

Tricks of the Depressive Mind

by Joshua Sowa

Oscar Wao is a character whose mind is constantly dipping into the unreal worlds of Sci-Fi and Fantasy. These worlds are where he is able to find a place he belongs and feels loved in, unlike the depressive and horrible life he lives in everyday. With these ideas in mind, does Oscar make for a reliable source of the stories Yuniior tells the reader? Is Oscar a character that is so lost in his fantasy world that he cannot tell the difference between it and the real one? If so, what drove him to this inability to tell the difference? These are all questions that the reader must answer to determine if what they are reading is fact or fiction in the realm of the novel. Using the psychological approach, it is possible to conclude that Oscar is unable to grip the reality of his situation at the end of the story. He faces so many depressive and physical beatings to the mind throughout the story that he gets completely lost in his fantasy realm, giving the reader an unreliable and heroic end to the story of his life.

To get this understanding of the unreliable end of Oscar's story, it is important to look into Oscar's past and the negative effect it had on his personality and mind. It is also very important to show the symptoms that Oscar has that suggest he is depressed. The beginnings of Oscar's depression link back to his first love, Maritza. The way Oscar devotes himself to this girl leaves him very vulnerable to the depression associated with a breakup; even at this very young age, he really believes that this is the woman he will marry someday. Ultimately, the way she ended it with him led to his insecurities and his problems that are evident throughout the entire novel. According to Webmd.com,

some of the main risk factors for depression are lack of social support and early childhood trauma or abuse. Both of these risk factors are evident even before Maritza breaks the relationship off. In Oscar's home life, it is shown that he has no support from his family; they are all preoccupied with their own problems and lives to concern themselves with how Oscar is feeling. The other risk factor, childhood abuse or trauma, is very evident even before the problems arise with Maritza; Oscar is distressed about girls at a young age and instead of comforting him his mother throws him down and verbally berates him. These two risk factors already in effect in Oscar's life plus the breakup he endures at the hands of Maritza, lead to his social abnormalities and depression in his later years.

When Maritza does separate from Oscar, he takes a downward spiral straight into depression. Webmd.com gives many symptoms of depression that Oscar shows in the novel. These symptoms include feeling hopeless and helpless, unable to control negative thoughts, weight gain, irritability, and thoughts of suicide (Webmd.com). Oscar feels hopeless with his attempts at getting a girl or even fitting in with all the kids his age. Because of the break with Maritza, Oscar became fat and this made him an outcast even more. Not only was he an outcast with his peers, his family even cast him out to a certain degree. They did not consider him as a Dominican like them and treated him much differently than they did when he was younger. All these factors made Oscar a very lonely and depressed individual. He is what would describe as an Atypical Depressive person (Webmd.com). A person that has Atypical Depression usually experiences fleeting moments of happiness when they have some positive influence in

their lives, such as a girlfriend in Oscar's case (Webmd.com). This could explain why he is always so quick to fall in love; it is because he wants to feel needed by someone. This sets him up for his continuous fallouts with the women in his life.

In the article "Depression-Related Psychosocial Variables: Are They Specific to Depression in Adolescents?," John R. Seeley suggests that depressed individuals report three to six times as many stressful life events as opposed to a person who is not depressed (365). With Oscar, the readers are able to see a repetitive pattern of these stressful events in his relationships with women. The readers watch as Oscar goes through four relationships that end badly and leave Oscar in a worse state than he was in when he went into them in. This also suggests that Oscar must have related these stressful events to Yunion in some way.

The first relationship with Maritza is the beginning of his failed relationships with women and his first step into his depression. The next girl Oscar encounters is Ana. She helps Oscar reach his temporary positive state of mind and he latches onto her so he does not lose the positive state of mind. When her boyfriend Manny reappears, Oscar begins to feel this positive state of mind drift away and he starts falling back into his depressive state. After this fall with Ana, Oscar shows a little bit of the aggressive nature that is typical with depression when he takes the gun to Manny's apartment. He begins to despair again and this is where he begins to lose his grip with reality and begins getting into writing more. His love for Ana is described in the book as "The only thing that came close was how he felt about his books; only the combined love he had for everything he's read and everything he hoped to write came even close." (45).

The third fallout with women happens during his time in college. At this point, Oscar has felt hopeless and alone throughout his entire time in school and then he begins again to feel the positive feelings that go along with his relationships with women when he meets Jenni. She gives him the temporary reprieve from his depressive feelings, as both the women before her did. The fall with her affects Oscar a lot more than any of the other falls. This one occurs so rapidly with Oscar walking in on her with another man, that he truly loses it this time and tears her room apart. This shows the aggressive nature of the depressive person and helps solidify the point that Oscar is suffering severely from depression throughout this entire novel. He then goes on to attempt suicide, which shows his desperation to remove himself from the reality of his situation and end his suffering. The action of suicide shows that the person is in one of the most severe forms of depression and certain symptoms are soon to follow because of it; they begin to lose their grip on reality and start to become delusional and hallucinate (camh.net). This can show the reader that Oscar is possibly already beginning to separate himself from reality and beginning to live in his own fantasy world in his mind.

The fourth and final fallout with women occurs with Ybon. This fallout differs dramatically from the rest because not only is Oscar in love with her, but she is also in love with him to a degree. He once again begins to feel himself entering his positive state of mind and possibly at this point is emerging somewhat from the depression he lives his everyday life in. Moving away from the depression, Oscar is able to approach this relationship differently and more logically than the previous ones. He does not

suffocate her as he did with other women because his positive state of mind is still intact even when he is not around her. In the part right before Oscar is violently beaten, he receives a kiss from Ybon. Oscar has never experienced an act of affection like this and this is the factor that completely removes Oscar from his depressive state. It is short lived, however, because right after he receives this, he is dragged away and beaten to the brink of death.

The description of the amount of trauma dealt out to Oscar's head and the picture of his body after can lead many readers to believe that Oscar is suffering from some sort of severe brain trauma. He is described as, "Unconscious and bleeding out of both ears and looking like he was one finger tap away from dead" (302). After he receives his beating, Diaz describes Oscar's head as swollen and he is bleeding from the ears. The idea of someone bleeding out of the ears automatically can lead a person to believe that there is some sort of internal bleeding in the brain that will result in some kind of permanent brain damage. The final blow Oscar receives during the beating is a stomp to the head with all the weight of the attacker pressing down. The men that are attacking Oscar are very large men and to have one of them stomp on his head would definitely cause some kind of internal brain injury; at the least it would cause a severe concussion.

According to the essay "The Future of Traumatic Brain Injury" by Jamshid Ghajar, even mild concussions can lead to long-term problems in an average person (190). This is just a mild concussion Ghajar is talking about; Oscar suffers from something more traumatic than this. The doctors themselves in the book are unable to properly

diagnose and state that they “couldn’t guarantee that Oscar didn’t have brain trauma” (303). The only description of any of the injuries Oscar suffers are, “Broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion” (301). The reader receives many descriptions of Oscar having a swollen head that, in Oscar’s own words, feels like it is killing him. Yuniior is shocked at the way Oscar looks and even when they release Oscar from the hospital and he is walking around, Yuniior describes the left side of his face as drooping. This suggests that there is some sort of neurological malfunction going on in Oscar’s head. In the article “The association between head injuries and psychiatric disorders: findings from the New Haven NIMH Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study”, Peter Lewinsohn, John R. Seeley and Ian H. Gotlib state that psychological and psychosocial disabilities are what plague the survivors of traumatic brain injury the most (936). These injuries are capable of throwing Oscar further into his depression and make him lose a grip on reality more so than before. Oscar has already shown certain aspects of himself that suggest his possible break from reality and these experiences push him further out of reality.

A good example of Oscar’s desire to break away from his reality is to look at all the examples the book gives us of Oscar substituting normal everyday life with the stories he creates in his mind. His passion for writing began at almost the same time he began falling into his depressive state. It is his way of coping with a life that was not living up to the expectations he has for it. There are many instances in the novel that show Oscar creating some sort of story, whether it be him writing a novel or being the Dungeons Master during a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Many depressive

individuals have some kind of an outlet to relieve themselves of all the pain and anger they feel that comes with depression. For Oscar, his writing became a way for him to escape this reality for one that suited him better.

It is curious, however, that many of Oscar's stories dealt with death and the end of the world. This shows that the world is not up to Oscar's standards and that he believes it would be better to begin fresh. Also, many of his main characters die in his stories. The characters Oscar is killing can be envisioned as representations of himself because of his desire to be some sort of heroic character, so not only does Oscar believe the world is not living up to his expectations, he is not either. Death is inevitable to Oscar and he believes that it will serve him better to be dead. At one point in the book Oscar even states that writing "may be the death of me" (195).

Oscar's love for writing and the traumas he faces throughout his life, including the beating and neurological damage he suffers at the end of the novel, makes Oscar a very unreliable source for Yunion's narration of the final scenes in the book. Oscar is in such a horrible shape when he visits Yunion the final time that it is impossible to believe that he was in the right state of mind when he returned to Santo Domingo. Oscar has two goals during this trip back and that is to recapture Yunion's love and write. This goal of writing can suggest that not only was Oscar writing about the family curse but he was also beginning to write the end of his own story.

After Oscar's beating and the removal of Yunion from his life, it is plausible that Oscar fell completely into his false sense of reality, and when he returned to her, it was not the same Oscar that left. There are countless examples of false narrative in the

story and Yunior at one point even addresses the unrealistic aspects of Ybon and Oscar's relationship together. Yunior states that even though it may seem unlikely, it is the truth, and for a narrator to have to reassure his audience seems a little unreliable. Yunior states, "I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an Ybon can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?" (285). It is interesting that Yunior uses the word "supposed" and this could lead someone to believe that maybe this is not a reliable statement. Throughout this entire book the reader is constantly reminded that this is a true account and that life is not always happy. So why then does Yunior feel the reader should entirely believe the end he gives us? He himself states that this world "ain't no fucking Middle-earth" (194). If this is not a fantasy realm, then how can he expect the audience to believe this fantasy ending?

There is even a whole section of the book when La Inca interjects and states that the reader was lied to already. She states that the story of how Ybon and Oscar met was actually false; he really meets Ybon at the club she works at. Therefore, the readers have an unreliable source in Oscar and an unreliable narrator in Yunior. The evidence of an unreliable narrator, added to the fact the readers know that Oscar has been severely beaten and possibly has received some sort of traumatic brain injury during his encounter in the cane field, as well as the fact that Oscar is known for his ability to write a good story, can lead a rational person to doubt the dramatic ending of Oscar's life. Because the reader knows the true characteristics of Oscar, it is plausible that the

ending the reader receives is not fact but rather a story Oscar creates to make himself look heroic in his final moments.

There are a few interesting clues at the end of the story that could possibly prove the theory of Oscar creating his own ending to his life. There are sections towards the end of the story that tell about the vast amount of writing Oscar produces during his last month in Santo Domingo. These parts describe how Oscar almost wrote three hundred pages during the course of the twenty-seven days he was in Santo Domingo. Oscar then tells Yunion in a note that he almost has "it"; Yunion asks the question that many of the readers are also asking in their minds: has what? This "it" could be interpreted in a number of ways; since Oscar has become so obsessed with the family curse, the "it" could refer to the cure. The "it" could also refer to his relationship with Ybon.

Yet, perhaps a more likely solution to the "it" Oscar is talking about is that he has finally found a way to write an ending to his life that could satisfy him. An ending he deems fit for a hero, for in many ways the ending can be viewed as a heroic one. Oscar stands up for himself and the woman he loves and states that "anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be" (322). This is nothing more than a cliché ending that a reader can find in a multitude of Fantasy and Sci-Fi films. In fact, if someone read this entire chapter only, it reads like some sort of heroic end to an epic fantasy story. That is not how a person like Oscar would realistically end his life.

Another thing to keep in mind is how Yunion would know the exact facts that happened right before Oscar was shot and killed. He was not there when it happened

and the only witnesses to the murder were the two men who did it and they will not be talking anytime soon. This shows yet another piece of evidence to suggest that Oscar fabricated the ending to his life because he was so deep into his depression over the loss of his love with Ybon that he was seeking a way to end his life. It is also plausible that he would be able to assume that they would take him to the same cane field only this time they were going to put a bullet in his head. Therefore, he created this heroic ending to his life and sent it to Yunior, who is now trying to pass it on to the readers as fact. Yunior is doing this to attempt to give Oscar some dignity. Yunior knows he is telling the readers a false story that he receives from Oscar but believes this ending will be more satisfactory than the one that was more realistic. Oscar is not a heroic character and the ending Yunior suggests is hard to believe.

There is one other little clue that this ending is actually a story written by Oscar. At the end of the chapter, there is a random "Oscar" at the bottom of the page (322). This could be viewed in a multitude of ways but it can also be viewed as a signature to the end of a story. If it were in fact a signature, then that would be proof enough that this was a fabricated ending put together by Oscar. This is not a suggestion that Oscar is still alive but rather a suggestion that Oscar knew what was coming and wrote it out in a heroic way that shows him as brave and defiant. This is a pivotal clue to the idea of Oscar creating his own ending to the story of his life. He knew what was about to befall him and decides to turn it in his favor and portray himself in a positive light.

If one was to accept the possibility that Oscar has fabricated his own ending, then one question to ask is why Junot Diaz would want to end his book like this.

Throughout the narrative Yuniors keeps reminding the reader that this “ain’t no fucking Middle-earth” and most of the stories do not end in a way that the reader would find satisfactory. For Diaz to end the story in this way, it can solidify the fact that the world today is not a happy one. Even though Oscar may construct the ending, he constructs it in a way that is still not satisfactory. Diaz is trying to state that even in people’s wildest imaginations and false realities, they are not able to escape the inevitable dissatisfaction that life can deal out regularly. Oscar may have written himself in a heroic and brave way, but he still could not escape the inevitable reality of death facing him. Life will always drag a person back in to reality, whether they want it to or not.

Oscar Wao is a character that faces many hardships throughout his life and in the end does not come out on top. The serious brain trauma and depression he has sustained has separated him from reality so much, that the only way for him to be happy is to end his own life. He does this through his writings, which become a reality to him. The ending of this story, while having some merit of truth to it, has been created in Oscar’s mind and the harsh reality is that his heroic ending was nothing more than a fairy-tale in the mind of a depressed and possibly deranged individual.

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