

The Brief
Wondrous
Life of
a novel
Oscar Wao
Junot Díaz
author of Drown

A companion guide to the
Literature to Life production of

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

By Junot Díaz

TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

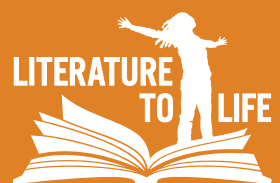


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PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

**Common Core Anchor/
NYS Arts Standards**

**A Timeline of
Oppression** History, Dominican
Diaspora, Oppression

[R.CCR.7](#), [W.CCR.9](#),
[SL.CCR.1](#), [SL.CCR.2](#),
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Speaking Oscar Storytelling, Language,
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[SL.CCR.1](#), [SL.CCR.3](#),
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POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Ethical Mantra Societal/Personal Ethics

[R.CCR.1](#), [R.CCR.3](#),
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NYS Arts: [TH:Cn10.1](#)

KEEP EXPLORING

**More ways to engage with
your LTL performance!**



PRE- AND POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

The following activities are recommended to be used as preparation and reflection before and/or after seeing the Literature to Life performance of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz.

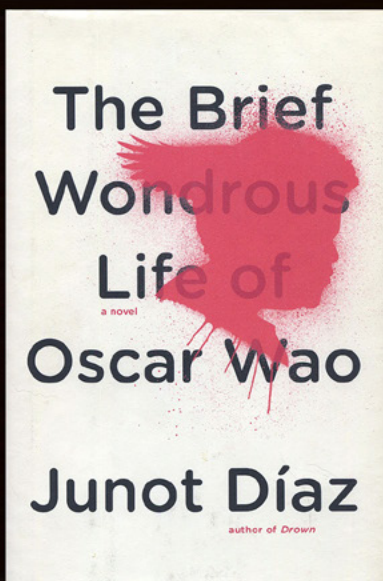
Our Teacher Resource Guides are designed for adaptation and flexibility in response to the teachers' needs. We have attempted to create enough variety to address different styles of learning and exploring. It is our hope that our guides provide insight and inspiration for teachers and students to explore texts from a theatrical perspective.

The time noted for each activity is approximate - please use the activities as they best fit within your classroom.

All Literature to Life resource guides are developed in collaboration with our Teaching Artists. We encourage teachers using our resource guides to reach out to us at info@literaturetolife.org to further discuss the material and collaborate in the shaping of your own exploration in the classroom. Think of us as a layer of support for you and your students.

“Fukú americanus, or more colloquially, fukú - generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World.”

-*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*



TIMELINE OF OPPRESSION

HISTORY, DOMINICAN DIASPORA, OPPRESSION

60 MINUTES

Students will become familiar with the history of oppression and struggle in the Dominican Republic that has influenced the Dominican Diaspora and migration.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the [Timeline of Oppression](#) cut up into individual slips of paper.
- Chart paper (one piece for each breakout group)
- Tape

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

History of the Dominican Republic-Sorting

15 min

- Divide the students into small groups (~4-5 per group).
- Distribute the cut-up timeline, one piece of chart paper, and tape to each group.
- Ask students to place the events in chronological order. As they do, they will tape each event onto the chart paper.
 - It's a race against time! Be the first group to correctly sort the timeline.
- Ask students to read the timeline aloud, correcting any errors in their order as they go.

Define "Oppression"

5 min

Ask the group to define "oppression." After listening to their definitions, share the **Official Definition**: Oppression is prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or control. It is the state of being subject to unjust treatment or control.

In the Shadow of History

20 min

Díaz uses footnotes to give context to historical references in the story, which is not typical in works of fiction. He has said that he grew up in the shadow of the history of oppression of his country and he chose to wrestle with it in this story.

Turn and Talk: Ask students to discuss (in pairs) how their ancestral/cultural history can affect their current history and how oppression can be transferred over generations. Each pair should share their thoughts with the class.

History Brought to Life

20 min

In the original small groups from the timeline sorting exercise, students will create a tableau (still picture) of an assigned event from the timeline. Follow the instructions and guidelines in the [History Brought to Life](#) document.

EXTENSION: DRAMATIZE IT!

Activate the frozen picture. Ask students to step into the role of each person represented in the tableau. In character, students should improvise dialogue and actions surrounding the historical event. They can include a narrator to provide context and description of the scene, but each scene should include dialogue. Afterwards, debrief as a group: why did students make the choices they did about dialogue and actions? What information helped them make these choices?

SPEAKING OSCAR

STORYTELLING, LANGUAGE, DOMINICAN CULTURE

70 MINUTES

Students will consider the way we use a variety of sources to inform our language.

MATERIALS

- [Glossary of Terms](#)
- Board or a large piece of paper

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

Read

15 min

Read the following quote from Junot Díaz and discuss as a class:

“We do not live in a monolingual world and neither do my characters.”

Ask your students what this quote means to them? What is a “monolingual world”? Do they agree or disagree?

Review

15 min

Some of the types of language that Díaz refers to using in this book include: Spanish, Historical, Nerdish, Slang, Spanglish

First, discuss as a class what each of these types of language mean and what kinds of words could fit into each category. Then, review the [Glossary of Terms](#) and classify each term into one or more of the types of language Díaz uses in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Brainstorm

15 min

In small groups, ask students to brainstorm the different types of language they use in their own lives. Do they use some of the same types of language listed above? What other types of language do they use? Ask students to give examples by documenting words or phrases they use in everyday life in each category.

Improvise

30 min

Now it's time to have a conversation! Ask one student to represent themselves (or they can act in character as a person from their life) and ask another student to present a character from (or in the style of a character from) *Oscar Wao*. The two students should improvise a conversation using words and phrases from the applicable glossary of terms (i.e. one using words/phrases from the one they created for themselves and the other using words and phrases from the [Glossary of Terms](#).) Debrief after each pair performs. How difficult/easy was it to understand each other? Why?

ETHICAL MANTRA

SOCIETAL/PERSONAL ETHICS

60 MINUTES

Students will chart the development of Yunior's personal ethics from the beginning to the end of the story and will consider the characters that influenced the choices that he made.

MATERIALS

- Board or Large piece of paper
- Post-it notes

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

Read

5 min

Ask a student volunteer to read the following passage aloud:

“When I’m not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym, I’m at home, writing. These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man.”

Yunior acts as a narrator of Oscar's life story, and through observing the people and events of Oscar's life, Yunior's life is impacted in both positive and negative ways.

Identify

10 min

Consider the characters that Yunior encountered by looking at Oscar's life story – both the positive and negative influences. As a class, discuss the events in Oscar's life and the names of the characters related to each event. Make a list on the board - for example:

- Event - Oscar Meets Ybón / Character - Ybón
- Event - Entering the Sugar Cane / Character - Golden Mongoose
- Event - Oscar Witnesses Violence and a Woman / Character - The Capitán

Write

15 min

Break the class into small groups and distribute the event/character names evenly among the groups. Groups are to give their assigned characters an “Ethical Mantra” - one line that sums up the ethical beliefs of that character. Instruct students to write each Mantra on a Post-it note along with the name of the character.

E.g. “Event - Oscar Witnesses Violence and a Woman/Character - The Capitán”

The students might write on the Post-it: “The man ALWAYS has the power, DON'T FORGET IT!” - The Capitán

ETHICAL MANTRA (CONTINUED)

SOCIETAL/PERSONAL ETHICS

60 MINUTES

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS) CONTINUED

Timeline

15 min

On the board, create a horizontal timeline of Oscar's life - with "the beginning" on the left side and "the end" on the right. As you discuss Oscar's life and add events on the timeline, ask students to place their Ethical Mantra Post-its for each character above the event it relates to.

Follow-up Discussion

15 min

Once the Post-its have been placed horizontally, have students approach the timeline one at a time, read the Post-it and move it above or below the timeline according to the positive or negative influence that the character/event had on Yuniar (i.e. positive would go above the line and negative below the line).

Which characters had the strongest impact on Yuniar, either positive or negative? How were these characters and their actions able to influence Yuniar?

EXTENSION: PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

It's your turn to think about and track the people that have had the greatest influence on you personally. Invite students to write down at least five significant events that have happened in their lives and the people involved in each event, just like they did for Oscar and Yuniar. Ask them to write the "Ethical Mantra" for each person, and then share the impact these people have had on their lives.

WALK THE LINE

BULLYING

30 MINUTES

Students will consider ways to become an ally to bullied students and how to deal with bullying in Oscar's story and beyond.

“Every day he watched 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 feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. In the old days it had been the white kids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was the kids of color who performed the necessities. Sometimes he tried to reach out to the school’s whipping boys, offer them some words of comfort, You are not alone, you know, in this universe, but the last thing a freak wants is a helping hand from another freak.”

-Yunior

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

Read and Discuss

10 min

Ask students to consider Yunior's words and discuss their meaning. Define the words **ally**, **bystander**, and **upstander**. What do these words mean in the context of someone being bullied? Discuss the ways that Oscar could have been more of an ally to the bullied students and less of a bystander.

Words as Ally

10 min

Next, have students form two lines facing one another. Choose one student to walk down the center aisle between the two lines. One at a time, students will share what words of encouragement they would share as an **ally**.

Words as Upstander

10 min

Ask another student to pass through the center as Oscar and share words of encouragement for him about how he can step out of the shadows and offer his support to other bullied students. How can he be an **upstander**?

EXTENSION: I PLEDGE

Ask students to consider how/why students at your school are bullied. What do they experience each day? Have students write a pledge letter - pledging to be allies at your school and explain what responsibility that carries.

FOOTNOTES

STORYTELLING, FOOTNOTES

45 MINUTES

Students will consider how context affects our storytelling by creating footnotes.

MATERIALS

- Paper for footnote writing - make it more fun with paper in the shape of a foot!
- [Passage from story, and quote from Junot Diaz](#)

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

Read and Discuss- Quote 10 min
After reading the quote, ask students if the footnote helped them to better understand the context of this piece of the story. How did it shape their understanding? Would their understanding be different if the footnote were removed?

Read and Discuss- Footnotes 5 min
Junot Díaz: *“As a literary device, footnotes reinforce authority, but in this novel they’re after a far more interesting game.”*
Ask students to explain what they think Junot meant by this statement?

Telling Stories 30 min
In pairs, ask students to tell a story that they know well from their lives or that has been told to them by a family or community member. Have them take a few moments to think about all of the details of the story (e.g. Where did it take place? Who was there and what did they say or do?) Each student gets three footnotes (a piece of paper to write on). As they tell the story, their partner can ask them to pause to clarify any detail that would help them better understand the story (e.g. if the story took place on vacation in Florida, the partner might ask where in Florida, what the culture was like, etc.). These details should then be written on the footnote.
As a class, discuss how the footnotes helped the listener better understand the story. How would life be different if we had to always include footnotes in our communication?

EXTENSION: PERFORM YOUR FOOTNOTES

Ask students to come up in their pairs, and as they tell their story aloud, have their partner read the footnotes. As a class, discuss the same questions above in relation to the stories being shared aloud.

KEEP EXPLORING

WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU SEE THE PERFORMANCE...

Here are a few more ideas about how you can encourage your students to reflect on the play. We would love to have copies of some of the writings or artwork your students create! Please email your reflective works to info@literaturetolife.org.

WRITE



- Write a review of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as if you were a journalist or news reporter.
- Write a letter to the actor, director, or teaching artist in response to the play.
- Write a letter to the author Junot Díaz in response to the novel.
- Write an obituary for Oscar to be published in his local newspaper, including some of his life's accomplishments, his passions, interests, and whom he will be remembered by.
- Write an epilogue. For example, what happens after the story ends? How do the choices made affect the remaining characters' futures?

DRAW



- Based on the descriptions given in the story, draw how you imagine the different environments Oscar encounters between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic.
- Oscar loves science fiction and comics. Create a comic strip of your favorite part of the story with Oscar as the superhero.
- Draw images from the Literature to Life production.
- Draw a poster for the LTL production of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. How would you "sell" it?

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Based on the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz ©2007

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