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Oscar the Cultural Hero: Exploring Social Contexts Through Pop Culture in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

American painter and expressionist Kenneth Noland once shared, "For me, the context is everything - from that comes the understanding of everything." In literature, social contexts have a large role in a story's development. Texts are written by individuals, but individuals are influenced by society. The historical, political, economic, religious, and even familial environments of any text shape the characters, events, and plots that occur. Social contexts enable the intended audience to understand the author's purpose in writing their work. Pop culture, for instance, and the following of books, movies, television shows, music, and such media, form context. Marvel and DC Comics are essentially two different publishing companies, home to many of pop culture's famous characters ("About Marvel: Corporate Information" & "About DC Entertainment"). In his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz alludes to Marvel and DC comics to illustrate Oscar's character development within his flawed social contexts and to highlight larger messages about identity.

On the most basic level, one reason Díaz alludes to Marvel and DC comics is to establish Oscar's character as an outcast in society. The novel opens and Díaz presents Oscar as a hopelessly romantic overweight nerd, using comic references to exaggerate his social isolation. As the narrator Yunior puts it in chapter one for example, "Oscar was a social introvert who

trembled with fear during gym class and watched nerd shows like *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*..." (22). The speaker further amplifies Oscar's social remoteness when he says, "Back when the rest of us were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brothers' cars...he was gorging himself on a steady stream" of "E.E. 'Doc' Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote all the Doc Savage books–moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age" (21). Díaz presents Oscar as was someone who "knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee" (21), who "walked into school every day like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was…" (19), and therefore "his adolescent nerdliness vaporizing any iota of a chance he had for young love" (23), utilizing a comedic tone to showcase that Oscar falls on the margins of society. The author's consistent mention of references to the comic world enable the reader to comprehend Oscar's sci-fi loving and nerdy persona. These allusions not only paint a picture of who Oscar is, but they also serve to explain where he lands in society. The abundance of Marvel and DC comics references emphasize how outcast Oscar is from his social context.

Given Oscar's identity, another reason Díaz alludes to Marvel and DC comics is to illustrate Oscar's escape from fukú. By the middle of the novel, the reader discovers that socially, Oscar faces a troubled reality, what Díaz considers a cursed life. Trujillo's arrest of Abelard, or The Fall, sets up Oscar's flawed familial context. Because the characters of Marvel and DC comics are heroes, comics provide Oscar with *zafa*, or hope amidst his problematic context. For example, after college graduation, the fukú is deeply manifested in Oscar's life, as Oscar experiences a "*meltdown*," for there were times "he went into his tíos closet and put the Colt up to his temple, when he thought about the bridge" (268). Díaz refers to Marvel and DC Comics to emphasize Oscar's escape from this post-graduation pain when he says, "He began to plan a

quartet of science-fiction fantasies that would be his crowning achievement. J. R. R. tolkien meets E. E. “Doc” Smith. He went on long rides. He drove as far as Amish country” (269) and “Social life? Those first couple of years he didn’t have one. Once a week he drove out to Woodbridge Mall and checked the RPGS at the Game Room, the comic books at Hero’s World, the fantasy novels at Waldenbooks” (266). These stories serve as Oscar’s way to shut himself out from the suffering around him, as they are lively and filled with action. The characters, heroes and heroines, give him strength and counsel during his dark times. In 1961, for instance, Marvel experienced a turning point when author Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby established “The Marvel Age of Comics” through creating *The Fantastic Four* superhero team. This initiation “brought a new style of superhero comic that focused on the characters' internal drama as well as their heroic adventures” and this “revolution extended beyond the characters and storylines to the way in which comic books engaged the readership and built a sense of community between fans and creators” (“Marvel Comics”). The narrator showcases how much Oscar can relate to comics given his cursed familial context when he says, “Oscar, as you might imagine, found this version of the Fall very very attractive. Appealed to the deep structures in his nerd brain” (246) and the story is “the kind of shit only a nerd could love” (246). Marvel and DC comics are sci-fi and hero based, and Díaz uses Marvel and DC to emphasize how much Oscar loves sci-fi, as it is a part of who he is. Books and comics are Oscar's escape from the pain of his familial context because of how he is able to find happiness through the heroism and drama in the stories.

A final reason Díaz uses Marvel and DC comics to illustrate how Oscar, a social outcast, is a cultural hero in Dominican culture, where men are expected to fulfill stereotypical masculinity. The speaker clarifies that Dominican society demands that men should model

manliness when they say, “Oscar never had much luck with females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)” (11) and Oscar “had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male” (19). However, even though Oscar is an unpopular and uncool individual because of his nerdliness, weight, and strange character, Díaz is trying to demonstrate that Oscar’s unique identity deserves to be celebrated. By the end of the novel, for example, the reader discovers how Oscar’s love of Marvel, DC comics, science fiction, reading, writing, and passion for books in general has impacted Yunior: “When I’m not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I’m at home, writing. These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (326). After Oscar’s death, for instance, Yunior continues to cherish Oscar’s nerdy, sci-fi-loving legacy because it reminds him that life is not all about chasing women, money, alcohol, or other greedy pleasures: “And yet there are other days, when I’m downtrodden or morose, when I find myself at my desk late at night, unable to sleep, flipping through (of all things) Oscar’s dog-eared copy of *Watchmen*. One of the few things he took with him on the Final Voyage that we recovered” (331). Even though he does not model the demands of his cultural context, Oscar’s ability to love, feel, write, and be himself are amplified through these comic references, and his underrepresented qualities inspire his family as well as readers. Oscar’s legacy, though seen as nonconforming and strange, impacts the people around him in new lights. Díaz stands up for Oscar’s identity, reminding readers that he is a cultural hero who deserves to be recognized for opposing the norms of macho Dominican culture and society.

Oscar is surrounded by his social context to which his nerdy self does not conform, his familial context that is framed by a political curse, and his cultural context that demands him to

be a true masculine *Dominicano*. As a result, Oscar's social environments shape his unique individuality throughout the novel. Although his life is "brief," it is still "wondrous," as Díaz showcases how the deviant Oscar has proven his ability to oppose conformity by choosing to be his truest self. Given Oscar's unique presentation of self, Díaz uses Marvel and DC comics to call his readers to the attention of larger messages about identity and society. He wants to urge readers to consider recognizing social outcasts in newer, positive lights. Harmony can't be achieved if everyone sings on the same note. Oscar's "differences" may have caused social disapproval, but they have also created a noteworthy character, a vivid novel, and most importantly, a fictional character for readers to relate to and look up to. Through his pop culture references and Oscar's character development, Díaz is reaching out to his audience of nerds, geeks, dreamers, hopeless romantics, possibly even reflecting on the social environment of his own life, uniting readers with a sense of hope, a human being to relate to, and a source of happiness through comedy in this lively novel.

Works Cited

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