

# The trials and tribulations of love



Junot Diaz's book *This Is How You Lose Her* provides an insightful look into love and loss, mostly through the eyes of its narrator, Yunion. Within this collection are stories of Yunion's infidelity and the relationships of those around him; this includes tales of his family's struggles with their respective partnerships. There is a subtle but evident shift in Yunion's attitude as these stories progress, turning him into a more rounded character. Though greatly flawed, Yunion's complexities make him human and allow him to reach a newfound understanding of love and its consequences. It is through attempting to cope with heartbreak that he learns to value the ideas of intimacy and compassion. By doing so, Diaz justifies the importance of moving on from past mistakes, rather than dwelling on them and letting them cause destruction to himself. With the use of a dynamic character such as Yunion, Diaz is then able to acknowledge the presence of male privilege, and emphasize the significance of dismantling the code of masculinity in order to truly understand oneself and one another.

Despite Yunion's claim that he is "not a bad guy" in "The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars," his penchant for cheating is highly evident in many of the stories in this book. Even in the aforementioned tale, he is caught cheating on his girlfriend "with this chick who had tons of eighties freestyle hair" (*This Is How You Lose Her* 1), and he spends the majority of the story trying to relight the spark in their relationship to no avail. A similar event happens in "Alma," in which Yunion's girlfriend finds out about his sexual relations with Laxmi, forcing him to contemplate what excuses he can use instead of admitting his infidelity. In "The Cheater's Guide to Love," he is even caught having cheated on his fiancée with fifty other girls over the course of 6

years, leaving him lonely and struggling to move on. The frequency of these occurrences alone already proves how reckless he is, and how little he seems to learn from past experiences.

The Yuniór presented here is a man who enjoys partaking in shallow, sexual relationships without much thought of the consequences. This is because he views women as objects for his pleasure. In “The Sun, The Moon, and the Stars,” he values Magda for her “big hips” and her willingness to have sex with him. Alma, in the story entitled with the same name, is viewed in a similar fashion with her “big Dominican ass” and “incredible pópola”. Yuniór also gives his brother’s ex, Tammy Franco, the nickname “Fly Tetas” (This Is How You Lose Her 97), and, in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love”, held grievances against his ex-fiancée for not giving “good head” or “[waxing] her pussy”. There are no mentions of what these women were like as romantic partners, only crude judgements of their physical and sexual appeal. Therefore, this shows how Yuniór was stripping away their individuality, objectifying them, and ultimately dehumanizing them.

Moreover, Yuniór had never accepted any responsibility for when his relationships fell apart. In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” he accused his parents, the patriarchy, and even Santo Domingo to escape the blame. However, later on in that story, his mindset changes during a revelation involving his friend Elvis and his illegitimate daughter. Yuniór had been holding a grudge against his ex-fiancée for not forgiving him, but it isn’t until Elvis tells him to find a “good Dominican girl” (This Is How You Lose Her 186) that he realizes what he had lost. Yuniór begins to consider the possibility of being in a long-term partnership, one where both partners’

needs and opinions are of equal importance. He also thinks about potentially having children and how it might have saved his relationship with his ex-fiancée. This, in itself, marks a pivotal moment in which his character started maturing and shedding his “misogynistic myopia” (“A long-term relationship”).

Another way Yuniors character changed is how he felt towards rectifying his mistakes. Throughout this book, Yuniors fails to understand the scale of pain he caused and holds on to “this ridiculous hope that maybe one day [his girlfriend] will forgive [him]” (This Is How You Lose Her 184). Time and time again, he tells himself that he will be able to salvage his relationship as long as he tries, regardless of whether his exes felt the same way. This occurs in both “The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars,” as well as in “The Cheaters Guide to Love,” but neither story ends with the reconciliation he was hoping for. Instead, he is left with pain, frustration, and longing while his ex-romances moved on with their lives. One of the main reasons why Yuniors could not see the error in his ways is due to his lack of compassion—a major flaw in his character. As Diaz points out in his interview with the National Public Radio, if Yuniors “really, really had that compassion that this is a person, this is a human being that I’ve hurt, he wouldn’t be so quick to scrub away his crimes”. He, in an almost self-centered manner, was more concerned with righting his wrongs than consoling the person he had hurt. Since Yuniors could not understand “the crime, the pain he has caused, the betrayal of a relationship [with] this woman” (“Fidelity in Fiction”), he couldn’t escape from the eventual punishment he inflicts upon himself.

In “ The Cheater’s Guide to Love”, this punishment not only takes the form of emotional grief and despair, but also manifests itself physically through the deteriorating state of Yuniór’s body. Diaz states in his interview with The Millions that “ Yuniór is this guy who tries through his body to avoid psychic issues, to use his body to sidestep the psychic weight of trauma”.

Unfortunately, as he fails to address this trauma emotionally, his body slowly “ somatizes his own depression, his own misery, his own grief. Grief not only about breaking the heart of the woman he loved but grief about everything that comes before” (“ A Brief Wondrous Interview”). Therefore, following the breaking-down and gradual rebuilding of his physicality, Yuniór’s character comes to understand compassion and appreciate the new beginning he’s been given, because it “ feels like hope, like grace—and because . . . sometimes a start is all we ever get” (This Is How You Lose Her 217).

Another significant change in Yuniór’s attitude towards women is how he starts trying to understand their point of view, to the point of writing a story using a woman’s voice. In the final pages of “ The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” it is revealed that this book is a collection of Yuniór’s narratives regarding his failed relationships. However, “ Otravida, Otravez” strays from this as Yuniór writes as Yasmin, a Dominican immigrant woman in an affair with a married man named Ramón. Diaz confirms in his PBS NewsHour interview that this story is about Yuniór’s father and his extramarital affair, and it is Yuniór’s attempt to “[imagine] the other woman’s life who almost tore his family apart.” What makes this so impactful to his character development is that Yasmin is someone “ that [Yuniór] would least be sympathetic to, that he

would least want to humanize” (Conversation: Junot Diaz), and yet he is trying to portray her in a truthful light without demonizing her or her actions.

Previously, there was no depth in how Yuniors viewed or understood women, to the point where this attitude could have been interpreted as sexism. Despite this fact, Diaz’s decision to characterize Yuniors this way presents him as “ deeply flawed” (“ Junot Diaz: ‘ This Is How’”) but a completely believable human being. Although he, as Diaz describes him in his Radio Boston interview, is “ a pain in the ass . . . a jerk . . . [and has] got holes in his heart,” he is a character many people can relate to. As Diaz mentions in his Google Books presentation, this reflects how most men lack a sense of “ internal scrutiny,” causing them to become an “ alien unto themselves” (“ This Is How You Lose Her”). Contrary to this statement, based on the context of “ Otravida, Otravez” and “ The Cheater’s Guide to Love”, it’s clear that Yuniors eventually becomes a man who rediscovers his internal scrutiny and breaks free from the code of masculinity.

This choice in characterization and the change in Yuniors’s behavior also serves as proof that privilege keeps us from truly understanding ourselves and one another. In Yuniors’s case, it is his male privilege that prevents him from realizing what outcomes his actions can lead to. According to Diaz, this privilege makes it difficult for many men to “ imagine the things that [they] do to women . . . as actually deeply troubling and as hurting another human being” (“ Fidelity In Fiction”). Yuniors is no exception to this in the earlier half of the book, but towards the end of it, his cluelessness starts to affect him both physically and emotionally. Diaz explains this during his Google Books talk that “ the consequences of operating in a world where you have

privilege is you quickly begin to realize that the energy it takes for you not to notice what you're doing begins to slowly eat at you." In the same presentation, he further clarifies that this slow collapse happens because it "creates all this kind of contradictions in you" ("This Is How You Lose Her"), showing how an interior breakdown can also affect one's exterior.

In summation, Diaz channels an imperfect but perfectly human character through Yunior in *This Is How You Lose Her*. Even though the nonlinear arrangement of the stories in the book makes his character development less obvious, Yunior definitely experiences significant emotional growth, making him a dynamic character. As he stumbles through one failed relationship after another, he becomes increasingly aware of his male privilege and objectification of women. Likewise, by writing a narrative from a woman's perspective, Yunior shows great maturity in trying to sympathize with the opposite sex and separating himself from the code of masculinity. Therefore, Diaz is able to alert his readers to how privilege can hinder mutual understanding, and how it is always better to move on from one's past than to dwell on mistakes, as represented by Yunior's experiences.