

PERSONAL IDENTITY



WHO AM I?" "What values are important to me?" "What kind of life will I choose?" How do I want to be remembered?" What is my path in life?" "How can I be true to myself?" There are universal questions that people of all cultures ask in the lifelong process of forming their identities. In the lessons in this unit students will consider these questions from personal and literary points of view and will consequently explore literature from a personal perspective.

LESSON I

POEM IN TWO VOICES: ANCESTRAL ROOTS

based on "Ending Poem" by Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales

Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, mother and daughter, wrote "Ending Poem" about who they are and their ancestors' contributions to their lives. The poets feel that their ancestors' ways of life are part of them, but each poet believes she is also a new and unique individual.

Have pairs of students read "Ending Poem" aloud, each partner taking one of the two voices. Then have students write a poem based on "Ending Poem." In addition to writing about their own experiences, have students write in their mother's, father's, or other older relative's voice about his or her experiences. They may also write the poem collaboratively with their relative. If students write the poems themselves, they may wish to interview a relatives to obtain the necessary information.

INSTRUCTIONS

Part 1—Provide biographical information about yourself and one of your parents or older relatives.

Begin your poem with the line "I am what I am." This is your line. Continue to write lines alternatively in your voice and in the voice of your relative. In your voice, tell about your background; in your relative's voice, tell about his or her background. The facts you choose to write about may include: place of origin, socioeconomic background, languages spoken and heard as a child, and basic values. Provide details that demonstrate these facts.

Part 2—Find traits you and your ancestors share.

Continue this part of the poem in one or both voices. Go back as many generations as you wish: hundreds of years or one or two generations. Specify the continent, country, city, or state your ancestors were from, and describe aspects of your ancestor's lives that are part of you, but are not all of you. If you can, describe traits you have internalized from two or three different generations of your family.

TWO SAMPLE VERSES FOR PART 2 OF THIS POEM

Russia is in me. (Asia too?)
The towns, the cities, the jammed streets, the domed synagogues.
But I am not Russia.

I am not New York City.
The color, the variety, my family, those are in me,
but they are not all of me.

You may already know about features or your distant ancestors' places of origin and ways of life that are part of you. If you do not, ask your parents and older relatives. Another important source of information is the library. Look up information about the areas in which your ancestors lived, and find characteristics of those places that resonate in you.

Part 3—Ending section

You may begin this section with "I am new." or "I move on." Describe how you are entering new territory or how you are different from your ancestors.

READING YOUR POEM

Practice reading your poem with your relative or with another person taking your relative's part, and at a class party read your poem with the other person.

LESSON 2

LITERATURE JOURNAL/COLLAGES; THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHARACTER'S IDENTITY

SUGGESTED LONGER WORKS

- **Bless Me Ultima*, Rudolfo Anaya
- **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou
- **Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin



ENDING POEM

Rosario Morales

Aurora Levins Morales

"Ending Poem" was written by and contains the voices of two poets—mother and daughter. Puerto Rican author Rosario Morales was raised in New York City and then returned to Puerto Rico to live with her Jewish-American husband. Their daughter Aurora Levins Morales was born and spent her early years in Puerto Rico on a coffee farm. Although the family eventually moved back to the mainland, readers can hear the islands in the Morales' poetry. In "Ending Poem," the poets celebrate the different cultures that have contributed to who they are today.

I AM WHAT I AM.

A child of the Americas.

A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean.

A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.

I am Puerto Rican. I am U.S. American.

I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx.

*A mountain-born, country-bred, homegrown jíbara child,
up from the shtetl, a California Puerto Rican Jew*

A product of the New York ghettos I have never known.

I am an immigrant

and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.

We didn't know our forbears' names with a certainty.

They aren't written anywhere.

First names only or mija, negra, ne, honey, sugar, dear

I come from the dirt where the cane was grown.

My people didn't go to dinner parties. They weren't invited.

I am caribeña, island grown.

*Spanish is in my flesh, ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips,
the language of garlic and mangoes.*

Boricua. As Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan.

I am of latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent.

I speak from that body. Just brown and pink and full of drums inside.

I am not African.

Africa waters the roots of my tree, but I cannot return.

I am not Taíno.

*I am a late leaf of that ancient tree,
and my roots reach into the soil of two Americas.
Taíno is in me, but there is no way back.*

I am not European, though I have dreamt of those cities.

Each plate is different.

wood, clay, papier mâché, metals basketry, a leaf, a coconut shell.

Europe lives in me but I have no home there.

*The table has a cloth woven by one, dyed by another,
embroidered by another still.*

I am a child of many mothers.

They have kept it all going

*All the civilizations erected on their backs.
All the dinner parties given with their labor.*

We are new.

They gave us life, kept us going,

brought us to where we are.

Born at a crossroads.

Come, lay that dishcloth down. Eat, dear, eat.

History made us.

We will not eat ourselves up inside anymore.

And we are whole.

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. In what sense does the poem show that the speakers are children "of many mothers"?
2. What does one of the speakers mean when she says at the end of the poem, "Come, lay that dishcloth down. Eat, dear, eat"?
3. What is the emotional tone of this poem? Give details from the poem to support your response.

