excursions, voracious, sheepishly, reluctance, interrogation, brawl, rummaging.



## Chapter 3 “Aurora”

### Summary

In this story, readers are introduced to Aurora, Yunior’s on-again off-again girlfriend. Yunior is just out of high school and living with a roommate . He is doing well selling marijuana to local kids in town . His girlfriend, who was sent to juvenile hall, comes to visit him. She’s been out awhile and when he first sees her she has the shakes from drug withdrawal. They reunite and she stays with him a few nights.

Yunior loves Aurora and wants to help her get clean. Together they have a fantasy of having a house with children. Aurora tells him that it is this image that helped her get through the solitary confinement that she experienced at juvenile hall. She was confined for hitting other girls.

Yunior prides himself on the fact that he’s different than the other drug dealers. He calls himself easy going and kind—unlike the people at the Hacienda where Aurora hangs out. Aurora begins to pull away from Yunior again, spending more and more time doing drugs at the Hacienda. He wants to save her but doesn’t know how; he wants to be different. However at the end of the chapter he tells of hitting her and making her face bleed.

### Analysis

This story is written in a journal-like fashion with short named entries. Yunior has a dream of having a traditional happy family with a house in the suburbs and children, the epitome of domestic bliss, but he doesn’t know how to get there. From the previous story chapters, readers know that he hasn’t experienced this type of home-setting in his own childhood, and based on what he is doing currently, selling marijuana, he isn’t any closer.

Yunior loves Aurora but knows that she’s a troubled girl. When she gets out of juvenile hall, he’s disappointed that she didn’t come straight to his house. He’s worried about her and wants to save her from drugs, her friends, and other men. He tries to get her to stay away from places like the Hacienda where people are doing drugs and prostitution, but she doesn’t. He knows that she’s not a good influence on him and “bad news,” but he has a hard time staying away from her.

What is most notable in this section is the distinction between how Yunior is living and how he perceives Aurora. He is selling marijuana and occasionally smoking it, but he doesn’t consider himself in the same category as she is. It is implied that she’s doing harder drugs, that she’s addicted, and that men are taking advantage of her. Yunior sees her behavior as dangerous and self-destructive.





Ironically, as much as he says he wants to save her, he contributes to her problems. They have volatile, violent fights and in the end, when he recalls her juvenile hall fantasy about them living in a house with a fence, he admits his failure as a man. He fails because in the end he hits her. Her hurts her just like everyone else has. He cannot escape the environment in which he was raised, even though he wants to.

## **Vocabulary**

Potent, blunted, census, incorporate, prowling, tenants, debating, ridiculous, boning, utility, beasting, squashes.



# Chapter 4 “Aguantando”

## Summary

“Aguantando” is a collection of anecdotes from when the narrator was living in Santo Domingo. For the first nine years of his life, Yunior lives in Santo Domingo without his father. During these years his mother would tell her sons their father had sent her letters telling her that he was coming to bring them back to the United States. After the first few letters, when Papi never showed up, they stopped believing him.

To provide for Rafa and Yunior, their mother works long hours at a chocolate factory. When she can not afford to feed or clothe them they stay at relatives’ houses. During one period, shortly after receiving a letter from their father promising that he was coming home, Mami is gone for many weeks. When she returns she is distraught, inconsolable, and distant from the boys. Yunior is upset that he doesn’t know how to comfort her.

When Yunior is 9, his father finally comes to Santo Domingo to bring them to the United States. A letter precedes him, but they all doubt that he is really coming. His mother is relieved to no longer be the sole breadwinner for the family and is eager to travel away and out of the destitution that they are living in.

## Analysis

From earlier stories the readers get a sense that Papi is not a gentle or patient man, even physically abusive to his wife and children. Yet, when he leaves they are desperate for his return. Though Yunior does not know his father, he wants one, and wanted to be whisked away from the poverty tin which they are living. Yunior is very protective of his mother. He feels guilty that she has been abandoned by a husband who took her money and now has to work hard to provide for him and his brother.

Likewise, his mother is lonely and tired and does not want to raise her boys by herself. She knows that her husband has done horrible things yet she is still willing to take him back rather than be without a husband. Rafa claims that he doesn’t want his father back. He puts on a tough exterior to protect himself from the constant disappointment, but still holds onto hope that he will come. He thinks that his Papi will come for them in the night like Jesus. This comparison means that he too believes that the father will be the savior from poverty.

## Vocabulary

Zinc, abandoned, brutal, consolation, embraced, commission, accompany, barred, cajoling, truculently, dote, penchant, cryptic, whittling, elaborately, disintegrating, mounted, partitioned, mortar, poised, pensively, laddering, bond, vaguely, inconsolable, cuffed, dimmed, trough, tremendous, churn, reluctant.



## Chapter 5 “Drown”

### Summary

“Drown” begins with Yuniór’s mother announcing that Beto, an old friend of Yuniór’s, is home. She’s surprised that Yuniór is not interested in seeing him. Yuniór remembers the homosexual experiences he and Beto shared a few years ago and is reluctant to see him.

Yuniór and his mother live alone now, as his father has apparently left them. Yuniór is trying to finish high school, but is constantly struggling. He knows that most of the kids in his school won’t amount to anything and even though he doesn’t want this, he does little to prevent it. He thinks he’ll “burn out” just like one of his teachers suggested.

An army recruiter cruises around the neighborhood trying to convince young men to join the services. Yuniór intentionally avoids him, crossing the street to avoid the car or walking the other direction.

### Analysis

This is a pivotal story in this collection. Yuniór is attempting to fight all of the forces that are seemingly against him: his father, his teachers, and the army recruiter. The one adult that is a positive force in his life is his mother, whom describes as fragile. He

contributes to the rent and the food that they eat; in turn, they take care of each other.

Yuniór knows that he should do well in school, but at times feels hopeless, as if there is little hope for him, even if he does well. He resents the army recruiter as he is looking for young men that have very little future promise, telling them all sorts of things in trade for years of service. Though it is not explicitly said, Yuniór realizes that the young men in his neighborhood are being exploited.

Yuniór is not interested in rekindling his friendship with Beto as he is conflicted over their shared homosexual experiences. Yuniór is not sure what he thinks or feels about it and therefore does not broach the subject with himself. Yuniór is also at a turning point where he knows that if he wants to accomplish his goals that he will have to make some changes. He and Beto used to steal and vandalize things—Beto represents a past that Yuniór no longer wants to live.

Yuniór goes to the swimming pool to swim amidst the other kids who are doing drugs and having sex. However, he goes to actually swim. Amidst all that is going on in his life and the forces working against his goals, the swimming pool serves as a metaphorical baptism.

## Vocabulary

Rousing, delirious, asphyxiation, commuter, spumes, churns, defecating, expectorating, circuit, looting, suspicious, juke, jovial, truant, gorge, semaphore, grimacing.



# Chapter 6 “Boyfriend”

## Summary

“Boyfriend” is the briefest story in this collection. While stoned one night Yunion wanders into the hallway of his apartment complex and overhears an argument between a couple whom he refers to as Boyfriend and Girlfriend. He stays in the hallway, listening to the duration of the fight. Boyfriend claims that he needs more space, but Yunion knows him and has seen him at bars hitting on other women. Throughout the week Boyfriend continues to go to Girlfriend’s apartment but never stays long. They have sex in the bathroom, where Yunion can hear them, and Girlfriend relays her day even though Boyfriend isn’t interested.

One day Yunion gets the courage to ask Girlfriend out, and she says yes. They go to a café, then back to his apartment where he plays some music for her. Nothing physical happens between them and they never go out again, but they remain friendly with each other when they pass in the hallway. Eventually, Boyfriend stops coming around.

## Analysis

What is notable about this story is how protective and interested Yunion is in the story of this other couple. He is at a time in his life where not a lot is going on and becomes consumed by this couple’s lives. He doesn’t like the boyfriend because of how he treats this woman and the other women that Yunion has seen him with. This demonstrates that Yunion has a high standard for how women should be treated, despite what he says and does in the other stories and what he has seen growing up.

Yunion is reluctant to ask this woman out because he considers her “high class” and educated. Most likely, this is also why he does not try to do anything with her physically when she comes back to his apartment. What is interesting is that in the other stories readers do not get a sense of this respect when Yunion is with other women (like Aurora).

## Vocabulary

Transplanted, vicinity, velocity, wreckage, manipulative, bizarre, cheeb, shabby.



# Chapter 7 “Edison, New Jersey”

## Summary

Yunior is living in New Jersey working for a game store that sells pool tables. His job is to deliver the tables and put them together. He and his partner deliver these tables to large beautiful homes and mansions. At one home the housekeeper is a young woman of color who does not want to let them in to deliver the table. Finally, she relents and she asks Yunior if he'll help her get out of there. Against his partners wishes, he agrees and drives her home to her neighborhood.

Meanwhile, he misses his girlfriend. His mother also misses the girlfriend, who remains unnamed throughout the chapter. Yunior's girlfriend, however, has found a new boyfriend and even though he has tried to win her back, he has not been successful.

Yunior calls the house where they delivered the Gold Crown table and is relieved the first few times when a man answers and not the girl. He hangs up without speaking. One day he calls and she answer the phone. He is disappointed, not understanding why she would

## Analysis

This story characterizes Yunior as a romantic. He misses his girlfriend and tries to win her back from her new boyfriend, Dan, but he fails. While delivering a pool table, he sees a housekeeper who is being mistreated. This implied not only by her drawer full of silky underwear, but also by the fact that she wants to escape. It is only later that Yunior realizes she went back because she loved the man. Yunior does not understand her motivations.

Throughout the book the narrator has referred to his family's poverty and the poverty of the surrounding neighborhood. In contrast, in this story Yunior is in homes where the privileged live. Although he wants out of his state of poverty, he doesn't necessarily want to be wealthy like the owners of the homes he visits.. It is also this story in which the narrator explicitly mentions college (p.135) in a reference to the past; therefore, the reader can see that Yunior will fulfill his personal salvation from poverty through wealth, but through education.

## Vocabulary

Lumbering, philosophical, scavenge, agonize, precision, delinquent, contrite, yuks, pane, conciliatory, archipelago, probation.



## Chapter 8 “How to date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie”

### Summary

This brief story reads like a running commentary that the narrator has received from other people. He uses this commentary to inform himself about how to date different types of women. What he realizes, however, is that he does not fit well with any women. With any color of girl it seems as if he has to alter himself, even if it is hiding the government cheese, to appease them.

### Analysis

In this brief chapter, Yunior is trying to figure out where he belongs. In the end, his conclusion is that he belongs nowhere. Even with girls from the Dominican Republic, he has to change himself so that they like him. Readers get a sense that just listening to the list of things to do and no to do is exhausting for Yunior.

What is especially poignant is when he notices that he likes to date “lighter” girls. He admires them for their beauty: their hair, lips and skin, and he realizes that in those moments he loves their attributes more than his own.

### Vocabulary

Presentable, nemesis, canisters, radical, suffice, gull.



## Chapter 9 “No Face”

### Summary

This story outlines a day in the life of Ysrael, the boy whose face was eaten by a pig when he was an infant. He hangs around an old church and the groundkeeper lets him inside in the heat of the day. Lou, the groundkeeper, also takes him to doctors and looks over him when no one else will show him this kindness.

The doctors are still promising surgery, but only after he loses function of muscles and tendons due to the damage. Ysrael accepts this information with little emotion, while still holding onto hope that someday he will be whole and have an entire face.

Late in the day a group of boys ambush him and threaten to cut his penis off. The ambushes happen often and Ysrael does what he always does: he runs and nobody can catch him.

### Analysis

The last two chapters in this collection shift in tone. The story of Ysrael is told in the third person, but Yuniors is still the narrator. It reads like a historical profile where the subject is interviewed extensively to rewrite and capture a narrative. In this way, Yuniors tells Ysrael's story. Perhaps he does it because of the guilt that he felt when he and his brother knocked him down with a Coke bottle to take off his mask and look at his face.

Ysrael's character endures the cruelty of poverty and a culture that cannot afford to look after the injured: the invisible. Ysrael thrives despite his environment and forever holds onto hope that his face will be fixed, for hope is all that he has.

### Vocabulary

Dehuller, bulge, temple, crackling, cobblestone, trills, dispersed, ambush, echoing, behooves, blunt, farmstead, bluff, celestial, dim, bowed, indignantly.





# Chapter 10 “Negocios”

## Summary

“Negocios” is the longest story in the collection, at nearly a quarter of the book. This is Yunior’s father, Ramon’s, immigration story. This story spans the five years that Ramon was absent from his family’s life: from the moment he stepped off of the airplane in Miami until he goes to retrieve his family in the Dominican Republic.

Initially, Ramon lives in Miami for a few months. He moves in with three other guys and pays rent to sleep in the living room while he works at a Chinese restaurant. He lives like this until he realizes that he will never be able to save enough money this way to bring his family over. He begins his journey north to New York.

To save money he walks to New York from Miami, often sleeping on park benches. Midway through his trip he is picked up by cops who are hoping that his presence will thwart the convict in the back of the patrol car from crying the whole time.

Once in New York he works odd jobs and looks for someone to marry, a plot to secure his citizenship. After being swindled by a “matchmaker” he meets a woman in the Laundromat. They date for a few months, after which he marries her. Shortly after, she has a son. They live together until he decides to get a new job and send for his family. During this time he rarely calls or writes his family. He visits the Dominican Republic once in these five years, but never sees his family, as he is with his new wife.

## Analysis

As in “No Face,” the narrator’s tone changes to that of a storyteller. Readers still get glimpses of the first-person narration of Yunior, but the focus is on Ramon’s story. Like with Ysrael, the tale is written as if Yunior went back many years later and interviewed people to put the story together.

Ramon works very hard to get to New York and he is smart enough to know that to secure his position in the United States he must marry a citizen. Initially, he marries just for this reason with the intention of eventually reuniting his family. However, his make-believe life with his new wife eventually becomes real and they have a child together. His new wife does not know about his other family in the Dominican Republic, although he does tell his friends about them.

Eventually, guilt and pressure from his friends make him realize that he must go get his wife and children in the Dominican Republic.

To help Ramon support himself and his family, one of his friends offers him a hot dog cart and another offer at a business, but Ramon wants something better for himself. The fact that he is unwilling to take the hotdog stand signifies that Ramon has bigger dreams



than this, despite the fact that his friend makes good money. Ramon's dream is to open a family restaurant once he brings his family to the United States. This dream is never realized, even when he brings his family over.

## Vocabulary

Hustling, loafing, spiraling, spat, gravitating, deliberations, troublesome, endured, slouched, hover, pincers, terminal, accordion, prosperity, operative, indulged, ensure, inscrutability, infraction, spastic, obtrusively, incoherent, assembled, resplendent, cataracts, obscuring, salvaged, dreadfuls, jaunts, hoarders, fledgling, abstained, bellicose, diligently, arbitrary, sporadically, swindlers, portly, carapaced, exorbitant, precipitously, lucid, recant, harangues, uncanny, cache, stippled, anemic, perilous, ziggurats, plumage, caroused, poultice, furlough, demoted, vigor.



# Characters

## Yunior

Yunior, the main character and narrator of the stories, tells them from an educated distance. By the time that Yunior writes these stories down, he is already an educated man. The reader knows this because of the explicit and implicit references to college and time passing. This can also be presumed because of the reflection and word choice.

Yunior is a young boy who grows up in the Dominican Republic and immigrates at the age of nine to New Jersey. He resents his father for the way he treats his mother, yet still wants a relationship with him. He is self-aware and witnesses the struggles that people like him go through every day in their lives of poverty and drug abuse. Midway through the book, he decides that he does not want to live like this anymore and begins to consciously change his actions to get out. Though readers never learn if he moved away physically, readers do know that he succeeded in graduating high school and going on to college.

## Rafa

Rafa is Yunior's elder brother by four years. Rafa has a tough exterior—a machismo he demonstrates through womanizing and physical roughness. He is a secondary character in the first few stories, after which Yunior never mentions him.

Rafa is not nice to Yunior, or really anybody, but there are moments when he lets down his guard and is vulnerable. Examples of this are demonstrated when the issue of his father's return is brought up. Rafa is just as hurt as Yunior about his father's abandonment but has used his grotesque manliness to mask this.

## Mami

Mami is Yunior's mother. He describes her as a skinny, funny and smart woman—an anomaly compared to the other women that he has seen. When she is abandoned by Papi she becomes vulnerable and fragile. She waits for Ramon for over five years, through multiple false promises of his return. In that time period she does not date or see other men, at least from Yunior's perspective.

Once the family is living in New Jersey and Papi has left her again, she lives with Yunior who helps support them both. Their relationship dynamic changes and even though she is his mother, he feels like he takes care of her. She is a housekeeper and works long hours. Although he still sees her as beautiful, smart, and funny, he sees a new fragility in her.



## **Papi (Ramon)**

Papi (Ramon) is Yuniór's father who abandons him when he is four and returns when he is nine to take him to the United States. In the years of absence from his family, he remarries in the United States and has another son. He mistreats his new wife just as he did his wife t in the Dominican Republic.

Eventually his guilt catches up to him and returns to the Dominican Republic to bring his family to the United States. For a few years, he is the breadwinner of his united family, until he begins to date the Puerto Rican woman for whom he will eventually leave his wife.

What is notable about Ramon's character is the steadfastness in his pursuit of a better life from the moment he first lands in the United States.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Capital**

The Capital is what Yunior and others call Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic.

### **Volkswagen Bus**

Papi's prized car is his Volkswagen bus. He gets mad at Yunior for getting carsick in it.

### **Pictures of his Father**

When Yunior is young, he often looks at pictures of his father to remind himself what he looks like. From these pictures he tries to recreate the relationship that they never had.

### **Pathfinder**

The Pathfinder is the vehicle that Yunior buys when he is dealing marijuana.

### **The Mask**

The mask is what Ysrael wears to conceal his face.

### **Hacienda**

The Hacienda is the drug and prostitution house where Aurora hangs out.

### **Edison, New Jersey**

Edison, New Jersey is the city where Ramon moves his family.

### **Hotdog Stand**

The hotdog stand is the business opportunity that is offered to Ramon, but he turns it down.



## Swimming Pool

The swimming pool is where Yuniar and his friends hang out. He often goes there to swim amidst his friends, who are doing drugs and other things.

## Miami

Miami is where Ramon first lived when he landed in the United States. From there he walked to New York.



# Themes

## The American Dream

Striving to achieve the image of the American Dream of one's own home, a family and a respectful job is the overarching theme for this collection of stories. It is the immigrant's American Dream. Some say that the collection demonstrates the failed dream, but in the end the narrator, Yunior is educated and writing about his experiences, which is a success for Yunior.

Yunior's father's dream was to own his own business and have a nice place to live with his family. Again, he does achieve this to a certain degree, but it does not make him a different or happier person. He moves his family from Santo Domingo to Edison, New Jersey where they all live as a family before Papi leaves them for the Puerto Rican woman. Again, Yunior and his mother find themselves in a dire state of poverty, struggling to provide for themselves.

It is true that they have much to overcome when they get to the United States, more than Yunior's father ever expected based on what he had heard other people say, but more than anything they have to overcome themselves. For Papi's image to fully be realized, he would have had to change. Yunior's dream is realized because he does change.

## Immigration and Poverty

One of the themes that this collection highlights is the cultural shift that immigrants undertake. In Santo Domingo, Yunior and his family live in extreme poverty, but his family is part of a larger community. Because of this Yunior's mother has many relatives and friends to rely on to help raise her boys.

When Ramon moves to the United States, he realizes that he has nothing. Even though he feels like he had nothing at home, he had his family, but now, he really does have nothing. Papi does not anticipate having to struggle for so long and work so hard to get the little pay and respect that he gets. When he arrives in New York, he seeks out a Latin community in which he can establish himself. It is when he becomes part of the community and remarries, that he is able to live a slightly better life. Without this community, however, he would have continued to struggle.

Ironically, it is this same community and culture—the culture of drugs and poverty within his ethnic culture—that Yunior feels is holding him back. He does not know how to be both an immigrant from the Dominican Republic and educated and successful. All around him he is being shown that it is not done, cannot be done and he is told the same thing.



## Coming-of-Age

One of the main themes in this collection of stories is Yunior's coming-of-age narrative. In the first few stories he is a naïve young boy who is surrounded by poverty, drugs, infidelity and sex. Despite all of this, he remains kind to others and hopeful that his father will one day return for his family.

Later when Yunior and his family are living in New Jersey and his father has a secret girlfriend, Yunior begins to see the world through a different lens. Unjustly punished by his father for his carsickness and then later introduced to his father's new girlfriend, Yunior is confused about his family life. He loves his family and wants it to remain intact after the long years of separation, but he also realizes that he must accept that this is not their reality.

In his own relationships with women, Yunior struggles with the images of how women are treated in the Dominican Republic and by his father, brother and uncles at home, but also knows that he wants to be different. He fails to do this with Aurora, but attempts to redeem himself by taking care of his mother, helping the Puerto Rican woman escape her boss and being kind to the Girlfriend in the story "Boyfriend." He knows that he needs to be different, he wants to be different, but struggles to realize this in his actions.

His desire to be different, to go beyond how and where he was raised, is what ultimately leads to his change. Since this is a collection of stories and not a traditional novel, the character change does not follow a typical character arc, but we do see a change that is marked in the contemplative and mature tone in the last two stories "No Face" and "Negocios."





# Style

## Point of View

The point of view is in the first person; it's told in Yunior's perspective. Because *Drown* is a story collection and does not follow the traditional fiction plot arc, the narrator's age ranges throughout. In stories that are set in Santo Domingo, the narrator is recalling anecdotes from his childhood. Based on the language and reflection, the reader can safely assume that the anecdotes are being recalled from a much older narrator and not being relayed from the nine-year-old boy who is telling the story in the first-person—though the events happened to the narrator when he was nine years old.

There are a few stories, like "Aurora" and "Drown," that are written in the simple past and read like a journal, punctuated by short entries rather than an ongoing narrative. This shift in closeness to the narrator stipulates a change in the character. It is in these stories that the narrator is maturing and becoming a man.

In the final stories of the collection, the tone shifts again and the reader is reading a narrative about Yunior's father and his experiences when he first came to the United States. Although this is still written in the first-person from Yunior's perspective, the reader knows that he did not learn this information about his father until much later in adulthood.

## Setting

There are three main settings in this collection: Santo Domingo, Edison, New Jersey and New York City. The time spans from late 1970's when Yunior is a small boy through his adulthood.

Stories that are set in Santo Domingo are recollections of the narrator's childhood. These stories have numbered sections that separate the anecdotes. The stories in Edison, New Jersey are where Yunior lives after his father has come to get them from Santo Domingo. The narrator lives here much of his life.

The stories of his father are from New York when he first arrived in the United States. During this time his father remarried and lived in a house with his new wife and baby.

## Language and Meaning

Like the setting, the language changes throughout the story collection. The narrator uses language in the stories about Santo Domingo that a child might use; this language in his reflection of the past are how the readers know that Yunior is telling these stories from a much older and less innocent perspective.



When the stories become journal-like, the language reflects the present in the narrator's life. Any reflection using this language is immediate and not seen through the lens of a much older narrator.

Lastly, when the narrator is telling his father's story, the language is much more mature and educated. Here the narrator refers to having been to college, and the language, diction, and sentence structure in these narratives demonstrates this.

## Structure

The stories that are set in Santo Domingo when the narrator was a young boy are divided up into numbered sections. The sections are brief, and each tells one vignette remembered from childhood. The effect of this is like memory: the reader cannot remember all of the details that connect the canvas of his childhood, rather little snippets are connected with loose transitions.

In the stories that read like journal entries, there is much more reflection. The stories are divided into titled sections that highlight what was happening to him at the time—almost like headlines from this time in his life.

The last two stories, "No Face" and "Negocios," read like a traditional narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Though they relate and connect to the previous stories in the connections, the narratives can stand alone and be understood.



## Quotes

These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like I was his son or something. (Fiesta, 1980)

It seemed like Papi had always been with her, even when we were in Santo Domingo for him to send for us. (Fiesta, 1980)

A week from then she would be asking me again, begging actually, telling me all the good things we'd do and after a while I hit her and made the blood come out of her ear like a worm but right then, in that apartment, we seemed like we were normal folks. Like maybe everything was fine. (Aurora)

I didn't know him at all. I didn't know that he'd abandoned us. That this waiting for him was a sham. (Aguantando)

Mami might have been skinny, a bad thing on the Island, but she was smart and funny and that's hard to find anywhere. (Aguantando)

I never wanted to be away from the family. Intuitively, I knew how easily distances could harden and become permanent. (Aguantando)

I was nine and couldn't even write my own name. (Aguantando)

Those are the orbiters. But the majority of you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand onto his desk. I could already see myself losing altitude, fading, the earth spread out before me, hard and bright. (Drown)

Pruitt. Most of our customers have names like this, court case names: Wooley, Maynard, Gass, Binder, but the people from my town, our names, you see on convicts or coupled together on boxing cards. (Edison, New Jersey)

A thousand years ago when I was still in college I learned something about them. (Edison, New Jersey)

Run a hand through you hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa. (How to Date...)

Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own. (How to Date...)

She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain say, I like you. (How to Date...)

He was twenty-four. He didn't dream about his familia and wouldn't for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the wrecks about our islands, stacked high as sugar cane. (Negocios)



He told himself, Think only of today and tomorrow. (Negocios)

Then you get your familia over here and buy yourself a nice house and start branching out. That's the American way. (Negocios)

While most of the men around him were two-times broke, he had seen a few, fresh off of the boat, shake the water off their backs and jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud. (Negocios)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Why is it so hard for Yunior to create a new life for himself? In the end, was he successful? How does he implicitly say this?

## Topic 2

What was Papi's vision of the American Dream? What was Yunior's? How were their dreams of a better life similar? Different? How were their circumstances different? Should achieving the American Dream have been easier for Yunior? How did the American Dream fail them?

## Topic 3

How did Yunior feel towards women? What was his relationship with his mother like? What influenced his feelings for his mother?

## Topic 4

When did Yunior lose his innocence? How did he change because of it?