

The Artist as Outcast: The Role of Power and Politics in Art

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Spring 2018

## I. Introduction

When we think of artists, we often think of the tortured artist figure. Stereotypically, artists are misunderstood, neglected by the world around them, and isolated because they feel that others cannot possibly understand their experiences. This characterization often falls into two categories: either the artist self-identifies as an outsider, or the artist's audiences push a sense of "outsiderness" onto the artist. Often, it is some combination of both. Why is it, then, that artists are presented in this way? I argue that artists are often presented as outsiders not only because of the stereotype of artists as creative geniuses, but because art and artists are inherently political, in that they pose challenges to existing power structures and dynamics.

In my thesis, I will first establish artists as outsiders and their inherently political role. I will briefly discuss James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as an example of the first category of artist, in self-imposed exile. I will then introduce the main body of my thesis, in which I examine two literary works that emphasize the second category of artists who are forcibly pushed into the margins. These works are Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). I ground my analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the 19th century Aesthetic movement in England, which Wilde only ever explicitly refers to as an artistic movement. Implicitly, however, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a warning against the hedonism that results from a purely aesthetic lifestyle, and is also a declaration of the perfection of queer love. In turning to an artistic movement to support queer love, Wilde's work is arguably more political than it would have been if his message had been explicitly delivered. I then introduce Junot Díaz's novel which on the surface tells the story of a nerdy boy who is unable to find love. Upon a deeper

examination, however, this novel focuses on the struggles of immigrant and diaspora communities, and the power that art holds in helping these communities overcome the obstacles that they face. In considering these two works together, *Oscar Wao* is the reverse image of *Dorian Gray*. While Wilde avoids politicizing his art in order to covertly discuss queer love, Díaz discusses cultural identity in as political a way as possible. Díaz does this while focusing less explicitly on the power of art and writing, despite the fact that art is central to the narrative. Furthermore, *Oscar Wao*, as a contemporary novel published in 2007, raises similar questions and concerns about expressing one's identity as Wilde's work does despite being written more than a century later. Ultimately, both works emphasize that the political nature of art is rooted in more than one specific movement or person – it is tied to art as a cultural element, as something that individuals put themselves and their identities into.

By first analyzing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Oscar Wilde's social and political influence, and then drawing parallels with the figure of the artist as depicted through Oscar de León in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I argue that artists are presented as outsiders because of the political and controversial nature of art, and the power that art has to reveal truths about oneself to the world. In their position on the outskirts of society, artists also possess the ability to reclaim their power and create their own space within the society that rejected them. By comparing Oscar Wilde and Oscar de León, it becomes evident that artists reclaiming power from their isolation has existed across movements and centuries. Nothing about art remains constant, except that it will always exist and continue to change over time. Artists wield massive social and political influence. As a result, while we do not need to agree with them, we do need to listen to them.

## II. Artists, Isolation, and Power

Artists are outsiders because they are political in nature. Aristotle famously stated that “human beings are by nature political animals, because nature, which does nothing in vain, has equipped them with speech, which enables them to communicate moral concepts such as justice which are formative of the household and city-state.”<sup>1</sup> The political nature of human beings, according to Aristotle, is rooted in their ability to communicate with one another through language. Taking this one step further, one could argue that artists’ ability to communicate with others transcends language. Artists communicate their thoughts, opinions, and identities creatively. Whether the art form is visual, oral, or written, artists possess the power to transform their identities into a new mode altogether, and communicate them in ways that operate beyond speech. Art thus becomes an arena for political and moral debate – even if the intention behind creating the artwork was not political at all.

Consciously or not, artists and their works convey political messages. Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, emphasizes that “the political interpretation of literary texts” is “the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to assert that “there is nothing that is not social and historical” (Jameson 5). Art is the avenue through which artists’ audiences learn about and begin to understand different cultures, identities, and ways of life. Literary texts and works of art, the problems they present, and the solutions that are realized should, then, be viewed as political interpretations of reality. However,

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<sup>1</sup> I will be including initial citations as footnotes, but if works are cited more than once, subsequent citations will appear in-text.

Miller, Fred. “Political Naturalism.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, 2017, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/Aristotle-politics/supplement3.html](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Aristotle-politics/supplement3.html).

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*.

[thecharnelhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Fredric-Jameson-The-Political-Unconscious-Narrative-as-a-Socially-Symbolic-Act-1981.pdf](http://thecharnelhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Fredric-Jameson-The-Political-Unconscious-Narrative-as-a-Socially-Symbolic-Act-1981.pdf), p. 1.

the problems that creative works index depend on their context. Jameson explains that “our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present,” meaning that we digest culture differently because of the context of our own experiences (Jameson xi). In this way, the political issues that we connect to works of art can change over time. A poet could have written a poem on a social movement during their time that in later years would be interpreted according to the reader’s own cultural and historical contexts: perhaps through a later social movement that would have been unimaginable during the poet’s time. New “pasts” are created constantly. Interpretation becomes a process that discloses the artist but also reflects the reader, and impacts the reader’s understanding of their own identity in relation to the work. Jameson affirms that consciously or unconsciously, creative works gravitate towards lived experience; a problem that exists in the real world is a problem that a creative work will, at some point, address. And if the absence of commentary on a specific issue exists, the absence in itself can be considered a political statement (Jameson xi).

Some artists see only the benefits of living an isolated existence: they comfortably sit on the margins of society and prefer to remain there. Artists typically fall into one – and sometimes both – of two categories: the artist that exiles themselves, and the artist that is cast out by those around them. One of the most stereotypical depictions of “the Artist” entirely in self-imposed exile is James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Stephen is a resentful and isolated young artist who views himself as “different” and superior, even as a child. For example, one summer evening, young Stephen comments that “The noise of children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made him feel” as though “he was

different from others.”<sup>3</sup> Stephen views the children playing as “silly,” placing himself above the children despite being the same age as them. In his case, his self-imposed exile is motivated by an inner belief of his own excellence. Scenes such as this run rampant throughout Joyce’s novel, as Stephen never quite grows out of the sense of superiority he develops as a young boy.

Later, Stephen considers going into the priesthood, and realizes that he would not succeed as a priest. This is because “His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders” and because “he was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world” (Joyce 162). Stephen establishes his own destiny as set apart from the rest of the world. He understands, already, that he is not fit to conform to “social or religious orders:” as an artist, he possesses an intellect that is distrustful of authority figures and concepts. He is destined to question these authority figures through his art. He is also destined to understand himself “apart from others” – he believes that it is only in isolation that he will be able to learn more about himself. Stephen, in his view, needs to be isolated in order to develop his “wisdom” and art in the way that he wishes. To “learn the wisdom of others” would mean forever “wandering among the snares of the world;” to be stuck looking for others’ wisdom rather than one’s own is the equivalent to searching for snares to trap oneself in. It is clear to see that in this passage, “others” are Stephen’s enemy: he only trusts himself and his own intellect. Self-imposed exile and refusing to conform to social order go hand in hand: he cannot allow the views of others, established through social orders, to govern his understanding of the world around him. Unquestioningly accepting social and religious doctrine would force him to conform, which would erase his identity as an artist: and Stephen’s

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Viking Press, 1964, p. 64.

difference is what makes him an artist. In order to ensure that his views are his own, he must isolate himself.

Not only is it important for Stephen to understand his own opinions as an artist, but it is also crucial for him to understand how to best convey these opinions in his work. Before Stephen leaves his home of Ireland, he explains that in going away he “will try to express [himself] in some mode of life or art as freely as [he] can and as wholly as [he] can, using for [his] defence the only arms [he allows himself] to use – silence, exile, and cunning” (Joyce 247). In order to properly express himself, Stephen quite literally casts himself out of society. To remain apart from the masses, to distance himself from what he already knows to be true, and to question the institutions around him are the ways in which he plans to achieve his artistic freedom. Stephen views his exile as a prerequisite to his ability to properly function as an artist. Furthermore, this exile is rooted in politics; he wants to deviate from the socio-political norm. He does not want to abide by the rules and regulations of the institutions around him, but to investigate them. Stephen refuses to subscribe to dogma, which is what allows him to create, as an artist. Stephen’s desire to leave his home country for his art emphasizes that many artists require exposure to new ways of life and new experiences in order to create valuable art.

Artists such as Stephen Dedalus, who intentionally isolate themselves in order to elevate their artistic output, do so in order to remain independent of already-existing socio-political and cultural forces around them. However, artists such as Wilde, Díaz, and the artist characters in their novels recognize that they are already different in some noticeable way from the world around them, but not by choice as is the case for Stephen. Cast out and rejected by society, these artists are often forced to create their own spaces where they can function independent of social

contexts. When cast out, these individuals can either succumb to societal pressure, or embrace this pressure and use it to their advantage, to not only create a space of their own but also to disrupt existing social norms and narratives of power in order to create social change.

### **III. The Aesthetic Movement of the 19th Century Fin de Siècle**

Wilde used his own isolation to his political and artistic advantage through advocating for aestheticism. Fin de siècle aestheticism was an artistic and literary doctrine centered on the study of beauty. Aesthetes have looked to and analyzed already-existing, often famous, works of art and literature in order to come to an understanding of what beauty is and why it is important. Walter Pater was one of these late 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetes, and he greatly impacted Wilde's literary philosophy through *The Renaissance* (1873). Pater wrote that what is important about artistic criticism "is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects," and that critics "will remember always that beauty exists in many forms."<sup>4</sup> Beauty, then, is something to be experienced sensually, not through intellect or logic. Art must be experienced instinctively, and proper critics of art will not assert a "correct" version of it but will appreciate art as that which is beautiful to them. The aesthetic movement according to Pater was rooted in the separation of art from life: Pater first coined "Art for art's sake" in *The Renaissance*, where he argues that art should be judged by the feelings it evokes in its audience, and its depiction of beautiful things. He concludes by declaring that "the love of art for art's sake, has most [passion]: for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (Pater, *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance*. Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.org/files/2398/2398-h/2398-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2398/2398-h/2398-h.htm) .



*Renaissance*). Art is thus inherently emotional, and serves no purpose besides making audiences feel and experience beauty.

By contrast, moral and educational messages were central to Victorian literature in England. Victorian writers and artists such as Charles Dickens and the Bronte sisters focused on depicting realistic scenes of daily life, through which moral lessons can be learned in anticipation of a happy ending. Victorian society valued an eagerness to work hard and improve itself, particularly as the Victorian period coincided with industrialization and technological advancements. Victorian literature's obsession with morality and happy endings bored and irritated aesthetes, and became objects of intense ridicule and satire. Anne Anderson and Ann Brookes of the Cranleigh Decorative & Fine Arts Society wrote, in their article "Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement, and the Cult of Beauty in Art and Design" (2016) that Aestheticism emphasizes the way in which art "should give sensual pleasure" and whose "aim [is] 'to exist beautifully,'" whereas the aim of Victorian art forms was to convey an English code of conduct and morals to its audiences.<sup>5</sup> The "art for art's sake" movement emerged from a widespread dissatisfaction with Victorian values, and a desire to rethink art's role in society and culture.

Aesthetes such as Pater and Wilde found the didactic nature of Victorian literature to detract from what art should be: a reflection of what the viewer or reader finds to be beautiful and nothing more. Aesthetes worked to separate historical, social, and political contexts from art. To aesthetes, art should not be a didactic tool, but a space in and of itself not meant to teach or convey anything but beauty. Consumers of art are encouraged to appropriate and invent their

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson, Anne, and Ann Brookes. "Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement, and the Cult of Beauty in Art and Design." *Sunflowers and the Old Blue: Oscar Wilde and the House Beautiful*. 26 Jan. 2011. *Cranleigh Decorative & Fine Arts Society*. Web. 2 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.cranleighdfas.org/rev1101.htm>>.

own interpretations of beauty in the way they want, but the interpretation cannot extend beyond that. In this way, art almost becomes geographical, a place to escape and experiment with beauty without any repercussions in the real world. However, Wilde, as a prominent aesthete and well-known follower of Pater, revolutionized the concept of “art for art’s sake” in the most political way possible. Wilde was a tremendously influential figure in England during the late Victorian Era, famous for championing individuality and rebelling against the restrictive societal conventions of his time. Wilde’s aesthetic movement went beyond Pater’s artistic movement: it served as a rebellious force in which a widespread sentiment of defiance led to Wilde’s publishing of satirical works chiefly aimed at discrediting Victorian social constraints.<sup>6</sup> These social constraints ranged from the pursuit of social advancement and rising in social class, to enforcing a sense of “Englishness” as superior to all other identities, particularly in colonial contexts. Wilde contributed extensively to the sardonic tearing-down of the Victorian concept of propriety most famously through his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). While his works belonged to the aesthetic movement, Wilde did not separate art from life. If anything, he used art to convey opinions that he would be unable to communicate otherwise. Publicly, Wilde believed that “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” and that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.”<sup>7</sup> In making such statements and labeling his work as untouched by reality, Wilde was able to create social and political commentary in a way that would shield him from the consequences because it operated under the cover of art as separate from life: at least, up to a certain point. If artists are not meant to put anything of themselves into their

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<sup>6</sup> "The Victorian Period." *The Victorian Period*. Web. 01 Mar. 2016.  
<<https://faculty.unlv.edu/kirschen/handouts/victorian.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Airmont, 1964, pp. 9-10.

artwork, then according to the philosophy of the aesthetic movement, art requires the creation of space between art and artist. When audiences learned that this was Wilde's artistic philosophy, they did not expect his work to reflect his own values and beliefs – which was precisely his intention. Wilde's was able to perform his identity in such a way that he was purely viewed as an artist, as opposed to a political figure.

Wilde's first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, provides ironic social commentary: but its true value can be found in its representation of same-sex love and desire. Dorian Gray tells the story of a young man named Dorian, described by Basil – an artist and close friend of Dorian's – as the most innocent and beautiful person he has ever known. Basil often paints portraits of Dorian, and he one day paints a portrait of Dorian that is so beautiful that Basil is ashamed of it, claiming that it is only as beautiful as it is because Basil painted his feelings for Dorian into it. As a result, Basil cannot exhibit the portrait – because art should be separate from life and as such cannot reveal Basil's feelings to his audiences – and gifts it to Dorian instead. Basil's friend Lord Henry comes to visit Basil as he is finishing this portrait, and Lord Henry is intrigued by Dorian and his beauty. Lord Henry, clearly an aesthete, convinces Dorian that his beauty is all that he has and that when it is gone, Dorian will be nothing. Dorian spirals into a panic, crying out a wish to stay young forever. This declaration, miraculously, comes true. Dorian stops aging and remains young and beautiful, while Basil's portrait of him takes on the ugliness of old age and sin. Dorian thus lives his life recklessly, ignoring any and all consequences and hurting his friends and loved ones in the process. He hides the portrait in his home, never allowing anyone to look at it. Dorian becomes more and more addicted to finding new sensations to experience over time and eventually becomes so emotionally unstable that he

murders Basil, who was once his good friend. Dorian realizes how evil he has become by the end of the novel, and tries to stab his own portrait because he no longer wants to witness his own faults. Dorian's stabbing of his portrait kills him instantly. The portrait once again becomes beautiful and Dorian's body takes on the ugliness and decay that the portrait once held.

In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde codes queer romantic desire between Basil and Dorian as friendship, while implicitly indicating that their relationship is anything but. Basil has romantic feelings for Dorian that he cannot bear to express, to the point that he wants to hide away his portrait of Dorian for fear that it will reveal the truth. Wilde's depiction of Basil and Dorian's relationship reflects his own queer identity, which he freely expressed not as "queer identity" but through his persona as "dandy." As Maurizia Boscagli writes in her book *The Eye on the Flesh*, for Wilde to possess "a ready-made and fully recognizable homoerotic identity would be historically preposterous in a time when no socially recognized queer identity yet existed" and so his "effeminacy" was "used by Wilde to pass exactly because his contemporaries decoded it as a signifier of class rather than sexual dissidence."<sup>8</sup> His embodiment of the fin de siècle dandy, then, allowed Wilde to maintain a detached position when covertly celebrating queer love, one that was separate from his own identity.

The dandy, exemplified by writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Lord Byron, was an especially controversial public figure in the Victorian Era, particularly if we consider how impactful work and work ethic was to Victorians. Integral to the persona of the dandy is a perceived laziness and a lack of willingness to work, as opposed to a representation of queer identity. Boscagli emphasizes this point when she describes how the dandy embodied "the image

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<sup>8</sup> Boscagli, Maurizia. *The Eye on the Flesh: Gender, Ideology and the Modernist Body*. UMI, 1992, pp. 30-31.

of idleness, vanity, immorality, and unmanly ineffectuality” but “the dandy’s effeminacy did not indicate same-sex desire” (Boscagli 32). As a result, it was not the dandy’s queerness that was “a transgressive and potentially dangerous figure in 1800s Europe,” but rather “his antisocial and unproductive self-absorption” (Boscagli 32). By embodying the dandy, Wilde was thus able to perform an identity through which he could hide his sexuality: if his identity is a performance, it is an art form, and for aesthetes art exists separately from life. Rhonda K. Garelick, in her book *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (1998), describes dandyism as “a performance, the performance of a highly stylized, painstakingly constructed self.”<sup>9</sup> This includes “Artful manipulation of posture, social skill, manners, conversation, and dress” in a way that embodies a “socially detached hero” (Garelick 3). Isolation, then, is an integral part of the dandy persona: identity in itself can be seen as performance art, and this performance art is only effective if it deviates from societal and cultural norms. One of the most influential works about decadence and dandyism is Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884), which Wilde references in *Dorian Gray* as the work that Dorian calls “a poisonous book” whose influence “he never sought to free himself from” (Wilde 113-114). The decadence of *À Rebours* consumes Dorian, fueling his shift from dandyism and aestheticism to a “new hedonism,” which ultimately destroys him.

Again, the aesthetic movement provided Wilde with the tools needed to publicly separate himself from his art, while privately, simultaneously inserting his beliefs into his work. Wilde, as a dandy, is arguably most famous for his queer identity and flamboyant personality, and as such he is the epitome of the artist in that his identity in itself was a performance of his artistic

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<sup>9</sup> Garelick, Rhonda K. *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin De Siècle*. Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 3.

ideology, and vice versa. “Performance,” again, is a key term to use in this context, because Wilde’s ability to transform his persona into a work of art in itself is framed as just that: a performance. Wilde’s ability to express his queer identity through the dandy’s artistic effeminacy emphasizes that in order for art to exist as a direct path to political engagement for a widespread audience of a variety of backgrounds and political beliefs, art cannot be explicitly politically engaged. Creating distance between the reader and any social or moral messages is crucial: readers need space to formulate opinions and contemplate new ideas, ideas that they might not be comfortable confronting in the real world. The coating of political messages with artistic license enables people who are unwilling to be politically engaged to engage in politics through art. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde depicts and empowers queer identities by equating queer love with art, thus emphasizing the perfection that he finds in queer love. Wilde’s representation of queer love allowed him to manipulate the principles of the aesthetic movement to express his own social and political opinions, and empower queer communities of the time. These communities would later look back and analyze him as one of the first ever public figures to openly embrace his queer identity, because Wilde gave his audiences a way to implicitly discuss queer identities. The aesthetic movement’s success lies in this paradox: the separation of art from life, and the distance of the artist from socially mainstream contexts (which in this case, would be heteronormativity). Whether forced into the margins or choosing to remain there, Wilde demonstrates that artists are able to use their position on the fringes of society to dissect what guides it. This is where they obtain their power: artists can catalyze cultural change by normalizing the “abnormal” or unknown.

#### **V. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its Preface**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, along with its Preface, seem to enthusiastically support living in accordance to aestheticism's core tenets: to be constantly searching for new sensations, to approach art from a sensual perspective, and to separate art from life. Upon closer inspection, however, this is not necessarily the case. Throughout the Preface, Wilde presents the aesthete's argument that art and literature should only be a depiction of beauty and bring pleasure to those who take part in them. Through the novel itself, however, Wilde warns readers of the fine line between aestheticism and the appreciation of beauty, and hedonism and constant self-indulgence, and how immorality can tip this balance. An example of how immorality can transform aestheticism into something dark and immoral is Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), in which Gustav Aschenbach, a writer, vacations to Venice in the hope of finding creative inspiration. He finds this inspiration when he, a grown man, falls in love with a fourteen-year-old boy named Tadzio. In order to justify this love, he recalls the mythical Greek philosopher, Socrates, who also fell in love with and fantasized about underage boys. Aschenbach thus sees himself as a "Greek," because he "dares" to acknowledge the erotic feelings that he has for Tadzio. Eventually, Aschenbach dies of cholera in Venice. Mann depicts him in his final moments in detail, his grotesquely and fancifully made-up body seeming to decompose in an intensely graphic manner. *Death in Venice* raises crucial questions about the relationship between artistic beauty and eroticism, and whether or not one can be separated from the other. This separation is interesting to consider in the context of *Dorian Gray*: according to Basil, the artist in the novel, artists should put nothing of themselves into their artwork. In discussing his portrait of Dorian, however, Basil refuses to exhibit it because, in his words, "I have put too much of myself into it" (Wilde 12). He is stunned by Dorian's beauty, and believes he has

somehow conveyed his attraction to Dorian in his painting of him. Basil never explicitly describes his romantic feelings for Dorian, instead calling Dorian the most beautiful, likeable, and pure person he has ever met. Here, we see the intersection of artistic beauty and erotic desire: Basil cannot separate his attraction to Dorian from his painting of him, and as such is unable to separate his art from his life. Basil's attraction to Dorian is clearly not perverse or immoral in the way that Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio is, but both works do illustrate the intertwining of art and erotic desire. This emphasizes again how closely art and life are connected in Wilde's work, even when he claims that they are not. One of the most prominent instances in which Wilde claims his art is and should be separated from life is in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Here, Wilde's strong support of aestheticism emphasizes the way in which the renunciation of all pleasure leads to an essentially empty existence. Wilde directly references the stringent societal conventions of the time throughout the Preface, which draws attention to the way in which the aesthetic movement protests against completely resisting one's desires. This is especially prominent when Wilde declares that "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming" and that "beautiful things mean only beauty" (Wilde 9). Wilde's dense prose in itself indicates that aesthetes value beauty, and give relevance to "being charming" as well as to writing in a way that not only conveys a message, but is beautiful. The context behind this elevated language, however, is significant as well. Wilde's aestheticism champions the individual. According to Patrick Duggan, just like "machines that mass-produce materials," Wilde "condemns [those] who act as metaphorical machines" who are "programmed to behave in accordance with society's ideas of propriety" rather than acting according to their



own preferences and desires.<sup>10</sup> One should pursue their individual desires, regardless of “propriety” – and in this way, the “machines” who find “ugly meanings” in life are “corrupt,” as they should instead allow themselves to enjoy life and find “beautiful things” in it. In the Preface, Wilde also discusses the role that art plays in everyday life. He questions established notions about the function of art, claiming that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (Wilde 10). Here, Wilde rejects the concept that art is an imitation of life; rather, he believes that the ideal life is one that imitates art, in that life “is beautiful, but quite useless beyond its beauty” because it is “concerned only with the individual living it” (Duggan, “The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality”). Art only imitates the “spectator” viewing it, and the way they relate to it in their own life. Art should be an entity entirely separate from the artist; it should bring pleasure and beauty to viewers and nothing more. Wilde ends his Preface with a bold statement against the incorporation of morality in art. He argues that “All art is quite useless” (Wilde 10). The purpose of art should not be to drive social or political change; it should be “useless” in all ways except in bringing pleasure to those experiencing it. Art “should not seek to convey a moral, sentimental, or educational message” and should only “exist beautifully” (Anderson and Brookes, “Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement”). Its goal should not be to influence others, but to create space for opinion and interpretation, especially within a restrictive English society. As a whole, the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a piece that champions aestheticism, emphasizing the importance of “art for art’s sake.”

While Wilde was a strong proponent of indulging in beautiful aspects of life, he is also aware of the consequences of a complete immersion in aesthetic values, for Dorian’s downfall is

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<sup>10</sup> Duggan, Patrick. "The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray." *Boston University Arts & Sciences Writing Program*. Boston University Arts & Sciences Writing Program. Web. 01 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-1/duggan/>>.

a direct result of his self-absorption and lack of moderation. Dorian Gray is originally depicted as a pure, innocent individual, later corrupted by Lord Henry. Upon meeting Dorian, Lord Henry projects his own values onto him. Henry pushes Dorian to “Be always searching in new sensations. Be afraid of nothing” because “A new Hedonism” is “what our century wants” (Wilde 28). Henry is convincing Dorian to rid his life of societal constraints, and to vie for a life of pleasure instead. In doing so, Henry transforms Dorian’s sense of morality. Henry molds Dorian into a reckless chaser of “new sensations” in order to free Dorian from the conservative values of the time period, by pursuing beauty. Additionally, while one could argue that aestheticism and hedonism are similar, the downfall of Dorian’s character exemplifies the way in which hedonism is the result of an intense immersion in aestheticism without any regard for the consequences of one’s actions. Hedonism is aestheticism gone wrong – it is not the pursuit of beauty, but rather a corruption of it. Dorian reaches an amoral point of no return when he fails to feel remorse once his actress ex-fiancé, Sibyl Vane, commits suicide, shortly after he breaks off their engagement and verbally abuses her. He coldly discusses her death with Henry, contemplating that he has indirectly “murdered Sibyl Vane” but “the roses are not less lovely for all that” and “How extraordinarily dramatic life is” (Wilde 90). He does not feel a noticeable change in his life, or in the way he sees himself. He loved Sibyl because of her acting – but as soon as her acting ability waned in his eyes, he abruptly broke off their engagement, cruelly convincing her that she is worthless. This is a testament to the shallow nature of his love for her; he does not love her, because he never knows or cares about her as a person. Instead, he values her aesthetic presence in his life and the fleeting sensations of pleasure and beauty that she has allowed him to feel while watching her act. The most telling aspect of his reaction is that he feels

no guilt. He is satisfied with his decisions because they are amoral, only concerned with aesthetic value. This is an extreme of aestheticism that Wilde warns against; Wilde himself comments on this theme of the novel by explaining that “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.”<sup>11</sup> It is important, if one wants to live an aesthetic lifestyle, that they also consider the moral implications of their actions. Dorian himself realizes this at the end of the novel, finally recognizing his faults – particularly after he murders Basil. He despondently declares that he “wish[es] he could love” but that he “seem[s] to have lost the passion and forgotten the desire” because he is “too much concentrated on [him]self” and his “own personality has become a burden” (Wilde 177). He has focused so much on chasing pleasure that he has forgotten the importance of lasting emotion, and what it feels like to genuinely care about the world around him. Here, Dorian admits that his narcissism has weighed him down, and excess has prevented him from enjoying life, even in an aesthetic manner. His guilt over his lack of morality catches up to him; nothing is special to him anymore, and he is now paying the price. Dorian realizes that living a life of unconstrained aestheticism results in “intellectual regression” and misery, that he should have controlled himself more, and that he should have focused on the consequences of his actions (Duggan, “The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality”). Ultimately, Dorian’s eagerness to indulge in life’s fleeting pleasures and sensations lead to his demise, Wilde using Dorian’s character to warn readers about the dangers of unbridled aestheticism and the importance of moderation.

Oscar Wilde was a leader of the aesthetic movement and struck back against constraining societal restrictions. His personality alone – the bold way in which he expressed himself and his

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<sup>11</sup> Benson, Peter. "Wilde and Morality." *Philosophy Now*, 2008. Web. 07 Mar. 2016.  
<[https://philosophynow.org/issues/65/Wilde\\_and\\_Morality](https://philosophynow.org/issues/65/Wilde_and_Morality)>.

constant questioning of the status quo – was enough to fuel a rebellion against a suffocating society. Through the Preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde accurately states his support of aestheticism, emphasizing that allowing oneself to enjoy beautiful things should in fact be encouraged, seeing as it leads to happiness and fulfillment. Through the novel itself, however, Wilde presents a counterargument, warning aesthetes to limit the way they allow themselves to yield to their desires. While art in itself should not necessarily convey moral messages, it is important to understand the consequences one – and others – may face as a result of their actions. Oscar Wilde summarizes his viewpoint best himself: “Everything in moderation, including moderation.”

In claiming that art should not convey political or moral messages, Wilde and aesthetes at large make a political statement, intentionally or not. This statement is directly tied to the role of the artist. The artist, the figure who is meant to create beautiful things and have no ethical sympathies, could be the most political of all, in that the figure of the artist is often seen as a social pariah. Wilde depicts Basil, the painter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as an outsider whose love for beauty ultimately destroys him. Dorian, who tries to transform his life into art – and arguably becomes a sort of performance artist in the performance of his identity – meets a bitter end after he is so consumed by hedonism that his life spins out of his own control. Wilde himself was an outcast, as he openly expressed his queer identity – and gay relationships were not only abnormal at the time, they were criminal. Wilde, however, expressed himself regardless, and strategically used his position on the fringes of society to satirize it. This is inherently political; to say that art should not convey moral messages, and then to use art to reject Victorian realism and social constraints, is paradoxical and emphasizes Jameson’s point, that all cultural

objects should, first and foremost, be interpreted politically. To state that a concept is not political, is political in itself. Thus, art and identity, art and the artist, and art and the political are inextricably intertwined.

#### **IV. The Politics of the Contemporary Aesthete**

Political art is a constant throughout Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Upon first glance, *Oscar Wao* does not have much to do with Oscar Wilde, apart from a brief reference to Wilde in the plot. However, despite belonging to entirely different centuries, both Oscar de León and Wilde experience the same sense of a lack of belonging due to inherent parts of their identities. Oscar de León is a contemporary aesthete who looks for beauty in all that he does, which sets him apart from his community. He is in love with the idea of love, always searching for someone new to fall in love with and desperately hoping they will love him in return. The narrator, Oscar's college roommate Yunió, describes Oscar's obsession with love as hereditary, as something that his mother struggled with as well. But in addition to this, Oscar is held to high standards of Dominican masculinity as a Dominican-American. He is expected to be handsome, tough, strong, and emotionless, but Oscar is anything but. He is a hopeless romantic, constantly writing about his love and affection for various women. Oscar is also overweight and unathletic, and he is incredibly invested in anything and everything science fiction. His friends and family frame his intelligence not as a positive attribute, but something to be ashamed of, because his extreme intelligence impairs his social skills. Near the end of the novel, Oscar is in love with a woman in the Dominican Republic, who cares for him in return but who is also in a relationship with a Dominican police officer. The police officer and his colleagues physically beat Oscar, in a scene parallel to when, in the past, Oscar's mother was almost beat to death

because of her love interest as well. The difference between Oscar's story and his mother's, however, is that Oscar's mother survives; the novel ends with the police officers brutally killing Oscar.

In Oscar's case, his isolation is framed in the context of a diasporic experience. Again, Oscar is a contemporary aesthete who is lonely, nerdy, and constantly searching for love. Because of the machismo in Dominican-American communities, however, Oscar does not find much success. His own immigrant community, because of his unattractiveness and his inability to understand social cues, casts him out. Oscar returns to his homeland, the Dominican Republic, and is cast out by Dominican society there as well as a result of his "American-ness." He thus turns to fictional worlds – science fiction novels, comic books, and video games – to create a personal space in which he can write himself into various narratives as a hero. Just as Wilde looks to ancient Greece to express his queer identity, Oscar de León looks to the world of science fiction in order to emphasize his own qualities as desirable and to find a sense of identity. His isolation leads him to create art that values the archetype of the nerdy, lonely boy. And seeing as Yunior writes Oscar as the hero of the novel itself, Oscar has, in part, succeeded in recreating his identity through his art. This is a testament to the power of art to transform Oscar's marginalized identity into a powerful and heroic one. Art can thus incite powerful cultural changes, which can be either radically positive or dangerous. *Oscar Wao* is an explicitly political novel in which it appears, at first, that art assumes a secondary role. As the novel progresses, however, it is clear that art as a process of transformation and healing is crucial to the story.

Junot Díaz, has, in some ways, a very different relationship with his work than Wilde. Díaz is candid about his background as a person of color, and often discusses in interviews the

degree to which his Dominican identity has influenced his experiences in the United States. Wilde did not possess this ability to openly discuss his marginalized identity, as, again, there was no foundation during the 19th century fin de siècle for the queer community to express their sexualities. However, one of the clearest similarities between the two is that the title of *Oscar Wao* references Wilde himself. Oscar's friends superficially nickname him Oscar Wao after Oscar Wilde, joking that both men are overweight and physically unattractive to women. Oscar's friends fail to discuss the more important, substantial, and glaringly obvious similarity between the two Oscars, which is their love for writing and creating art. Díaz's use of Oscar's nickname in the title emphasizes the importance of his reference to Wilde, and acknowledges Oscar de León as an established artist. Another similarity between the two authors lies in the expression of their identity through their literary texts, and the ways in which their own experiences are tied to their works. *Oscar Wao* is quite autobiographical; Oscar de León, is Dominican, lives in New Jersey, and attends Rutgers University as Díaz himself did. Oscar immerses himself in video games and grapples with Dominican machismo, as Díaz himself did. Through Yunior's voice, Díaz expresses his own opinions about the importance of art in political contexts – revealing that it is impossible to fully separate an artist from their artwork.

Part of what makes Díaz's work political is his use of and references to science fiction. Science fiction is the avenue through which Oscar escapes the reality that rejects him: as an unmasculine, nerdy figure, he is the constant object of ridicule for his friends and family. Díaz chooses to use science fiction for a very specific reason, aside from his own love for it. In an interview with *Vox* (2016), Díaz states that “The default strategy for science fiction and for fantasy is the strategy of estrangement: taking something that we are actually very familiar with,

spinning it in a different way, and allowing us to approach it without all of our defenses,” which “allows us to reflect and deliberate on matters that we might not otherwise.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to discuss that “science fiction and fantasy, given their generic history, their generic preoccupations, have at their heart discussions about power, discussions about empire” and “What we would call realistic literature has a lot of trouble attempting to grab or encompass or come to terms with some of the more extreme history of our reality, whether it’s genocide or slavery” (Grady, “In Conversation with Junot Díaz”). Some topics, then, require a more immersive and creative approach in order to establish space for discussion. Because science fiction is worlds apart from the reality in which readers live, readers feel as though they have more space to relate the text to issues they face in their own lives. The distance created between the reader and the literature allows readers to reflect and create new ways to think about their own experiences. Wilde also created a sense of artificial distance between his work and his own life, in order to convey his true opinions and political messages. Díaz goes on to more directly discuss the political implications of literature – particularly in terms of “politically neutral” artwork. Díaz explains that “There’s a deep tendency in our society to view mainstream status quo literature as having no politics, which is completely untrue. It has a very strong political value; it just happens to be conservative” (Grady, “In Conversation with Junot Díaz”). Díaz establishes political neutrality in literature as a conservative tool, a refusal to acknowledge conversations about controversial elements of society. Literature about the experiences of marginalized communities becomes labeled as “political,” which drives away audiences that are accustomed to Anglo public spaces and political neutrality. When “politically neutral” art is the

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<sup>12</sup> Grady, Constance. “In Conversation with Junot Díaz: On the Force Field of Privilege and the Power of Art.” *Vox*, 2 Oct. 2016, [www.vox.com/culture/2016/10/2/12818984/junot-diaz-in-conversation](http://www.vox.com/culture/2016/10/2/12818984/junot-diaz-in-conversation).



expected standard, it becomes increasingly important to for artists to deviate from this standard in order to convey their points: points that, in Díaz's case, include the diasporic experience and the struggles that immigrant communities face in the United States. This, again, inverts Wilde's strategy; Wilde used the current of politically neutral art to his advantage, in order to implicitly convey his queer identity, while Díaz attempts to work against the current of political neutrality through his own art in order to openly challenge existing power structures.

In his interview with *Vox*, Díaz focuses on the figure of Yuniór in *Oscar Wao* as well, and the way in which Yuniór serves as another voice through which Díaz expresses his identity. Yuniór is “a narrative vehicle for discussing: How does a Caribbean-Latino immigrant from a poor family with serious intellect and educational training, how does he come to terms with the super-oppressive, fucked-up world he lives in? How does a person like Yuniór create art in spaces where no one expects and a lot of times doesn't want art?” (Grady, “In Conversation with Junot Díaz”). Creating art, in Yuniór's case, thus becomes a tool through which he reclaims his identity. Because he lives in an oppressive context, Yuniór has to find ways to write about the Dominican experience in a way that will accurately convey what his community endures. For Yuniór, Oscar becomes the allegory of the marginalized Dominican experience. He is someone who constantly searches for a place to belong, and, when he doesn't find it, creates his own through his writing. This is the path that Yuniór follows in writing the book to begin with. In a sense, he reinforces the crucial need for marginalized communities to create their own spaces of belonging in the United States, and emphasizes that art can oftentimes be the key to creating these spaces.

## **VI. Belonging in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

The figure of the writer occupies a unique and crucial space in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. On the surface, the novel seems to be a story about the life of Oscar de León, a writer and social outcast. *Oscar Wao*, however, is far more political than it appears to be: it delves into diasporan cultural identity, the social and political consequences of dictatorship, and the power that writers hold in political contexts. Oscar is Dominican, and is marginalized as a diasporan in the United States. In addition to this, Oscar is incredibly nerdy, overweight, and is unable to attract women that he is interested in. This proves problematic for Oscar, as Dominican culture values hypermasculinity: men are meant to be strong and unemotional, as well as possess the ability to attract any woman they want at any given time. Oscar, then, is also marginalized within the Dominican community itself; he is emotional and terrible with women, so he does not fit the stereotype of the ideal Dominican man. Thus, he feels that he does not belong in both the United States and the Dominican Republic. Oscar is thus forced to create a space of belonging of his own, and he does this through writing. Oscar reads and writes science fiction and fantasy, attempting to create a space where he can escape from the world that has rejected him. Ultimately, Oscar finds that he is unable to exist in both the U.S. and Dominican worlds at once, not even through his writing. However, this text demonstrates the importance of writing as a tool through which individuals can and should create their own identities and break down social and political boundaries.

Oscar is marginalized in the United States but also in the Dominican diasporic community, which contributes to the isolation that leads him to writing as an outlet and source of identity. Oscar is presented as an outsider from the start, when Yunior describes Oscar's isolation in Oscar's own sci-fi terms: "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a

smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto...Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest.”<sup>13</sup> Here, being “bookish” and a “boy of color” both contribute to Oscar’s exclusion from his peers. Within Anglo American communities, Oscar is excluded as an “Other” because he is a “boy of color.” Within American communities of color, Oscar is an outsider because he is “bookish,” rejected by those around him. Oscar is twice-marginalized, once by Anglo communities, and then again by his own. Diasporans already experience exclusion from both their host nation and their home nation, but Oscar is also isolated from the rest of the diaspora community itself, leaving him with no one to connect with and no experiences to relate to. Yuniór constantly references Oscar’s isolation from the Dominican diasporic community, notably when Yuniór discusses the ideal Dominican man. Oscar “is not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about” – “dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)” (Díaz 12). To be Dominican requires men to have “luck with the females.” Oscar, who has girls run away from him when he tries to talk to them, is the complete opposite of this. As such, he becomes “un-Dominican.” According to Elena Machado Sáez’s article “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora” (2011), this framework of the desirable Dominican male establishes “Oscar’s virginity,” in the eyes of the other characters, as what “delegitimizes his masculinity and his identity as a Dominican.”<sup>14</sup> Even among Dominicans, he is considered to be an outsider, completely unlike them – and this exclusion remains a constant throughout his life. Even in college, Yuniór’s friends would tease Oscar for his virginity and inability to attract women, saying “Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar

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<sup>13</sup>Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, a Member of the Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2007, p 22.

<sup>14</sup> Machado Sáez, Elena. “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2011, p 535. *JSTOR*.

would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am” (Díaz 180). Again, Dominican-ness is tied, here, to masculinity. Oscar does not fit the Dominican standard of sexuality, and so he is “not Dominican,” belonging nowhere. This is why he retreats into his fictional worlds. There, he can be, do, and create whatever he would like. Oscar’s failures with women provide him with motivation to write: if no place will accept him, he has to create his own.

After being rejected by Anglo and Dominican-American communities, Oscar seeks acceptance in the Dominican Republic, hoping that there he can find a place where he belongs. Unfortunately, when Oscar finds a woman he falls in love with in the Dominican Republic, even she does not completely accept him into her world – despite being one of the very few women that care for him in return. She tells him to “Go home” to the United States, and he says “This is my home” (Díaz 318). She responds, “Your real home,” and he asks, “A person can’t have two?” (Díaz 318). In calling the United States Oscar’s “real” home, she is implying that he does not belong in the Dominican Republic. Her wording unintentionally rejects Oscar’s identity as Dominican – the Dominican Republic can never be his real home because he is from the United States. To Oscar, however, the United States is not his real home either. It is for this reason that he continuously relies on writing to create a place in which he belongs, even if that place is a fiction of his own making.

## **VII. Oscar as Cast-Out Writer: His Love for Love**

When seeking romantic relationships, Oscar’s emotions are extreme. He is far too sensitive to fit the Dominican male ideal, and as a result of the exclusion he experiences, falling in love provides him with material for his writing. His numerous relationship failures, however, leave him lonely and unhappy. Yuniors notes that Oscar has always been one to “[fall] in love

easily and deeply,” who “had secret loves all over town” and who would “[direct] at any and every girl in the vicinity without regard to looks, age, or availability” his undying affection (Díaz 23). Oscar is openly a romantic; his male peers, such as Yuniór, are depicted as unemotional and seeking physical gratification, while to Oscar the physical aspect is not enough. He craves a physical but also intimate and emotional connection, to love and to be loved. It does not matter who he directs his love at: it is the action of loving, of being loved, and of expressing his feelings that he longs for. Throughout most of his life, the closest he can get to achieving a romantic emotional connection is through writing. In writing, he can depict himself as a hero and be the type of person that would have the relationships he craves. This love for beauty and connection to his emotional identity push Oscar to the margins, especially when he is in high school: “he [cries] often for his love of some girl or another. [Cries] in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him” (Díaz 23-24). He does not want to be vulnerable in public, or to be ridiculed out in the open. Here, Oscar violates the stereotypical Dominican definition of a man. Dominican men are not meant to display emotion, as it is, to them, synonymous with weakness. It is for this reason that Oscar begins to write, as a high-schooler. Yuniór comments, “And already on scraps of paper, in his composition books, on the backs of his hands, he was beginning to scribble” without knowing “that these half-assed pastiches were to be his Destiny” (Díaz 22). His writings become the space that carries him through his high school years, and the rest of his life. He cannot communicate his experience: he has no one to relate to, as his community casts him out. He thus turns to writing as a way to escape the reality that has rejected him. It is because of Oscar’s sentimentality, the very thing that motivates Oscar to write, that the people around him

and his so-called friends do not consider him to be Dominican, or consider him to be the “wrong” type of Dominican man.

Oscar’s emotional vulnerability and his nerdiness collide, pushing him into the margins and leaving him there. When Oscar finally does fall in love for the first time, he compares the experience to his love for books, emphasizing that his identity is rooted in his ability to love and his ability to write. He realizes that “The only thing that came close” to being in love “was how he felt about his books; only the combined love he had for everything he’d read and everything he hoped to write” (Díaz 45). In the stereotypical fashion of the artist, Oscar is sentimental and love-struck, in that love has a deeply emotional effect on him. His sentimentality is often connected to his sexuality in the novel, which is especially evident when Yuniór describes Oscar’s Doctor Who Halloween costume, and says that he “couldn’t believe how much [Oscar] looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (Díaz 180). This nickname spreads to the point that everyone begins to call him “Oscar Wao,” their accents making “Wilde” sound like “Wao.” While at first glance this comparison is shallow and made on a derogatory basis, upon closer inspection it becomes more significant. Wilde did not adhere to societal norms of masculinity of his time in his decorative artistic taste and flamboyant attire, not to mention his relationships with men. Nonetheless he took advantage of his societal role as an outsider: his intellect, wit, and flamboyance drew a large audience of followers to him. This reference, coupled with Díaz’s use of the name “Oscar Wao” rather than “Oscar de León” in the title of this novel, indicate that the comparison to Oscar Wilde is more significant than Yuniór’s words imply. This subtle comparison to a figure like Oscar Wilde emphasizes Oscar’s own role as an outsider, especially in the way that he uses his position as an outsider and writer to remove himself from restrictive

societal constraints. Oscar reflects on these societal constraints that led to his exclusion when he is a substitute teacher at his former high school, and remembers the times when he would constantly endure teasing from his classmates, the times when he had to watch “the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay – and in every one of these clashes he saw himself” (Díaz 264). He knows too well what it feels like to be picked on for being an outsider, for being “fat” and “smart” and for being an immigrant as well. Regardless of the reason they are being picked on, Oscar sees himself in the figure of the “outcast,” in whatever type of person is deemed an outsider by the majority. He feels he is destined to remain in the margins – only able to create space for himself and his identity through his writings.

### **VIII. Writing as a Powerful Political Tool**

In examining Oscar’s trajectory throughout the text, it is evident that marginalized, outcast individuals are forced to create their own space to find their own identity. Oscar turns to writing in order to create this identity, and it is through writing that he can overcome societal constraints and political obstacles. Writing is a powerful creative tool, and through the text, *Oscar Wao* emphasizes that it is crucial for writers to use the power they possess to break down social and political barriers. The novel takes place against the backdrop of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, and while not all of the narrative occurs when Trujillo is in power, his influence remains a constant throughout. Yunió often refers to something he calls fukú, or “the Curse and the Doom of the New World” of which Trujillo is the “high priest” (Díaz 1-2). Fukú is rooted in colonial and dictatorial oppression, and its consequences have plagued the

de León family for generations by killing – or nearly killing – most of the family, including Oscar. The only way to counter the fukú is through zafa: a “counterspell,” the “only way to prevent disaster” (Díaz 7). In this novel, it is the writer who possesses the power of the zafa. This is especially evident when Yuniór, in the midst of his storytelling, inserts a short but powerful footnote about the role of writers in relation to that of dictators. After a short segment about the murder of a man who wrote on the injustices of Trujillo’s dictatorship (who was allegedly killed by Trujillo and his accomplices), Yuniór wonders “What is it with Dictators and Writers anyway?” because they “[seem] destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle” (Díaz 97). The core of a dictatorship is unquestioning obedience – the core of writing is to question and think creatively. On the surface, these seem to be opposing concepts. Yuniór continues, however, by explaining that this eternal battle between dictators and writers is not because of their differences, but their similarities. While “Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists,” Yuniór believes that “Dictators...just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*” (Díaz 97). Yuniór’s reference to Salman Rushdie is an unsurprising one – Rushdie is a vocal proponent of using literature to convey both truth and difference of opinion. In an interview for the *Citizen Times* (2016), Rushdie explained his belief that “writing remains a dangerous vocation” because it combats “creeping censorship:” “literature will outlast even the worst dictatorships.”<sup>15</sup> But Yuniór takes this concept further; yes, dictators dislike writers, but not only because they introduce differing opinions. Writers shape narratives in the same way that dictators do. In creating a written work, a writer establishes a world in which the writer is dictator: anything written is considered an absolute truth within that

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<sup>15</sup> Neal, Dale. “Rushdie: Writers Risk Their Lives Speaking Truth to Power.” *Citizen Times*, The Citizen Times, 19 Feb. 2016.



world, and only the writer can decide what that truth is. If Oscar wishes to write a narrative in which he, as he exists in reality, is a hero, he can. If he is able to do this, and gain support and influence, he could have the power to change what is considered “normal” – as a writer, Oscar could theoretically transform the criteria that determine whether a community accepts an individual or not. Social outcasts could thus become attractive, likeable figures. As Jennifer Harford Vargas writes in “Dictating a Zafa” (2014), both dictators and writers “are narrative makers and narrative controllers” that “create metanarratives and produce meaning,” “who can make the unbelievable believable,” and “control subjects and exercise their authority through words to dictate their subjects’ or characters’ actions and thoughts.”<sup>16</sup> Dictators and writers, then, are one and the same. But because of this, writers wield an immense amount of power: dictators are afraid of writers because they are an undermining force. Writing, here, is an inherently political action.

The power structure established between writer and dictator, in the context of this novel, is rooted in fukú and zafa – bringing the fight of those who seem most distant and all-powerful back to a normal, everyday character like Oscar. “Dictating” takes multiple forms in *Oscar Wao*: “dictating as dominating (the fukú) and dictating as recounting or writing back (the zafa)” (Harford Vargas 10). If Trujillo is the “high priest” of fukú, then the power of the zafa lies in the writer. Díaz’s intention here is to reveal to readers the power of the story: the group or individual that controls the narrative can wield tremendous power, whether that’s in the form of dictatorial power, as is the case of Trujillo, or through creating social change through writing. Colonial and dictatorial oppression have been imposed through histories *written* by conquering groups. These

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<sup>16</sup> Harford Vargas, Jennifer. “Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Diaz’s ‘The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.’” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 39, no. 3, Sept. 2014, p. 8. *JSTOR*.

histories declare some groups as superior than others, and also constitute a culture of toxic masculinity such as Dominican machismo in *Oscar Wao*. It is only through the power of the written word that colonial ideology and Trujillo's terror can be fought. According to Anne Garland Mahler in "The Writer as Superhero" (2010), "the way to combat the fukú...is for those under the curse to take the pen into their own hands, using the written word to create a counter-discourse."<sup>17</sup> It is for this reason that Oscar's role as a writer, and Yunior's role in creating the story through which readers learn about Oscar as a writer, are crucial. It is only through writing, and creating a story in which someone like Oscar is the hero, that one can combat restrictive societal norms.

*Oscar Wao* likens writers to dictators in an attempt to equalize: writers have a responsibility to keep writing, because when they do, they possess power that can topple authoritarian regimes. The novel does this by incorporating readers into the text. One of the many instances in which the narrative breaks the fourth wall is when Yunior "[wonders] if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. [His] very own counterspell" (Díaz 7). When Oscar dies – arguably attempting to complete the zafa and break the fukú – Yunior is the one who takes up the fight and continues the cycle. It is possible that zafa always exists as long as someone is writing, and uses their writing to break down social and political barriers. By establishing the novel in itself as zafa, Yunior expands the narrative, brings fukú and zafa into the reader's world and away from that of the "all-powerful," faraway dictator. Zafa can now exist beyond the confines of the plot. Fukú is more than just a plot device that drives the bad luck of the de León family, or that leads to Oscar's demise: it is an active force that the book in itself is antagonizing, so that Oscar

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<sup>17</sup> Garland Mahler, Anne. "The Writer as Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz's 'The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.'" *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2010, p. 131. *Taylor and Francis Online*.

– despite his “flaws” – ends up being a heroic character. Readers thus participate in the novel’s *zafa*, in the rewriting of history. This is particularly true in the way that “the novel marginalizes and parodies the dictator and centralizes socially marginalized characters to challenge authoritarian power and hegemonic discourses” (Harford Vargas 11). Trujillo, and the Dominican police officer that orders Oscar’s death, are background characters that set the stage for the heroic story of Oscar, the social outcast. The figure of the dictator is secondary to and ultimately challenged by Oscar in the novel – the social pariah, the atypical Dominican man, but above all, the writer.

Oscar de León transcends both the stereotype of the friendless, nerdy loner, and that of the hyper-masculine, “ideal” Dominican male. As a writer, Oscar’s role is more powerful and political than either of these categories, in that he can create his own identity and his own criteria for a personal sense of belonging. The framework of the story is subtly centered on the power of the writer, especially in regards to history, but the more explicit focus is on the lives of the characters and the way in which they approach love, loss, healing, and attempt to find – or create – an individual identity. In this way, Díaz is able to skillfully demonstrate the way in which it is impossible to separate the personal from the political: social and political institutions might influence our everyday lives, but even the most unlikely individuals such as Oscar have the power to turn any oppressive social construct upside-down.

## **IX. Conclusion**

While there are certainly artists and writers who intentionally operate within the boundaries of dominant regimes and cultural movements, artists who are marginalized in some way – due to their gender, race, sexual orientation, or other identities – create works that raise

questions about identity, and that express their identities in new ways. Marginalized artists are often forced into outsider roles because they are designated as threats to mainstream cultural practices and modes of thought. Oscar Wilde and Junot Díaz both emphasize this, through the power that artists possess over their audiences' consciousness. Artists often challenge power structures and dynamics, and therefore they are viewed as troubling by their society, as we can see both in the 19<sup>th</sup> century fin de siècle and in the present day.

Today, what it means to be an artist is changing drastically. We consume global news and political ideologies through social media posts, we learn about the struggles of marginalized communities through music, we witness people's hardships around the globe through movies and documentaries. We, as human beings, are at the peak of emotional connection in that media all around us is constantly making us feel strong emotions in contexts that we have never experienced and could not possibly understand. At no other point in history has our world been so connected. What does this mean for the role of the artist?

Anyone can be an "artist," depending on one's definition: people learning to paint can create Instagram accounts to post their works, and novice photographers can easily build a website for their work through the click of a mouse. The definition of art is changing; nonetheless, the most interesting aspect of art is its constant nature. Everything about art changes, except for the fact that it exists. People will always need creative outlets to allow them to express themselves through methods that transcend basic language and communication. Often times, people are more powerfully swayed about specific political issues when learning about them through artworks, or listening to songs about them, as opposed to listening to a political official giving speeches. The root of art's political nature lies in human capacity of emotion and

the human need for emotional connection: we seek to be understood. Those who cannot be understood in all of the ways that others can, turn to experimenting with new ways to create, as artists do. Those on the margins are forced to find new ways to build bridges connecting them to an audience, to fulfill that need for emotional connection and to express what it is that makes them so different from everyone else. It is for this reason that artists are some of the greatest revolutionaries and change-makers that exist today. Taking into account an artist's individual past and the context through which they created their work, we will always be able to learn more about ourselves and others through the power of art.

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