



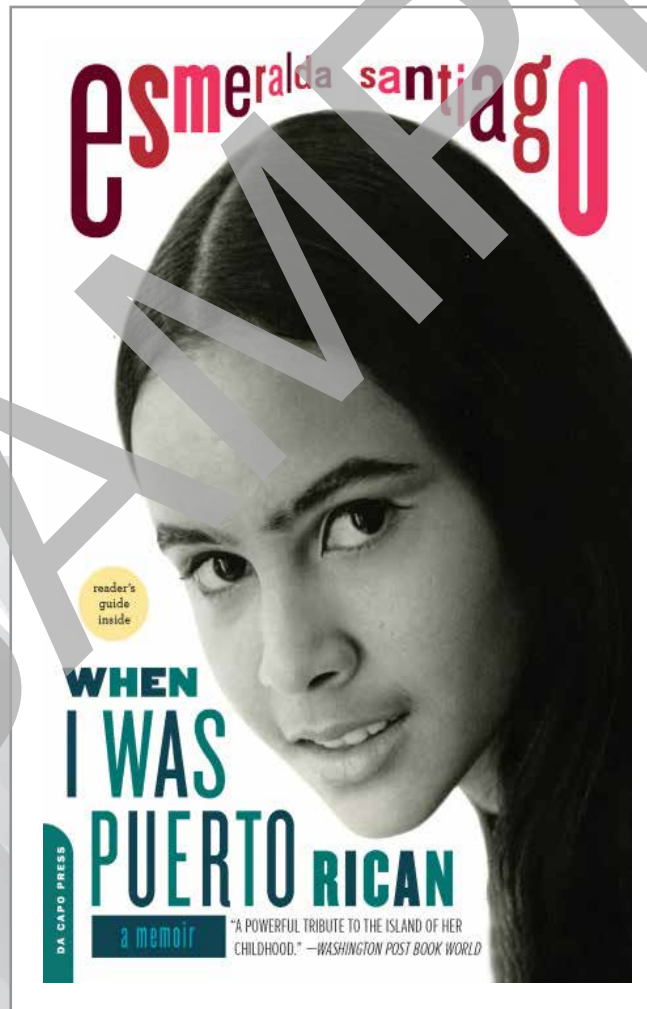
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

When I Was Puerto Rican

Esmeralda Santiago



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

When I Was Puerto Rican

Esmeralda Santiago

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, symbolism,
irony, genre, characterization,
plot development, setting,
theme, style, allusion

Writing

Poetry, newspaper article,
report, autobiography,
monologue

Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting,
inferring, thematic
development, conflict

Thinking

Brainstorming, analysis,
compare/contrast, current
events

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue,
interview, oral presentation

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
applications

Across the Curriculum

Art—montage, sketch;
Drama—script; Music—ballad,
appropriate selections;
Current Events—articles,
pictures, research

Genre: autobiography

Setting: Puerto Rico; Brooklyn, New York; primarily late 1940s to early 1960s (beginning with the author's life as a child in Puerto Rico and ending with her life in the United States); Epilogue ten years later

Themes: coming-of-age, overcoming adversity, Puerto Rican culture, effect of marital strife on children, adjustment to a new culture, education, immigration

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. society, person vs. nature

Style: straightforward narrative

Tone: reflective; optimistic

Date of First Publication: 1993

Summary

Esmeralda “Negi” Santiago relates the story of her coming-of-age in a direct, simple narrative, beginning with her childhood in rural Puerto Rico and concluding with her experiences in New York. Esmeralda is the eldest of Mami and Papi’s seven children. Although the family is poor by most standards, the children grow up relatively carefree and happy in Puerto Rico except for the strife between their parents. Mami and Papi have never married, and Papi’s continuing relationships with other women lead to frequent conflicts, separations, and reconciliations. Mami eventually leaves Papi and moves to Brooklyn, New York, to make a new life for herself and her children. Esmeralda is thrust into a world where she encounters a new culture and must learn a new language and new rules. Even though leaving Puerto Rico and her father devastates her, Esmeralda adapts to her new life. She overcomes adversity and eventually is accepted to New York City’s Performing Arts High School. In the Epilogue, Esmeralda, now a student at Harvard University, returns to Performing Arts and the room “where her life changed.”

About the Author

Personal: Esmeralda Santiago was born on May 17, 1948, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the first child of Pablo Santiago and his common-law wife, Ramona. Seven children were born of this union, and Ramona would eventually bear four other children. When Esmeralda was 13, she moved to New York with her mother and siblings. Esmeralda and her husband, filmmaker Frank Cantor, founded a media and film production company, CANTOMEDIA. They have two adult children, Lucas and Ila.

Education: Esmeralda attended elementary school in Puerto Rico and junior high school in New York. She was then accepted into New York City’s Performing Arts High School and majored in drama and dance. Upon completion of high school, Esmeralda studied part-time at various community colleges for eight years before receiving a full scholarship to Harvard University, where she graduated magna cum laude in 1976. She also earned an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Esmeralda volunteers as a spokesperson for public libraries and works to develop community-based programs for adolescents. She co-founded a shelter for battered women and their children and serves on various boards of organizations that promote the arts.

Career: Esmeralda has written and produced documentary and educational films. In addition, various newspapers and magazines have published her essays and opinion papers. Her first book, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, was published in 1993. Other works include two other memoirs,

Metaphors and Similes

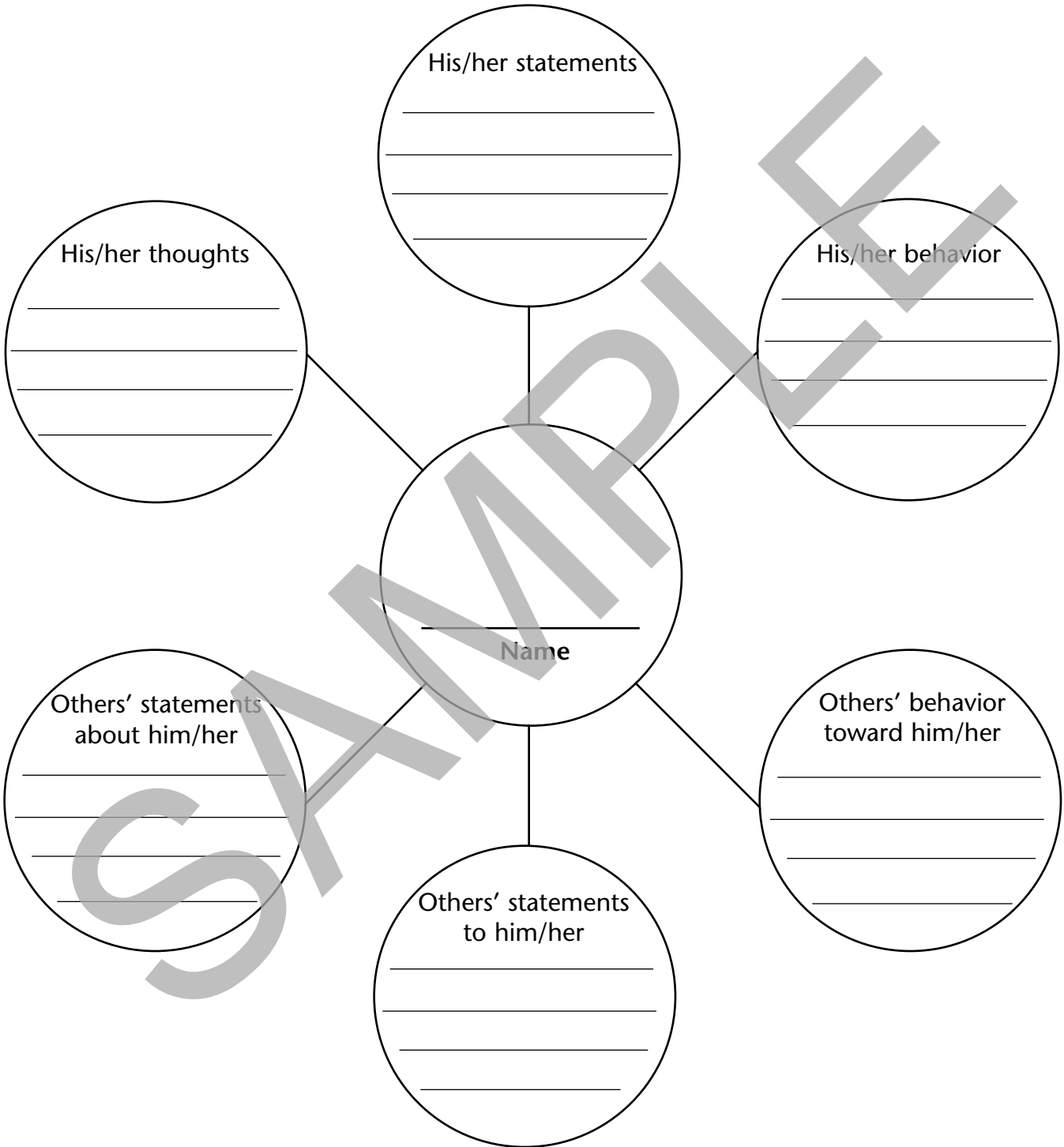
A **metaphor** is a comparison between two unlike objects. For example, "he was a human tree." A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike objects that uses the words *like* or *as*. For example, "the color of her eyes was like the cloudless sky."

Directions: Complete the chart below by listing metaphors and similes from the book, as well as the page numbers on which they are found. Identify metaphors with an "M" and similes with an "S." Translate the comparisons in your own words, and then list the objects being compared.

Metaphors/Similes	Ideas/Objects Being Compared
1. Translation:	
2. Translation:	
3. Translation:	

Character Web

Directions: Complete the attribute web below by filling in information specific to a character in the book.



Pages 3–33

Esmeralda (Negi) reflects on eating a guava in her native Puerto Rico and compares it to one in a grocery store in New York. This begins her narrative of growing up in Puerto Rico as the oldest child in an ever-expanding family. She starts school in the rural area of Macún. Tension builds between her father, Papi, and mother, Mami, primarily over his relationships with other women. Mami and the children leave for Santurce.

Vocabulary	
plantain (7)	
barrio (11)	
nationalism (12)	
husbandry (12)	
litany (29)	
transcended (29)	
injunctions (32)	

Discussion Questions

1. Examine the meaning of the introductory statement, “A ship that doesn’t sail, never reaches port” (p. 3). (This statement sets the stage for the entire book. In the prologue, Esmeralda Santiago lives in New York [the port] but reflects on life in Puerto Rico [her point of departure]. The statement refers, somewhat literally, to the journey she made from Puerto Rico to New York. The quote also figuratively refers to the journey through life that was necessary for her to “reach port,” i.e., mature and grow into a successful adult.)

2. Analyze the significance of the guava to Esmeralda. (The guava can be viewed as a metaphor for her experiences before and after leaving Puerto Rico. The ripe, delicious yellow guava of her memory

represents the richness of her cultural past in Puerto Rico. Even the green guavas she ate as a child bring pleasant memories. For the most part, her life as a child was simple and peaceful despite the conflict between her parents. She felt loved by a broad circle of relatives. The New York guava, not quite ripe and too firm, symbolizes her new life in New York. She is no longer a child, and yet, much like the guava, she is not fully mature. Also note that Esmeralda decides not to purchase the New York guava. To her, guavas represent another place and time that is irretrievable. For this reason, the experience of eating a guava must remain as intangible and distant as the memories of her childhood. pp. 3–4)

3. Discuss the meaning of *jíbara* (female) or *jíbaro* (male), and interpret the statement, “A *jíbaro* can never wash away the stain of the plantain” (p. 7). (A *jíbara* is a rural Puerto Rican with distinctive dialect and customs. Though translated the word means something along the lines of “salt of the earth,” since the end of the nineteenth century, the word has come to have a negative connotation, similar to “hillbilly.” The quote says that even though a *jíbaro* may move away from his rural setting, get an education, correct the dialect of his speech, and/or renounce his native customs, the *jíbaro* heritage will always remain a part of him. The usage of the word “stain” in the statement seems to suggest, as Esmeralda’s mother does, that being a *jíbaro/jíbara* is shameful.)

4. Discuss information about Esmeralda’s life in Macún. What does this reveal about her family’s financial status and about her relationship with her parents? (The family does not have a lot of money. Their house is built from metal sheets and sits on stilts [“a giant version of...lard cans,” p. 7], and its floor initially is made of odd-shaped, buckling wooden slats. The family lives on a dirt floor temporarily after Papi tears up the floor. A thicket with chickens, snakes, and insects surrounds their house and latrine. The children sleep in hammocks strung across the room. Esmeralda prefers helping Papi, who works as a handyman, to helping Mami in the kitchen. Although Mami is a firm disciplinarian, e.g., rapping her knuckles on the children’s heads and demanding complete obedience, she is also tender and protective, e.g., holding and comforting Esmeralda after termites attack her body. Whenever Esmeralda feels her mother is too harsh and her father too indifferent, she lashes out at Delsa because she cannot oppose her parents.)

Esmeralda's curiosity is piqued by the dirt floor, while Mami is fearful of it [scorpions and snakes could invade]. This incident is the first of many where Mami and Esmeralda have contradictory reactions to the same situation. pp. 7–16)

5. Explain why Esmeralda wants to be a *jíbara*, how Mami reacts to this, and the significance of her nickname. *(She loves the songs and poems that tell about the jíbaros' lives because, even though they face hardships, their lives are independent and contemplative. They feel close to nature, as does Esmeralda, and they are patriotic. Mami tells her she cannot be a jíbara because she was born in the city, where the people mock jíbaros for their customs and dialects. However, Esmeralda realizes her family lives like jíbaros, e.g., house, music. Mami's reaction reveals that she wants her children to rise above their jíbaro heritage. Esmeralda will eventually experience the negative side of being a jíbara [p. 39]. Her nickname is Negi, which means "little black one," because she was so dark when she was little. pp. 12–14)*
6. Discuss the ongoing conflict between Papi and Mami, and note the universality of its effect on the children. Explain the introductory statement, "He falls in love even with broomsticks" (p. 21), as it relates to Papi's infidelities. *(Papi is often indifferent to Mami, and she becomes insulting and demanding when they conflict. Their fights escalate the year Héctor is born. The children become fearful and anxious as they listen to their parents' venomous anger toward each other, and they tiptoe around them or play as far from them as possible. After a particularly vicious verbal exchange, Esmeralda begs her father not to leave, and she and the other children begin to cry. Mami's anger and hurt often cause her to withdraw emotionally from the children. Their parents' actions—fighting and then reconciling—leave the children confused. Esmeralda believes, after overhearing Mami's conversations with other women, that men are shameless persons who cause their women much suffering by their sinful behavior with prostitutes. The primary points of contention between Mami and Papi are his relationships with other women, which cause him to leave for days at a time. Mami believes he sleeps with other women anytime he gets the chance, i.e., falling in love even with broomsticks. Mami and the children finally leave because of his infidelities. pp. 21–25, 29–30, 32–33)*
7. Discuss the information about Provi and Margie. How does Esmeralda show her naïveté? Why does Papi turn to Esmeralda for comfort? *(At one time, Provi was Papi's lover, and they have a child, Margie. Although he vows to Mami that he no longer has any interest in Provi, he does want to see Margie. Esmeralda asks about the child after overhearing her parents talking about her. Esmeralda learns that Margie is a year older than she, but Margie has never met them because the two mothers do not get along. Esmeralda envisions Margie as someone much like Papi and dreams about Margie coming for a visit. Esmeralda naïvely asks Mami why she doesn't like Provi and learns quickly that Provi's name must never be mentioned in their house. Papi tells Esmeralda that Margie and her mother have moved to New York. He turns to Esmeralda for comfort because she empathizes with his loss. pp. 25–28)*
8. Examine the effect that school has on Esmeralda. Note her concept of dignity and the significance of the chapter title, "Fighting Naked." *(Esmeralda's view of the world broadens when she starts school and meets other adults and children. Her parents have taught her good manners, and reciprocal dignity guides her interactions with others and establishes what she expects from them. She understands her place as a child in an adult world and knows how to show respect for adults. Esmeralda loves the order of school and volunteers to help with the daily tasks. The good manners she displays outside her home contrast with the interaction within her home, e.g., yelling, entering rooms without permission, and interrupting others. As she compares her family with others, she realizes the vast differences between families, e.g., drunken fathers, bad mothers, criminal siblings, devoutly religious families, families with running water and electricity.*

In school, she learns that children beat up each other for minor offenses. She tries to follow Mami's orders not to fight at school but will defend herself when it is unavoidable; however, she strips to her underwear before doing so, i.e., "fighting naked," so she will not get her school uniform dirty. pp. 30–32)

9. **Prediction:** Will Mami and Papi's separation be permanent?

Supplementary Activities

1. Read *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum, and then write either (a) a paragraph that explains how this assessment correlates with Esmeralda's first school experience or (b) a poem that explains what she learns in school.
2. Write a journal entry explaining your interpretation of the introductory statements for each chapter. Continue this throughout the book.
3. Use the Metaphors and Similes chart on page 8 of this guide to write at least one simile and one metaphor from this section. Include an interpretation for each example. This is an ongoing assignment for each section and will include both metaphors and similes when applicable. Examples: **Similes**—"I stood still as a statue" (p. 27); "Papi disappeared into himself like a snail into a shell" (p. 29); see also p. 28; **Metaphor**—Mami: a garden (p. 8)

Pages 37–83

Esmeralda has trouble adjusting to school in Santurce because of her *jíbara* dialect. Papi visits the family often, and Mami has another child, Alicia. Her parents reconcile, and the family returns to Macún. Esmeralda learns about death when her best friend's grandfather dies. Another baby is born into the family. Esmeralda begins to learn English and American ways when people from the United States come to assist in the Americanization of the schools.

Discussion Questions

1. Read the introductory statement on page 37, and explain how it relates to Esmeralda's life in Santurce. Examine her reaction to being a "*jíbara*" in the school in Santurce. (*Esmeralda suddenly finds herself in a new city and school. This experience is quite different from her life in Macún, so in some ways, it is as though her old life has been erased and replaced with a new one. She has an extended family, and her house has running water, electricity, and a shared bathroom. She experiences the excitement of a big, family Christmas gathering and learns how pork sausage is made. She is no longer free to roam as she wishes because there are people in the city who might harm her. She envies the Catholic schoolchildren she sees on her way to school because of their neatness and the order of their lives. In Macún, she spoke the same*

dialect and observed the same customs as most everyone, but in Santurce, the children taunt her for being a "jíbara." Her dialect, wild actions, loud voice, and large gestures make it difficult for her to fit in with the other students and leave her feeling alienated. pp. 37–42)

Vocabulary

cachet (37)
 urchins (41)
 dissipated (48)
 phantasms (49)
 novenas (53)
 imperialist (71)
 tableau (74)
 repugnant (82)