

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1997 Volume I: Twentieth Century Latin American Writing

# Survey of Latin-American Culture Through Literature

Curriculum Unit 97.01.08 by Yoselin Roman

The purpose of this unit is to help students gain a clear understanding of the Latin American heritage and cultural milieu. The selected materials deal with past and current attitudes and perceptions prevalent in some parts of Latin America. In order for students to really understand, appreciate, and possibly identify with the dilemmas posed in the literature, it is necessary for them to acquire an understanding of the dynamics of how and why, Latin American society and culture actually functions in different situations. In order to reach this goal, students will read literary works and view films dealing with, but not limited to the following cultural issues: The role of women, cultural gender expectations, political structure, and the role of religion. Existing customs, as well as myths, will also be explored in terms of their effects on socialization and acculturation.

### Religion

It is not easy to comprehend the complex role religion plays within Latin American culture. It is not an issue of God or Christianity, but an intricate synchronization of the beliefs of different cultures and races that have been present at one point or another in the history of Latin America. Although there have been many different influences the most prevalent has been the European Tradition, consisting of the Catholic and Protestant Faith. The native Indian influences, of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans from Central and South America as well as the Arawak and Tainos of the Antilles with their polytheistic views and last but not least, the African influences of the Yoruba and Congo Tribes, brought to Latin America from Africa centuries ago.

In order to survive what became both a new and threatening world for the African slaves, and the eradication of their existing way of life for the Indians; both groups struggle to preserve their sense of spirituality and religious beliefs as pure as possible. Under the control of European Conquerors both Indian and African slaves were subjugated to a new religion, Christianity. Interestingly enough, the efforts of the Spaniards to Christianize the heathens were more effective on the Indians than on the African slaves.

Faced with the conquest of their culture, the Aztecs (Mexico) who at the heights of their civilization had conquered many tribes in Mexico and Central America (Lerner 1987) understood and to a certain degree accepted the impact that Hernand Cortes and his conquistadors would have on their way of life. Due to superstitions and religious beliefs, Montezuma, the last ruler of the Aztecs viewed Cortes as the Deity Quetzalcoatl (Lerner 1987), who in a Legend vowed to someday return, regain and rule his kingdom.

In the midst of omens in the form of natural catastrophes, and celestial phenomena, such as: eclipses, high rates of abnormal births in both, humans and animals. The very superstitious Montezum a fearfully

relinquished his throne to Hernand Cortes upon his arrival to Tenochtitlan, the crowned of the Aztec empire (Bierhorst, 1992).

Thereafter, the Spaniards proceeded to annihilate the Aztecs way of life via the destruction of their palaces, temples, pyramids, and worst of all, their spirit. Both land and Indians were assigned to explorers, soldiers, and nobles by the King's representative. Having conquered many tribes, the Aztecs understood that as they did to others, the new rulers would impose a new set of rules and guidelines for them to follow. Initially, most Aztecs felt that they were being punished by the gods. They tried to appease the gods via sacrificing humans among other things. Unable to understand the sacrifices, the Spaniards ordered the Aztecs to halt such religious practices. Soon after, the Spanish priests introduced writing and reading as well as the Roman Catholic faith to the indigenous population as part of their new way of life.

Since human sacrifices were no longer tolerated, some of the Indians continued to worship nature and follow their ancient religious practices in secrecy; while others embraced the new teachings of the friars. Consequently, a small segment of the population along with Catholicism, continued to worship nature, and to follow their ancient religious practices in secrecy (Gossen 1986).

Although the Indians and the Africans were forced into Christianity, they continued to practice their religion in a clandestine manner. As the Spaniards struggled to indoctrinate Christianity onto the heathens, the Africans, unlike the Indians, increased their efforts to preserve their religious culture by fusing it with Christianity.

## **AFRICANS IN THE CARIBBEAN**

In a foreign, threatening, and unknown world, the African slaves used their spirituality as their most powerful defense mechanism. Since one of the goals of the conquerors was to christianize, the African slaves were forced to tolerate the imposed teachings of the friars. However, due to the existing language barrier, the slaves were able to continue to practice their native religion (Yoruba or Congo) by synchronizing their deities with Catholic saints (Gonzalez-Wippler 1987). This way, both the Congo and Yorubian slaves were able to fully and openly practice their religious faith under the pretense of Christianity.

In the teachings of the friars, the slaves saw major/core similarities of attributes and legends which facilitated the synchronism of both religions. Of utmost importance in the catholic faith is the concept of the trinity, the father, son and Holy Spirit. According to Gonzalez-Wippler 1987, the concept "Olodomare" is equally core to the African religion. Olodumare, as the trinity, is also composed of three separate but equally undeniable spirits—Olodumare Nzame, Olofi, and Baba Nkwa. Olodumare Nzame, the creative principle, responsible for all creations in heaven and earth (the father). Similarly to Jesus Christ, Olofi was in charged of the creations on the earth, and at one point also habituated the earth among humans. Baba Nkwa, as the Holy Spirit, also enjoys an ambiguous role. For example, the Catholic Saint Barbara became the Yoruba orisha Chango. This was possible because both had similar characteristics, attributes and legendary experiences such as: warrior like abilities, connection with thunder, incarceration, the color red, and although Chango is male, in the legend he is known to disguise himself as a female in order to escape.

According to Mbiti (1970) all the Yoruba deities/Orishas were synchronized, with the Catholic saints, in order to facilitate religious practice and freedom. For example the following list illustrates some of the most important orishas/saints in the Yoruba tradition:

Yoruba gods	Catholic Saints
Olofi	Crucified Christ
Obatala	Our Lady of Mercy
Aganyu	Saint Joseph
Yemaya	Our Lady of Regla
Chango	Saint Barbara
Oshum	Our Lady of Caridad
	del Cobre
Oggun	Saint Peter
Babalu-Aye	Saint Lazarus
Eleggua	Holy Guardian Angel
Orunla	Saint Francis of Assisi

This synchronization allowed the slaves to safely practice their religion and at the same time, to please their masters with devotion. Through the synchronization of both Yoruba and catholic religion a new and powerful religion was born in Latin America Santeria. The existence of Santeria in Latin America is evident in the writings of Jorge Amado's *Tereza Batista—Home From The Wars*, and *The War Of The Saints*, where the orishas freely interact and came to the aid of the protagonist similarly to Greek mythology, in which the gods intervened in the behalf of the mortals openly.

Over time, the religious beliefs of the people of Latin America have mutated to the point that at present many sects of religions exist and are practiced openly or in a clandestine fashion. Aside from the known sects of Christianity, Catholic, and Protestant alike there are a series of existing religious practices of which the most popular are: Santeria, Spiritism, Palo Mayombe, and Condumble or Voodoo.

Spiritism is another cult that quickly gained attention and popularity in Latin America in the mid 1800's. Up to date, the work of the French spiritualist, Allan Kardec (pseudonym for L.D. Hippolyte Rivail) is essential to all seances or mesa blanca as they are commonly known all over Latin America (Harwood 1977). Interestingly enough, Hill and Williams (1965) attest that with time, the Kardecist practices and ideas have also been synchronized with Catholicism, Santeria and indigenous curing practices.

On the other hand, Palo Mayombe is the synchronism of the Congo and Catholic religion. The main difference between Santeria and Palo Mayombe is that the latter is often perceived as being dark or dealing with negative forces/spirits (Mbiti 1970). Similar to Voo-Doo & Condumble which have also been traditionally associated with back magic/echisos and or witch craft/brujeria. According to Hill and Williams (1965) the spirits do not have their own sense of morality, they rather assume that of the prist or practitioner. As long as the practitioner takes care of the needs/wants of the spirits, the spirit in turn will reciprocate. Consequently, although some is believed to be white magic, and some black magic the determining factor is the sorcerer's intentions not the magic.

## **Gender Roles and Expectations**

In terms of gender, the Latin American culture more so than any other culture clearly delineates a set of rules and guidelines for both males and females to follow from birth to death. Strict adherence to these guidelines is expected and enforced by the elders in an effort to maintain social and cultural constancy. Some of the most serious indoctrination's are boys don't cry, girls do, promiscuity in males is acceptable and admired as great lovers, in females the same behavior is shunned. These same practices in women often lead to label such as whores or prostitutes. Males make all the decisions, while women stand by and support them. Even in homes where most of the financial support is provided by the female, the male has the final word.

This is clearly illustrated in the short story by Sandra Cisneros (1991). The Eyes of Zapata, in the book, *Woman Hollering Creek*. The protagonist Inez, is an indigenous-Mexican female living in a patriarchal society, and as such, she has undergone a socialization process that encourages docility and submissiveness in women. This culture has relegated a traditional role that sustains that women are born to be nurturers caretakers, and obedient to men (Zavella, P. 1990). According to Honig (1990), gender role formation and expectations are largely defined by culture. The patterns of sexual attitudes are intrinsic, but the symbolization of these patterns are changed and influenced by culture. In this story, Inez's mother's death is reflective of the consequences of what happens when a woman refuses to conform to traditional roles or norms and crosses the cultural barriers set by a machista society.

Culturally, Hispanics are expected to marry and have children reasonably early in life. For the male it is particularly important because gender role expectations define masculinity. In the Hispanic culture, masculinity is measured by numerous intimate relationships and the ability to procreate (Caraballo, 1980). This is a recurring theme throughout Latin-American literature which is illustrated in The Eyes of Zapata by Sandra Cisneros (1991), *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands by Jorge Amado (1977), One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1976), House of Spirits by Gabel Allende (1982)*. In each novel or story, the male protagonist is characterized as philandering, strong willed, of some financial means or political power whom with charm or physical force acquires the woman who catches his fancy. He is greatly admired by his male peers for his sexual prowess, considered a trophy by his lovers, and accepted without questions or qualms by the long, silent suffering wife who knows her place and role. Paradoxically, these males are attributed with having special and tender considerations for the women in their lives. The need for intimacy is coupled with the desire to be protective of and loving with a significant other. Kadushin (1990), explains that the concept of machismo within the Hispanic culture includes a tender and benevolent concern for those in need of support by someone confident of his sense of masculinity, it involves providing leadership in the family. It includes elements of manhood, honor and dignity.

These traits are evident in the persona of Esteban Trueba, the patriarch in the novel by Isabel Allende (1982), *The House of Spirits*. Although brutal at times, his sense of obligation towards his legitimate family, his unyielding love for his wife, and his fierce protectiveness of his granddaughter exemplify gender role and expectation for the male within the Latin-American culture.

As in all cultures and segments of society, change is inevitable. Change is usually brought about by outside forces that often threaten the structure and organization of the cultural group. These may include, but are limited to political climate, economic or class status, education, health, or religious freedom. For whatever reasons, many Latin Americans have been forced to leave their countries of origin in the pursuit of happiness. Many of these immigrants face innumerable challenges as both family units and a cultural group.

In Julia Alvarez's book *When the Garcia Girls lost their Accent* (1991), the chapter, The kiss, addresses issues that are of concern to all families, but more so to families who migrate to the United States. A large family composed of all female children can present special problems. In Dominican families those issues are highlighted in terms of traditional roles and values of the Dominican culture. In the United States, women play a significantly different role than they do in the Dominican Republic. Family roles and beliefs must evolve upon arrival to encompass the dual nature of two cultures, thus altering the structure of the family to a degree. As a family's primary unit grows older and new relationships are introduced into the nuclear family, the structure

must change in order to allow for the expansions of roles.

The family, in this story, has significant ties to the Dominican culture that clarify the manner by which the adult daughters interact with their father. The father is attributed a high degree of respect from the family and in turn is expected to provide for the family (Gibbs, 1989). The father has ultimate control over the family and the direction the children choose to take. For the Alvarez family, moving to the United States changed the way the family viewed itself and the beliefs that governed it. The children became more independent as they grew older and the father struggled to hold onto the power he was given as a right in the Dominican Republic (Levine and Padilla, 1980).

The Alvarez's family composition is ripe for problems around issues related to gender role conflict and sexuality. Sexuality of teenagers in America is quite different than in the Dominican Republic in how it applies to young women (Espin, 1987). The angry words that are addressed to Sofia upon the father's discovery of the love letters exemplify many of the attitudes that men have toward women in the Dominican Republic, that they are "whores" if they are sexually active outside of marriage (De La Cancela, 1986). The father's beliefs and values have not changed simultaneously with Sophia's. In addition, the respect he expects her to have for his decisions is thwarted when she leaves home, blatantly betraying tradition.

Child rearing practices in the Dominican culture differentiate the gender roles at a an early age. In the chapter The Kiss, by Julia Alvarez, it's clear that the young granddaughter feels the regard her grandfather has for her baby brother and certainly understands that it has to do with the fact he is a boy. She feels less important and disempowered by the ambitious words her grandfather bestows on the child. In most cultures, male children are regarded as a gift because they carry on the family line, preserving its place in history. This has a powerful effect on little girls and the way they perceive their abilities in comparison to little boys. The women in the Alvarez family have done relatively well for themselves. This could be attributed to the lack of gender competition that would have been present if a male child was part of the family composition. In a family with children of both genders, there is normal sibling rivalry that emerges. However, unless the family is clear about the equality in ability of the children, the girl child is often assigned specific tasks that demean her intellectual and physical skills. In the Dominican culture, this differentiation in importance and ability is painfully apparent by a careful examination of their roles and tasks assigned to each gender.

## Women and Class Structure

As with gender, there are certain roles and expectations that women are expected to conform to within their class structure. These roles have and continue to be explored by Latin-American literary figures in contemporary society. Much attention has been bestowed upon two particular group of women; those belonging to elite structure and those belonging to the lower class.

In novels such as *The House of Spirits (1982), Of Love and Shadows (1984),* by Isabel Allende, *The Love Queen Of The Amazon*, by Cecile Pineda (1992), the ladies of society are portrayed as intelligent, of good taste, educated, of moral constrain and propriety. They live lives of comfort and luxury, but are trapped by societal norms. They have little freedom as individuals, their opinions are often not valued and they rely totally upon their husbands. In effect, they live in prisons erected by their own desires to attain a prestigious place in society. Ironically, their lives are often in emotional disarray and void of passion.

Interestingly enough. women of the lower class, who for reasons of survival have become prostitutes seem to have a sense of control over their destiny. In Jorge Amado's literary works *Tereza Bautista—Home From the Wars* and *Tieta*, the protagonists, who have endured and survived many life threatening obstacles show great

tenacity and fortitude. In their chosen profession. they are free to enjoy their sexuality, their Clientele, and most importantly. they are free to throw away the shackles that bind women to norms. convention and propriety. These women are strong, opinionated, resourceful in the face of adversity; in all, captains of their own ships.

Tereza Bautista, the heroine of the book by the same name, is the story of a woman who had been condemned to a life of poverty and abused by being born into a class structure of oppression and maltreatment. Sheer strength and an invincible will to live propelled her to survive in the tyrannical world of her sadistic captor. Through these trials, Theresa learns that she can only truly be free, if she is self-sufficient and independent. As a kept woman, she was accountable to her kind lover, and had to conform to a certain norms. As the slave of the captain, she was less than an animal, subject to all his sexual and abusive whims. Only as a woman of "La Vida" was she able to acquire the freedom and empowerment she so desired.

The Story *Tieta* by Jorge Amado, a satirical comedy, illustrates that not all women are willing to suppress their sexuality. and are willing to sacrifice social convention in pursuit of this. Teita, the head, strong, willful, adolescent sheep girl, abandons all caution to the wind and embarks on a sexual odyssey that leads to her "ruination". When her father uncovers her sexual exploits, he beats and disowns her. She is ostracized by her community and family members because of her moral transgression. Tieta perceives this as her liberation. She travels to the city where her natural ability and astuteness helps her becomes a renown madam, whose clientele consists of rich and powerful men. As an entrepreneur, in the oldest profession, she gains the financial wealth to be comfortable and independent, without having to conform to traditional gender roles or societal norms. Having acquired financial success and prestige, her family receives her as the prodigal daughter.

## **Political Structure**

The ability of the people of Latin America to self-rule is fairly recent, due to their long history of European colonization. Unlike their western counterparts, the political climate of Latin America can be best described as relatively unstable, with the exception of long periods of dictatorships. The political instability, as well as the social views of the upper, and lower classes have helped the people to conform to an environment of constant political change. As a class of ruling elite emerges, every decade, or so, the political expectations and level of corruption within the government changes. New emerging systems give hope of a better future to the masses. Sadly enough, most changes on any level exist for the betterment of a few, not the many. These political changes are clearly illustrated in Isabel Allende's (1982), account of the Chilean coup detat in her novels *The House of Spirits and Of Love and Shadows*. Also, Rivabella's (1986), book, *Requiem For A Women's Soul*, illustrates in a forceful manner the impact that political unrest and persecution has on civilians in Centro America.

Although this unit is intended for advanced to honor level Spanish classes, it is also appropriate for English classes since all the reading materials illustrated in the unit are available in English translations. This unit not only can supplement English classes, but it can also be utilized as a supplement for the core curriculum of the multicultural literature/education courses of the New Haven Board of Education. These readings are intended to increase the awareness and cultural pride of Latino students, as well as to deepen non-Latino students cultural sensitivity, awareness and acceptance. This is important because according to the Dept. of Immigration and Naturalization (1980), since 1980 over two million Latin American immigrants have legally migrated to the United States. This, of course, is indicative of the rapid increase of Latinos not only in New Haven, but also throughout the rest of the United States.

## SUGGESTED READING LIST FOR STUDENTS

Julia Alvarez— How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent Jorge Amado— Teresa Batista Home From the Wars Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz— A Woman of Genius Gabriel Garcia Marquez— One Hundred Years of Solitude Gabriel Garcia Marquez— Chronicle of a Death Foretold Isabel Allende— House of Spirits Sandra Cisneros— Woman Hollering Creek

## **SELECTED POETS AND POEMS**

Alfonsina Storni—You Want Me white Julia de Burgos—To Julia de Burgos Rosario Castellanos—Nonentity Jeanette Miller—Woman Belkis Cuza Male—My Third World Olga Orozco—Olga Orqzco Lolita Lebron—Alone

## **Recommended Films For Students**

1. *Mi Vida Loca* (1985) A drama illustrating the life of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles, California. The movie depicts massive gang activity as well as the struggle faced by young Mexican Americans in an effort to mediate values and identify with their society. The movie contains some violence and cursing (in English).

2. *Mi Familia/My Family* (1994) Depicts the struggles of a Mexican American Family over three generations. Strong contrasts of values between grandparents, children, and grandchildren are observable. The movie contains some violence e.g. gang fights as well as some cursing (in english).

3. *El Norte* (1974) Depicts the struggle of a brother and sister who migrate from a small village in Guatemala to find better life up North, in Los Angeles, California.

Curriculum Unit 97.01.08

4. *Like Water For Chocolate* (1992) Depicts strong matriarchal values and guidelines. The main characters are challenged with the struggle to reconsider beliefs, love, responsibility, and duty. Some Nudity. (Spanish/English Substitutes)

5. Dona Hor and Her Two Husbands (1979) A parody depicting the plight of a remarried young widow faces when her dead husband's spirit returns demanding conjugal rights. Deals with religious moral values as well as social issues and their implications. Portuguese with English substitutes.

### Lesson Plan 01—Lesson will be covered over a three day period.

Grade: 11-12 Class: Latin American Literature Core: Above Average Topic: Customs and Values **Section:** Part 1

## (1) Objective:

As a result of all the classroom activities and homework associated with this lesson the students will

a) be able to understand how values and customs in Latin America, differ from those in North American.

#### (2) Equipment/Materials:

a) Black board, chalk

b) VCR and television

## (3) Instructional Activity

(a) Teaching Procedures:

In teaching this lesson I will take a Visual and Vocal approach. Basically making the students active participants in the lesson.

- (b) Class Activity:
- 1) The students will view the movie "EL Norte".

2) Students will engage in a discussion focusing on the following topics: attitudes, values, and expectations of immigrants as well as the reality they face once in North America.

#### (4) Homework:

Writing Assignments: Students should compare and contrast three values and three expectations that the protagonists had prior to their arrival with their post arrival experience.

#### Lesson Plan 02—Lesson will be covered over a three day period.

Grade: 11-12 Class: Latin American Literature Core: Above Average Topic: Cultural and Gender Expectations **Section:** Part 2

#### (1) Objective:

As a result of all the classroom activities and homework associated with this lesson, the students will

a) be able to understand how culture and gender expectations affect the way of life for Mexican Americans.

#### 2) Equipment/Materials:

a) Black board, chalk

b) VCR and television

## (3) Instructional Activity

(a) Teaching Procedures:

In teaching this lesson I will take both a Visual and Vocal approach. The students will become active, in the lesson.

(b) Class Activity:

1) The students will view the movie "Mi Vida Loca".

2) They will discuss male/female roles in society, physical strength vs emotional strength duty vs sacrifice, the different meaning of love for males and females, and the effect of gender differences on values.

### (4) Homework:

Writing Assignment: Over the three day period, students will compile a list of similarities and differences between main stream North American Culture and Mexican American Culture. Based on class discussions, the movie, and the students compiled information they will write an essay.

#### Lesson Plan 03

*Grade: 11-12* Class: Latin Literature Core: Above Average Topic: Long Term Writing Assignment **Section:** Part 3

## (1) Objective:

As a result of the this lesson, the students will a) improve their comprehension, reading, writing, and translating skills based on literary exposure, classroom discussion, and prior assignments.

#### (2) Equipment/Materials:

- a) Black board, chalk
- b) Teacher made reading list

## (3) Lesson:

An explanation will be given on what is required for the long term writing assignment

## (4) Long Term Writing Assignment

1) The students will read a serious of poems in Spanish from the reading list and choose three for translation.

2) The students will also chose a book from the reading list and write a three to five page report addressing the following questions:

- a) What culture expectations is the protagonist faced with?
- b) How well does the protagonist mediate between value and needs?
- c) What impact does the cultural gender expectation have on the protagonist?
- d) List the effects of religion on customs and myths.

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Curriculum Unit 97.01.08

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