

Depression Of Masculinity

by Nicole Moore

In the book The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao , the main character Oscar, spends his whole life trying to fit in but could never find his place. Once he finally feels like he is a part of Ybon and belongs it is ripped away from him. Oscar goes through major boughs of depression which was brought on by all the things people were expecting from him being that he was Dominican. Although it seems like Oscar never had a chance he proves everyone wrong in the end. Oscar had a short life and unfortunately it was spend trying to convince himself, family and peers that he was good enough, Dominican enough and all the while causing him personal turmoil which in the end is part of the big scheme of things that killed him.

Oscar is a Dominican male, which is a very crucial variable in this book. Being that Oscar is Dominican many people expect Oscar to be something he is not. Being a Dominican, male in this book means being out on the town, being a hero, or being a womanizer. Oscar is feeling all this pressure from all of these expectations. The feelings of inadequacy lead to Oscar become depressed and withdraw, forcing him to live in a fantasy world he has created through his books and the characters in them. The expectations of a Dominican male didn't define Oscar, and he was labeled as weird because of it. This paper will explore what pressures forced Oscar into the depression he was in for most of his life.

At the beginning of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the narrator

paints a picture of Oscar that is going to change as time goes on. In the beginning, Oscar is described as a young boy at seven years old as chasing all the girls around. This behavior was not only encouraged by his family and friends, it was expected. He sounded like a typical Dominican male and he was. There was only one problem; on page 15 of the book it states "It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" This line in the book is a very important piece of the puzzle. Oscar didn't have a male model in his life and that missing part of his life had to have caused him some emotional trials throughout his life. Not only did he have no one to look up to, he had a empty feeling.

In Oscar's later years he is not much for chasing after the girls anymore. His appearance has changed drastically and he no longer attracts the women. In fact the book describes him as an overweight freak. Oscar had no sense of belonging anymore. "He walked into school everyday like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was, and all he could think about was the day of his manumission, when he would at last be set free from his unending horror." This statement alone tells how alone and secluded that Oscar was feeling. The world of girls and social life was way out of his element. He had been in his own fantasy world for so long he no longer belonged to this world of high school and he was feeling it everyday. As Oscar proceeded with high school his weight was rising because of his on going depressive state.

On page 19 the book mentions "Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often)

and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he'd become the neighborhood pariguayo [party watcher.] His weight gain was from a result of his depressed state and because of his weight gain he felt as though he could not do certain activities like party, or try to pursue women because of his size. These traits were not Dominican at all. His family could see him going in this downward spiral and both his family and his friends didn't approve of these undominican characteristics.

Throughout the book Oscar's appearance was described as nerdy. Illustrated in the book on page 20, "He wore his semi kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses-his anti-pussy devices, "Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them-sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded." Even his only friends made fun of his appearance. Oscar seemed as though he had let himself go. In his mind he wasn't good enough for his Dominica heritage, he was never going to get a woman and he was never going to fit in. Since Oscar felt so alone he was an outcast anyways. He knew he was different. He knew he didn't fit in with even his own family. He just let himself go, Oscar knew in his heart he was never going to amount to the Dominican or male figure anyone wanted him to be.

Oscar felt so secluded from everyone else his age. While most boys were chasing women and looking for a good party, all Oscar wanted to do was watch tv and read about anything fantasy. This was Oscar's way of repressing his emotions about not being able to keep up with his other male peers and his way

of being on top in his own world. In the book it talks about how different Oscar was from his peers. Page 23 in the book states “Sucks to be left out of adolescence, sort of like getting locked in a closet on Venus when the sun appears for the first time in a hundred years.” This type of seclusion would lead anyone to a depressive state. According to the royal college of psychiatrics, Philip Timms, “If you are alone, have no friends around, are stressed, have other worries or are physically run down, you are more likely to become depressed.”

Oscar just gave up on himself and the thought of ever getting with a woman. In Oscar’s depressed state, on page 25 in the book “He cried often for his love of some girl or another. He cried in the bathroom where no one else could hear him.” Oscar couldn’t talk to anyone because no one could understand where he was coming from or the man he had become given his heritage. He had to repress all those feelings. It was easy for Oscar to repress his feelings because that is all he knew. When he was growing up no one in his whole family expressed their emotions they all held it inside. Oscar was only doing what he had been taught to do.

Oscar’s sister Lola tried to push him throughout the book. Although she doesn’t ever really think it is possible she wants him to live up to her and everyone else’s expectations. Page 25 in the book states “You’re going to die a virgin unless you start changing” Even his own sister sees him as a failure. Not only does he get teased by his friends but also by his own blood.

Lola thinks that all Oscar’s short comings are because he is lazy, at one point she tells him he is allergic to trying. According to Leonard Holmes

depression is not a sign of personal weakness, and it cannot be willed or wished away. Although Lola's point may be valid it is much more likely that Oscar physically feels like he can't do anything right because of his depressed stupor he is in. The shame and repressed emotions account for Oscar's unwillingness completely. Oscar is not weak or lazy he is just outside of his own thoughts and abilities because he is looking through the eye of a depressed person. According to Leonard Holmes "Some symptoms of depression include: Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down", and Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain." All these symptoms Oscar was experiencing.

Throughout the book Oscar has many transitions that he goes through. One of the most pivotal parts of the book is when Miggs gets a girlfriend because Oscar thought he was an even bigger freak than he thought of himself. All Oscar's wishes of ever finding a woman were shot. This is what sparked a change in Oscar he knew he had to fix his appearance. Oscar even took up writing which must have been a great outlet to express his emotions he had been holding in so tightly.

It seems like when Oscar finally does accept his accomplishments of a new look and a love for writing his life falls right into place. Even Lola notices the change in her brother. Oscar finally falls in love for the first time with the girl in his SAT prep class, Ana. He was finally acting a little more Dominican. Oscar even had a bit of a confidence now that he found this girl in his life. When Ana's "ex" boyfriend Manny comes back into her life, it threatens Oscar's existence and

chance at happiness. When she is no longer available Oscar starts to feel those same old depressed feelings again. He also feels the pressure of his writing career falling down the drain since the company he wanted to write for closed. All this pressure was just too much on Oscar.

Oscar was feeling angry at the thought of being “betrayed” by Ana when she new he liked her all along. In his first year in college his depression cycled again. He returned to being fat, not exercising, and all of his darkish ways. Oscar started to feel like he was back in high school again all alone.

After high school Oscar meets Yuniior, the narrator of the book, who says he will change his life, Oscar still feels hopeless. Yuniior is all Dominican, everything that Oscar has been dying to be. He feels as though Yuniior may be able to help him. When Yuniior tries to get him to exercise Oscar gives up and once again returns to his old habits or depression, over indulging in food, and feeling an all the time low. Yuniior being around is like a slap in the face to Oscar because he will never be as “Dominican” as Yuniior always getting all the chicks he wants and having the good looks too. Even though Yuniior had everything he didn’t have La Jablesse. Oscar thought he had one her over. Once again his depressed state had subsided. Oscar had one thing in common with everyone despite his differences that was that he needed to feel and be loved. Oscar was depressed otherwise. He needed to feel a sense of belonging.

When Oscar finds out that Yuniior is going to be staying in a different apartment he becomes overly depressed. Oscar decides to suppress his emotions more and starts drinking his troubles away. When Oscar does drink

too much he does try to commit suicide, he is crying out for help because he feels his is at his end of the rope and that it was hopeless there was nowhere else for him to go. He felt his life was no longer worth living because he had no love, he didn't fit into any group, and he was secluded from everyone and everything.

He couldn't bare the thought of living this miserable life any longer. According to Reiss & Dombeck, "In addition to suicidal ideation, there are other warning signals that suggest suicide risk as well as the possible presence of a mental or physical illness. Of particular concern are signs and symptoms that represent changes from a person's conventional or normal behavior, appearance, and functioning." Oscar had many warning signs that came about way before his suicide attempt. For example he had started to gain and then lose weight, he wasn't interested in being social, and he wasn't caring about anything including his appearance, these are classic warning signs for depression which can lead to suicidal thoughts or attempts.

The emotional suppression and has acted as a scapegoat for Oscar and his family in many ways and really pushed Oscar to suicide because he was never allowed to express his feelings because his family was never really open. First of all they never have to admit to themselves that their was a problem to begin with because they just blame their surroundings for everything bad that happens in their life so they don't have to deal with their feelings head on. Oscar is learning slowly how to deal with his emotions and this is just a bump in the road.

After Oscar graduates and is now teaching in his hometown, he is faced with the same ridicule he felt as a child as an adult and once again keeps his feelings all boxed up inside. Even his male students make fun of him. When talked about on page 264 in the book “Asked in the middle of lectures if he ever go laid, and no matter how he responded they guffawed mercilessly.” Oscar couldn’t escape the Dominican lifestyle and expectations throughout his life. He lead a life of shame and self pity because he couldn’t figure out how to be a “man”. “No girls who loved him? No girls anywhere in his life?” as stated on pages 266-267 in the text. Oscar wanted nothing more than to be loved. It seemed like the more he tried to fall in love the harder it was for him and the deeper he went into a depressive state of mind, a deep dark place. Oscar didn’t know how to deal with his emotions because he had no one to talk to and every time things got tough Oscar would become weighed down by all his emotions.

One page 268 in the book, “Some mornings he would wake up and not be able to get out of bed. Like he head a ten-ton weight on his chest.” The way Oscar is describing his life without love is so sad and with all his emotional baggage he had been carrying his whole life this must have been very tough. He is obviously so depressed he can’t even function in his “normal” daily activities. Oscar’s depression comes in many cycles in his life and stays for different periods of time sometimes lasting a long time and sometimes a shorter time.

As mentioned before there are many turning points for Oscar throughout this book. When Oscar meets Ybon his life is forever changed. Oscar decided to take a chance with Ybon. Oscar can finally talk to Ybon about his problem which

in turn makes Oscar feel a lot better since he has never been able to tell anyone about his problems. He knew that she had a boyfriend and knew how depressed he would be if she ever left him but he had to keep going. Was he trying to prove he was Dominican enough? Was he trying to get laid for no other reason than he wanted the experience? Was Oscar so far in love he was will to take a chance with Ybon? These are all questions that might run through readers heads at this point in the story.

When Ybon's boyfriend finds out about Oscar and goes crazy on him and tries kill him this makes Oscar happy because he realizes that her boyfriend wouldn't have tried to kill him if he didn't think they were serious. This statement shows what a low self-esteem Oscar really has, after being beaten almost to death he is happy that he was beat because this means he is in a real relationship with Ybon.

When he talks to Yuniar about the kiss that almost got him killed he says on page 305 "I kissed a girl, Yuniar. I finally kissed a girl." He was so excited to be part of that man hood that he had to tell Yuniar of the kiss not that he had almost gotten killed. According to Lewis Linden, "Manliness, it can be seen, is an eminently relational notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity in a kind of fear of the female, firstly in oneself." (pg 6) Oscar had never been able to prove to anyone that he was actually a man and now he was making that progress that proved he had what it would take to be welcomed into what the Dominicans would call "manhood". Even now one could see that Oscar even feels more open with his emotions when talking to Yuniar as well. He is

slowly but surely opening up.

When Oscar gets the courage to go back to Ybon he is showing a massive amount of courage. He was showing a little bit of his Dominican side. He was proving to everyone that he was Dominican and he wasn't a pussy or gay he was in love with a woman and would do anything for her love.

At last Oscar finally feels as though he proves his man hood because he doesn't die a virgin. According to Macdonald & Woods, "Too often, society sees 'masculinity' as the reasons why men abuse their bodies and minds, abuse their partners, refuse to seek help from friendly health services, and die young." Yes Oscar even took a beaten to prove he wasn't to gay or pussy to go after the woman he loved no matter what the price was he was to pay to be Dominican and masculine enough. This was a turning point for everyone else in the book because they realized that Oscar was a man and he died a manly death even though the norms of masculinity in the Dominican perspective are what essentially killed Oscar.

When looking back at Oscar's life there is overwhelming evidence that he was trying to fit in for himself and for others. He wanted to be that "Dominican" boy and it really weighed on him that he couldn't fulfill that missing element of his life. Oscar was depressed in so many ways and had several periods of depression throughout his life. The feelings of inadequacy that he must have felt in being an outsider must have been very overwhelming.

Oscar's last days of his life may have proved to be his most important ones. The last days were victory for Oscar because he was finally achieving the

success of being loved and feeling loved along with the perk of looking and being masculine enough to be considered a true Dominican. Although Oscar dies a very cruel death he doesn't die in vain because he dies being the masculine Dominican male figure he was always striving to be to make his family & peers happy but to also fit in. Oscar was dying being the Dominican man he always wanted to become to prove his masculinity, and lastly he was dying for the sake of true love which in the end is all Oscar truly wanted. Yes Oscar gave his life to being molded into a Dominican Masculine man that in the end ended his life.

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