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# Canon Complications

From a distance the generalities on which literary critic Harold Bloom builds his definition of the Western Canon appear to be stable, but a closer look reveals obvious cracks in his foundation. Surrounding Bloom's idea of the image of individual thought are a few specific regulations that create both obvious complications and contradictions. His Canon calls for literary works to be measured by anything but political or moral assessments, despite their immense force in impacting the self. Junet Dıaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* accurately represent the individual in thought in such a way that overwhelmingly includes thinking on the outside influences of not only other individuals, but the cultures outside of them as well. The addition of such elements arguably produces a more genuine opportunity to appreciate individualism as it is in reality, undoubtedly dealing with the struggle of being shaped and molded by politics and morality. By this standard Bloom's designations for the Western Canon are incomplete. He requires mortality in conjunction with memory in order to portray a foundation for cultural thinking. Dıaz and Ferrante provide a distinction between the internal and the external without dismissing a crucial piece of the equation. To ignore politics and morality in calculating the Canon is to leave out substantial influences on the individual that demand recognition.

The importance of political effects on individual development is at the very core of *Oscar Wao*, demonstrated through Oscar himself and the weight of his life and death that have consumed the narrator, Yunior, enough to record the account in extensively personal detail. Oscar's individualism is immediately apparent in Yunior's critique of his lacking in the masculinity complex as he explains Oscar "had none of the Higher Powers of your typically Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated… Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks" (Díaz, 20). Oscar's variance through an obsession with nerd ethos paves the way for an all-encompassing view of the Fukú and its unending intricacies. With the Fukú having an extremely political origin, Yunior is enabled to paint Oscar's life as unfortunate in any alternative scenario. Without the mentality of a smooth-talking player Oscar is left alone longing for love, but simultaneously Díaz makes clear the inefficiency of those who are skilled at procuring the ladies through the inescapable fact that every one of his male characters getting women experience unhealthy or broken relationships. The reasoning behind this can be traced all the way back to the dictatorship of Trujillo over the Dominican Republic which instilled extraordinary levels of fear into the inhabitants due to unending violence and barbaric ideals of masculinity. Whether Trujillo is the master of or slave to Fukú is not necessary to understand the effect both together have had on three generations of the De Leon family, especially Oscar. After years of having the Fukú demolish his chance at love, the one thing he wants more than anything else in the world, Oscar is, not surprisingly, rather desperate. The mixture of such disparity with a hopeless romantic psyche proves to be lethal in the form of his relationship with Ybón, leaving the reader to question what role the Fukú played. Without it, Oscar would have had somewhat of a better chance with the ladies growing

up, which would have provided him with, at the very least, enough common sense not to get killed over one. Díaz's placement of Oscar into an eerily similar situation to that of his mother with the Gangster acts as evidence of the double-ended sword that is the Fukú once it has taken hold of an individual or a family. Although, unlike her son, Beli did not go back to her lover after being beaten in the cane field, she was left to live the rest of her life in struggle and misery. Oscar knew this suffering well, and he truly believed a happy life would never exist for him because of it, so why not opt for some kind of choice in dying? True change requires sacrifice, and in this case Oscar's arguably sacrificial actions in dying for love gave way for a change in Yunior from skeptic to believer. Despite never thinking anything of it in his younger years, Yunior is touched by the Fukú through means of its dwelling among the skewed concepts of masculinity. After being a player from the very beginning, Yunior still cannot escape the negative tendencies that come along with that particular lifestyle. Yunior makes clear he really does love Oscar's sister, Lola, but when he gets her he still cheats, and provides no further explanation for why beyond repeating a variance of similar thoughts such as "All my fault, of course. Couldn't keep my *rabo* in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful girl in the world," (Díaz, 311). But, in finally choosing to mark his story in the intro as a counter-curse, or Zafa, Yunior clearly exemplifies more of internal blending with external, leading to psychological change and ultimately marking *Oscar Wao* as a piece of contemporary fiction deserving of a spot in the canon. Even Harold Bloom's specific standards involving mortality and memory, or mortality's influence over cognition are met through this change in Yunior. In the end, the narrator gains knowledge through Oscar's death for a better understanding of self and the world outside of the self. Bloom's Canon refuses to measure by politics, but the

greatness of *Oscar Wao* is how everything is born out of the dangerous impact of the governing parties over the Dominican Republic.

The importance of moral effects on individual development is vividly felt within the friendship between Elena and Lila and underneath the entire plot of *My Brilliant Friend*. Elena as the narrator and the protagonist at first appears to fit Bloom's generalizing standard for the Canon, however Lila's identity is similarly heavily discussed and shown in excessive detail. It does not take long to witness how much of Elena's identity revolves around Lila's in both imitation and competition. The very first interactions in the park between the girls solidify Elena's place in their relationship when she explains to Lila "What you do, I do," after following her lead in pushing both the dolls down into the cellar (Ferrante, 55). Although Elena was already a dedicated student, she is obsessed with Lila's immense determination enough to skip school and go to the beach with her upon her request of the random adventure, something she "would have never had the courage to do by [herself]," (Ferrante, 73). Elena's relationship with Lila grows and feeds into her fixation, to the point of feeling significantly hurt at the discovery of Lila's secret Sunday trips to the school library and even making plans to "devote [herself] to [Lila] totally, especially in summer, when [she] would have more free time," (Ferrante, 103). Elena rarely, if ever, exposes us to any parallel reciprocations on Lila's part, that is to say it never feels as if Lila is as equally dedicated to Elena as Elena is to her. By the close of *My Brilliant Friend* Elena is essentially questioning who "won" between her and Lila as parts of herself truly reflect on whether or not her commitment to education was worth it if she did not acquire the same things as her friend. Bloom's literary critique could, in these regards, argue for Ferrante's novel as individualism rendered through an ongoing identity crisis. However, once again his certain standards of measurement must be overruled in order to fully understand the

relationship between Elena and Lila. The girls are undoubtedly altered through growing up in a violent town filled with inhabitants whose senses of right and wrong are skewed during post World War II tensions. Lila's "tough" character could be explained by genetics or just natural personality, but the impact of being raised amidst a causality with violence is certainly to blame. Even if it was a given trait, such bravery is typically learned in a gradual manner with age. Yet, it is Lila who is prepared and willing to confront Don Achille despite both girls and pretty much everyone in their small community harboring a staggering fear against him. After the incident with Don Achille, barely a little older, but still a child, Elena describes Lila, "Although she was fragile in appearance, every prohibition lost substance in her presence. She knew how to go beyond the limit without ever truly suffering the consequences. In the end people gave in, and were even, however unwillingly, compelled to praise her," (Ferrante, 64). It is crucial to recognize that this description is from the current, aged Elena looking back rather than Elena as a child making an uninformed assumption about Lila. It would only be later in life that she would truly appreciate Lila's uniqueness, leaving the reader to guess as to whether Elena may have really wanted to be her instead of being her friend. After all, the success Elena did find within the confines of her education was almost entirely a result of Lila pushing her to study and cultivate an appetite for learning. However, even if Lila was able to possess her intimidating identity in a different setting with better morals, it is completely possible that Elena may still have admired those qualities but not felt such a strong need to imitate them residing in a safer environment.

To generalize Harold Bloom's ideology, the Western Canon is grounded with an emphasis in individualism. Noticeably deserving of holding this prestigious title, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *My Brilliant Friend* redefine what it looks like to understand the individual self. Although both novels do represent individual thinking Bloom would argue

against measuring their aptitude by political or moral means, but these are the base elements which not only completely saturate the plots, they without a doubt shape individuals in real life all around the world. Bloom's definition of the Canon is a framework that must remain exposed with a very specific strength: the strength of being more open-minded when attempting to standardize the human experience.

# Works Cited

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