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Truth and Identity in Autobiography: Teaching Esmeralda Santiago's novel *When I Was Puerto Rican*

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Esmeralda Santiago spoke at the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Conference in New York City on Saturday, March 17, 2000. She told teachers that she truly honors all who work with children. The cheers and standing ovations that thundered through the audience made it clear how honored is Esmeralda Santiago. She reminisced about Mrs. Pauline Brown, her teacher at Jr. High PS39 in Brooklyn, who truly listened. "She never made her students feel bad," Santiago told the audience. Esmeralda Santiago's memoirs *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman* revisit these and other years, communicating to other immigrant children Santiago's important message: "There is nothing TO DO to become acceptable. This usually depends only on others. As immigrant children and young people in America today, lets teach them to think more about 'how do I become me?'" With this quote in mind, Santiago presents her work as an exploration of her search for identity and as a model for young people in their own search.

Because students are naturally inclined to read and write about topics that concern themselves and their experiences in the world, autobiography is an appealing genre to students. In reading autobiographical novels and essays, students can find realistic role models. In writing autobiographical essays, students can find a rhetorical method for self-reflection. In this sense, a unit on autobiography can prove to be a valuable teaching tool for students of all ages and ability levels. Esmeralda Santiago's novel *When I Was Puerto Rican* is an autobiography that traces Santiago's memoirs through her childhood in Puerto Rico and her transition from Puerto Rico to New York City. Her second memoir, *Almost a Woman* continues the spirited documentation of her adjustments and experiences as she grows up in New York City and attends the High School for Performing Arts.

This curriculum unit is designed for an Advanced Placement (AP) English course for high school juniors, however it is easily adaptable to other secondary levels. The AP course is structured as an analysis of writing and rhetoric with an intense focus on preparation for the national Advanced Placement exam in language and composition. Another element of the AP English class is to provide students with some exposure to literary criticism and guide students to analyze works with philosophical insight. Since New Haven is also a diverse community, and its student population is primarily that of minorities, African American and Latino writers hold a strong and solid position within the district curriculum. Esmeralda Santiago's works appeal to students' interests and backgrounds while also addressing the AP curriculum requirements for analysis, writing and rhetorical study.

The main objectives of the unit are as follows. (1.) Students will be able to identify and analyze the author's use of literary devices. (2.) Students will be able to respond to the novel in terms of narrative style and technique as well as in relation to the novel's plot and themes. (3) Students will be able to analyze a work of literature in terms a variety of elements and from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

When I Was Puerto Rican is compelling, entertaining and an exercise in effective storytelling. With this idea in mind, the first instructional issue raised for consideration is: Does Santiago's "storytelling" constitute a work of autobiography? This becomes a central theme in the unit for teaching students rhetorical, theoretical and personal approaches to reading and writing autobiography. The unit is divided into lesson plans and background instructional information for teachers according to the topics outlined below:

I. Defining Rhetoric and Autobiography

A. Rhetoric and Authority

B. Autobiography

1. The Truth in Autobiography

2. Santiago's Style and Eloquence

II. Autobiography Provides a Voice

A. Bringing Social Issues to Light

B. Santiago's Voice as a Child, Adult and Latino

Defining Rhetoric and Autobiography

Rhetoric and Authority

Rhetoric in literature has come to be known as the use of literary and persuasive devices used in various styles of writing. More specifically, rhetoric includes not only use of literary elements such as symbolism or metaphor but also the combination of style and arrangement of words and sentences - the interrelated aspects of form and meaning in a work of literature. Essentially, rhetoric is the study of an author's use of language. In an Advanced Placement class that focuses on analyzing literature in terms of its rhetorical approach, the general idea of rhetoric means that students are asked to look at literary elements and how they work together to execute an author's purpose and create a response from the reader.

A rhetorical analysis requires the reader to look closely at details, the author's tone and to get a sense of the author's general purpose. For students who are learning to take a critical approach to reading, a discussion of authority provides a strong introduction to analyzing autobiography. The most noteworthy resource on the subject is Michael Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" In his essay, Foucault discusses writing as a relationship an author has with the text, not the reader. The reader witnesses this relationship and the circulation of language and ideas. The author is not at the center of the work, but is only a part of the overall structure of a novel – even an autobiography.

Autobiography

Autobiography has always been defined in English classrooms simply as the work of literature based on the author's life. In today's English classrooms, autobiography is included in the study of literary genres, because it is often the approach taken in many "coming of age" stories, used in classrooms to address lessons in literature and writing and well as to confront social issues. A successful coming of age story depicts a protagonist who is initiated into adulthood through knowledge, experience and understanding. In this process, the protagonist destroys any false senses of security and experiences a loss of innocence. Santiago's novel *When I Was Puerto Rican* follows this design.

Students usually try to identify with subjects in concrete terms, therefore, providing a definition for autobiography is important. Is it separate from other forms of narration? As stated earlier, Santiago's autobiography reads like a story, like a novel – and the author admits to being rather removed from the experiences described in the book – so is it an autobiography or a work of fiction based on her life? Who or what is the subject of autobiography? Are the perspectives and experiences communicated true or created? Is autobiography an effort to define or recapture the self? Is it even possible to truly know oneself? How important are the answers to these questions in analyzing Santiago's autobiography? From a rhetorical point of view, these questions are less important than the actual narration. From a personal perspective, however, a reader may ponder these questions while searching for a personal connection to the themes and events in the novel.

For a high school English class, these complex questions provide topics for intense analysis and class discussion. Students may claim that the novel is true because Santiago's experience is true to her whether she crafts her memoir or not. Some students experiencing their own identity searches, may find Santiago's self-awareness impressive as she makes infinite statements that reflect insight and understanding. Because of Santiago's eloquent narration, it is effective to look at the novel as a mirror of the writer's life. It doesn't matter if we, as readers, assess Santiago's self-awareness as limited, because she is communicating experiences more than anything else. It is through the experiences she describes and the way that she describes them that her "self" emerges.¹ In this sense, the subject of the novel is Santiago's experiences. At the same time, it is through Santiago's reactions to experiences that students can make personal connections.

Ultimately, students will have to read the novel and analyze the author's purpose and success to decide what an autobiography is to Esmeralda Santiago. Defining autobiography too strictly at this point in the unit only allows for students to make judgments based on what they've been told in school or read previously. It is my goal to set the stage for reading *When I Was Puerto Rican* and defining autobiography through close reading and group analysis.

The Truth in Autobiography

Simply because the author uses her own name as the main character, the novel seems to be openly

autobiographical. However, an experienced reader knows better than to assume that the “I” of a novel is automatically the “I” of the narrator. This is not an easy concept for students to grasp and provide this unit with a great challenge – guiding students to analyze the author’s use of narration in the text. Using a first person narrator might mean that some of the events and experiences presented in the novel are autobiographical, but the use of first person might also simply serve as a vehicle for telling the story. This is the essential idea of the unit for students to examine.

The main element that contributes to the storytelling effect of *When I Was Puerto Rican* is Santiago’s eye for detail as she describes people and events. But how reliable is Santiago’s perspective? After all, *When I Was Puerto Rican* begins when she is only about age four. It is valuable for students focusing on critical analysis to look at the concept of truth within autobiography. As bell hooks states in her essay, *Writing Autobiography*, “The longer it took me to begin the process of writing autobiography, the further removed from those memories I was becoming. Each year, a memory became less and less clear.”²

It is amazing that Santiago could recall experiences from her childhood with such vividness. Negative experiences, such as punishments, arguments or embarrassing incidents are the information of family secrets. To reveal family secrets is to disturb the bond of family – a task necessary for the memories of an autobiography to be true. The struggle an author must face to break this bond and truly reveal both the positive and negative aspects of experience is where writing autobiography may have its limitations. As such, the fictionalized aspects of *When I Was Puerto Rican* may actually reveal more difficult truths because fiction allows experience and emotion to be expressed in another voice.

It is almost impossible for the retelling of memoir to be completely “accurate.” No two people perceive experiences the same way. It is important for students to internalize this fact when reading and analyzing autobiography. Literary critic Leigh Gilmore calls the study of autobiography, *Autobiographics*, in order to describe the elements of self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation.³ A writer’s autobiographical accounts are extremely personal and, in order to recall, may be “recreated,” in a sense, in the author’s mind. This idea poses another topic for class discussion and student analysis.

Mini Lesson

Ask students to recall and experience from the previous week that lasted only about 5 to 10 minutes. In a paragraph or so, students should describe the incident with as much detail as possible. Have students review their description and consider the following questions – Did the memory become a bit “fuzzy”? Did they have difficulty remembering small details such as exactly what people said to one another?

Does “recreating” an incident within narration make an author’s retelling unreliable? An autobiography must have the personal perspective of the author in order to be an autobiography, but does that make the story any less real? As students debate and perhaps in discussing *When I Was Puerto Rican*, defend the authenticity of an author’s retelling, students can learn to appreciate another person’s perspective. In addition, students should be aware that the ability to step away from the narrator’s interpretation and analyze an actual situation of the text is an important skill for analysis.

It is helpful to hold a class discussion on what makes a narrator unreliable. Can a person be telling the truth and be unreliable? Explore this idea openly with students. Students may provide concrete examples where they’ve found a speaker to be unreliable while still revealing truth. During class discussion, students may recognize that they are constantly evaluating the reliability of speakers in their daily lives – with teachers, parents and peers. Experience has taught us that everyone who tells a story isn’t necessarily reliable. What an

instructor can do to apply this discussion of reliable storytellers is to guide students through establishing a list of characteristics that make the reader judge a speaker/narrator as reliable or unreliable.

Mini Lesson

Provide students with descriptions of short incidents. This works best if students work in small groups of two or three. Ask students to explain if they think the narrator is reliable or not. If the narrator is judged as unreliable, students should outline what they believe to be the truth of the situation. (Exercises are available in Appendix V.)

Mini Lesson

While reading, students may keep a log of the reactions to the narrator's memoirs, responding to questions that assess the author's reliability. Students may ask the same questions at times when the narrator's voice appears to be that of the author as an adult rather than a child. (Guide questions are available in Appendix VI.)

Sometimes, the pleasure of reading autobiography is less about the events the author recalls, and is more about witnessing and relating to the narrator's reaction to events. Ultimately, it is the elements of human nature and feelings that the reader, especially a young reader, connects with best. Whether some elements of autobiography are created or recreated doesn't really effect the way a student can develop empathy for another person's experience. The desire to "tell one's story - to recall the past - to reminisce - to come to terms with - are all ideas that appeal to young people who experience daily internal struggles. Autobiography enables a writer, and often a reader too, to self reflect on experiences that continue to shape and inform the present.

Santiago's Style and Eloquence

What's so magical about *When I Was Puerto Rican* is Esmeralda Santiago's ability to intertwine her childhood memories with sophisticated interpretations of her experience and communicate it all with such narrative eloquence. For example, as a child, Esmeralda wondered why she had the nickname Negi when her given name was Esmeralda. While her mother explained that her nickname was given because she was loved, Esmeralda concluded the following; "It seemed too complicated. Each of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not."⁴

In addition to her blend of memory and self-awareness, Santiago creates a unique and original writing style as she speaks in a mix of languages, blending Spanish terms with English dialogue and description. The approach of blending languages reflects the scope of Santiago's experience as an immigrant. In her NCTE speech in March, 2000 she also stated, "I was not American but I wasn't truly Puerto Rican anymore either, because my Spanish had become a little rusty." In the novel, however, it appears that certain ideas only lend themselves to be described in Spanish terms. For example, whenever Negi speaks of sexuality, the behaviors of men and women or of food, she uses Spanish terms. She refers to common terms for describing stereotypes such as "gringo," "puta," "jibaro," and "sinverguenza." In these instances, Santiago's style reveals a frankness of language and hearts that is an appealing narrative element of the novel. This cultural duality, blending language and images of Puerto Rico and America obviously added to the novel's success.

Autobiography Provides a Voice

The study of autobiography is also connected to an author's quest for voice. Autobiography allows writers to define themselves as individuals; distinct from those images fostered by society or by cultural stereotypes.⁵ Knowing Santiago's background, a reader could infer that her purposes for writing *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman* are similar. Santiago, as a young Latino immigrant in New York City who was relocated against her own will and understanding, searched for images, stories, experiences that she could relate to. In her autobiography, Santiago creates a voice for other Latino children and adults to witness. She combats the idea that a woman's voice, especially a Latino woman's voice, is insignificant. For a writer, she proves that nothing is too minor to be woven into a memoir – no incident is too small – because all experiences shape who we are and who we become. We all have a story to tell. We all want people to value what we've done. We all want to help others with what we've learned. Santiago allows the reader to connect to each of these ideas in her memoir.

In the novel, Santiago reveals her family's honor for education and for their own culture. She teaches her readers to celebrate and accept who they are today as well as whom they are becoming – an idea of inspiration for young people struggling with identity. Because of its confidential and intimate nature, autobiography also allows a writer to examine difficult memories, thoughts, feelings and underlying concerns such as sexual identity and power. The novel become the author's own truth-telling experiment. Several issues lend themselves to be revealed in autobiographical works and are elements in *When I Was Puerto Rican*.

Bringing Social Issues to Light

Writers of autobiography tend to bring to light the connections between work, social class, education and inequality. These connections are an important aspect of Santiago's autobiography. Autobiography gains much of its drama from a writer's attempt to use the story - her voice - to come to terms with experience and gain self-acceptance. As witnesses of private dialogues and personal experiences, young readers are given a model for self-acceptance and catharsis. In the novel, Esmeralda Santiago reflects most frequently on the issues of identity and family relationships.

Recalling that many autobiographies provide great stories to address the concept of rite of passage, Esmeralda's struggles include those that lead her to question her identity – as a girl, a daughter, a student, a friend. As the novel provides a journey through various rites of passage, the movement from childhood to adulthood is marked by many different experiences. She gains a new awareness of cultural identity as American customs are introduced and she eventually moves to America. She learns the complexity of relationship among family members and especially between men and women through witnessing her parents' struggles. Her identity as a young woman, however, is also measured as she awaits becoming "Senorita." In the novel, "senorita" signifies starting the menstrual cycle, and for Negi, signifies another period of change for her. Moral issues such as having to worry about men's advances and pregnancy once she becomes *senorita* connect Negi to the larger community. She identifies herself not only by how she feels but also by how she is seen by others. In this sense, the novel allows students to think about both physical and psychological rites of passage.

Cultural identity is one of the most important themes throughout the novel. It is introduced at the start of the

novel when Santiago is shopping in a New York City bodega, and the sight and smell of guava fruit attracts her attention. Another significant experience when Santiago became aware of her cultural identity was when the Puerto Ricans of Santiago's community in Macun were introduced to American customs. She titles the chapter, "The American Invasion of Macun" and describes Americans who visited to teach the Puerto Ricans about health and hygiene and to provide the families with American food. Describing her first experience eating scrambled eggs, for example, Santiago says with poignant humor,

"I . . . dipped my spoon into the gelatinous hill, which was firmer than I expected. It was warm and gave off that peculiar odor I'd smelled coming in. It tasted like the cardboard covers of our primers, salty, dry, fibrous, but not as satisfyingly chewy. If these were ever once eggs, it had been a long time since they'd been inside a hen." 6

Esmeralda's initial images of Americans are shaped by these experiences. In the voice of a child, Negi describes her impressions in great detail. Her brutal honesty, while humorous, reveals her great love for home. Once in America, she confronts prejudice and discrimination on a deeper level. For example, when she is registering for school, the administration decides she should begin in the alternative class for kids who can't succeed in regular classes. Because of her lack of knowledge in English, she was judged as less intelligent and less able than an average student. As she describes each detail of these experiences Santiago celebrates the capacity of the human spirit when confronted with adversity. When asked to attend seventh grade instead of eighth grade, Esmeralda responded to the school administrator with the following solution,

" "Seben gray?" I asked Mr. Grant, pointing at his big numbers, and he nodded.
"I no guan seben gray. I eight gray. I teeneyer."
"You don't speak English," he said. "You have to go to seventh grade while you are learning."
"I have A's in school Puerto Rico. I lern good. I no seven gray girl."
"Meester Grant," I said, seeing the moment, "I go to eight gray six mons. Eef I no lern english, I go to seven gray. Okay?"
"That's not the way we do things here," he said, hesitating.
"I good studen. I lern queek. You see notes . . . I pass seven gray."
"You have until Christmas," he said."7

Needless to say, Santiago succeeded and went on to graduate from the New York Performing Arts High School. Complicating Santiago's initial experience even further, however, there were other Spanish and immigrant communities who were unaccepting of the new Latino arrivals. It was through education that many Latinos

(and Esmeralda Santiago) gained a stronger footing in mainstream America. Santiago's novel further helps improve the situation for Latino immigrants as she reveals much of the ethnic and racial prejudice immigrants endure.

Family is one of the most enduring topics of literature and cultural studies. The universal relationships among family members provide a basis for common experiences, emotions and perceptions. Analyzing one's relationships with others also requires an author and reader to examine aspects of one's personality that may have been shaped through the influence of other people.

In her NCTE speech, Esmeralda Santiago also discussed her parents' reaction to the novel. To her, and our, surprise, her father was proud to be the villain of her novel. Her mother claimed the novel was more about her than it was about Esmeralda. While the audience laughed at these anecdotes, it was clear that Esmeralda's parents recognized her purpose. Her father apparently read the book using a Spanish/English dictionary when it was first published in English. What was his immediate response? Esmeralda tells the audience he said the book was for all young couples who want to be parents - to show the role they play in their children's lives.

When I Was Puerto Rican can be viewed as a story of many lives really - the lives of Esmeralda and her family. Her experiences seem to amplify her mother's struggles, and Esmeralda's interpretations of experiences are the result of her mother's life of loss and longing and her father's frequent absences. In addition, as one would expect, her awareness of culture was shaped by what she learned from her parents and the relationships she witnessed at home.

One example of a theme related to family in the novel is that of men as *sinverguenzas*. This term, Esmeralda learns, means that men had no shame in indulging in behavior that caused women much suffering. Her father often acted as a *sinverguenza*, because he refused to marry Esmeralda's mother. It was also common knowledge that he visited what Esmeralda called a "puta". She says,

"Putas, I guessed, lived in luxury in the city on the money that *sinverguenza* husbands did not bring home to their long-suffering wives and barefoot children. Putas wore lots of perfume, jewelry, dresses low cut to show off their breasts, high heels to pump up their calves, and hairspray. . . . I wanted to see a puta close up, to understand the power she had over men, to understand the sweet-smelling spell she wove around the husbands, brothers, and sons of the women whose voices cracked with pain, defeat and simmering anger." 8

In the NCTE speech, she discussed her intention of addressing many social issues through her autobiography and of providing other Latinos with inspiration and personal connections. Included in this discussion, however, was her analysis of what happened as a result of the novel. Santiago was in the midst of a new cultural conflict – she was criticized for the novel’s title and ultimately for her transition into mainstream American culture.

When *When I Was Puerto Rican* was published in English, and later published in Spanish, she was viewed (even by her own family) as less than 100% Puerto Rican. As difficult as this was for her to endure, she states, “How funny – Puerto Rico IS America. But it’s the experiences that change you anyway.” Some Latinos claimed she was ‘contaminated’ by Americanism. Others said she had lost her ‘cultural purity.’ She was viewed as a traitor to her culture. Santiago openly admitted that experience changed her, as it would anyone. In an interview she once said, “I felt as Puerto Rican as when I left the island.”⁸

In reading the novel, students and teachers alike may want to discuss whether or not Santiago lost her Puerto Rican purity, because the entire novel is about a child’s search for identity. This child underwent so many changes and transitions, it is obvious that she was shaped by all of them. Therefore, one might question, if she was searching for identity from the start of the novel, and identity might mean, as a child, as a young woman, as a daughter, as a Puerto Rican, etc. - was she ever purely Puerto Rican to begin with? In the novel, she is just figuring out what this means to her.

Mini Lesson

Discuss the irony of the title, *When I Was Puerto Rican*. When was Esmeralda purely Puerto Rican in the novel? Can the readers identify at what point Esmeralda started to become less Puerto Rican to be able to say, “when I was?” Ask students to work together to list the different ways Esmeralda experiences identity in conflict (some examples are listed below). Upon completion, students may work in small groups to debate which side of the conflict Santiago appears to favor in the novel. Students should search for examples from the novel to support their interpretation.

- (a) Is she black or white? (c) Is she American or Puerto Rican?
- (b) Is she urban or rural? (d) Is she “her mother’s daughter” or her father’s

Santiago’s Voice as a Child, Adult and Latino

The main focus of an analysis of voice in this unit is to look at the shifting voices present in the novel. The novel is told through the point of view of a child. Esmeralda, called Negi, is the main narrative voice. In certain instances, however, the voice of the author, Esmeralda Santiago as an adult, is revealed. It is clear, upon close reading, that Santiago speaks from the perspective of a child when she recreates experiences from her childhood. Within these chapters, however, she effectively blends the perspective of an adult who, as she looks at her own memoirs, has reached a new understanding about her experiences. Toward the end of the novel, a clear Latino voice emerges as she struggles with the transition into her new life as an immigrant.

From a rhetorical perspective, the use of voice in the novel seems to serve two purposes: first, it provides a range of viewpoints toward the experiences presented and second, it denies the reader from relating too closely with any one aspect of the characterization. Santiago’s use of different voices is clearly a consciously chosen narrative technique, because the blend of perspectives is very subtle. In fact, the technique works tremendously to allow many readers to identify with the main character at various points in the novel (through the different voices presented), and it seems to aid the reader’s analysis of the author’s reliability.

The use of plural voices seems to represent a plural consciousness – Santiago can be reminiscing about the past and include shifts into the present. She can see events from various perspectives and therefore, so can the reader, providing more entry points for readers to find connections to the characters and their experiences. In analyzing this aspect of voice in class, students should attempt to identify where the voice shifts. This is a major element in analyzing the author’s narrative technique. To shift voices so implicitly requires great narrative control and is indicative of a finely crafted narrative style.

Mini Lesson

Ask students to identify experiences that they can relate to in the novel and categorize them according to Esmeralda’s various perspectives. Indicate if you relate to her perspective as (a) a child or teenager, (b) as a girl, (c) as a daughter or son, (d) as a sibling, (e) as a student in school, (f) as a Puerto Rican or other ethnicity, (g) as a newcomer to a community, etc. Share the results in class discussion or ask students to write autobiographical essays.

In many ways, *When I Was Puerto Rican* provides a new definition for autobiography, because Santiago communicates that the novel isn’t really only about her. It is a crafted work of art that spans many primary years of Esmeralda Santiago’s life. It is a novel with a purpose, an exercise in self-exploration, identity and culture and a model of successful narrative. The novel reads easily and holds the reader’s attention to every last word, but the novel is anything but uncomplicated. The elements of narrative, theme and social importance in the novel make it an irreplaceable addition to English curriculum.

Appendix I

Essay Assignment and Rubric

Writing an essay of response.

The essay should be at least six paragraphs in length and include details from the novel to support your response. Keep the following focus in mind as you respond to *When I Was Puerto Rican*.

What does the work mean to you? Consider your own intellectual and moral reactions to the text.

What particular aspects of my life can help me understand and appreciate the work?

How can this work improve my understanding and widen my insights?

How can my increased understanding and my connection to the work help me understand it more deeply?

Rubric

While most assignments in preparation for the AP exam are holistically graded, a brief and simple rubric is provided for use in other high school classes.

Criteria Points Possible Points Earned Does the essay have a clear introduction, body and conclusion? 20 pts. Are the paragraphs sufficient length – including details and effective explanation of ideas? 20 pts. Does the

essay include accurate details and connections that make sense in relation to the novel? 20 pts. Is the essay edited for clarity of ideas, fluency and organization? 20 pts. Is the essay edited for grammar and mechanics? 20 pts. Total Score 100 pts. @1H:Appendix II

Lesson Plan

Students can work in small groups to analyze specific rhetorical strategies in the novel. In an AP class, students would be expected to make a formal presentation to the class that includes handouts and a class discussion. This portion of the unit may take as long as two weeks but can be completed while students are reading. An AP class would be expected to finish the novel is just over one week. Two to three additional days would be provided for students to organize presentations. Presentations should last only 5-10 minutes and can be completed in less than one week.

Some Topics for Rhetorical Analysis:

The author's use of dialogue.

Examine the inclusion of specific dialogues that took place between Negi's parents. Why do you think the author selected these examples?

Identify metaphors.

The novel begins with the introduction of a metaphor - the guava fruit.

The author's use of language to describe a "state of being."

How does the author explain "states of being" such as fear, aimlessness, anxiety?

The organization of the novel. (framed by a flashback)

Why did the author choose to start the novel in the present day? As you read, were there times when you were reminded that the novel is a flashback or memoir? What purpose does this serve? Does the ending effectively frame the story?

The author's use and explanation of Spanish terms.

Examine the author's use of Spanish terms in the novel. What is the purpose of this element of the novel? What was its effect upon the reader? How did the inclusion of these terms aid the reader's understanding?

Examples of description and its appeal to the senses.

How many of the narrator's descriptions appealed to the reader's sense? Explain.

The author's tone.

What is the author's overall tone of the novel? Does her tone change in certain chapters? How? Why? Explain.

The mood of the novel at various points.

What is the overall mood of the novel? Does it change in certain chapters? How? Why? Explain.

The author's use of similes.

What types of similes did the narrator use in her descriptions, especially of food? How did the use of similes remind us that we were witnessing experiences through the eyes of a child?

Appendix III

Lesson Plan

Ask students to identify the statement or quote from each chapter that had the most impact for them while reading. If your class needs a point of focus for each chapter, you might provide a list for students to analyze after reading. This works well as a homework assignment or in class after reading each chapter. In an AP class, students may read as many as eight chapters in one assignment, so this discussion could follow each reading. One to two class periods of discussion is recommended to cover the topics listed below.

Some suggested topics for discussion or response writing:

Prologue How to Eat a Guava

“But this is autumn in New York. And I am not longer a child.”

Chapter 1 Jibara

“I was puzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on. p13

Chapter 2 Fighting Naked

“I started school in the middle of the hurricane season, and the world grew suddenly bigger, a vast place full of other adults and children whose lives were similar, but whose shadings I couldn’t really explore out of respect and dignidad.” p30

Chapter 3 Someone is Coming to Take Your Lap

“The rise and fall of their words sounded like a promise.” p45

Chapter 4 The American Invasion of Macun

“There were no fathers. Most of them worked seven days a week, and anyway, children and food were woman’s work.” p64

Chapter 5 Why Women Remain Jamona

“I dressed to their murmurs in the other room, their voices soft but strained, and I wondered if men even talked like this, if their sorrows ever spilled into these secret cadences.” p103

Chapter 6 Mami Gets a Job

“I got the message that my mother was breaking a taboo I’d never heard about. The women in the neighborhood turned their backs on her when they saw her coming, or, when they talked to her, they scanned the horizon, as if looking at her would infect them with whatever had made her go out and get a job.” p122

Chapter 7 El Mangle

“She treated me like I had a disease. If I died and never came back to school, she’d probably be happy. But not for long. I’d come back to haunt her.” p150

Chapter 8 Letters From New York

“The jukebox blared the lover’s troubles. His voice cracked a little when he sang that his heart was closed. But no matter how final he meant it to sound, eventually he would forgive his woman and they would go on living, loving and fighting. Just like Mami and Papi.” p155

Chapter 9 Casi Senorita

“I had wrapped myself in the blanket of responsibility she was about to drop on me. It felt heavy, too big for me, yet if I made the wrong move, I was afraid it would tear, exposing the slight, frightened child inside.” p181

Chapter 10 Dreams of a Better Life

“She was a stone packed inside a shell that wouldn’t crack.” p208

Chapter 11 Angels on the Ceiling

“I felt disloyal for wanting to learn English, for liking pizza, for studying the girls with big hair and trying out their styles at home, locked in the bathroom where no one else could watch.” p230

Chapter 12 You Don’t Want to Know

“There was an extended family But Mami was too proud to ask them for more than they volunteered, and we were all developing the same stubborn pride, behind which our frightened selves hid, pretending everything was all right.” p254

Chapter 13 A Shot At It

“I stood up abruptly, and my chair clattered onto its side two feet from where I stood. I picked it up, wishing with all my strength that a thunderbolt would strike me dead to ashes on the spot.”

Epilogue One of These Days

“I had forgotten the skinny brown girl with the curled hair, wool jumper, and lively hands. But she hadn’t.” p269

Appendix IV

Lesson Plan

As a culminating activity, host a Puerto Rican meal and book discussion. Students may research recipes in the library or on the Internet and each prepare something for the dinner. For the discussion, prepare some questions to get the discussion going, but allow students to make their own comments on the book outside of their rhetorical reading and analysis. For example, ask if they would recommend the book to a friend and why or why not?

The planning and research of recipes should take one class period, and the breakfast or lunch should be held on the following class day.

Sample Discussion Questions -

What do you think is the Esmeralda’s opinion of herself at the start of the memoir? Does her opinion change as the story progresses. How? Why?

What is the most difficult problem Esmeralda faces in the memoir?

Does she solve this problem? If so, how? If not, how does she deal with the problem?

Who are the most important people in the Esmeralda’s life? How do you know?

Select an incident from the memoir that you perceived as insignificant. Why do you think this incident was included in this memoir? What meaning could it have possibly held for Esmeralda?

@1H:Appendix V

Assessing Reliability

“Oh man, these teachers. I mean, they got it in for me. Four different teachers send me to the dean in the same month. It must be a conspiracy. And, I tell you, I don’t deserve it. Nope. This is just another example of discrimination.”

Do you think this is a case of discrimination?

What makes the narrator believable or not believable?

What do you think is the truth of the situation?

“The buildings – they are so beautiful. We have nothing like them in my country. And the sun, it shines on the windows, it is golden. Even the – what are they called – sidewalks. They glisten. Perhaps they have diamonds in them. I am so lucky to be here in Milwaukee. It is surely the most beautiful city in all the world.

Is Milwaukee the most beautiful city in all the world?

What makes the narrator believable or not believable?

What do you think is the truth of the situation?

“Well, today’s the day. I have to break up with her. I’m getting kidded all the time by the guys. They say she’s not cool enough for me. Just because she dresses a little differently and is so involved in school. And I like her. A lot. But I can’t stand the kidding. I’m afraid everyone will start to think I’m not cool enough for them. So I’ll have to tell her I can’t see her anymore.”

Does the narrator like the girl a lot?

What makes the narrator believable or not believable?

What do you think is the truth of the situation?

“I am worried because my daughter Joan’s English teacher is way too hard. Joan brought home her homework yesterday and I can’t even understand it and I’m an adult! I think that teacher should be fired!

Should the teacher be fired?

What makes the narrator believable or not believable?

What do you think is the truth of the situation?

@Text:“I owe it to the shareholders of this company to make as big a profit as possible. And if that involves forcing aging and expensive employees into quitting, well, that’s just the way of the world. Can you believe that one of them sued me? And hired a female lawyer to boot! Of course, my time is too valuable to waste in court. Maybe a bribe. A little cash will certainly make that lady lawyer handle this case, shall we say, a little less aggressively. One thing you can count on – everyone has a price.” Is it certain that the opposing lawyer will handle the case less aggressively? What makes the narrator believable or not believable? What do you think is the truth of the situation? Exercise found in:

Smith, Michael W. Theory and Research into Practice: Understanding Unreliable

Narrators. NCTE, 1991, p16.

Appendix VI

Evaluate and Re-evaluate the narrator's reliability at various points in the novel.

Use the following questions as a guide:

Does the narrator appear too self-interested?

Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable?

Is the narrator sufficiently experienced?

Is the narrator sufficiently moral?

Is the narrator sufficiently (or too) emotional?

Are the narrator's actions too inconsistent with her words?

Also:

Identify any examples of situations in the novel that you felt might have occurred differently than the narrator recalled.

Create a meaning or outcome of the situation that you find to be more realistic or believable based on your understanding of the characters in the novel.

Why do you think your interpretation of the situation is different from the narrator's?

Exercise adapted from:

Smith, Michael W. *Theory and Research into Practice: Understanding Unreliable*

Narrators. NCTE, 1991, p16.

Notes

1 Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1994, p35.
2hooks, bell. "Writing Autobiography." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Eds. NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993, p1037. 3Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1994, p43. 4Hirschberg, Stuart and Terry Hirschberg. *First Person Singular*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997, p4. 5Santiago, Esmeralda. "Jibara," *When I Was Puerto Rican*. NY: Random House, 1996, p14.

6Santiago, Esmeralda. "The American Invasion of Macun," *When I Was Puerto Rican*. NY: Random House, 1996, p76.

7Santiago, Esmeralda. "Angels on the Ceiling," *When I Was Puerto Rican*. NY: Random House, 1996, p226-227. 8Santiago, Esmeralda. "Fighting Naked," *When I Was Puerto Rican*. NY: Random House, 1996, p29-30. 9Santiago, Esmeralda. "A note to the

reader," Vintage Books Reading Group Center. 23 March 2000. Random House Online. Internet. 10Smith, Michael W. Theory and Research into Practice: Understanding Unreliable Narrators. NCTE, 1991, p16.

Instructor Resources

Adelman, Michelle, Et.Al. "Thanks for the Memoirs: There has Never Been a Better

Time to Write the Story of Your Life," Time. April 12, 1999.

This article is available online and discusses memoir as a popular trend for writers today. The article

discusses major memoirs that have become best sellers as well as popular courses in autobiographical writing at many Universities.

Appiah, Anthony Kwame and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Eds. Identities. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1995.

This collection of essays provides background on the study of identity in relation to race, class, gender, ethnicity and nationalism. Atwell, Nancie. In the Middle: Writing, Reading and Learning with Adolescents. NH:

Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987.

A popular resource for writing teachers, this text provides numerous examples writing workshop programs that work well in all types of classrooms. Benstock, Shari. "Authorizing the Autobiographical." Feminisms: An Anthology of

Literary Theory and Criticism. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Eds. NJ:

Rutgers University Press, 1993, p1036-1039.

This article examines women writers who use autobiography as a form of self-expression. The article discusses the concept of voice, authority and reliability of the narrator. "Esmeralda Santiago" Contemporary Authors Online. The Gale Group. Netscape.

Internet. March 26, 2000.

Contemporary Authors is available online at the public library and in text form. It provides a brief

biography and critical comments on the author's works.

Foucault, Michael. "What Is an Author?" Paul Rabinow, Ed."The Foucault Reader. NY:

Pantheon Books, 1984.

Michael Foucault's famous essay on authority and the text poses an important question, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" The essay also analyzes the relationships between the author and the text and the text and reader. Gilmore, Leigh. Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-

Representation. NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

The most useful resource I found on autobiography, this book examines various approaches taken by women writers when writing autobiographical works.

Hirschberg, Stuart and Terry Hirschberg. *First Person Singular*. Boston: Allyn and

Bacon, 1997.

This book is a great text for essays and stories written in first person. It provides students with various samples for analysis.

Hollander, Kurt, Ed. *The Portable Lower East Side: Latinos in New York City*.

Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2, 1988.

This reference book provides information on the neighborhoods, experiences and history of Latinos in New York City. It provides valuable information on the relationships between Latinos and other immigrant communities in NYC.

hooks, bell. "Writing Autobiography." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory*

and Criticism. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Eds. NJ: Rutgers University

Press, 1993, p1036-1039.

Bell hooks essay describes her struggles as a woman writing autobiography. It is a valuable example of analyzing the process through the author's eyes.

Roberts, Edgar V., Ed. *Writing about Literature*. NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1999. A classic Prentice Hall writing text, in its ninth edition, this resource provides literary readings and

sample student essays. While it does not include a chapter specifically on autobiography, it does give

specific information on teaching and on assigning essays to guiding students through rhetorical

analysis.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *Almost a Woman*. NY: Random House, Inc., 1998.

Santiago's sequel to *When I Was Puerto Rican* which chronicles her experiences growing up in New

York City and concludes with her marriage.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. NY: Random House, Inc., 1996. Santiago's first autobiographical novel that chronicles her experiences as a child in Puerto Rico and her transition into her new life as an immigrant in New York City. Smith, Michael W. *Theory and Research into Practice: Understanding Unreliable*

Narrators. NCTE, 1991.

This article was published through the National Council of Teachers of English and provides an analysis of instructional techniques for teaching students to analyze narration. Smith, Sidonie. "Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior: Filiality and Women's

Autobiographical Storytelling." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and*

Criticism. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Eds. NJ: Rutgers University

Press, 1993, p1036-1039.

The article addresses women's autobiographies as exercises in 'storytelling' and analyzes the idea of fictionalized narrative to reveal deeper truths. The article is moderately useful as it focuses most of the analysis on *Woman Warrior*. Tomkins, Jane. "Me and My Shadow." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory*

and *Criticism*. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Eds. NJ: Rutgers University

Press, 1993, p1036-1039.

The article discusses women's writing as self-exploration. The essay is useful for analyzing a variety of literary works. Little is focused specifically on autobiographical novels, but it is an extremely useful resource for reading about silencing, self-reflection and writing.

Other Resources Located

Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, Eds. *Narrative and Genre*. NY: Routledge, 1998. McCallum, Robyn. *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction*. NY: Garland

Publishing, Inc., 1999.

McCracken, Ellen. *New Latina Narrative*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1999. Neuman, Anna and Penelope L. Peterson, Eds. *Learning from Our Lives: Women,*

Research and Autobiography in Education. NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia

University, 1997.

Yarbrough, Stephen R. *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language*

and Culture. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

Related Student Readings

Hirschberg, Stuart and Terry Hirschberg. First Person Singular. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997. Santiago, Esmeralda. Almost a Woman. NY: Random House, Inc., 1998. Santiago, Esmeralda. When I Was Puerto Rican. NY: Random House, Inc., 1996.

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