

Argument-Centered Education -- Response Builder -- Issue: Is *Drown* sexist? -- Position: *Drown* is sexist

	<p><b>Argument 1 (w/Ev):</b> Girlfriends in <i>Drown</i> are demeaned and disrespected throughout the collection. Aurora, for example, is the recipient of considerable contempt, despite being the narrator's girlfriend. "I'm amazed at how nasty I feel, how I want to put my fist in her face" (55).</p>	<p><b>Argument 2 (w/Ev):</b> Mothers and wives in <i>Drown</i> are relentlessly mistreated and exploited, most especially Mami and Nilda, both by Ramon Sr. Ramon in effect abandons his first family to take up with Nilda, but it is a relationship that gives him some personal comfort and sanctuary, not one that is loving or mutual. After he leaves her too, Nilda reflects back on Ramon. "I thought that I would never stop hurting. I knew then what it must have been like for your mother. You should tell her that" (207).</p>
<p>Counter-Argument 1 (w/Evidence and Reasoning)</p>	<p>There is rough treatment exchanged between the narrator and Aurora, but by the end of the story he acknowledges to his friend Cut that he feels deeply for Aurora. "You know how it is when you get back with somebody you've loved. It is better than it ever was, better than it ever could be again" (64). These characters aren't perfect, or models of behavior, but they do seem to love each other, which means that the work is redeeming the disrespect shown.</p>	<p>Papi is unquestionably a flawed character, but he does not relentlessly mistreat and exploit his wives. In fact, he lives under the significant moral sway of his Dominican family while trying to become established and realize some of the American Dream while in New Jersey. "With the hum of his new life Papi should have found it easy to bury the memory of us but neither his conscience, nor the letters from home that found him wherever he went, would allow it" (192). Papi is more relentless in his commitment to realizing some form of success, which he is committed ultimately to sharing with his wife and children, than he is in mistreating them.</p>
<p>Response to Counter-Argument 1</p>	<p>There are interludes in the story collection in which boyfriends and girlfriends act lovingly to each other. But these are not the dominant moments in these characters' relationships. They are the pauses between demeanment and degradation. "Aurora," for instance, ends with the narrator expressing a wistfulness for Aurora's statement of love and domesticity (which she made right after being released from prison), while recounting that he was soon going to hit her again and make "the blood come out of her ear like a worm" (65).</p>	<p>Papi does apparently experience pangs of conscience while he is in New Jersey, away from his Dominican family. But they are few and far between, and they do not prevent him from mistreating either Mami or Nilda. He essentially lives for years ignoring his wife and children back home. He doesn't even send them letters. "It was now a one-sided correspondence, with Papi reading and not mailing anything back" (191). And with Nilda, he never really gives her anything, not financially or emotionally. That is why she is so bitter toward him in the end. Papi is an exploiter of the women in his life.</p>
<p>Counter-Argument 2 (w/Evidence and Reasoning)</p>	<p>When male characters disrespect their girlfriends they are actually expressing self-denigration and insecurity. In the story "How to Date a Browngirl . . ." the narration suggests to the reader: "Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own" (147). This story helps the reader get into the mind of the collection's sexist boyfriends and leads them to recognize that sexism masks a kind of adoration for these girlfriends borne of their own insecurity about their own looks and selves.</p>	<p>When he is reunited with his Dominican family in New Jersey, Papi and Mami are represented as having times of happiness and togetherness, contradicting the claim that he only mistreats her. In "Fiesta, 1980," Mami enjoys herself at tio's party. "She appeared happier now and the way her hands worked on our dinner you would think she had a life somewhere else making rare and precious things" (34). The story ends on a poignant note. "In the darkness, I saw that Papi had a hand on Mami's knee and that the two of them were quiet and still" (43). Papi and Mami's relationship is complex and nuanced, and it includes a deeply affectionate bond. It is not a simple tale of sexist abuse.</p>
<p>Response to Counter-Argument 2</p>	<p>Boyfriends may unintentionally reveal when they are exhibiting sexism their underlying insecurity, but their sexism is undeniable, nevertheless. This passage, for instance, appears to be mainly part of a strategem to enable guys to have sex with the object of their flattery. "A whitegirl might just give it up right then. Don't stop her" (147). Further, there is the overlay of race on the passage cited in the counter-argument. The voice in the how-to manual seems to be revealing more about internalized racism than he is about internalized sexism. Either way, the sexism in boyfriends' behavior in the collection cannot be excused or mitigated by a degree of discovery of its core source.</p>	<p>It is fair to add color and granularity to Papi's treatment of Mami in <i>Drown</i>. Papi's complexity helps make the story collection as life-like and moving as it is. But it is going too far to imply that Papi's treatment of Mami is balanced, or that it is as loving as it is neglectful and exploitative. Papi, after all, gets the money from Mami's father that he needs to escape (which is what he does) to America, as we see early in "Negocios." He more or less forgets about Mami for six years. He takes a new wife, after having had an open affair back in the Dominican Republic. His abusive pattern of behavior repeats itself with Nilda. No, Papi is a deeply sexist character, one that <i>Drown</i> refuses to directly condemn. What Junot Diaz shows us -- like too many male writers -- is a portrait of an abuser of women who is nevertheless the dominant figure in his immediate world, one who is never truly punished for his moral crimes.</p>