A Cheater’s Heart

Junot Diaz, author of *Drown, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, and This is How You Lose Her*, places his characters in the Dominican Republic and the States. He incorporates his own life experiences into his stories. Diaz introduces the central character, Yunior, who drives the stories told throughout the books and gives us an understanding of the typical Dominican man. Yunior states, “I’m not a bad guy. I know how that sounds- defensive, unscrupulous- but it’s true. I’m like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good” (3). He is a sharp, attractive protagonist who gives the books an edge. Throughout the three books, Yunior matures as a character and becomes more than the typical Dominican man. Although he is a confident, suave guy, who directly addresses the reader in the books, he objectifies women and does not consider their emotions and motivations. He always believes that his relationships can be repaired and does not understand his sadness when a girlfriend breaks up with him. However, he is able to experience compassion and hope after he cheats on his fiancée and loses her forever.

Diaz establishes Yunior as a confident, witty young man in *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In “How to Date A Browngirl…” from *Drown*, Yunior details a step-by-step plan for a date. Yunior states, “Shower, comb, dress. Sit on the couch and watch TV…Wait and after an hour go out to your corner…Get back inside. Call her house and when her father picks up ask if she’s there” (Drown 144). Yunior’s use of short and precise statements
and snappy language such as “shower, comb, dress”, shows that he is confident. His writing style gives the impressions that he is this charming in real life, which gives the reader insight to understand why he is so attractive to the girls he meets. His confidence is strong even after he is caught cheating on his girlfriend. Yunior pleads, “Then you look at her a smile a smile your dissembling face will remember until the day you die. Baby, you say, baby, this is part of my novel” (This is How You Lose Her 50). Despite the fact that Yunior knows he will lose his girl, he never drops his sure attitude. He has a smooth response prepared for this exact situation and delivers it expertly.

The use of second person narrative compels the reader to live in Yunior’s world. The final chapter of This is How You Lose Her, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love”, opens with, “Your girl catches you cheating” (179). From the start, Yunior puts the reader in his situation to feel the impact of the breakup. The reader has suddenly become a cheater too, a “total batshit cuero” (179). The second person narrative used in some stories creates an intimate relationship between Yunior and the reader. Yunior’s actions appear repulsive; his fiancée “caught [him] with fifty [girls]” (179). However, because Yunior directly addresses the reader and puts all his emotions, mistakes, and thoughts on the reader, he becomes a likeable character; the reader is able to feel sympathy for him. Yunior states, “You’re good for like a week. Then your moods become erratic…you’ve lost all the mutual friends you had in NYC…your mother won’t speak to you after what’s happened…and you’re feeling terribly guilty and terribly alone” (182-183). Since the words are directed toward the listener, they become guilty, sad, and alone. The second person narrative changes the experience of reading the novel to experiencing the novel. The reader gains better insight into Yunior’s beliefs, feelings, and actions.
Until the last chapter of *This is How You Lose Her*, Yunior objectifies women. Yunior states, “You, Yunior, have a girlfriend named Alma, who has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans” (*This is How You Lose Her* 47). He introduces the reader to his current girlfriend in this chapter and first describes her by her body. He describes women by going through a list and checks off their most distinct physical attributes. These lists indicate that he is concerned first with the appearance of the women he dates, and learns about their character afterward. Later in the chapter, Yunior explains, “Alma is slender as a reed, you are a steroid-addicted block; Alma loves driving, you books; Alma owns a Saturn, you have no points on your license; Alma’s nails are too dirty for cooking, your spaghetti con pollo is the best in the land” (48). Yunior knows that he has nothing in common with Alma. His black-and-white comparisons create a mood that makes it seem like he does not like or care for Alma too much because they are so opposite. However, he stays with Alma because she has a great body, has sex with Yunior, and he seems to be happy.

Yunior does not value the emotions and motivations of the women he dates. He asserts, “it’s an opposites-attract sort of thing, it’s a great-sex sort of thing, it’s a no-thinking sort of thing” (49). Yunior is so absorbed by the physical attraction he feels toward Alma and the pleasure he gets out of having sex with Alma that he thinks their relationship is no big deal. He does not see the emotion attachments that Alma has to Yunior or her point of view on their relationship. He thinks that they have a casual, open relationship, which backfires after he cheats on her. Alma confronts Yunior, “when she starts shrieking, you ask her, Darling, what ever is the matter?” (50). Until the last moment, Yunior hangs onto the idea that he could convince his girls that he did not cheat on them. When they are upset with him, he cannot admit he is a cheater, or
that they are right to leave him. He hopes that they will stay with him, which shows that he does not understand the depth of their feelings toward him, the depth of his betrayal.

Yunior repeatedly thinks there is a way to fix his relationship after his girl discovers he is a cheater. In “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” Yunior assures Magda, his girlfriend at the time, very soon to be ex girlfriend, “I sat down next to her. Took her hand. This can work, I said. All we have to do is try” (25). In Yunior’s mind, everything can be repaired in his relationship if he and his girlfriend “try”, or forget, that he cheated. Yunior’s mindset demonstrates that he lacks the ability to feel empathy for the women he hurts. If he had the ability to feel true empathy and compassion for his girlfriends, then he would know that he could not just fix the relationship and overlook the pain his girlfriends feel. In an interview with Junot Diaz, he states, “I wasn’t really encouraged to imagine women as fully human” (Fidelity in Fiction). Diaz comes from the same background as his character, Yunior. Diaz offers a view of traditional Dominican masculinity: women are inferior to men. Yunior fails to realize that his casual infidelity can cause the women he dates to feel the profound sadness that later Yunior feels. He seems blind to the fact that women are also human beings and throughout all of Yunior relationships, he never finds a girl that is good enough to stop him from cheating, to get him to feel compassion. He does not ever find a girl who makes him realize that women can be as complex, emotional, and motivated individuals.

Although Yunior does not discuss the depth of his girlfriend’s emotions, he does discuss the affect the breakups have on him. During Yunior’s breakup with Alma, he states, “You take your time turning off the car. You are overwhelmed by a pelagic sadness. Sadness at being caught, sadness at the incontrovertible knowledge that she will never forgive you” (50). Even though Yunior knows that he will eventually get caught cheating, he is still overwhelmed by the
sadness of leaving Alma. His use of the word “pelagic” seems like an overreaction. If breaking up causes Yunior an ocean of sadness, he should not have cheated at all. However, Yunior does not have this mindset. He has a cheater’s mindset and at this point, he does not understand the sadness that he feels after the break ups, he just knows that sadness is present. Junot Diaz points out, “All of Yunior’s fucked-up visions of women never get him anything. They end up with him more alone, more frustrated…and farther away from the thing that he deeply longs for- a human connection” (Fassler). His visions that women are inferior to men, that women can be cheated on, that women can be summarized by their appearances, tear Yunior away from a real dedicated relationship. These are the reasons why Yunior feels an ocean of sadness, however, he has not grown enough to think of women as fully human-as the same as himself- and he just becomes frustrated and despite his sadness he moves on to another girl.

In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love”, Yunior’s experiences prime him to learn how to feel compassion and empathy. He hits his lowest point five years after his fiancée leaves him. At first, Yunior tries to fix the relationship and tries to get her back. His efforts are similar to his attempts to patch up all of his other relationships. However, his ex fiancée threatens him with a restraining order. Yunior states, “You stop. You move back to Boston. You never see her again” (181). When Yunior accepts his fiancée’s decision to leave him he finally starts to show a change. He realizes that his fiancée does not want to be around a cheating and lying person. He shows that he respects her by moving away. Yunior thinks that he will be all right and bounce back from this break up like all of his other ones. However, he falls into a depression “so profound you doubt there is a name for it” (183). He has felt “pelagic sadness” before, but he has never felt extreme and intense depression. The change in sadness signifies another change in Yunior. He realizes that this break up is different. He tries to find a new girl. He tries to write,
run, and do yoga. However, every time that he tries to improve his situation it gets worse. Yunior states, “From there what little life you got goes south. A student complains to the school that you curse too much…you get pulled over by the cops three weekends in a row” (213). Nothing seems to go right in Yunior’s life since he lost his fiancée and every life experience he has after that allows him to finally change his point of view.

Finally, Yunior is able to accept his crimes, feel compassion, and find comfort at the end of This is How You Lose Her. Yunior finds himself able to read “The Doomsday Book” (216), which is the book his fiancée made for him that contains all of the emails and photos from the girls he cheated on her with while they were together. The book brings Yunior to a few conclusions. He acknowledges who he has been for his whole life. He states, “You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are” (216). Once he reads the book, he is able to see himself from his fiancée’s point of view and even though it “kills [him] to admit it” (216), he understands that cheating on her was wrong. He is able to feel empathy for her by seeing himself through her eyes and he admits that his fiancée was right to leave him. Additionally, Yunior sees that he will never be able to forget the love he feels towards his ex fiancée. He writes, “The halflife of love is forever” (217). He can never escape from the pain he feels because he lost her. He will always love and long for her, even if the feeling diminishes over time.

In the end, Yunior gets back to the only thing that ever has helped him stay grounded and human: he writes. After the break up he tried to write a couple books, but “all of them suck pipe” (190). He has nothing that inspires him to write. After he reads the Doomsday Book, however, he is able to write a few pages. He states, “For once you don’t want to burn them or give up writing forever. It’s a start” (217). Yunior’s new self-awareness and compassion allow him to have a new attitude towards life. He is hopeful that his life may improve or that he may continue to be
able to write. He states that when he writes it “feels like hope, like grace” (217). He does not know if he will never become profoundly depressed again or if he will be able to find love again. However, Yunior is a different, gentler man than he was at any other point in Diaz’s novels. The writing has given him the start of a new life.

Despite all of Yunior faults, he is able to see himself accurately by the end of the novels. He is no longer the athletic, charming man he used to be, however, he is more empathetic and thoughtful. Throughout Yunior’s experiences, he develops into an intricate character who overcomes cultural norms. He will continually love his ex fiancée, but he writes and pines for improvement in his life because of the hope that writing gives him.
Works Cited


