

A Castle Built on Sand:
Allusion and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Author's Dedication:

To begin on a personal note, I would like to explain how I was first introduced to the novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. It was by a very serious and dignified Japanese professor of my acquaintance. We share a mutual love of Dickens and Matthew Arnold. I respect his scholarship and erudition immensely, as well as his superb taste in matters literary. Therefore, when he suggested the book, I purchased a copy and read it in short order.

I saw him perhaps six weeks later and we shared a wonderful discussion about the many allusions. He confessed that he knew very few of the ones related to popular culture, but adored the process of going online and looking them up. It opened up a world to him of which he was previously largely unaware and, being a person who values knowledge for its own sake, this filled him with joy.

For a novel to have an effect like this on a brilliant man who has spent decades consuming the best and brightest that the canon has to offer is a cheering thing. It made me understand that there was something new in this work that bore closer examination. It also helped me overcome my own reflexive shame at recognizing more of the references than might otherwise be socially comfortable in certain circles. Therefore, it is to Professor Eiichi Hara that this paper is respectfully dedicated.

Introduction

Part of the intellectual playfulness that accompanies literature is its engagement with the legacy of previous texts. When one thinks of allusion in a Western cultural and historical context, perhaps the sources which come to

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mind immediately are Classical mythology and the Bible, followed closely by the works of those authors widely regarded as the mainstays of literature, from Shakespeare to Milton through to the Romantics and beyond. Such canonic intertextuality is a firmly-rooted idea which has been perhaps most famously expounded in recent decades by Harold Bloom's work *The Western Canon*, but this certainly draws upon centuries of established tradition. There is a question of what the reader might experience, however, when an author chooses to walk outside implied or assumed borders.

The 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Diaz, offers an example of exactly such a transgression of boundaries. Whilst many traditional allusions are apparent in Diaz's text, they sit equally with references to pop and geek culture, including movies, television, comics, and science fiction novels. Readers are forced to ask what this shift might mean. Diaz himself has discussed this in an interview, saying of his work, "it's really fascinating, because in some ways the book asks the readers...to take not only Oscar seriously but his interests seriously" (Jay).

This discussion shall consider the effect of alternate sources of allusion from popular culture and other areas, rather than those strictly drawn from the Western literary canon. It shall also look at the difference between intimacy and distance in terms of how allusions can be applied to position a text within a cultural context and with regard to the reader.

Allusion

An allusion is commonly defined as a brief reference to another text, an event, a person, a place or idea, but with the source not directly explained by the referrer. Especially within a literary context, the thing to which an author alludes should be somehow significant or culturally recognizable to at least some potential readers, otherwise the allusion becomes too obscure or could even go entirely unnoticed. What might constitute such significance is obviously difficult, however, and detailed definitions of the term tend to note this fact (*see* Abrams 8; Baldick 6). For example, a given date might be extremely significant to a certain individual, but probably not to another – or, if

so, it would likely be for different reasons. Similarly, the significance of a given allusion depends upon its audience. In the specific case, allusion is distinguishable from metaphor and simile, but, in a broader sense, can perhaps include them, as it might also metonymy and synecdoche. The boundaries blur somewhat when one considers a broad range of examples. The term itself comes from Latin *ludere*, to “play with” something. It thus evokes the process of playing with language, and, as survivors of the postmodernist age, modern critical readers might be tempted to connect it further with the idea of the infinite play of the signifier so familiar to contemporary intellectualism.

In literature, allusions have often tended to be markers of the cultural context, or desired placement of a text. In that way, perhaps they can be considered aspirational. Examples of this at work can be found in the Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which is full of a wide variety of allusions. The opening lines make a Homeric plea to a “heavenly Muse,” combining both classicism and Christian ideas at the outset, which is characteristic of this work (Forsyth 516). Another example can be in the found following passage, which opens Book 6 of *Paradise Lost*:

*All night the dreadless Angel unpursu’d
Through Heav’ns wide Champain held his way, till Morn,
Wak’t by the circling Hours, with rosie hand
Unbarr’d the gates of Light.*

The most immediately noticeable allusion here for a classical scholar would likely be “with rosie hand”, intended to recall Homer’s *Odyssey*, where “rosy-fingered dawn” is a common poetic device (Ferber 52). Additionally, mention of “the circling Hours” is a reference to the Horai, the goddesses of the passing of time and the seasons (Harvey 387). An overtly Christian poem making reference to the mythology of another religion might seem odd and even ironic, but it was far from an unusual case in Milton’s day. The reference to classical sources served to contextualize the poem within the realm of what one might consider “high” culture or art in a seventeenth-century context. As for

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contemporary recognition, this passage is still well-known enough as example
of allegory to be noted on websites such as *Literarydevices.net*.

Consider also the following lines from T.S. Eliot:

*I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order? (424-426)*

Here, one finds the Fisher King, a figure possibly of Celtic origin, although with parallels in Greek and other mythologies, tied directly to the health of the land (Pratt 307). This is part of an apparent ongoing effort by Eliot to elevate his narrative in *The Waste-Land* to the mythic, all through the use of allusion. The poem goes on from here to reference Dante and the Sanskrit *Upanishads*, although the overall effect is spoiled somewhat by the use of a children's song (*London Bridge is Falling Down*). In both cases, allusion serves to offer context and is somewhat aspirational.

There are, of course, works which use allusion and yet fail completely to elevate themselves to the level of the textual sources on which they draw. *The DaVinci Code* might be one example, filled as it is with references to religion, history and culture. These are, however, mashed together so ineptly that they show little more than a lack of understanding on the part of the author. As one critic noted in 2004, "Brown's writing is not just bad; it is staggeringly, clumsily, thoughtlessly, almost ingeniously bad" (Pullum).

Understanding what an allusion is and how it might be employed is one thing, but it must be asked how it can be recognized when the subject itself might not be familiar to the reader, however. It is worth considering how, in other words, one becomes aware of the *process* without necessarily understanding the *content*. This discussion shall now therefore turn to an examination of several ways in which the recognition of an allusion can take place, with the first and the last of these arguably pushing at the boundaries of the definitions of allusion and moving more towards metaphor or allegory.

In the first place, an author may reference something directly in terms of, for example, simile. An example might be “He felt like the Swan after a particularly energetic bout with Leda.” This is probably the easiest sort of intertextual reference for a casual reader to spot, but arguably not true allusion.

Secondly, there may be a passing reference that fits more or less seamlessly within the text, as in the Milton example from earlier. The allusion may or may not be noticed specifically, but its existence might well be suspected by the attentive reader.

Related to this is a third situation in which the author might leave a space within the text that implies that there is something to be recognized. Eliot does this constantly. This might be hard to note when it happens, but is still distinctive, especially as one learns to recognize the cadences of a particular writer. In this sense, it is similar to standup comedy, where the comic pauses rhetorically – often using aposiopesis - in order to let the audience know that they have reached the punchline of a joke. Often, people might laugh reflexively before they realize what that joke is.

Finally, the author might construct a situation within a narrative which is evocative of another. This can often be accompanied by symbols or cues that strengthen the relationship, and is usually the hardest to spot. A simple example might be the allusions to Christian mythology in CS Lewis' *Narnia* books, which can then become elevated to the level of allegory. At the same time, however, the narrative structure itself can be considered to have an allusive quality.

As noted, it can be argued that allusions can function either as *inclusionary* or *exclusionary* devices. The present discussion is further going to argue that the type of allusion and the subject matter, or the grounds on which it is based, can alter the experience of inclusion or exclusion in terms of reception. These can be alienating, shaming, otherizing or slyly ironic, as well as performing a host of other functions. This discussion shall now, however, turn to the novel that is being used as an example of allusive shift.

The Novel in Context

The book *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was published first in 2007 by the Dominican American author Junot Diaz. In 2008, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award, amongst others. It concerns an overweight, socially awkward boy called Oscar and his struggle for identity and masculinity in the Dominican-American subculture, as well as in the broader world. It also focuses on his mother, his sister and a host of other characters in an extended chronography that spans from the Trujillo years in the Dominican Republic (1931-1960) to the present day. It employs magical realism in that it centres on the idea of a family “fuku”, or curse.

Diaz creates a world that is at once inclusive and deliberately excluding, both embracing and alienating the reader. The novel can potentially both tantalize and isolate on an alternating basis. When considering the potential reader in terms of this specific novel, however, the idea of a target demographic or intended audience is rather nonsensical. It implies that Diaz was writing only for those who might understand his allusions, and that exclusion from such group somehow means exclusion from the process of enjoying the work or consuming it in a manner less than satisfying. Nothing, however, seems likely to be further from the truth. Indeed, the very process of allusive use in this novel mirrors everyday discursive interaction. One can easily imagine a pair of old friends or a couple who seem to have a language all of their own from which others are, of necessity, excluded. That feeling of alienation, of “otherness”, if one likes, is part of the human condition.

Diaz demystifies the process of allusion and allows the reader an opportunity to feel less guilty somehow about being otherized. This was mentioned earlier, when noting that allusion offered inclusion or exclusion. To provide a general example, if a reader misses a reference to an obscure medieval text in Umberto Eco, they may feel somehow ashamed and lessened by the experience, despite the irrationality of doing so, but not recognizing the names of characters from a 1950s B-movie might not bother them in the same way. In the reverse case, in fact, they might feel somewhat smug about recognizing the former and vaguely embarrassed by knowing the latter.

If it is difficult to imagine a situation in which one might be ashamed of recognizing an allusion, imagine encountering the words “They say we’re too young for love, But I’m catching feelings (doo-do-doo-doo-do-do-do-do-do-do)” and immediately recognizing that this is from Justin Bieber’s album *Believe*. There are many social circles where that *faux pas* alone would be enough to cause exile.

In this sense – and perhaps not only in this sense – one might argue that the novel is meta-allusive. In other words, it alludes to the process, use and reception of allusions themselves. It allows the reader space to question not merely the in-text examples, but their own reactions to them. Numerous critics have noted this effect in action. Below are a few examples:

Meghan O’Rourke (2007):

Junot Díaz’s fiction is propelled by its attention to the energetic hybridity of American life.

Edwidge Danticat (2008):

[Oscar was] spawned by a writer with a profound understanding of the mythical implications of science fiction.

Matt Hill (2008):

[The narrator] is apt to...season the prose with sci-fi arcana...to make, in other words, few concessions to the kind of artificial, standardised rhetoric that we normally think of as ‘literary’. It thus marks the distance travelled in the politics of American narrative voice since, say, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which signalled the throat clearing of a different, newly confident subculture...[Oscar Wao] bespeaks a society fragmented into a thousand overlapping cultures, comfortable with difference and distrustful of centrality. Its linguistic world is one in which we are all migrants, with all the excitement and occasional confusion that condition entails.

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Christopher Tayler (2008):

Funny, unapologetic and intensely readable, his [Diaz's] novel has a fine sense of itself as a performance rather than something ominously lapidary.

Specific Allusions in the Work

There are a seemingly endless number of layered allusions in the novel, and cataloguing them would be both a cheerless and near-impossible task. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is valuable, however, to consider a few of them in context. The most obvious is in the name of the protagonist, first given in the title of the novel, which evokes homonymically the idea of Oscar Wilde, here in the context of an urbane yet isolated individual misunderstood by the society that he at once adores and stands back from. The title also suggests that the reader is about to embark on a chatty, informal biographical work via the association with Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, a collection of character sketches of leading figures put down in the last decades of the seventeenth century. There is a second association with "brief" that is perhaps less expected and outlined in the opening pages.

Diaz's novel begins with two quotations. Despite being extremely short, the first is given a page all its own, adding weight to such a brief sentence.

"Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to **Galacticus??**"

Belying the portentous, literary overtones, Diaz makes it clear that this is a line taken from a comic book. Actually, it is from 1966 and appeared in the Marvel series *The Fantastic Four*. The character "Galactacus" is a kind of godlike, distant supervillain. The quotation implies that an indifferent world might not care about an individual such as Oscar, but further implies that the reader will find reasons to do so, just as they might find value in comic culture itself, often dismissed as childlike and shallow.

An example of what one might consider to be an even more obscure subcultural reference can be found in the passage given below:

A year later, the substituting turned into a full-time job. He could have refused, could have made a “saving throw” against Torture, but instead he went with the flow. (Diaz 263)

This is a reference to *Dungeons and Dragons*, a role-playing game that became massively popular in the 1980s and was played with dice and paper (Ewalt). A “saving throw” means rolling the dice to avoid something undesirable happening. Here, the implication is that life is a game and Oscar has suffered a setback in it by taking on work as a substitute teacher. Such an allusion is apparent within the text, via both the oddity of phrasing and the use of quotation marks, and the reader is made aware that something is being referred to, even if they might not know precisely what.

In the next example, it is again apparent that an allusion is being made – or, more accurately, a pair of allusions:

Turns out that in her heart our girl was more Penelope than Whore of Babylon. (Diaz 109)

This refers to two things, mixing the classical and biblical in the same way as Milton, but with a different sense of cultural exuberance. Milton was a Christian who used classicism as a remote metaphoric language, whereas in this case, both references seem equally remote for Diaz. Penelope is, of course, the wife of Odysseus (Harvey 312), and a symbol of marital fidelity. The Whore of Babylon is a figure from Revelations (Chapters 17 and 18), a typically misogynistic Christian image. It is a passage about Oscar’s mother as a young girl. She has fallen in love with a rich boy, been caught having sexual relations with him and been reviled for it.

These are three simple examples from many. In literary terms, such a method of approaching the novel is potentially fascinating. Imagine that one is reading Swift and wants to understand the narrative in terms of the Tory politics of the past. One has, in other words, to use one obscure thing to explain another. In the case of Diaz’s novel, however, there is the chance to

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follow a familiar cultural reference and wind up at a deeper understanding of an idea within the novel. Some references might be obscure, but others will not, as in the following passage:

I'm going to be the Dominican Tolkein, he said...His room nerdier than him, if that was possible. X-wings and TIE-fighters hanging from the ceilings. (Diaz 192-193)

Here, Diaz expresses the loneliness and isolation of the protagonist through his need to externalize and relate to imaginary worlds, as he finds the realities of the one in which he lives too much to bear. It is a subtle point, beautifully expressed through minimalist, layered allusions to contemporary culture. One would be hard-pressed to find a modern novel reader who had not heard of *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*. They might not have read or seen them, but they would surely know what they are.

Conclusion

At the outset, this discussion looked at the poetry of both Milton and Eliot and discovered aspirational usages of allusion. This begs the question of to what, then, Diaz might aspire in this work. It seems likely that that he wanted to create a novel that was a result of itself, a product of its own time and place, and, whilst playing with signifiers, the work could be coupled with contemporary culture. It is tempting to say “popular” culture, but that is something of a misnomer.

Diaz offers a protagonist who is at once an everyman and a nobody. In this lies the central contrast and pathos of the novel. Identifying with Oscar Wao is something from which a reader might shy away, as he is of a type that exists on the fringes of society, but, by unfolding and explaining his complex character through the use of allusions to popular tropes, the protagonist is humanized, made sympathetic and the complexity and beauty of the hidden subculture to which he responded is outlined. Literary allusion is frequently a distancing process. In this work, however, it has become something intimate.

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