National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE





20 GREAT MEXICAN SHORT STORIES

Sun, Stone, and Shadows





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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.



The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.



Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

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Introduction

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through the anthology of Mexican short fiction, Sun, Stone, and Shadows. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the stories, Mexican culture and history, and the authors' biographies. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the book, The Big Read CD presents the readings of the stories and first-hand accounts of why Mexican short fiction is a compelling way to explore the country's culture and heritage. Many celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, book lists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of the great Mexican authors included in this anthology.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia

Duna Moria

Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Reading Short Fiction

Activities: Read Handouts One and Two, and the Introduction from the Reader's Guide. Write a short essay considering the appeal of a favorite story.

Homework: Read Castellanos's biography from the Reader's Guide (p. 8) and "Cooking Lesson."

2

Day Two

"Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos

FOCUS: Realism

Activities: Discuss ways Castellanos uses language that appeals to the senses.

Homework: Describe the story's narrator.

3

Day Three

"Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss the narrator and how the story might change if told from third person.

Homework: Read "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo. List the story's main characters and write a one-sentence description of each.

4

Day Four

"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: List the main characters of the story. Conduct a mock trial of Juvencio. Write a description of what happens to the characters after the story ends.

Homework: Re-read the story and identify its major turning points.

5

Day Five

"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo

FOCUS: Plot

Activities: Discuss the story's pacing and construct a timeline. Write a short essay considering the ways flashbacks and plot twists change the way the reader feels about the story's characters.

Homework: Read "My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz. Identify moments when the story seems bizarre and others where it seems more conventional.

6

Day Six

"My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz

FOCUS: Surrealism

Activities: Discuss surrealism. Identify specific instances where the story might be considered surrealistic, traditional, or romantic. Write about how Paz's quote on modernity might provide interpretive clues to the story.

Homework: Re-read the story and read Handout Three. Write two paragraphs about Diane Thiel's interpretation of the story.

7

Day Seven

"My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz

FOCUS: Metaphor

Activities: Discuss imagery and personification. Debate Thiel's analysis of the story. Write an essay considering the impact of understanding both the literal and the figurative qualities of the wave.

Homework: Read "Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes. Pay close attention to the structure of the story.

8

Day Eight

"Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes

FOCUS: Epistolary Writing

Activities: Discuss the story's structure and how the form lends itself to horror and suspense. Write a short story using the epistolary form.

Homework: Find examples of symbolism in "Chac-Mool."

9

Day Nine

"Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes

FOCUS: Symbolism

Activities: Discuss the symbolic value of the stone figure. Write an essay on the symbolic value of water.

Homework: Have students begin writing essays. Outlines are due at the next class.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Short Story Great?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great short story. Review essay outlines and drafts.

Homework: Essays are due next class period.



FOCUS: Reading Short Fiction

Literature has a lot to offer the reader. As art made verbal, the act of reading improves vocabulary and makes readers aware of the power of language, enhancing the ability to express ourselves. Short fiction traces its roots to the ancient tradition of oral storytelling when tales were passed down from one generation to another. Short stories are more focused than novels, making them ideal for reading in a single sitting. Because of its brevity, short fiction offers teachers unique opportunities to explore various aspects of literature (plot, character development, point of view, and setting) within a manageable time.

?? Discussion Activities

Read Teacher's Guide Handout One: Short Fiction. Ask your students to name some of their favorite fables, fairy tales, parables, or tall tales. What aspects of these stories appeal to them? Do they remember whether they first heard the story read (or told) aloud, or if they read it themselves? Is reading a story a significantly different experience from listening to it read aloud? Which do your students prefer and why?

Read the Introduction to Sun, Stone, and Shadows from the Reader's Guide (p. 3) and Handout Two: Reader-Response Criticism. Use the essay and handout to talk about the ways reading Mexican literature can expand a reader's understanding of Mexican culture and history. Generate a discussion about the ways plot, action, or a particular character within a story can be interpreted in different ways by different people. Ask your students to keep a separate notebook that will serve as a reader-response journal. They will use this journal for their homework, to track their responses to stories, to note questions, and to list vocabulary words.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write three paragraphs in their reader's journal considering a favorite fable, fairy tale, parable, or tall tale. What was the plot of the story? Did it have a moral lesson, or was the story simply entertaining? Ask students to consider why the story appealed to them at the age they first heard it, and whether or not it has the same emotional effect on them now.

Homework

Ask students to read the short biography of Rosario Castellanos from the Reader's Guide (p. 8) and "Cooking Lesson." Ask students to write a short essay in their journals comparing the woman and her kitchen to a person in their own life who may or may not like to cook.



FOCUS: Realism

"Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos

Realism is an attempt to reproduce faithfully the lives of ordinary people in everyday situations. Characters, settings, and events are presented in ways the reader should recognize as plausible. Realism often relies on appealing to the reader's senses because the success of realistic fiction relies on an author's ability to structure plots that ring true from emotional, psychological, and sensory perspectives.

Food and its preparation are an especially important part of Mexican culture. In "Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos, a newly married woman attempts to cook a roast for the first time. The kitchen, the meat, and the aromas are described in great detail and echo the narrator's emotional condition. It becomes clear that the sterility of the kitchen and the narrator's culinary failure symbolize her troubled marriage and her resistance to assuming a traditional role in her new household.

?? Discussion Activities

Ask several students to read their homework aloud in class. Are the essays similar? If not, discuss students' various reactions to the story as a class, remembering that reader-response criticism allows for different interpretations of the same story as long as the reader's opinions remain grounded in the text. How much does personal experience affect the way students identify with this story? Is the same true for all works of literature?

Ask students to name several examples of images, thoughts, actions, or emotions in the story that are both realistic and believable. As a class, discuss how each element contributes to the success of the story.

Setting is the time and place in which the action of a story occurs. Often, setting is more than just background information. A particular setting can cause things to happen. Characters placed in a specific setting might behave in certain ways, have profound realizations, and reveal their innermost natures. Discuss the importance of setting in this story.

Writing Exercise

Rosario Castellanos appeals to each of her reader's senses to create realistic fiction. Ask students to write a short essay identifying ways Castellanos has appealed to all of the reader's senses while writing "Cooking Lesson."

Homework

In their reader's journals, have students write a short description of the story's narrator, including a paragraph on each of the following questions. Who is the narrator? How does she feel about her marriage and the traditional roles of women in Mexican society? What parallels does the narrator see between herself and the ruined meat?



FOCUS: Narrative and Point of **View**

"Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the story, using "I." A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters' thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

"Cooking Lesson" is narrated from the first-person point of view by a newly married woman struggling to cook a meal for her husband. She tells us, "I stand here like an imbecile, in an impeccable and neutral kitchen, wearing the apron that I usurp in order to give a pretense of efficiency and of which I will be shamefully but justly stripped." As she prepares the meal, she reflects on her troubled marriage.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Using the homework assignment from the last class, ask students to discuss the role of the narrator in the story. Why might Castellanos have chosen to tell the story from the young woman's perspective rather than through a third-person objective narrator? How would a change in point of view have changed the reader's perspective?

Ask students to write a response to the quotation below in their reader's journals addressing the following questions: Why is the narrator rebelling against her role as a wife? How might her duties differ from those of her mother's generation? How does she believe her husband will react if she refuses to perform these tasks, or if she fails to do them well? Why might that breed resentment?

All the responsibilities and duties of a servant are assigned to me for everything. I'm supposed to keep the house impeccable, the clothes ready, mealtimes exact. On the other hand, I'm supposed to contribute to the support of the household ... In my free time I transform myself into a society matron who gives luncheons and dinners for her husband's friends, attends meetings, subscribes to the opera season, watches her weight, renews her wardrobe, cares for her skin, keeps herself attractive.

Homework

Read "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo. Make a list of the story's main characters and write a one-sentence description of each.



Lesson Four

FOCUS: Character **Development**

"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters that hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The protagonist of Juan Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" is Juvencio Nava, a man who has lived in hiding for thirty-five years after killing a neighbor, Don Lupe Terreros. Juvencio is pursued by Don Lupe's son, now a colonel, who has finally caught up with his father's killer. Juvencio's own son, Justino, has acted as a liaison between the colonel and Juvencio, despite concerns for his safety and that of his wife and eight children.

Discussion Activities

List the main characters on the board in front of your class. Using the homework assignment, discuss each character's role in the story. Assign a student to play each part. Ask the rest of the class to split into two teams. Assign one team to be Juvencio's defense attorneys and the other team to act as the prosecution. Each team may call the characters to serve as witnesses for either the defense or prosecution. Argue Juvencio's guilt or innocence, then debate his sentence. Does Juvencio warrant sympathy? What was his motive for killing Don Lupe? Is Colonel Terreros justified in his revenge? Does Juvencio deserve his punishment? Could anyone in this story be considered a hero?

Writing Exercise

In their reader's journals ask students to write about what happens after the last scene in "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" Does this blood feud end with Juvencio. or does it set off a cycle of revenge? Is Colonel Terreros satisfied with the death of the man who murdered his father? What role did Justino play in his father's capture, and how does he cope with this experience?

Homework

Have students re-read the story, this time identifying major turning points in the plot and shifts in time.



FOCUS: Plot

"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" by Juan Rulfo

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

Rulfo's story grips the reader from the very first sentence—'Tell them not to kill me, Justino!'—and the urgency of the narration continues on every page. The actual story is fairly simple: One man kills another over a land dispute; the killer goes into hiding and is caught nearly four decades later. The complexity of the story is the result of how the details and turning points of the story slowly unfold.

?? Discussion Activities

By propelling the reader into the middle of the action in the first sentence, Rulfo immediately piques our interest. Discuss as a class your students' reactions to the opening sentences of the story. Who is trying to kill this man? Why? What did he do? Does the way Rulfo began the story garner sympathy for the protagonist? Why or why not?

We soon find out through flashback that Juvencio is not innocent. Ask students if they felt conflicted about their support of Juvencio. Did the tension in the story increase when they learned that he had murdered Don Lupe?

Have students map out a timeline of the story's main events. Which are told in the present and which are revealed through flashbacks? How does the way the reader finds out new information affect how he or she feels about the characters?

Writing Exercise

"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" slowly reveals itself through flashbacks. Have students write in their reader's journal about the twists in the story's plot. Did their allegiance shift between the characters? If so, at what point did this change take place? Did they anticipate any of the plot twists? Which revelation had the most impact? Why?

Homework

Read "My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz. Identify several examples for each of the following questions: Which specific moments in the story are bizarre or dreamlike? Which moments seem more conventional?



Lesson Six

FOCUS: Surrealism

"My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz

Surrealism is a movement in art and writing, begun by the French poet André Breton in 1924 with the publication of his manifesto Le Manifeste du Surréalisme. It stated that a deeper reality exists, which to mortal minds is unfathomable. To mirror that profound reality, surrealist artists are fond of bizarre and dreamlike imagery. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, surrealists seek to create their art according to the dictates of the unconscious mind.

Surrealism flourished between World Wars I and II. Such artists as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), René Magritte (1898-1967), and Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) painted surrealist works at different points in their careers. Reading Octavio Paz's "My Life with the Wave" as a Surrealist prose poem is only one of several possible interpretations of this fascinating short story. First published in 1976, it can be read as an erotic allegory, an exploration of the artist's relationship with his muse, a short story exploring magical realism, or in ways yet undiscovered.

?? Discussion Activities

The following statement summarizes André Breton's surrealist ambition: "I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak. I am looking forward to its consummation, certain that I shall never share in it, but death would matter little to me could I but taste the joy it will yield ultimately." How might this surrealist claim apply to Octavio Paz's story "My Life with the Wave"?

Although "My Life with the Wave" is a fantastical story, which elements of the plot resemble other, more traditional stories students have read? In particular, how does the story seem like a conventional love affair? Ask students to identify specific moments in the story where the language evokes a typical romance between two people. Can the story still be considered Surrealist?

Writing Exercise

In his Nobel lecture Octavio Paz said, "We pursue modernity in her incessant metamorphoses yet we never manage to trap her. She always escapes: each encounter ends in flight. We embrace her and she disappears immediately: it was just a little air." In their journals, have students write two paragraphs considering how this quotation might provide clues to interpreting the story.

Homework

Reread "My Life with the Wave," then read Handout Three in this guide. Ask students to write two paragraphs explaining the reasons why they agree or disagree with Thiel's interpretation.



FOCUS: Metaphor

"My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz

Writers use figurative language to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions. Imagery, a word or series of words that refers to any sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste), helps create a visceral experience for the reader. Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. A simile is a comparison between two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have a significant resemblance. Similes employ a connective, usually "like," "as," or "than," or a verb such as "resembles." A metaphor states that one thing is something else in order to extend and expand the meaning of one of those objects. By asserting that a thing is something else, metaphors create a close association that underscores some important similarity.

Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, an animal, or an abstract term (truth, death, the past, etc.) takes on human qualities. Understanding this story depends on paying attention to both the literal and figurative elements that Paz evokes.

Discussion Activities

What specific images does Paz use to describe the presence of the wave in the narrator's life at the beginning, and how do these images change by the story's end? How do the later, darker images contrast with the literal descriptions of clothing, trains, police officers, a jail cell, and an ice bucket?

Identify specific moments where the wave is described with human qualities. How do these moments of personification—along with the bizarre physical details of her elemental nature—give "My Life with the Wave" a surreal quality?

As a class, list three possible interpretations of the story's last two paragraphs. Why might the narrator say that the wave "was an implacable whip that lashed and lashed"? Ask several students to read their homework assignment aloud. Do they agree or disagree with Diane Thiel's point of view expressed in Handout Three?

Writing Exercise

In their reader's journals, ask students to list several places in "My Life with the Wave" where words can refer (whether directly or simply by suggestion) to both a woman and a wave. In two paragraphs, describe how a full appreciation of the story depends on noticing its literal and figurative qualities.

Homework

Have students read "Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes. Ask them to pay special attention to its unusual form, consisting of a diary nested inside another character's first-person narration.



Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Epistolary Writing

"Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes

The word "epistolary" comes from the Latin word for letter, *epistola*. "Epistolary" writing is told by way of documents written by one or more characters. These can take the form of letters, as in Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*; of diary entries, or a combination of documents, as in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. Fiction writers usually use the epistolary form to add authenticity to a story, a sense that the author or narrator has discovered these documents and is sharing them with the reader.

Discussion Activities

Carlos Fuentes chose to structure this story as a diary nested inside another character's first-person narration. Discuss the structure of "Chac-Mool" using the homework assignment from the previous class. Why might Fuentes have decided to tell the story through the filter of a narrator reading his friend Filiberto's diary entries? How might the ending have had to change if Fuentes had just given us Filiberto's diaries?

The narrator's account isn't just a framing device. He interrupts Filiberto's diary twice. In the first of these interruptions he writes, "The entry for August 25 seemed to have been written by a different person. At times it was the writing of a child, each letter laboriously separated; other times, nervous, trailing into illegibility." How does a reader's awareness not just of Filiberto's medium—in this case, "a cheap notebook with graph-paper pages and marble-ized-paper binding"—but also his erratic penmanship, condition how we interpret his story?

Finally, consider that two of the greatest horror stories, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, and "Chac-Mool" are all written in epistolary form. What is it about the epistolary form that might lend itself to the creation of unease, or suspense, or dread?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short story in their reader's journal using the epistolary form. Encourage them to be creative. They may use letters, diary entries, e-mails, or even blog posts.

Homework

Have students page back through "Chac-Mool" to find examples of symbolic objects. How is the symbolic meaning different from the literal significance of the object? How does each symbol inform our understanding of the story or characters?



Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Symbolism

"Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the story's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a story is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the story.

Beyond its delights as a spooky story, what might "Chac-Mool" mean? As the story begins, Filiberto has just drowned trying to swim away from his hotel. The narrator arrives to pick up his friend's body and finds Filiberto's notebook in a satchel. The diary entries describe Filiberto's doomed last days with his Chac-Mool statue.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises

Show your students photographs of a Chac-Mool. Discuss what symbolic value this primitive stone figure has in the story. Ask your students why they think the Chac-Mool starts out in the cellar, and why Filiberto winds up there. We last see the Chac-Mool as a "yellow-skinned Indian in a smoking jacket and ascot" (p. 46). How has the Chac-Mool changed over the course of the story? Who changes more, him or Filiberto? By the end, are they both ruined?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a two-page essay on what water might symbolize in "Chac-Mool." Does its symbolic value change or evolve over the course of the story? Of all the ways for Filiberto to die, why do you think Fuentes opted for drowning? Have your students support their ideas with passages from the text.



Homework

Have your students begin to write their essays, using the topics at the end of this guide or subjects that emerge as students look through their reader's journals. Outlines are due at the next class.



FOCUS: What Makes a Short Story Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn and reflect, a great story is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students the following questions: If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a short story rather than a novel, poem, speech, or essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Writing Exercise

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit outlines and rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things they should look for in a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should finish writing their essays to hand in during the next class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the story. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

- 1. Marriage threatens the identity of the female narrator of "Cooking Lesson" by Rosario Castellanos. Expand the plot summary and the character analysis from your reader's journal to explore the ways the piece of steak serves as a symbol for the narrator's life. How do the changes that take place as the meat cooks help us understand the narrator's emotional state? Why might Castellanos have chosen meat as a symbol?
- 2. Analyze one of the stories in the collection and draft one sentence that summarizes its primary theme. Using quotations from the text, write an essay that supports your claim. Be sure to consider the title of the story, point of view, main characters, setting, and objects of symbolic value while writing your essay.
- 3. Magical realism blends elements of the real world with imaginative surrealistic descriptions and events. Many Latin American writers are considered masters of the form. Expand the entries in your reader's journal to consider the ways Octavio Paz brings elements of magical realism to the page in "My Life with the Wave." How does the incorporation of fantastical characters and events add to the effect of the story? How does our world differ when studied through the lens of possibility provided by magical realism?

- 4. Writing about setting invites you to study not only the story's time and place, but also the ways that a particular setting affects each of the characters. Choose a story in the anthology and write an essay considering the following questions: When and where does the story take place? Does the location suggest anything about the characters' lives? Is weather an important aspect of the story? If so, how?
- 5. Take two stories in which you find similarities and evaluate the strengths of each, providing evidence from the texts to support your judgments. This could include character studies of the stories' protagonists, comparison of the settings, contrasting different authors' styles of writing, or a focus on the ways a similar topic or theme is addressed.
- 6. Choose a story you did not enjoy reading and write a critical review. Be sure to offer thoughtful reasoning for your criticisms and support your arguments with passages from the text.

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

- Photo Gallery: Divide students into five groups. Assign each group one of the following topics:
 - a. Ancient Mexico
 - b. The Mexican countryside, including crops grown today
 - c. Modern Mexican cities
 - d. Twentieth-century political leaders
 - e. Cathedrals and churches

Ask each group to find and print photographs relating to its assigned topic and write captions for each. Assemble the photographs into an exhibit that can be shown at a school assembly or in conjunction with a Big Read event in your community.

- 2. Performance: Work with your school's drama instructor to produce a reader's theater or stage version of one or more of the short stories in the anthology. Students who do not feel comfortable acting can work on lighting, set creation, or costume design.
- 3. Artist's Gallery: Ask students to draw or paint a scene from one of the short stories in the anthology. Display the artwork in your school's hallway or at a local Big Read event, or create an exhibit on Surrealist Mexican art. Ask students to research the artists and their creations, including biographical, cultural, and historical facts that add to a complete understanding of the work. Display the exhibit in a school library, auditorium, or at a popular venue in your community.

- 4. Read-a-thon: Read several stories from the anthology aloud at a local coffee shop or local hangout. Team with a culinary arts program at a local high school or college to provide typical Mexican sweets for patrons to enjoy with their coffee.
- 5. Adaptation: Divide the class into groups. Ask students to adapt their favorite stories from Sun, Stone, and Shadows using your town or city as a setting. They should write all the dialogue and take the parts of all the characters. Ask each group to perform for the entire class or at a student assembly. Afterward, discuss the shift in setting. How did it change the story? What are some of the social issues Mexico and the United States share?
- 6. Cultural Appreciation: Teaming with a world history, current affairs, or social studies class, plan a day to explore Mexican culture. Play Mexican music, show a Mexican film, enjoy Mexican food, and talk about recent news events that have special relevance to the people of Mexico.

Short Fiction

Modern literary fiction has been dominated by two forms: the novel and the short story. "Fiction" (from the Latin *fictio*, "a shaping, a counterfeiting") is a name for writing that is at least partially imagined. In historical fiction, a writer draws on factual information to present scenes, events, and characters, but the facts are of secondary importance. Readers should expect a novel or story to create a sense of how people respond to life's circumstances rather than an authentic chronicle of past events.

Ancient forms of the short story date back to the days of oral storytelling. Most of us are familiar with Aesop's fables and the parables of Jesus from the New Testament. These brief narratives teach a moral lesson. Usually short enough to be memorized, they tend to be less complicated and closely detailed than a story written for the printed page. Fairy tales such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" and tall tales like those about Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill are set in world of magical possibility where supernatural and fantastic occurrences are commonplace. Fairy and tall tales tend to be more elaborately constructed than fables and parables but they thrive on action rather than on character development.

The written short story emerged in the early nineteenth century and was the last major literary form to develop. The short story did at least three things that changed the way brief fiction was told. First, it condensed the action of the tale—usually into a single situation focused on a single character. All of the dramatic and narrative power of the

story was compressed into exploring that one action—its motivations, unfolding, and effects. The second hallmark of modern short fiction is fully delineated character. Characters are usually imagined people who populate a story. Some works of fiction have characters that are not human, such as in "My Life with the Wave" by Octavio Paz, but even these characters are imbued with human traits.

Finally, the short story used prose in a poetic manner. Sound and rhythm, image and symbol, tone and point of view were carefully crafted to communicate the plot as well as the physical and emotional experience of the story. Edgar Allan Poe, who helped develop the short story, thought of the form as an essentially poetic kind of prose narrative that created a trancelike state of heightened feeling, thought, and sensitivity.

The plot of a short story is the element most readers most remember. Plot is a pattern of actions, events, and situations an author uses to tell a story. Through plot, writers create a series of emotional responses in the reader: suspense, humor, sadness, excitement, even terror. A successful short story combines plot with strong characters and poetic language to challenge, delight and enchant its readers.

Excerpted from *The Longman Anthology of Short Fiction* by Dana Gioia and R. S. Gwynn, eds.

Reader-Response Criticism

Literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature. Literary criticism is nothing more than discourse—spoken or written—about literature. Reader-response criticism attempts to describe what happens in the reader's mind while interpreting a work of fiction. This type of literary criticism recognizes that like writing, reading is a creative process. Reader-response critics believe that no text provides self-contained meaning; literary texts do not have meaning independently from readers' interpretations. According to this school, a text is not complete until it is read and interpreted.

The easiest way to explain reader-response criticism is to relate it to the common experience of re-reading a favorite book after many years. A book one read as a child might seem shockingly different when re-read as an adolescent or as an adult. The character once remembered favorably might seem less admirable while another character becomes more sympathetic. The book has not changed. However, our life experiences between the first reading and any subsequent re-reading can affect the way we respond to a story.

Reader-response criticism explores how different individuals see the same text differently. It emphasizes how religious, cultural, and social values affect the way we read and respond to a work of fiction. Of course, no two individuals will necessarily read a text in exactly the same way nor

will they agree on its meaning. Rather than declare one interpretation correct and the other mistaken, reader-response criticism recognizes that different insights are inevitable. Instead of trying to ignore or reconcile the contradictions, it explores them. Reader-response criticism also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read the same text with different assumptions.

While reader-response criticism rejects the notion that there can be a single correct reading for a literary text, it doesn't consider all readings permissible. Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations. We cannot suddenly change the setting, the way a story's plot unfolds, or redefine its characters.

Keeping a reader's journal is a great way to keep track of the fiction you read and your emotional responses to the stories. You can use the journal to explore ideas for essays, note important quotations, and list words to look up in the dictionary. Use your reader's journal while studying *Sun. Stone*, and *Shadows* to provide a convenient way of documenting your own response to the stories you read in the anthology.

Excerpted from *The Longman Anthology of Short Fution* by Dana Gioia and R. S. Gwynn, eds.

Octavio Paz's "My Life with the Wave" An Allegory of the Creative Process, by Diane Thiel

Octavio Paz's "My Life with the Wave" has a many-layered nature which eludes immediate definition. Is it a love relationship that the wave describes, or is it an aspect of himself? Is it memory? Or is it the muse, inspiration—which follows him from the sea, causes him imprisonment, and then is waiting for him on his return home, ready to toss him in many directions?

The wave is vested with human qualities, and the speaker has a relationship with her that is both physical and emotional. A superficial reading might lead to the conclusion that the wave is merely a representation of a love relationship. The sensuous nature of the wave and the erotic and tempestuous relationship of the speaker with her support this impression. A closer reading, however, reveals some inconsistencies. The wave presents some non-human qualities. Her tempests, like those of the sea, are tied to the weather. She lacks the human center of mortality, and the vulnerability which comes from it.

The origin of this piece—its inclusion in *Águila* o sol (Eagle or Sun), a collection of prose poems which deals with the creative process—offers a useful clue to the deeper possible meanings of the wave. The pieces in *Águila* o sol describe the artistic process as a physical, erotic encounter, sometimes violent. Paz's choice of a wave to depict the experience is an evocative one. As a writer, he struggles with the volatile demands of the Muse. It is a relationship which strikes a familiar chord with all writers. The wave will follow you home. You have no choice in the matter. It will come in search of you. You will do anything for this wave. Going to prison will not keep you from writing.

But it is a tempestuous relationship—tortuous at times, because you may not know what the Muse requires.

The double metaphor—the creative process as a wave, and the wave as a person—is effective because it can describe the relationship with the Muse simultaneously on intellectual, emotional, and visceral levels. The erotic connotations are particularly effective because they heighten the intensity of the piece. Paz chose a feminine noun (*la ola*) for his character, which requires the feminine pronoun in Spanish. The effect in the original language is somewhat subtler than the use of "she" in English. The translation strongly encourages one to initially read the piece as a description of a love relationship.

The final image of the wave, broken up to fill ice buckets, may be chilling, but it is also a clue to her identity. The ideas generated by the creative process become tortuous at times. One may have to leave a project for a while, in order to allow the inspiration to solidify into words. For the writer, inspiration can be a monster with which one must battle, until it is broken up into pieces—words, poems, stories. The fact that the speaker "sells" the wave further suggests her nature as Muse. Is the waiter the editor, who uses small shards of the product of inspiration to enrich the lives of readers, like chilled wine? It is an unfortunate fate—the wave of inspiration reduced to restaurant ice. One cannot truly capture the wave, Paz seems to suggest, only serve it in the tiniest of pieces.

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Teaching Resources

Books

Castellanos, Rosario. A Rosario Castellanos Reader: An Anthology of Her Poetry, Short Fiction, Essays, and Drama. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988.

Fuentes, Carlos. Myself with Others. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988.

Paz, Octavio, The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico. New York: Grove Press, 1961.

Rulfo, Juan. *Juan Rulfo's Mexico*. Washington: Smithsonian, 2002.

Web sites

www.mexonline.com

This Web site contains information about the culture and history of Mexico.

www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/paz-bio.html

The Nobel Foundation Web site contains information about Octavio Paz, an overview of his work, a complete bibliography, and the text of his Nobel lecture and banquet speech.

www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/645

The Academy of American Poets contains a biography, bibliography, and link to information related to Octavio Paz.

www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/fue0int-I

The Web site of The American Academy of Achievement serves to spark the imagination of students across America and around the globe by bringing them into direct personal contact with the greatest thinkers and achievers of the age. The site contains an interview with Carlos Fuentes conducted in June 2006.

www.surrealism.org

This site contains information on the Surrealist movement that was founded in 1924 by André Breton. It also contains biographical information on Surrealists such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Max Ernst.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

- 1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- 2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- 3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- 4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- 5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

- 6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- 7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- 8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- 9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
- 10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
- II. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
- 12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

^{*} This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.

"At home, my father made me read Mexican history, study Mexican geography, and understand the names, the dreams and defeats of Mexico ... a land of Oz with a green cactus road, a landscape and a soul so different from those of the United States that they seemed a fantasy."

—CARLOS FUENTES
from Myself with Others: Selected Essays



Top left, clockwise: Rosario Castellanos, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz.

"The temples and gods of pre-Columbian Mexico are a pile of ruins, but the spirit that breathed life into that world has not disappeared; it speaks to us in the hermetic language of myth, legend, forms of social coexistence, popular art, customs. Being a Mexican writer means listening to the voice of that present, that presence."

-OCTAVIO PAZ

from his 1990 Nobel Prize acceptance lecture

"From today on, I'll be whatever I choose to be at the moment..."

—ROSARIO CASTELLANOS from her short story "Cooking Lesson"

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS



The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A great nation deserves great art.

