

Oscar's Half Empty Glass

by Ryan Ferries

There is a famous idiom that most people know, which goes as follows: an eight ounce water glass is sitting on a table and four ounces of water are actually in the glass. Now, one can look at this water glass and the amount of liquid that is within it as being either half full or half empty. Initially a person may not think very much about the two answers because in fact both of them are true; the water glass is both half empty and half full, so it should not matter if a person says it one way or the other. However, the meaning behind this question can go a lot further. An answer can tell a lot about a person, depending on the response they give. For instance, the common conclusions of this idiom go as follows: if a person says the water glass is half full, this person is more optimistic. This means they see things in a more positive manner and when they see something that may be bad, they try to find something good that may come out of it. However, for the people that say that the glass is half empty, this answer tells the exact opposite about the nature of this person. This person thinks about topics in a more pessimistic manner, which means that he tends to think things will go badly even if it does not appear that way and feels as if life will always have major disappointments that will outshine the good moments. Although there is not actually a "correct" answer, since they are both technically right, there is one answer that may be more beneficial to the person answering.

The best way to answer this question is by stating that the glass is half full. A person that can go through life with the ability to think about experiences in a positive way can have a more fulfilling life and get more enjoyment out of what he does every day. Norman Vincent Peale talks about this topic in his book entitled Six Attitudes for Winners. There is a saying that Peale

states in the beginning of this book which he comes back to numerous times. He says, “Attitudes are more important than facts” (5). This means that a person’s way of thinking about something is more important than what may or may not actually be true. Peale thinks that this is because people can change a lot about their lives just by the attitude that they have, regardless of what is actually true. A person’s positive or negative thoughts and attitudes towards themselves, others, and life experiences have a great influence on the direction that the person’s life may take. If a person can think positively, he will have a better outlook on life in general, which will be better in the long run. This type of attitude goes along with psychological studies since it is an emotion that people can control.

The novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, written by Junot Diaz, can be analyzed using Peale’s conclusions. Many characters throughout the book have different events happen to them because of the attitude that they have towards life. When looking at this novel, psychological criticism can be used. One of the main ideas of psychological criticism is to look at characters within a novel and try to understand why they think certain thoughts and why they perform certain actions and for the reader to try and think about what it means that the character does it that way. This can be an important criticism to think about when reading because this can give a better understanding about a character, which provides a better picture of the overall novel as well. When the reader has a better understanding about the characters and knows more about them they have a better reading experience overall and can make more conclusions from the book itself. A reader should use psychological criticism when looking at The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao in order to better understand the characters and to analyze how they look at life and if it is healthy for the characters to go through life in this particular way.

The novel is about a Dominican Republic family and tells the story about the “fuku” or curse that is on the family. One of the main characters is a geeky male named Oscar. He does not have many friends and has a hard time relating and talking to anyone, especially girls. If Oscar was asked the question about whether the water glass is half empty or half full, he would likely say that it was half empty. Oscar does not think about life in a positive manner and this is not good for him. If he were able to think about life in a more positive way, he might have had a more fulfilling life. Unfortunately, he always has a pessimistic attitude about everything and this is a great disadvantage. Since he thought that every girl would reject him, he was not able to interact with them and would just scare them off. If he possessed a more positive attitude about it, he may have been able to be more comfortable and then act more naturally around girls. If Oscar was able to take a chance on something, he might be more fulfilled with its outcome.

A major topic that Oscar thinks about in a negative and unproductive way is his family’s “fuku.” From a young age, his grandma always told him about the curse and talked to him about how only bad things could happen to their family. Through the years, this turned Oscar into becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In his textbook Essentials of Sociology, James Henslin says that a self-fulfilling prophecy is “An originally false assertion that becomes true simply because it is predicted” (126). Henslin is saying that even if something is not necessarily true, people will make it true because they think it is what is supposed to happen. Since Oscar believed that his family had a curse, he did not try to do anything to prevent bad things from happening but simply accepted that his life was going to be bad.

Self-fulfilling prophecy is a topic that is depicted often in media. It happens so often because it is such a common part of everyday life, even though most people hardly even know it

exists. Within the novel Diaz makes many different pop culture references. At one point in the novel, he references the popular film The Matrix. This film gives a very clear image of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Neo (the main character within the film) is walking in to see the oracle; who is supposed to tell Neo what he needs to do and who he is going to become. The oracle is a psychic who can see into the future to know what will happen and how it will happen. When Neo walks into her office she tells him, “Don’t worry about the vase.” Neo then turns around and accidentally breaks the vase. He is amazed that she knew what he was going to do and asks her how she knew that. The oracle responds “What’s really going to bake your noodle later on is; would you still have broken it if I hadn’t said anything?” Neo would probably not have broken the vase if the oracle had not said anything as he entered the room. However, breaking the vase is a false statement that became true because Neo listens to the oracle and accidently breaks what she is telling him not to worry about. By Neo breaking the vase, he becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy without even knowing it.

At first it may not seem like Neo and Oscar have anything in common. Neo is a stereotypical hero in the film and was the one chosen to save the world. He steps up to the challenge and does all he can to help the world even though what he is doing is very dangerous and he could potentially die. On the other hand, Oscar reads comic books all day and does not have any challenge that is waiting for him to accomplish. Oscar does not seem like he can save anyone even if he was asked and doesn’t seem like he can really take care of himself either. However, these two polar opposites do have one trait in common, they are both self-fulfilling prophecies. Oscar is a self-fulfilling prophesy because ever since he was a young child, he was told there was a family curse. Instead of not believing it or forgetting about it and just living his life, he starts to believe that he is cursed. Yuniore, who is the narrator of the book, says “Dude

[Oscar] used to say he was cursed” (171). This shows that Oscar did not keep this a secret and wanted people to hear about the curse. Oscar even says, “I am ill fated” (176). Oscar grew up hearing all about the curse and he chose never to question if it was true. Both Neo and Oscar turned into self-fulfilling prophecies without ever having knowledge of it.

It seems like Oscar always had his self-fulfilling prophecy looming over his head. Instead of thinking about life in a positive way, he blamed everything on the curse to try and make it someone else’s fault instead of his own. This is not a healthy thing for Oscar to do because he could never have control of his life because he was blaming all of his problems on the curse. He became so obsessed with how he was cursed that he always thought that bad things would happen to him. Oscar even thought that his inability to get a girl was because of the curse. With this unfortunate thinking he became obsessed with a woman who already had a boyfriend. The boyfriend did not like Oscar and Oscar would not take the hint that he should stop seeing her and would do everything he could in order to be with her. Unfortunately, the boyfriend ended up killing Oscar because of his obsession. This may not have happened to Oscar if he had not gone through his whole life thinking that something bad was going to happen to him. If he had not thought he was living a life that was cursed, his mind would not have been as foggy as it was, so he might have stopped what he was doing before his actions led to his death.

Even though The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao was written in 2007 it has some of the same themes and character traits as an 1843 classic, The Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. This novel tells the story of the most famous misanthropic character in literature, Ebenezer Scrooge. Ebenezer Scrooge is also noted for making one of the biggest transformations a person can make. Through the character of Scrooge the reader can see the

powerful affects of both negative and positive thinking. In the beginning of the novel the reader sees Scrooge as a cold-hearted, greedy, downright nasty fellow. He is full of “Bah Humbug.” The reader cannot even sympathize with his unfortunate beginning. Scrooge’s mother dies giving birth to him and his father pretty much abandons him at the boarding school. Unfortunately for Scrooge, he cannot overcome his difficult start and puts up a negative wall so as not to get hurt again.

Scrooge saw the whole world negatively. His whole attitude to his employee, family, and townspeople was crass and mean. Not surprisingly, nobody liked him; in fact they hated him and made fun of him. He had no friends, no relationships, and no joy in his life. Scrooge’s negative attitude infected his life so much he could not even conceive of the idea of being happy. Then, on Christmas Eve, Scrooge had to endure the horrors of the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. This was his wake up call. He had to witness all the devastation his negativity caused in himself and others. Luckily for Scrooge he got the hint and woke up a new man. His whole attitude changed. He was happy, generous, and cared for others. With his positive change others changed towards him. They were confused to be sure, but liked him a whole lot more than before. Dickens wants the reader to know that a positive attitude is not just for the outward display, but for something much deeper. He writes of Scrooge, “Many laughed to see this alteration in him, but he let them laugh and little heeded them. His own heart laughed and that was quite enough for him.” (52) Dickens shows the reader that complete transformation has happened to Scrooge because Scrooge feels that positive force deep within himself. Scrooge has become a happy, positive man because of his change in attitude. Scrooge is an extreme example about how ones thoughts can affect their life and how anyone can change no matter how old they are. Scrooge and Oscar have some similarities with one another. They both think that life is

unfair and have a hard time fitting into society. The main difference is that Scrooge was alive long enough to change his ways while Oscar did not have this chance.

Unlike Oscar and Scrooge, who both look at the water glass as half empty, Oscar's mother Beli would look at the same water glass and say that it is half full. She does not share a lot of the same characteristics as her son Oscar because she looks at life in a different light than he does. She may not be completely optimistic; however, she usually has a positive outlook on life. For instance, she does not believe that her family has a curse. When La Inca tells her that she is cursed, Beli just laughs and says, "You might be cursed, but not me" (128). Even though they were both told at a very young age that the family was cursed, Beli decides not to believe this. She does not go through life always thinking that something awful is going to happen even though she does go through some hard times. It is clear that Beli does not have a perfect life because she goes out with men who are not the best for her, her father throws boiling hot oil at her and she gets cancer when she is older. However, when these bad things happen to her, she takes them in stride and just blames it on life in general. She does not let all the bad things that happen to her cripple her or make her weak. Instead, she takes them in stride and uses them to try and become a more independent and stronger person than she was before.

Her daughter Lola also has a similar attitude towards life. Lola is a couple years older than her brother Oscar. She too grew up in the family where many members told her that the whole family was cursed. Yet, like her mother, she does not believe in the curse either. When she is talking about what she believes in she says this, "If you ask me I don't think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. And that's enough" (205). This thinking is more like her mother's ideas than her brother's thinking. Lola does not believe that she has been born

into a cursed family. Even though bad events happen to her as well, Lola does not blame it on the curse and just thinks that it is a part of life. Even though Oscar and Lola were brought up in the same manner and were both told the same things about the curse, they obviously believe two very different things. Lola does not believe in the curse and thinks it is stupid to blame anything on it, which is similar to her mom's belief. By going along with life and not just blaming the bad things that happen to her on a curse, Lola seems to get more out of her life than Oscar gets out of his life.

Other books also talk about how a positive attitude and positive thinking can lead to a better life with more joy in it. Many novels have tried teaching this topic to people in hopes that people can lead more meaningful lives. Henry David Thoreau talked about this topic in his book Walden, or Life in the Woods. Thoreau believed that a person could do whatever he set his mind on. He wrote, "I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours"(267). This is something that is simplistic in theory that can be added to one's life, however it can be hard to reach as a goal. However, all one has to do is change the way that he thinks about going through life and make it more optimistic. If a person has a positive attitude about what is going on you will have a better chance to have a more fulfilling life and be more satisfied with it. Even though this may sound simple, it can be hard to hold such a positive attitude. Even through thick and thin, Thoreau talks about the importance of keeping the positive attitude in one's life, because it will make everything more bearable. This is the outlook that Beli and Lola seem to try and practice. They try and look at the good in life rather than dwell on what is going wrong. Even when things are hard, they just try to move on to something better without getting down.

As already illustrated, many media forms show how positive attitudes and outlooks toward life can end up changing a person drastically. However, there has also been scientific studies done to analyze people's thoughts and what people can do to become a happier. Many scientists have looked into whether there is any correlation between having positive thoughts and actually having a positive and fulfilling life. Mark Stibich is one scientist who studied the simple act of smiling to see how it influenced various people in their lives. He then wrote an article talking about his findings called Top 10 Reasons to Smile. Some of his reasons to smile are fairly obvious. For example, when a person sees another person smiling they are more likely to go talk to them. This is because they look friendlier and therefore are easier to go up to and talk with than a person who looks unhappy. A person who is frowning does not look as approachable. However, some of the other reasons may not be quite as obvious. Stibich writes, "Studies have shown that smiling releases endorphins, natural pain killers, and serotonin. Together these three make us feel good. Smiling is a natural drug" (Stibich). This proves that smiling actually has the power to help the brain feel better since it releases natural endorphins.

With the facts from Stibich's studies it is not hard to understand why someone who is feeling happy will more than likely have a smile on his face. It is no wonder that just a simple smile can change a person's day. Sarah Illenberger wrote an article for *Time Magazine* that also talked about the benefits of smiling. It says "Not only does mood drive facial expressions but facial expressions, in turn, can change mood. This is why some psychologists urge depressed or angry patients to smile more" (Illenberger). A study showed how smiling actually sends enough endorphins and serotonin to the brain where it can potentially change a person's overall mood. Some people may find it hard to smile because they are always looking at the bad in various situations, therefore they do not get these natural high feelings that a smile may cause. In this

case changing one's thoughts and actions is very important. If a person that typically thinks negative thoughts can learn to smile more, he may be able to change his mood naturally.

The goal of most novels is to tell a story that a reader can get a personal message out of and possibly even enhance his own life. Different characters from a book can show readers how they should and should not act. In the novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the author is showing us how to have a better life by learning from the people in the book. Oscar thought that he was cursed and that bad things were always going to happen to him. Therefore, his self-fulfilling prophesy came true because he did not do anything to prevent these bad events in his life. The same book shows Bali and Lola with a different view on life and the family curse. They do not believe in the curse and think more positively, which results in a happier and longer life than Oscar. This book shows how a person's thoughts can change a lot about his life and how much he gets out of it. Since Oscar was not able to change his thoughts, his own life was left unfulfilled. Even science has shown how thoughts and attitudes can help or hurt a person's mental psyche. It seems like one way to have a happier life is by thinking happier thoughts and smiling more to help send natural endorphins to the brain. Perhaps if Oscar could have learned how to smile a little more and have more positive thoughts he may not have met with the tragic fate that he did.

The same water glass is still sitting on the table. It still has the same four ounces of water in it. Perhaps thinking about the same question might have a little more meaning now. Saying that the glass is half full is a step towards leading a better life. Gandhi once said "A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes." The simple act of thinking about the water glass as half full becomes a part of ones self and perhaps could lead to a more fulfilling life.

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