

MISREAD BY SOCIETY

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Luis Negrón is a Puerto Rican author who has recently become more well-known due to *Mundo Cruel*, a book that was published by “La Secta de los Perros” in 2010. His works are generally focused on the gay community, the marginalized, and people who “are less to society.” Written in this same vein, *The Pain of Reading* is an October 2012 story that he wrote for *The New York Times*. It presents the dynamics of a dysfunctional family that lives in southeastern Puerto Rico. They struggle with problems such as poverty, divorce, and homelessness. The text, which was translated to English by the well-known scholar of Latin American literature, Suzanne Jill Levine, concentrates on an unnamed boy who finds an escape through reading and that innocent act leads him to be humiliated by his parents. Some readers might be prompted to think his decisions are an example of escapism, a way of completely putting aside or leaving a reality because of some of the aforementioned problems. In this light, reading would be a purely imaginative activity through which the boy withdraws or separates from his world. This, I suggest, is not the case. The protagonist does not engage in escapism. Instead, he uses reading as an activity that allows him to engage and deal with the world. With this in mind, it seems that he suffers because of miscommunication, not due merely to his family's socioeconomic instability or what seems to be his parents' lack of formal education.

The Pain of Reading (Negrón, 2012) presents the struggle the narrator goes through when he is misunderstood by his parents and society. In the middle of the story, the boy lets us know that he is afraid to take some books home from the library because he fears something might happen to them. But he wanted the librarian to think he had “a normal house and a normal family, the way it was in the books,” (Negrón, 2012: 39) so he goes ahead and checks them out. It is painful to know that he has to lie or pretend to at least appear to have a normal life. The protagonist is already somewhat hurt by the situation, and he is ashamed to let people know what his life is like. Significantly, taking the books is taking a chance, but it is one that will allow him to read more and also confront his world.

The most important interaction among the characters takes place when he, his three siblings, and his mother start living in Arroyo, in a house with his uncle and aunt by the sea. As Negrón describes the setting, “My uncle was young and had just married a lively young woman who always smiled. They lived in Arroyo, in a house by the sea.” (2012: 27-28) Next, we learn what the narrator enjoyed most in his daily life there. In his words, “I loved two things in particular about the town: going to the theater to see the posters of the movies they were playing and tiptoeing among the rocks that formed a breakwater down by the small dock. I loved the breakwater, and when I would sit at the very end I would feel like I was traveling, like I was far away from everything.” (2012: 29-30) These activities appear to have a special place in his adjusting to his new home. This is pure creativity, the reason why it is an important trait. Not everybody can pull off such an “escape” like that; but just by sitting at the end of the breakwater he is able to create and alternate reality. He feels like he is traveling, just as he says “far away from everything.” This interaction is important because this is where we know that he is not all right at all.

One day a library opened in Arroyo, at first the protagonist did not dare to go in because he had his mother's flip-flops, but his aunt bought him some shoes and he went inside. He was fascinated by the collection of literary classics, but the book that caught his eye was, *Little Women*. The narrative unfolds, “...[I] had already started reading it in the library and I could not put it down. My aunt sat me in an armchair in the living room so that I could read in peace. I spent hours there, totally fascinated.” (2012: 41-43) Later on, the protagonist informs us that his father, who had been away for some time, unexpectedly arrives and nothing good happened, “...[] Papi showed up with some money. Mami received him with the hatred and anger that stirred her to love him despite everything. We kids ran out to meet him, shouting Papi! Papi! Overjoyed to see him again, we crowded around him, my sister showing him a dance step, my brother, an egg-laying hen he had found, and me showing him my book, *Little Women*”. (2012: 44-47)

Everything was going well, until his father has an outburst, “What is this about little women? He asked my mother. “Estás criando un pato?” — You raising a fag?” (2012: 49) Both of them argued and Papi left angrily, the boy's mother proceeds to yell at him “Queer! Little woman!” (2012: 53) and then she grabbed the treasured book and tore it into pieces.

Nowhere in the story, has it said that he is actually gay. The reason why I believe that the boy is misunderstood is because when his father comes back out of the blue, with some money, the boy and his siblings showed him something that

they have done or learned. The brave protagonist showed “Papi” the book *Little Women*, and “Papi” did not react positively. Yet, his father does not engage the boy directly. He asks his wife if she was raising a fag. This is an insulting and humiliating comment. Shortly thereafter, the protagonist opens up and reveals that his dad has hurt him and also aggravated a wound. “That was the word I most feared in school, or playing games with my cousins, the word I could not escape. I was ashamed to hear it from my father; it was painful for me to see him leave, thinking that of me...” He goes on and confirms the destructive power of language, suggesting that the word “pato” or fag makes miscommunication overwhelming. The boy explains, “Because of that word that no matter what — no matter what I do or how I do it — I could never escape.” (Negrón, 2012: 57) This line reinforces that idea that literature does not function as a complete escape from his problems, and thanks to his parents, he is nearly hopeless. When he is with his family, he feels powerless and uncomfortable, but when he visits the breakwater or reads he feels far away from his problems. The destruction of the book is painful because literature serves as a catharsis for the character; he not only uses fiction to come to terms with challenges in his reality, but cleanses his spirit throughout the story as he reads. Negrón elaborates a similar idea to contextualize his writing in general in a 2013 interview done at the International Book Fair in Lima, Peru. (Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETP-MRFrmPc>) In his words, “...maybe you are not happy and neither do I, but we can be content and that is what my writing is all about; about the efforts people make to find a moment of happiness.”

The trait of creativity in this character shows the reader that the boy has a sort of control over his environment, but when trapped 'in reality' he has little control. The protagonist's creativity is a psychological trait, which is essential to the plot of the story and the author's ability to communicate moments of happiness. At the beginning the protagonist informs us that his mother and father were most of the time fighting and that he and his three siblings were used to the separations, but one day it all changed, “Papi had gotten involved with the woman next door, and for Mami this was the last straw,” (2012: 4) this time, they truly got separated. They were homeless, so Mami and the four children had to find a place that could give them lodging. “We lived like nomads, pushing on whenever our hosts’ hospitality had run dry.” (Negrón, 2012: 10) One day they did not have anywhere to stay, so Mami left the three older kids in the ballpark and took the younger son with her to look for some place to stay. She finally appeared and led them to the back of a furniture store, all of them took some boxes and went back to the park. Creativity helps the character find some sort of happiness. This can be seen, for example, when he says, “This seemed like fun, like camping out, and we laughed with excitement – but very quietly so that Mami would not hear us. I found a

washing machine box in perfect condition and felt happy to have a room of my own. We took the boxes back to the park and pretended to make a living room.” (Negrón, 2012: 22-24) Between the chapters of their own misfortune, the children see a ray of sunshine which brought them happiness and fun for a few quiet moments. It is interesting to know that when they were in the ballpark the kids constructed a living room. A living room is considered a rather normal “place for the family,” a place where everyone sits down, talks, and has a good time. It is also a place that encourages communication. In other words, all that the children want is for their family to be together in peace.

Confronting reality through strategic use of the imagination is a great way of dealing with things. After all, there are other ways to cope, but they are not healthy at all. For example, the problems that the boy has in his life can lead someone to eventually use drugs, drink alcohol, or completely withdrawal. These are unhealthy ways of escaping reality and they do not produce good results. But this character takes another route, one that will teach other people to be creative, to find some sort of passion when reading, to feel curious, and to not give up. The reader of *The Pain of Reading* is likely to be inspired and he or she might even be willing to read American author, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), or the other classics that have caught the attention of the protagonists, *Moby-Dick*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

The reader who chooses Alcott's volume will become immersed in the family dynamics of four sisters and perhaps surprised to see that a nineteenth-century text deals with problems similar to those that Negrón's work addresses. As literary critic Barbara Sicherman explains, the book "...has been read as a romance or as a quest, or both. It has been read as a family drama that validates virtue over wealth...[...]," but also "...[...]" as a means of escaping that life by women who knew its gender constraints only too well." (Sicherman, 2010: 34) Alcott introduces the character Jo, a tomboy who is frustrated with the limitations that society imposes upon young girls. Her family is threatened by separation, like that of Negrón's protagonist, and she and her sisters use their imagination to try to keep it together.

The most valuable thing for me as a reader of *The Pain of Reading* is that I truly feel empathy towards this character. Not only for his creativity, but also because he is misunderstood. I know how it feels when family members and the people that you love believe that you are someone that you are not; even if you try to do all that is possible to change their minds, they do not modify their thinking. I imagine myself as the boy, sad, in need of someone's understanding and love,

lonesome, and full of questions. In the protagonist's shoes, I would ask, why did “Papi” think that of me just because I like the book *Little Women*? Where does all the anger come from? How can I ever go back to the library when “Mami” tore the book into pieces? It was not even mine. Holding onto what is left of my optimism, I know that “Papi” thinks that way of me because he does not understand what the *Little Women* is actually about. I can explain the story to him and explain to the librarian what happened to the book. I might not be able to borrow any more books, but hopefully I would at least be allowed to finish Alcott's novel. As a writer and a member of the gay community, Negrón also feels empathy towards the boy. Related concerns are evident in *Los otros cuerpos: antología de temática gay, lesbica, queer desde Puerto Rico y su diáspora* (2007), a volume which Negrón co-edited with Moisés Agosto Rosario and David Caleb Acevedo. This book brings together voices that identify the concerns, motives, and desires of the gay, lesbian, and queer community. Clearly, the author recognizes the transformative power of dialogue and literature, both absent within the family of *The Pain of Reading*. I believe that during his childhood the author struggled to find who he was, and the people around him misunderstood his feelings and actions. Just like the protagonist, I have my own way of escaping reality, and this is by writing. I feel that there are no limits when writing, you can create something beautiful or destroy what you have done just by adding words.

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