

Significance of Hair as a Means of Racial Identity in the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.

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Significance of Hair as a Means of Racial Identity in the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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Abstract

Considering Junot Diaz's sexy and thought provoking novel, I analyze the fashion in which he utilizes underlying racial conflict in the Dominican Republic throughout the development of not only Oscar, but many of the other characters as well. By investigating the history of Africans in early Dominican Republic and the racial profiling that led to cultural oppression, I unearth a more profound understanding of the complexity of Oscar's psyche and his battles uncovering the truth behind the self. Not only do I hone in on Oscar's identity issues, but I also shine a light on his mother and his sister Lola, who both individually redefine what it means to be considered a "Dominican" woman. I dive into the concept of "otherness"—specifically "black" versus "not black" and more specifically "Dominican" versus "Haitian." The false acceptance of Europeanness drives the racial issues in the novel and in Dominican society overall.

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In an unorthodox fashion, Diaz uses hair to illustrate racial differences and identity amongst the characters of the novel. Diaz's keen attention to hair, his characters' attitudes towards hair, and its correlation to racial identity combined serves as a microcosm of Dominican society. I address how the historical oppression of Dominican Africanness is reflected in the characterization in *Oscar Wao*, how hair is used as a mechanism to describe ethnic identity, and lastly, how Dominicans in and out of the novel use hair as a representation (or denial) of their racial identity.

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