



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2000 Volume I: Women Writers in Latin America

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

Guide for Curriculum Unit 00.01.03
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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. This curriculum unit is divided into lesson plans and background instructional information for teachers.

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. Santiago presents her work as an exploration of her search for identity and as a model for young people in their own search.

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, which students take in May. The main objectives of the unit are as follows. (1) Students will be able to identify and analyze and author's use of point of view. (2) Students will be able to identify and analyze the author's use of literary devices. (3) 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.

(Recommended for English and AP English, grades 9-12.)

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