



Drown
Junot
Díaz

***Drown*, by Junot Díaz (1996)**
Debatable Issues

This is our set of debatable interpretative issues on the collection of stories *Drown*, by Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz.

1. Papi is a complicated character, sketched most memorably in the final story in *Drown*, “Negocios.” One interpretive question that arises in trying to understand this semi-autobiographical collection is identifying the precise tone the work takes toward Papi. Through his depiction of the character, and especially in the stories’ tone, does Junot Díaz show a deep sympathy toward Papi or does he in the end condemn Papi, or (if it is some combination of both) precisely what does he feel for his fictionalized father?
2. Viewed through one lens, *Drown* is an immigration story, the story of a family’s relocation in the latter half of the 20th century from a Latin American country, the Dominican Republic, to the northeastern urban United States, in search of a better life, in search of the American Dream. It is in this way a story of an experience that many millions of immigrants have shared. What is the work’s take on the immigrant experience? According to *Drown*, is the American Dream a worthy goal, one that through hard work and ambition Latin American immigrants have a realistic chance of achieving, or has immigration to the U.S. been an empty promise, one that has failed to deliver a better life for the common Latinx immigrant?
3. What is the reader to make of the stories in *Drown* that focus on the “delinquent” (in the words of one character) teenage and young adult activities of Yuniór, Ramon II, the primary narrative voice and authorial stand-in character? Does Díaz view this period of his life – of Yuniór’s life – with unmitigated regret, fond nostalgia, some specific combination of the two, or something else entirely?

4. Some readers, especially women readers, have criticized Junot Diaz's fiction, including the stories in *Drown*, for depicting misogynistic treatment of women in way that is either exculpatory or neutral. In other words, his characters often objectify, sexualize, or in other ways mistreat or abuse women, without enough authorial condemnation of this sexist behavior. In an article in *The Atlantic* ("How Junot Diaz Wrote a Sexist Character, But Not a Sexist Book," September 11, 2012), Diaz took the opportunity to respond to this charge.

The problem and paradox is that Diaz *must* allow for accusations of sexism in order for his work to read like art. If it's too clear what his feelings are, if an agenda or platform asserts itself, then the story's worth as literature is diminished. "If it's too brute and too obvious then it becomes allegorical, becomes a parable, becomes kind of a moral tale. You want to make it subtle enough so that there are arguments like this," Diaz has said. The value of literature, then, comes from presenting readers with morally ambiguous situations and letting them react. "For the kind of sophisticated art I'm interested in, the larger structural rebuke has to be so subtle that it has to be distributed at an almost sub-atomic level. Otherwise, you fall into the kind of preachy, moralistic fable that I don't think makes for good literature."

Where do you come down on this question? Is *Drown* infected by the sexism of the community from which Diaz has emerged and which it depicts? Or, as a work of literary art, does it in a sophisticated way represent but morally shade this sexism, expressing a subtle feminism?