

Classroom Exercise: Hispanic/Latino/Chicano Literature

by

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An overview and introduction to Hispanic-American Literary Periods

"The different periods of Mexican American literature primarily correspond to changes in the political order of the Southwest and California. The literature before 1821 (the date of Mexico's independence from Spain) is called "Spanish" because of its strong ties to Hispanic culture. The literature between 1821 and 1848 falls in the "Mexican Period" because during this time the northern territories were politically a part of Mexico. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, ceded much of northern Mexico to the United States, and the many Mexican citizens who lived in that region and who chose to remain there became American citizens. Therefore, the term "Mexican American" both accurately and appropriately identifies the literature dating from 1848 until the 1960s. The "Contemporary Period" begins in the 1960s and coincides not with a change in the national affiliation of the Southwest and California but with a rising tide of cultural and political consciousness expressed through acceptance of the word 'Chicano.'" (Tatum)

From the sixteenth century up through the present, the oral tradition genre has had a strong presence in the Hispanic culture. Folk tales, poetry, songs have passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. During the Spanish and Mexican periods, histories, historical narratives, chronicles, diaries, poetry, and plays were written by Spanish explorers. During the Mexican American Period, Spanish-language newspapers circulated along the United States-Mexico border from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California contained examples of short fiction, novels, poetry and plays by popular and by anonymous local authors; after the 1930s, more works were produced in English. Also, traveling theaters toured the Southwest performing Spanish and Latin American works, resident theaters in larger cities performed plays for a Spanish-speaking audience, and local amateur groups performed traditional folk and religious plays that had origins in the Spanish Period. The literature of the contemporary period, written after 1965, reflects a break with the works that preceded them. The chief source of this break lay in the Chicano movement's rejection of the efforts toward assimilation made by the Mexican Americans after World War II through the early 1960s. (Tatum)

Mexican Americans are bilingual peoples and often the literature, while primarily written in English, is sprinkled with many Spanish words and phrases. Often a poem or short fiction piece will be presented in both English and Spanish, usually on facing pages. A collection of pieces of literature may

also present individual pieces written in English and individual pieces written in Spanish.

Adapted from Charles Tatum ed. *Mexican American Literature* HBJ, 1982)

Literature studies using *Braided Lives*

Introduction and Background to Hispanic/Latino/Chicano Literature

- A brief history of American Hispanic literature is necessary to explain the close relationship of Mexican literature and Mexican American literature
- A part of the unit should focus on the bilingual factors in Hispanic (Latino/Chicano) literature
- The essays incorporated in this unit are intended to foster an understanding and appreciation of the Hispanic-American perspective; one that will be exotic to most of the students in Minnesota high school English classes
- Selections of myth are an important introduction to the literary traditions of a culture (and can help in analyzing the effects of stereotyping); independent reading suggested
- Note that Hispanic is a broad cultural term for peoples who have origins in Mexico and Puerto Rico, Latin America. The terms Mexican American and Chicano, Chicana, Latino, Latina are preferred terms to denote those American peoples with common cultural origins of Puerto Rico, Mexico and the Southwest (New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California).

The following are suggestions for getting discussions and journals started

The journal should be kept in a tabbed section of a 3 ring loose-leaf notebook. The journal entries should include:

- *Personal response (how the piece connects with me),
- *Descriptive or Literal meaning response to literature,
- *Interpretive Response (meanings 'beneath the surface'),
- *Evaluative Response (how the work 'stacks up' with others in the same genre),
- *Creative Response (how the work stimulates me to write, draw, sing, speak, dance)

In other tabbed sections, file class Handouts, reproduced essays and poetry selections, and materials assimilated in other sections of *Braided Lives*.

1. Discuss issues central to this section of *Braided Lives*. Students and teacher will elicit what their prior knowledge of these issues are. Students and instructors can also orally review the use the '1650' map to enhance discussion; an overhead transparency made from the 1650 map could be helpful. Each student will have the map for the Class Notebook. (Note that this study could be associated with the units on native American Literature) Comment in Journal

2. Discuss the factors of bilingual literature and bilingual writers, including the difficulties non-Spanish-speaking readers may have. Use the poem and the 'Guide to Spanish Pronunciation' assigned in this section in the discussion. Students who are literate in Spanish or with experience in Spanish language classes can help. If numbers permit, knowledgeable students teamed with those who lack experience will help with the language elements. Discover other possible solutions with the class if language-knowledgeable students are not in the class. The language issues of bilingualism will be apparent here.

Comment in Journal

3. Read the essays by Gloria Anzaldua and Juanita Garciagoday.

After the essays have been read, discuss them. Ask a class member to comment to the group at large how these essays can help in understanding, analyzing, and interpreting the literature. Groups could also discuss and consider how the essays help explain the "otherness" inherent in being Hispanic and American. Race and class struggle as well as gender differentiation can be discussed also.

Comment in Journal.

4. Investigate the importance of the example myths as a way to understanding cultures different from one's own. Discuss what myths are, what functions they play in our lives, what traditions in a culture myths represent. Volunteer oral reading of some Hispanic example myths. Discuss the way women are portrayed in myths (Good? Evil? Powerful? Passive?). Discuss how society continues these images in the media: movies, tv, soap operas, magazines, and how this becomes a stereotype. Compare the portrayal of women and men in the myths just read. Discuss the positive and negative implications of Power and Limitations; discuss how and why women may want to revise a myth to include females as powerful and active instead of as passive figures. Later, make references and comparisons to the traditions established in these myths.

Comment in Journal. Add some examples of the media portrayal of women: ads, etc. Look especially for Hispanic women.

5. Compose a short opinion paper based on discussions and journal comments. Each student will develop a unique thesis based on new and awakening awareness of Mexican American culture and the role of the Chicana (female Mexican American) as revealed thus far. As students process the writing assignment, the instructor will skim the journals for a holistic grade. The class will set a reasonable due date for the short paper (2-3 pages).

6. To connect the study of this section the instructor could read aloud to the student some poems from *Braided Lives* or other such as "Don't Give in Chicanita"-Gloria Anzaldua. Check the "Further Readings" section of *Braided Lives* for suggestions.

Students comment as they wish in journals after the reading.

Reminder:

A good grade scheme for group work and discussion is collaborative group discussion technique: appoint a recorder, a timer, a leader, a reporter.

For Oral work or group work, a grade of 1/3 teacher, 1/3 students, 1/3 individual self is workable

Contextual Approach Create a project that will enhance our study of this literature.

[Choose and, some, or even all]

1. In small groups of 4 or 5: Create a class bulletin board-display wall and FYI shelf for any pictures, brochures, photocopies, of materials that will connect with the stories. Look for travel articles, "in the news" events, travel brochures, fashions, advertising, history sociology, anthropology, religion...music covers, song lyrics

2. Singly, in pairs, or in small groups—Give an oral presentation of any of the following:

- A history of the region in an era important to writer's essay, story, poem
- A history of Puerto Rico, Mexico, Latin America, American Southwest
- Biographies of any writer
- Summaries and commentaries on essays by critics, reviewers of writers
- Art and Music that connects with the stories
- Religious stories or Myths or Legends that connect with the stories

3. Create an original art piece or music piece in response to either of the stories using phrases or images from either story

4. Create a dialogue between you, a friend, and any author or character. Read it to the class as reader's theater.

5. Create a pastiche from pictures in current magazines of images from news, arts, entertainment, advertising in American society that denote Hispanic-American women, men, children, families Use all Hispanic-American cultures: Latino, Chicano, Puerto-Rican, American Southwest, Mexican-American, hispanic immigrants,

6. One third of population by year 2000 will be persons of color. Investigate, explore, research what this will do to the bastions of white culture. How will this affect education? bilingualism? economics? migration patterns?

7. How would you film a story or poem from this section of *Braided Lives*? Create a scenario. Demonstrate with chalktalk, overheads, commentary, script board.

8. Work with a partner of the opposite sex. Discuss your perceptions of the role of men and women in your story or poem. Write up your observations and conclusions. Note what you never observed before because of your own gender.
9. What are the types of oppression in the story? Physical? Social? Emotional? Psychological External? Internal? Race/Class/Gender?
10. The role played by the society within the culture. Restrictions of the protagonist to the social expectations, institutions. Restrictions by the White society to the social expectations, institutions: For both cultures: resulting in rebellion? defiance? acceptance? accommodation?
11. How has the awareness of the oppression affected the growth, development and change in the protagonist/speaker?
12. Dehumanization: to what extent is each character dehumanized?
13. The irony of the oppression to the oppressor (this could be very difficult). How the oppressors are dehumanized
14. The nature of the protagonist: unheroic? fallible? in what way and why?
15. "Freedom". How would each of the protagonists define freedom? What use would each make of freedom?
16. To what extent is each of these stories/poems/essays a social criticism? of the law, the state, the church, the school, the family?
17. Relevance and topicality: how relevant is the work to you here and now? To what extent is each work didactic or lyrical in purpose?
18. Methods of revealing and developing character compare techniques among the stories.
19. Discuss the significant effects of POV in the story (third, first, dramatic); discuss the narrator.
20. Discuss the crisis situation in each—and how the protagonist responds (would you have responded differently or the same?)
21. The significance of settings: time and place.
22. The significance of beginnings and endings: discuss the opening and closing scenes or passages.
23. Examine three short exchanges between the protagonist and another character and comment on the significance.
24. Comment on strategies used by character to survive conflict, crisis: this reveals the philosophy and attitude of the author.
25. How much are your dreams, ambitions, challenges fashioned by your family and culture?