

Beli's non serviam:  
joycean parallels in  
the brief wondrous  
life of oscar wao



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“ And out of this disillusionment and turmoil sprang Beli's first adult oath, one that would follow her to the states and beyond. I will not serve. Never again would she follow any lead other than her own. Not the rector's, not the nuns', not La Inca's, not her poor dead parents'. Only me, she whispered. Me” (Diaz 103).

Caught halfway into a romantic encounter in a school broom closet, young Hypatía Belícia “ Belí” Cabral is expelled. Due to the high standing of her partner, and partly due to her own low social class and ill-regarded skin tone, Belí is given sole blame for the incident, and leaves El Redentor in shame. Heartbroken and unsure of the future, Belí is at a metaphorical crossroads. Will she continue to do the will of her guardian, La Inca, and return to education? Or will she utilize the newfound agency afforded by her emerging womanhood and take control of her own life? In the passage above, the reader will see that she chooses the latter.

Belí makes what the narrator calls an oath, and the technique employed in his narration contributes to this idea. The alliteration of “ Not the rector's, not the nuns', not La Inca, not her poor dead parents” supports the narrator's denoting this passage as an oath; as a sacred vow. The repetition of “ not” and later “ me” in “ Only me, she whispered. Me.” again evokes a chant-like, holy quality. However, the most significant and illuminating device in this passage comes in the form of an intertextual reference: The sentence, “ I will not serve”. This quote matches verbatim a line uttered by a similarly disillusioned Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is through the lens of Joyce and this Stephen Daedalus that a reader can best

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understand this section—this oath—as one that highlights Belí's growing dissatisfaction of her life with La Inca, highlights her emerging independence and foreshadows the violent tragedy that necessitates a departure from her homeland.

For author Junot Díaz, whose vast repertoire of textual references and allusions in *Oscar Wao* ranges from those to Homer and Ovid to King and Kirby, this Joycean parallel can only be read as intentional. At the end of his university days, Stephen Daedalus, bitter from a youth characterized by a lack of love, poverty and an oppressively religious culture makes this exact remark. During a conversation with a friend, Stephen makes his oath, stating plainly “ I will not serve” (Joyce 239). He later elaborates on this assertion, “ I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church” (Joyce 247). Stephen refuses the demands of his home of Ireland, his family of paupers, and of the Catholic Church. Belí's determination embodies similar rejections. The young Dominican rejects the pressures of her family; of the overbearing La Inca and the respected legacy of her parents. She rejects the pressures of religion; of the rectors and nuns that managed her school and later saw her expelled. Finally, in her determination to serve only herself, Belí begins on a journey that will see her torn from her fatherland. Belí, like Stephen, aims to create a future with an outcome determined by only her own choices. Leaving school, she begins to seek out her own fortune as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant, where her good looks and fiery personality earn her a valued place among the staff and customers. This prosperity, however, is not to last, and while Stephen makes

his future pursuing the arts in France, Belí meets a different, unpleasant fate resultant from her own self-assured decisions.

"I will not serve" does not only signify a budding disillusionment with power and a strive for independence: It foreshadows a fall into despair. Belí's oath is both her awakening and ruin. The line, "I will not serve" carries a religious significance that was touched upon by Joyce through a church official present in Stephen's youth, Father Arnall. In a fiery sermon, Arnall attributes the refusal to serve God to the fall of man; that it was Adam's vainglorious denial to obey God that led to humanity's expulsion from Paradise. Arnall states, "Theologians consider that it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: non serviam: I will not serve. That instant was [Adam's] ruin" (Joyce 117). Although readers do not see consequences for Stephen's non serviam until he returns in Joyce's *Ulysses*, Belí experiences a downfall similar to Arnall's vision of Man in that its cause can be traced directly back to her "oath". Through her ambition to serve only her own ends, Belí meets a character known as the Gangster, and through him Belí's life makes a turn towards violence and further heartbreak. On an evening she was expected at dinner with La Inca, Belí meets this imposing figure and engages in a torrential affair with him soon after. This relationship leaves the young girl with child, and later, after refusing to terminate the pregnancy, beaten to near-death in a cane field.

Facing further violence, Belí is forced to leave the D. R., and spends the rest of her years raising children as a single mother in the poverty of the

Patterson ghetto. Her bold assertion, "I will not serve", while initially

empowering, only serves in essence to make Belí a political refugee. In a <https://assignbuster.com/belis-non-serviam-joycean-parallels-in-the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao/>

hospital bed, succumbing to cancer and close to the end of her life, Belí seems to reflect on how her hardheaded independence led to her sad decline, remarking, " All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was esto, she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America" (Diaz 113). Belí's empowerment and subsequent fall shares in the double meaning of Joyce's non serviam as both the call to the individual awakening and the omen of individual ruin.

### **Works Cited**

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief and Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead books, 2007, New York. Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Viking, 1916, New York.