



Drown
Junot
Díaz

***Drown*, by Junot Díaz (1996)**

Argument-Based Questions

These argument-based questions on the ten stories in *Drown* can be used in a variety of ways in class to help students to analyze the text in relation to the debatable interpretive questions established at the beginning of the unit. One way is to conduct small group discussions on the questions after the class completes pairs of stories, so conducting small group discussions five times in the unit. The groups should be asked to share out their responses with each other. There is an opportunity here to look for differing, clashing interpretive responses to the stories.

Another way to use these questions, using them at the end of the unit, is to jigsaw with them. The class should be divided into five groups, with each group assigned two stories. The groups should discuss each question, with each student offering their view, supported by reference to the text. The group members should try to come to a consensus around their best collective response to each question. Each student should write out the group's collective response so that they can bring it to newly formulated jigsaw groups. These groups should have one representative from each of the five groups. Each student in the jigsaw groups should present their responses to each of their questions, beginning each one by reading the question aloud. After each response, students have an opportunity to disagree with the response or add something significant to it.

“Ysrael”

1. The epigraph to *Drown*, from Gustavo Pérez Firmat is not part of this story, of course, but we'll cover it here. Why do you think Díaz chose this as his work's epigraph? What work does an epigraph do in a novel or story collection? What diasporic feeling or tone does it convey?
2. The story begins with a lot of discussion of Rafa (age 12, Yunió age 9) and his sexual pursuit of girls. Does this opening section in *Drown* trigger any concern about sexism, about the way that women can be objectified, not on in the environment that Díaz is describing but by his stories themselves?

3. Why do you think Yuniór breaks out crying shortly after their bus ride (13)? What do we learn about Yuniór and his brother's experiences in the Dominican Republic in this story, prior to its climactic scene with Ysraél?
4. What do you make of Rafa's cruel treatment of Ysraél in the story's climactic scene? What could possibly account for his behavior? Is Yuniór culpable at all in the incident? What relevance does it have (if any) to any of the four interpretive questions we are using to study *Drown*?

"Fiesta, 1980"

1. In the opening scene in this story, as Papi comes home and the family prepares to leave for the party, is Papi depicted as abusive, to either Yuniór or Mami or both? Does his hostility rise to the level of abuse? Or does he exist within the bounds of normal behavior for a father responsible for discipline?
2. The setting of the party – tío Miguel's home – and the party itself, are these represented as positive, happy, comforting places?
3. What level of damage do you think Papi's taking Yuniór to his mistress's home, and making him wait while he was with her, does to Yuniór? How serious a moral failing of Papi's is this?
4. Yuniór is silent in two crucial occasions: once, when his tía asks if there is any fighting or violence in his home, and once when Mami, noticing he was sad but not knowing the cause was his meeting his Papi's *sucia*, asks him what is wrong. Why do you think Yuniór keeps his secrets to himself in both of these instances?

"Aurora"

1. The narrator in "Aurora" is meticulous in his use of language, even when he is high. "This s--- is potent, I said. That's the word I'm looking for. Potent" (47). Why does Diaz include this detail of character? Putting it in the context of what the narrator does and what he thinks, what does this concern about language tell us about him?
2. How would you describe the narrator's first encounter with Aurora in the story? Do the two love each other at all? Are they only using each other? Is Aurora being objectified by the narrator? If so, what implication does that have for Diaz's story: is it somewhat sexist?
3. Now consider the relationship between the narrator and Aurora through the remainder of the short story. Respond to similar questions. How would you characterize their relationship – is it caring, do they love each other, are they co-dependent (enabling each other's addictions), are they using each other, are they together merely to stave off loneliness? Is Aurora an objectified being or a rounded character, in the narrator's eyes? What are the implications for the story?

4. Perform a close reading of the following passage, and connect it to at least one of our interpretive questions, identifying a position can be used for and an interpretive claim it could support.

I'm thinking how easy it would be for her to turn around and say, Hey, let's go home. I'd put my arm around her and I wouldn't let her go for like fifty years, maybe not ever. I know people who quit just like that, who wake up one day with bad breath and say, No more, I've had enough (62).

Be sure to try to place the passage within the larger narrative context of the story.

“Aguantando”

1. As a boy in the Dominican Republic, Yuniór pictures his father, who has emigrated to New Jersey, as he appears in one particular photograph. Identify three or four adjectives that crystallize what he thought of his absent father in that picture? In what specific ways does Yuniór's childhood perception of his father influence Yuniór's later perceptions of him?
2. What were material conditions like for Yuniór's family in the Dominican Republic? Cite at least three specific details to support your response. What implications does this narrative inclusion have on the American Dream thematic question we are asking of *Drown*?
3. Yuniór and Rafa are occasionally sent away for a couple weeks to live with their relatives. Mami periodically needs a break from the pressures of being a single parent. The two brothers experience these periods very differently. How does each of them respond to being sent to live away from their mother for awhile. What do we learn about how each one differently defines how a good family relates to each other?
4. What is the tone of this story (the emotion or the attitude taken by Diaz toward the subject matter)? Cite the two most important short passages that reveal this tone and explain how they do so.

“Drown”

1. How would you characterize Beto, the narrator's friend, based on the first couple pages of the story. Choose two adjectives that best characterize Beto and cite a sentence or two from the early part of the story that demonstrate each.
2. What kind of son is the narrator to his mother, in this story? What are two reasons to think he is a good son and two reasons to think he is not a good son? Which side would you say is weightier, more significant, more valid as an interpretation?
3. How is the narrator's father depicted in this story? If he were to represent two powerful forces in the narrator's life, what would those forces be, and which incidents or dialogue in the story substantiate each of them?

4. The narrator has two sexual encounters with his friend Beto. What they tell us about the narrator's sexuality, if anything? How does sexuality affect the relationship between Beto and the narrator? In the end, what kind of relationship do Beto and the narrator have?

“Boyfriend”

1. Early in the story the narrator compares Boyfriend and Girlfriend's fighting with each other in the apartment below him to his breakup with Loretta. How do the two relationships contrast, and what does that contrast tell us about the narrator?
2. The narrator refers a couple times to his “heart-leather” (112). To what extent do you think the narrator has actually grown callous and how much he is bluffing here and is actually an emotionally sensitive person. What evidence can you draw on to support your view?
3. What do you make the of the final lines in the story:

At the end of the month she [Girlfriend] got her hair cut short. No more straighteners, no more science fiction combs. I like that, I told her. I was coming back from the liquor store and she was on her way out with a woman friend. Makes you look fierce. She smiled. That's exactly what I wanted.

How does these closing lines change or solidify how we understand each of these two characters?

“Edison, New Jersey”

1. To what extent is the job that the narrator has in this story one that is facilitates an immigrant's (i.e., the narrator's) pursuit of the American Dream, and to what extent does it delay or hinder that pursuit?
2. Why do you think the narrator broke up with his girlfriend, and what longer-term influence on his character do you think this breakup had on him?
3. The narrator has multiple motivations for driving the maid from Pruitt's home into New York, helping her escape his home and employment. What are they?
4. There is an ambiguity at the end of the story, when the narrator calls the Pruitt home and the maid, who must have returned to her job, is there and answers the phone. What implications does this ambiguous ending have on the meaning of the story as a whole? In what way does this story connect with any of the four interpretive questions we are using to study *Drown*?

“How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie”

1. This story stands out as the most unusual in its formal properties. It appears to be in the form of a kind of how-to guide, offering advice as to how to act or behave depending upon the ethnicity and social class of the girl that the (presumably male) listener or reader is on a date with or is pursuing, but is more so a description of the narrator’s own behavior (or his ideal behavior) on various dates. What might the idiosyncratic formal properties imply about whether the collection as a whole can be charged with sexism?
2. Find the two most sexist or arguably sexist passages in the story. Why might some people identify them as sexist? What might Diaz say in his defense against the charge?
3. Consider the story’s references to race and ethnicity – from the title to the various ways that the narrator distinguishes between the behavior and culture of Latino, African-American, and Caucasian girls and women. How do you respond to these distinctions? Do you find them objectionable? Or are they redeemed by the literary purpose of the story and the story collection in which they appear?

“No Face”

1. This story of Ysrael, told from his own perspective, surprises the reader with the character’s pose and self-possession. Unlike in the opening story of the collection, here Ysrael does not seem like a victim, and instead has a certain strength. Identify the three most important differences in the way Ysrael represents himself in this story from the way he is perceived by Yunior and Rafa (in “Ysrael”).
2. Does this story mitigate the abuse that Rafa and Yunior inflict on Ysrael, or does it somehow make that abuse even more reprehensible?
3. Ysrael’s story seems like something of almost an obsession for Diaz in this collection – like a bad dream he is having that he cannot shake. How might Ysrael’s story, told from both his own and from Yunior and Rafa’s perspectives, interact with and inflect the story collection’s theme regarding the inspirational value, or the illusory emptiness, of the American Dream?

“Negocios”

1. Here is how this story introduces Ramon’s (Papi’s) intent to leave the Dominican Republic to pursue the American Dream. He has come to talk to his wife’s father, to explain to him what he intends, in order to try not to lose the inheritance that his father-in-law has suggested will be theirs.

I don’t know what you’ve heard but I swear on my heart that none of it is true. All I want for your daughter and our children is to take them to the United States. I want a good life for them.

How does this introduction of Ramon's intention to pursue the American Dream color *Drown's* attitude toward it, if at all?

2. Early after Ramon's arrival in the U.S., the story says,

He didn't dream about his familia and wouldn't for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the many wrecks about our island, stacked his as sugar cane (169).

Analyze this short passage. What thematic significance do you find in it, related to one or more of the interpretive questions we are using to study *Drown*?

3. Look back at what Ramon does and has to do after he lands in Miami, ultimately to settle into his new life in New York. Identify two admirable or respectable traits that he demonstrates and two disreputable or contemptible traits that he demonstrates, citing a textual reference for each.

4. Analyze this passage carefully.

He [Ramon] often drank too much and went home to his room, and there he's fume, spinning, angry at the stupidity that had brought him to this freezing hell of a country . . . and angry at the blinkered existence his jobs and the city imposed on him (179).

In what specific, several ways is Ramon abused, taken advantage of, or thwarted in the United States?

5. What does Ramon's relationship with Nilda tell us about Ramon as a moral agent? Do we think less of him because of it, and if so why and to what extent? Or as readers do we sympathize with him in needing her companionship and affection?

6. In what ways does Jo-Jo's influence on Ramon change him and make it more plausible that Ramon might make a success of himself in America?

7. Closely analyze these three passages. Connect each of them to either the father theme or the American Dream theme in the collection of stories. Identify which position they are aligned with, and formulate a claim that they could be used to support to advance that position.

While most of the men around him were two-times broke, [Ramon] had seen a few, fresh off the boat, shake the water from their backs and jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud (190).



Pap had difficulty separating the two threads of his friend's beliefs, that of negocios and that of familia, and in the end the two became impossibly intertwined (191).

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 (191).