

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**How the Garcia Girls
Lost Their Accents**

by Julia Alvarez

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Notes

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents is Julia Alvarez's first and best-known novel. It is the story of four sisters, who, with their family, must flee the Dominican Republic to make a new home for themselves in New York City. The sisters must adjust to a new culture, lifestyle, and language.

This episodic novel progresses backwards in time with multiple shifts in point of view, flipping between the lives the girls had in the Dominican Republic and their lives in America.

Teachers should be aware that the book contains a few instances of overt sexual behavior, profanity, and infrequent racial slurs. In addition, one short section of the book deals with the use of marijuana.

All references come from the Plume edition of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, copyright 1991.

Brief Biography of Julia Alvarez

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950. Shortly after her birth, the family returned to their home in the Dominican Republic, where they remained until she was ten years old. Her father, a doctor who was active in the underground, worked against the dictator, General Rafael Trujillo. In 1960, the family was forced to flee their homeland to once again live in New York City.

There are four daughters in the Alvarez family. Julia is the second oldest. In New York, she attended a private boarding school for girls, where she fell in love with books and began to write. Alvarez was graduated from Middlebury College in 1971 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. In 1975, she obtained a Masters degree in fine arts from the Syracuse University.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents won the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award, and her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, was nominated for the 1995 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Brief History of General Rafael Trujillo's Dictatorship

General Rafael Trujillo (1891 - 1961) was the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Under his rule, the Dominican Republic was a police state. General Trujillo controlled the army, amassed great wealth for himself, kept the citizens of the country in poverty, and greatly restricted the civil rights of the Dominican people.

The Dominican Republic is one-half of the island of Hispaniola; the other half belongs to Haiti.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define vocabulary words from the story.
2. interpret Spanish words and phrases from their context in the story.
3. recognize when the point of view changes in this story and discuss how this sometimes abrupt change to a different perspective helps to add realism and believability to the characters.
4. discuss the quality of life the García girls are accustomed to before they immigrate to the United States; point out the ways their everyday lives change in the U.S.
5. write a character sketch of Papi describing the “old country” values he wants to instill in his daughters.
6. discuss the ways American values conflict with the “old country” values; cite incidents from the story showing how this conflict manifests itself in the adult lives of each of the four daughters.
7. cite incidents to support the following theme in this story: immigrant children, who have roots in two different cultures, often experience difficulties establishing their identities.
8. cite incidents from the lives of the daughters that illustrate the point that in this coming-of-age story, each girl has an experience that bridges the threshold from childhood to adolescence.
9. discuss the structure of the novel and the extent to which this structure reinforces the theme that immigrant children have difficulties establishing identities. Be sure to consider:
 - the episodic format
 - the story’s progression backwards through time
 - the frequent switch of settings.
10. discuss what each of the following might represent in the story: the figure on the bank, the cat, the Palmolive sign, the Barbie dolls, the raven, the puzzle of the human body, the face on the statue, snow, and the makes of cars.
11. write a character sketch of Laura discussing what her “special” stories reveal about each of her daughters.
12. comment on the significance of Yolanda’s many nicknames.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. This story progresses backwards through time. Create a time line for each of the four daughters listing the major incidents in their lives.

BOOK I 1980 – 1972 BOOK II 1970 – 1960 BOOK III 1960 – 1956

Carla
Yolanda
Sandi
Fifi

2. Why does the family immigrate to the United States? For what reasons does Papi decide not to return to the Dominican Republic?
3. List three “old country” values Papi wants to instill in his daughters.
4. Why does Mami often say “Good bulls sire cows”?
5. Family cohesion is an important theme of this story. How do each of the following incidents help to strengthen the García family unit?
 - Papi’s birthday party
 - Mami’s “special” stories about each daughter
 - Fifi’s sisters successfully break up her romance with Manuel
6. Why does Mami wear rainbow colors? In what sense does Mami try to help her daughters straddle the demands of both cultures?
7. Briefly summarize the circumstances in the story surrounding each of the following items. What might they each represent?
 - the Palmolive soap sign
 - the raven
 - the makes of American cars
 - the Barbie dolls
 - snow
 - the monkey hands
8. What are Yolanda’s “antojos”?
9. Cite three incidents from Yolanda’s life that support the theme that immigrant children with roots in two different cultures often have difficulties establishing their identities.

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents

BOOK I
1989 - 1972

Chapter One – Antojos
Yolanda

VOCABULARY

antojo – whim, craving
barrio – a district or suburb of a city; in the U.S., a quarter inhabited by Chicanos
Bienvenida a ti – greetings to you, welcome to you
bougainvillea – woody tropical vines
cafecitos – small cups of coffee
camioneta – van, bus
cantina – a saloon
cede – to give up rights
collusion – a secret agreement
comprende – understand
dominicana – a person from the Dominican Republic
doña – lady
dubious – doubtful
facsimile – copy
guava – a type of fruit
Guayabas – guavas
guerrillas – a small army of soldiers who make surprise raids
machetes – a large knife used for cutting sugar cane or underbrush
mangoes – sweet yellow fruit
mi amor – my love
novena – the recitation of prayers for nine days to seek some special favor
nuestro placer – our pleasure
phalanx – a closely massed group of individuals
por dios – for God
proprietary – like an owner or boss
refresco – a refreshment
santo – a saint
tamarind – a tree with brown pods that are used in foods
Tía – aunt
verandah – an open porch

**Chapter 3 – The Four Girls
Carla, Yolanda, Sandra, Sofía**

VOCABULARY

anal retentive – a disorder characterized by compulsive attention to tiny details
generic – referring to all members of a class or group
prophetic – predicts or foreshadows
providential – decreed by providence; guided by God or nature
psychotic – a severe mental disorder in which the person loses contact with reality
rhetorical – characterized by words, not action
schizophrenic – severe mental disorder
sestina – a verse with six, six-line stanzas

1. How do the four girls feel about the “favorite” story the mother tells about each of the girls?

2. List three clichés from this chapter.

3. What does the story of the red sneakers reveal to the reader about Carla’s, Papi’s and Mami’s personalities?

4. What is the mother’s secret wish for Yolanda?

Chapter 4 – Snow
Yolanda

NO VOCABULARY

1. Why does Yolanda mistake snow for a bomb?

2. Find a sentence in this chapter that illustrates why Sister Zoe is special to Yolanda.

3. Find a simile in this chapter.
