Bad Influence Study Guide

Bad Influence by Judith Ortiz Cofer

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Introduction

Published in *Stories of the Barrio: An island Like You* in 1995, "Bad Influence" details a summer in the life of a young Puerto Rican girl from Paterson, New Jersey. In keeping with the other stories in the collection, "Bad Influence" speaks to topics specific to young Puerto Rican Americans, while addressing issues universal to young people. At fifteen, Rita, the narrator, is at odds with the world of her Puerto Rican grandparents, whose eccentric, old-fashioned ways strike her as ridiculous. A typical teenager, she is hypercritical of the adults around her, and finds them invasive and disrespectful of her boundaries. Rita has been sent to the island to stay with her grandparents to keep her out of trouble with boys. Initially she is brutally caustic and critical of everything from her grandmother's telenovelas to her grandfather's spiritual powers (which she satirizes as Ghostbusting). Her take on Papá's approach to curing a family of an evil spirit (or *mala influencia*) is both hilarious and believable. Over time, however, Rita makes a new friend and comes to appreciate her grandparents and life on the island. In the course of the summer, Rita manages to assert her individuality while incorporating her heritage, in her effort to navigate both the American and the Puerto Rican in herself.

Author Biography

Judith Ortiz Cofer describes herself as the product of two worlds, urban America and the island of Puerto Rico, and her work is a reflection of this cross-culturalism. Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, in 1952, Ortiz Cofer spent her early years on the island in the company of her mother, grandmother, and aunt while her father served in the U.S. Navy. Before long, however, her father's military career took the family to Paterson, New Jersey, beginning the family's pattern of moving back and forth between the mainland and Puerto Rico. Ortiz Cofer's parents, J. M. and Fanny, had strikingly different feelings about American life, and this disparity resulted in a feeling of conflict in their daughter. While Ortiz Cofer's father was quiet, serious, and imperative that the family assimilate, her mother was flamboyant and warm, never comfortable in New Jersey. Cofer's mother so longed for her homeland that she refused to learn English and relied largely upon her daughter to communicate outside of Spanish. In her collection of essays, *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer reports she became a "cultural chameleon, developing early the ability to blend into a crowd, to sit and read quietly in a fifth story apartment for days and days . . . or, set free, to run wild in Mamá's realm." She writes, "I instinctively understood then that language is the only weapon a child has against the absolute power of adults. . . . I quickly built up my arsenal of words by becoming an insatiable reader of books."

Ortiz Cofer spent her last two years of high school in Augusta, Georgia, where her family had moved for a more tranquil lifestyle. She won a scholarship to Augusta College, and earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1971 and a master of arts in English from Florida Atlantic University in 1977. Although she worked as a bilingual teacher for many years, she began to write poetry seriously as a graduate student. In 1989 she published a novel, *The Line of the Sun*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In 1990 she published *Silent Dancing*, an essay collection about her Puerto Rican childhood, and another essay collection, *The Latin Deli*, in 1993. In 1995 she published *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*, a collection of short fiction for young adults focused on Puerto Rican expatriate teenagers. Besides her work as lecturer and teacher at numerous schools and universities, Ortiz Cofer has contributed widely to poetry, fiction, and non- fiction anthologies, always tapping into her experiences as a bilingual and bicultural woman. In 1998, she published *The Year of Our Revolution: New and Selected Short Stories and Poems*.

Plot Summary

Rita arrives in hot, humid Puerto Rico from Paterson, New Jersey with a bad attitude. She has been sent to spend the summer with her grandparents as an alternative to a retreat at a convent, where her friend Meli has been sent. Her parents want her out of contact with her racy boyfriend, Johnny Ruiz, and the result is her exile to the island.

Rita has never spent more than two weeks at a time on the island and she has no desire to get better acquainted with it now. She finds her grandparents and their friends annoyingly gregarious and overwhelming; when she tries to calm herself in the car by practicing deep breathing, her grandmother assumes she's having an asthma attack and harangues her with asthma stories. What Rita really wants is to be left alone.

As soon as the family gets back from the airport, Rita goes to her room to nap and withdraw. When she wakes up, her grandfather is outside her window crooning to his distressed rooster. He tells her (accurately) what she has been dreaming, and reports that the rooster has a skewed sense of time. This is Rita's introduction to her grandfather's talents as a spiritualist. Exasperated, Rita gets up and watches telenovelas with her grandmother, ever critical of Mamá Ana's ongoing dialogue with the television characters. Later that evening, Mamá reports that the next day they plan to travel to the seashore, so Papá can cure a young girl in distress. She explains Papá Juan's powers "that allowed him to see into people's hearts and minds through prayers and in dreams." Rita is skeptical.

The next morning Rita's grandparents awaken her before sunrise. At first Rita fakes an asthma attack so she can stay home alone, but Mamá Ana's dramatic response meets with a miraculous recovery. The three of them head for the beachfront home of the family in need of Papá Juan's help. Having slept in the car on the way, Rita cannot help but enjoy herself on the beach with her grandmother while Papá Juan consults with the señora and Angela in their elaborate, pink house. In the course of the day, Rita learns that the young girl in question refuses to eat or communicate with her mother, and the suspected cause is Rita's mother's boyfriend, the source of the *mala influencia* in the house. Rita is recruited to invite Angela to eat crab on the beach with them, and during the meal Mamá Ana announces that Rita will be having her fifteenth birthday party in two weeks, and Angela must come.

Rita's party is a huge gathering of neighbors, food, and music, and she gets to wear a blue satin cocktail dress with high heels. Angela and her mother come, and Angela reports that Papá Juan's cure was a success; her mother got rid of her boyfriend and Angela looks much healthier. From then on Rita's summer is greatly improved. She spends a good deal of time with Angela at her home by the beach, and they discuss Rita's story about Johnny, joking that he might be suffering from a *mala influencia* himself. Over time Rita feels disassociated from her experience with Johnny, and it seems like a movie she has seen years ago.

By the time her family arrives in August, Rita feels integrated enough into life on the island to take lessons in perceptiveness from her grandfather, and calls herself a medium. Although at first she plays on her mother's guilty anxiety and holds back from her, she soon warms up and assures her that the summer has gone well. Her mother reports that Meli enjoyed her convent experience so much that she plans to attend parochial school in the fall. Instead of being stricken by the news, Rita laughs, and as Mamá Ana reports on the summer to her mother, Rita fantasizes about how she and Meli can get together to move in on the cute boys at the Catholic school.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Rita, the narrator of this story, is an "almost" fifteen-year-old girl with attitude. When she and her best friend Meli lie to their parents and get caught spending the night with two boys, Rita's parents give her a choice of punishments. She can either spend the summer with her grandparents in Puerto Rico or she can go on a convent retreat for Catholic girls. Rita chooses to go to Puerto Rico, though she really wishes she could stay in her hometown of Paterson, New Jersey.

Normally, Rita sees her grandparents once a year and spends most of her time in Puerto Rico on the beach with her cousins. This time, however, none of her cousins are on vacation at the same time. When Rita arrives in hot and humid Puerto Rico, she is greeted by her grandparents, Papa Juan and Mama Ana, and about a dozen other neighbors and friends. They all jostle to help her with her bags and a caravan of cars returns to Rita's grandparents' home. The ride is so hot and crowded that Rita decides to practice Zen calming methods, and her grandmother mistakes her deep breaths for asthma.

At Ana and Juan's house, Rita tries to take a nap but is repeatedly interrupted by Ramon, the family rooster that has no sense of time, and the noise of the people in the neighborhood. Though she's annoyed, she's able to sleep briefly and she dreams of Johnny Ruiz, the boy with whom she got caught staying overnight. After her nap, she goes into the living room where her grandmother gives her tea "for her asthma." Mama Ana settles down to watch her telenovela (soap opera) and Rita feels so misplaced that she considers calling her mother and going on the convent retreat instead. She realizes, however, that her grandparents don't have a phone. The closest one is at a neighbor's house.

Rita goes to bed early. Before she falls asleep, she thinks about Johnny and her friend Meli. She doesn't think her parents understand dating, because they would like her to end up with a boy from a family with whom they are familiar. Though she never slept with Johnny, Rita thinks about it, because it would be cool to date a basketball player, and Johnny usually dates older girls and expects them to have sex. Rita's thoughts are interrupted when Mama Ana comes in to say goodnight and tell her they will be waking up early to accompany Papa Juan to a job by the beach. Juan is a "medium" or "spiritist" who can see into people's hearts in order to help them with spiritual problems. Tomorrow, they are scheduled to meet with a girl who has stopped eating and refuses to talk to her mother. Ana also tells Rita that when she was a young girl, she had wanted to be a dancer, but she met Juan and got married when she was fifteen and began having babies instead. Rita falls asleep thinking about Johnny.

Rita's grandparents wake her up at four in the morning. Rita tries to use her assumed asthma as an excuse to stay in bed. Ana offers to stay with her and plans to call the

comadre (Spanish for godmother) over to make some strong tea. This option is no better than the first, so Rita says she is feeling better.

They drive to the girl's house, and on the way, Rita falls asleep. She wakes up to find the car parked at a house on the beach: a large house painted pink and white. Outside, the ocean looks beautiful. Mama Ana is on the beach in the water, catching crabs, and she calls Rita over to see what she's caught. She offers Rita some café con leche. Though Rita usually hates it because it's too sweet, she takes some and is surprised to find that she enjoys it.

Papa Juan is having a session with the troubled girl and her mother. The sixteen-year-old girl, Angela, is so skinny that Mama Ana thinks she has "packed her bags for the other world." Mama Ana blames the girl's problems on a man living in the house, a "mala influencia" (Spanish for bad influence). Ana and Juan could feel the bad influence in the house. Angela's mother also seems to have some problems. Papa Juan will interview each person then decide which spirits need to be called on for help. If a bad spirit rests over the house, the job will be to decide what it wants or needs.

After helping Ana pull in the crab traps, Rita goes for a walk down the beach. She collects shells and sees some dolphins. She wonders how the girl in the pink house could be sad in an environment as beautiful as this beach. When she's done walking, she eats lunch and falls asleep. She wakes to Juan's voice. She pretends to sleep so she can eavesdrop. Juan verifies that the man is the agent for the evil spirit. Angela shows evidence of physical abuse and she seems frightened.

Juan drops into something like a trance then wakes up and writes in his notebook. He plans to tell the woman to kick the man out of the house, prepare some herbs that will cleanse the home, and give the girl tea and instructions to help her mother. Juan and Ana decide to send Rita to invite the girl, Angela, to dinner, so they wake her. Rita goes to the house and Angela's mother, an actress for toothpaste commercials, answers. Rita invites Angela to dinner, but her mother doesn't think she will come. However, Angela emerges from her room, grabs Rita's hand and takes her outside.

Angela speaks to Rita in English, which she learned by spending time with her stepfather, an American, in New York. At the crab feast on the beach, Rita eats a lot, but Angela only picks at the food and Ana encourages her to eat more. Before Angela returns to the house, Ana invites her to Rita's fifteenth birthday party, and Angela accepts.

The next two weeks pass uneventfully. Rita gets a blue satin cocktail dress for her birthday. Ana plans a big party with friends and neighbors.

The day of the party arrives and the house is prepared with food, Japanese lanterns and a record player for salsa music. Many people come to the party, including Angela and her mother, who arrive in a white limousine. In addition to looking healthier, Angela tells Rita that her mother kicked the bad influence out of the house.

The party is a success; everyone has a great time. Rita's attitude toward her grandparents softens and she sees them as a pair of kind, fun loving people who are well respected in the community.

For the rest of her trip, Rita spends a lot of time at the pink house. She and Angela become great friends and make plans for Angela to visit Rita in New Jersey. When Rita tells Angela about Johnny Ruiz, they decide he might be a mala influencia, too. In return, Angela tells about her father who had left when she was five, her stepfather who had died in a plane crash, and the worst of all, the man with the bad spirit Juan had chased away. Rita realizes that Angela and her mother believe that Juan has special powers, too.

In early August, Rita's family arrives in Puerto Rico, and another caravan greets them. Rita's mother isn't sure how to treat her daughter, perhaps not believing Ana's letters that said Rita was enjoying her summer and not having any asthma attacks. To dispel her mother's fears, Rita hugs her mom and asks Meli. Meli had gone on the Catholic girl's retreat and enjoyed it so much that she was planning on switching schools.

Instead of being disappointed, Rita laughs because both she and Meli had actually enjoyed the punishments their parents had come up with. Rita even started taking medium lessons and had learned how to tell when a person is troubled.

The story ends as Rita settles into the car ride and starts to think how she can meet up with Meli to scope out the cute basketball players at St. Mary's.

Analysis

Author Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in Puerto Rico, but moved with her family at the age of two to Paterson, New Jersey. *Bad Influence* is the first story in a collection of short stories about teenagers in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. The stories are written about teens for teens, and Cofer is a renowned Puerto Rican writer. Though *Bad Influence* is a fictional short story, the similarities between Rita and Cofer suggest the story contains autobiographical elements. Cofer spent much of her life between two different cultures: Puerto Rico and the United States. Likewise, in *Bad Influence*, Rita is coming to terms with her Puerto Rican heritage. Cofer incorporates many aspects of Puerto Rican culture into the story. She portrays a community that greets neighbors' family members at the airport and accepts any excuse for a party. She also includes aspects of Puerto Rican spirituality, cuisine, music, and tradition.

Perhaps Rita can be seen as a symbol of Puerto Rican culture as a whole. Puerto Rico, a commonwealth of the United States, is known as a unique blending of American influence and Spanish Caribbean culture. Puerto Ricans are proud of their differences from the United States, and their unique mix of Spanish, African, and Taino cultures makes their small island a wealth of interesting traditions, beliefs, and practices.

When Rita arrives in Puerto Rico, she is critical of everything Puerto Rican from the friendly neighbors to her grandfather's "ghost-busting." She wishes she were in New

Jersey. Though her roots are in Puerto Rico, Rita seems very attached to her American life. She arrives thinking about Johnny Ruiz, though her description of her love interest lets readers know that he is not a very nice boy and that his interest in her is motivated by his hope that she will sleep with him.

Rita's first few encounters with Puerto Ricans result in critical and sarcastic reactions. She sees her grandparents' and their neighbors' friendliness as an invasion of her privacy. She sees her grandfather's spiritual counseling as crazy voodoo or ghost busting. To her, Ramon the rooster is an annoyance and Mama Ana is a silly busybody.

Toward the middle of the story, Rita's attitude begins to change. The transition becomes apparent on the beach in front of Angela's house. Rita can't help but notice the beauty on the beach and she abandons her bad attitude for a while. As she looks around her, Rita thinks, "How could that girl in the pink house be so unhappy when she could wake up to this every morning?"

Her appreciation for her surroundings grows as she spots dolphins in the ocean and eats crabs on the beach with her grandparents and Angela. Her open-mindedness extends to the people and culture of Puerto Rico as she makes friends with Angela, enjoys a birthday party in her honor, and even grows to appreciate Papa Juan's spiritual gifts.

It's important to note the choice of first person point of view. A good short story brings about a change, however subtle, in the main character. Rita does not act on her sarcasm or criticism, so her change is mostly internal. Readers must hear Rita's thoughts and attitudes in order to see the change. Cofer shows readers a change in Rita's character by giving insight into her thoughts. Throughout the story, she has fewer sarcastic thoughts and readers see a gradual but sincere acceptance of (and affection for) her grandparents' quirks and the unique culture of Puerto Rico. Consequently, Rita's change is subtle, but believable.

At the end of the story, Rita has grown to appreciate her grandparents and the culture of Puerto Rico. She has even started taking medium lessons to develop her own spirituality. Rita has successfully incorporated aspects of Puerto Rican culture into her own life. However, the last line of the story shows that Rita is still a boy-crazy American girl who is excited about the new school year and getting back together with her friends. She's still a sassy teenager with attitude, but she has added layers to her identity and shown some maturation during her summer in Puerto Rico.

Characters

Mamá Ana

Mamá Ana is Rita's excitable, gregarious grandmother, with whom she spends the summer. Warm, short, and plump, with a passion for soap operas, Rita finds her attention suffocating. When Rita tries some deep breathing exercises, Mamá Ana interprets them as asthmatic wheezing and clucks over Rita's "condition" throughout the story. Initially Rita finds her grandmother smothering and invasive, but over time she comes to see her as having a way with people and "this talent for turning every day into a sort of party."

Maribel Hernández Jones

Maribel Hernández Jones is Angela's glamorous mother, a famous actress in toothpaste advertisements. She is wealthy from a previous marriage and lives in a pink house that Rita finds ridiculous, but she cares for her daughter enough to take her condition seriously. She calls in Papá Juan to cure Angela, and heeds his advice in cleansing her house of evil spirits and getting rid of her boyfriend.

Angela Hernandez

Angela is the anorexic girl whom Papá Juan is called to cure. She has stopped eating and communicating with her mother because of her mother's abusive boyfriend and his reported "bad influence." At Mamá's and Papá's prompting, the boyfriend is removed from the house, and as a result Angela's health improves. Because she has spent time in New York, Angela speaks English and shares with Rita a certain cross-cultural sophistication. She and Rita develop a friendship that helps make Rita feel connected on the island.

Meli

Meli is Rita's friend from home who gets sent to the convent for the summer. Rita and Meli got caught earlier trying to spend the night at Meli's boyfriend's house, which results in their grounding. Apparently she likes the retreat at the convent, because she plans to attend Catholic school in the fall.

Joey Molieri

Joey Molieri is Meli's boyfriend and Johnny's cohort in trying to seduce Rita and Meli. When Rita and Meli compare notes on the lines the boys used on them, they are identical.

Papá Juan

Papá Juan is Rita's eccentric, spiritualist grandfather. He is reportedly endowed with special gifts that give him insight into people's hearts. When Rita first arrives on the island she thinks her grandfather is senile because he comforts his emotional rooster and reports the contents of Rita's dreams. Although at first she satirizes Papá Juan's work by calling it Ghostbusting, she comes to recognize that he is an intuitive, perceptive man, and eventually even learns skills from him. His attempt to cure Angela and her mother of their "bad influence" sparks Rita's curiosity and draws her into life on the Island.

Rita

Rita is the sarcastic, fifteen-year-old narrator of "Bad Influence." When her story begins, she has been sent from her home in Paterson, New Jersey, to spend the summer with her grandparents in Puerto Rico. The visit is an alternative to a summer in a convent, and intended to keep her away from her boyfriend, Johnny Ruiz. Rita is furious as a result, and much of the story is her sarcastic, adolescent running commentary on her experience in Puerto Rico. Initially she makes every attempt to withdraw from her grandparents and life on the island, and describes their world through critical, and often hilarious, teenage eyes. Over the course of time, however, her interpretations soften as she makes a new friend and becomes engaged in the lives of her family and the ways of her homeland.

Rita's Mother

Rita's mother is responsible for sending her to the island for the summer and impeding her relationship with her boyfriend, so Rita resents her a good deal at the beginning of the story. When her mother joins her on the island later in the summer, she appears nervous, anticipating more of Rita's anger, but Rita has mellowed and they connect warmly.

Johnny Ruiz

Johnny Ruiz is Rita's boyfriend, and the cause for her summer's exile to the island. Rita says he can date any girl he likes, and he usually dates older girls and expects to have sex with them. Rita is caught trying to spend the night with Johnny, and after she is grounded he tells her that although he thinks her family is crazy, he will give her another chance in the fall. Rita's summer in Puerto Rico wears away some of Johnny's attractiveness, and by the end of the story she and Angela characterize him as a troubled young man.

Themes

Fantasy vs. Reality

Rita comes to the island with what she sees as a realist perspective. Her smart-aleck, know-it-all attitude is authoritatively adolescent and grounded in her American upbringing, as evidenced upon her arrival when she reports, "My friends from Central High would have died laughing if they had seen the women with their fans going back and forth across their shiny faces fighting over . . . who was going to sit next to whom." She makes light of her grandparents' spiritual work by calling it Ghostbusting and asserts that her grandfather must be senile because he comforts his troubled rooster. However, as she is drawn into the scenario between Angela, her mother, and her mother's boyfriend, Rita is affected by her grandparents' wisdom and acumen in determining the source of strife in the family. Papá eventually teaches Rita some of his skills of perception, and she comes to call herself a medium. By the end of the story, Rita has assimilated the seemingly mystical in her grandparents' culture into her own version of reality.

Bad and Good Influence

Mala influencia initially refers to the evil spirit that Papá banishes from Angela's house, but the term applies to Rita's summer in several different ways. Rita has clearly been sent to her grandparents in hopes they will be a good influence over her, since her parents think she is on the verge of getting into trouble with boys. Rita and Angela are good influences on each other; in the course of their summer together Angela moves toward wellness and Rita adapts comfortably to island life. Rita and Angela joke about Rita's boyfriend Johnny Ruiz, who was seen by Rita's parents as having a bad influence over her. They agree that he sounds like a troubled young man, and joke that perhaps he is himself under a *mala influencia*.

Individual vs. Community

Rita arrives in Puerto Rico from New Jersey sporting an individualist attitude; she sees herself as separate and isolated. She tries to get away from her family and feels suffocated by the way her grandparents push themselves into her bedroom and into her life. They touch her too much and she feels suffocated by so much close contact. She tells an anecdote about trying to make a phone call while the neighbors listen and interpret; her mother explains that Puerto Ricans have different ideas of privacy from Americans, and Rita's desire for more space is a very American quality. Over time Rita becomes accustomed to the island lifestyle, and although she and Angela are allowed to withdraw from others and assert their identities this way, eventually she becomes more willing to join the community.

Drama and Hyperbole

On the day Rita arrives on the island, Mamá Ana watches telenovelas and Rita rolls her eyes at her grandmother's dramatic relationship to the Puerto Rican equivalent of soap operas. She takes a critical view of the exaggerated, typically Latino reactions to events around her such as Mamá Ana's shrieks and wails at Rita's feigned asthma. As she depicts the conversations around her, the drama inherent in Latin American culture is apparent in the rapid speech patterns and exclamations that pepper the text. Ironically, Rita's brand of adolescent cynicism bears a similarly overblown quality, as when she characterizes her grandmother, at work trapping crabs, as a murderess. Thus she is inextricably part of a culture that strikes her as foreign.

Style

Point of View

"Bad Influence" is a narration of Rita's summer according to her point of view, the account of which shifts over time. At the opening, Rita's narrative is intensely critical, sarcastic, and very funny. She is a classically exasperated, smart aleck teenager with typically hyperbolic, derogatory opinions about her elders. Everything about Puerto Rico is insufferable in her eyes until she spends a beautiful morning at the beach with her grandmother, while Papá Juan attends to Angela and her mother. Once she makes friends with Angela and celebrates her fifteenth birthday with a huge fiesta, her perspective gradually shifts and softens; Rita acclimates to life on the island and begins to enjoy herself, rather than enduring it. Although she by no means drops her sarcastic, know-it-all tone, even her criticisms have a lighter, kinder tone. For example, at the opening of the story she calls her grandfather's car a tiny subcompact, while by the end of the story, when she joins her grandparents in picking up the rest of her family at the airport, she calls it his toy car. Rita's perspective is softened and expanded over the course of the summer to incorporate the Puerto Rican into herself.

Setting

The setting of "Bad Influence" is the core of the story; in essence, Rita's summer is about a sense of place and her identification with location. Although Rita's heritage is Puerto Rican, at age fifteen she identifies strongly with her home, school, and friend in Paterson, New Jersey. As a result, although she has spent two weeks of every year in Puerto Rico on vacation, she predicts her summer there will be, in a word, strange. Her emphasis on this word indicates not only the oddness of the events during the summer, but the fact that she finds the island foreign and apart from herself. Physically Rita finds the place repellent, overly hot, and humid: "it was like I had opened an oven door." Physical climate operates as a metaphor for personal climate in that, like the weather, people in Puerto Rico are intimate, sweaty, hot-tempered, excitable, and very physical.

In Puerto Rico, Rita is forced to deal with a culture that she finds not only foreign in its intimacy but, in her eyes, antiquated and mystical. In keeping with stereotypes of Latin Americans, her grandparents are Catholics who have holy water and an altar in their home, and believe that her grandfather has spiritual powers. Rita is forced to endure a lifestyle that includes rising before dawn and interacting with community members of all ages, rather than a world comprised solely of her peers. By the end of the summer, Rita has taken lessons in mysticism from her grandfather and adapted to life on the island by establishing a friendship with Angela and visiting the beach on a regular basis. In so doing, she incorporates parts of old-world Puerto Rico into her contemporary American self.

Symbolism

Most of the symbolism in "Bad Influence" concerns the disparity between life on the island and life in the United States. When Mamá Ana and Papá Juan pick Rita up at the airport, they have to squeeze into what Rita calls her grandfather's subcompact car. Rita focuses on the tiny, old car as a measure of status, sizing it up by American standards. Similarly, household conveniences like air conditioning are notably absent from Rita's grandparents' home, much to her chagrin. She brings up the absence of A.C. numerous times, so it stands out when she attributes the real and metaphoric chill in Angela's house to the fact that these wealthy people might have air conditioning. Although access to A.C. indicates wealth and status, it is meaningful that Angela's house, in which she and her mother are estranged, is cool inside, while Mamá and Papá's lively, comfortable house is overly warm. Rita complains throughout the story of uncomfortable heat, an apt metaphor for personal feelings; her grandparents themselves are too warm, too close, and in fact suffocating to her when she first arrives on the island. Over time she does acclimate both physically and personally to the temperature and to the climate, or copes with the discomfort by going to the beach and finding relief in her peer, Angela.

Rita herself operates as a symbol in as far as she is a synthesis of two worlds, the American and the Puerto Rican. It is no accident that on the afternoon of her arrival Papá Juan sees into her dream while comforting his confused rooster, Ramon. Ramon has a skewed sense of time and thinks day is night and night is day. Like Ramon, Rita is out of balance in her new setting, and although she believes she has a clear view of the world around her, she sees through a skewed lens of her own, which is that of an American teenager, and not necessarily reliable. Her view of life on the island is impacted by the fact that she is somewhat of an outsider, and in her own words, Spanish is "not my best language." At the end of the story, having been a catalyst for Angela's healing and to a degree her own, Rita has a more balanced view of life, both in New Jersey and in Puerto Rico. She makes a claim to be a mind-reader herself, and although this is in keeping with her adolescent omniscience, she has a better developed sense of perception by the end of the summer.

Historical Context

Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States in 1898 by the Treaty of Paris as a result of the Spanish- American War. U.S. citizenship was granted to Puerto Ricans in 1917, and during World War II it became an important U.S. military base. On June 4, 1951, Puerto Ricans voted in approval of a law which allowed them to draft their own constitution, and on July 25 of the following year Puerto Rico was declared a Commonwealth of the United States. As a result, Puerto Ricans share most rights of other U.S. citizens, although they are not allowed to vote and for the most part do not pay taxes. Although several elections have been held since 1952 to reinstate Puerto Rico's commonwealth status, not all citizens are in agreement over it; over the years different factions have advocated independence for the island, sometimes resorting to violence. Since 1968, governmental bodies in Puerto Rico have vacillated over maintaining commonwealth status, achieving statehood, or advocating independence. In 1993, 43 percent of citizens voted to retain commonwealth status, 46 percent advocated pursuing statehood, and 4 percent chose independence.

Since World War II, when Puerto Ricans were drawn into the U.S. armed forces, migration between the Island and the U.S. mainland has been consistent. Ruth Gruber, in *Puerto Rico, Island of Promise*, writes, "New York has the same pull to Puerto Ricans that it had to the America-bound immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their relatives are in New York; there is security in family." Before 1948, 95 percent of Puerto Rican immigrants to the mainland moved to New York. That statistic has diminished over time, but New York is still the traditional destination for Puerto Rican expatriates. Although Puerto Ricans leave the Island for a variety of reasons, most go in search of work, which is scarce at home, and a higher standard of living. Unlike other immigrants, who often come to the U.S. fleeing persecution or oppressive governments, Puerto Ricans tend to have tremendous national pride. The island of Puerto Rico, however, is too small and has too few natural resources to hold its people. The birth rate continues to soar, and population density is higher per square mile than any state aside from New Jersey and Rhode Island. As a result, unemployment and the resulting poverty is always an issue in Puerto Rico. Many Puerto Ricans, like Ortiz Cofer's family, move back and forth between the Island and the mainland because it can be done with relative ease, and because of the conflicting reception on the mainland. The rapid and voluminous influx of Puerto Ricans into New York in particular has resulted, as with any minority group, in slums, gangs, and a great deal of racial prejudice toward Puerto Ricans. Mainland Americans have tended to forget that Puerto Ricans are American citizens, and Puerto Ricans have historically been treated with the same disregard and exploitation as illegal immigrants. Over the last two decades, however, Puerto Ricans as a community have assimilated at a high rate and much of the community has moved into suburbs such as Paterson, New Jersey, as in Ortiz Cofer's stories.

Literary Heritage

The literary heritage of Puerto Rico is indebted to its history as an intersection of pre-Hispanic Indian settlement, Spanish colonialism, importation of Africans in the slave trade, and, most recently, American imperialism. The oral history of the Indians and Africans from throughout the Caribbean predate the arrival of the Spanish in 1493. The encounter between the Spanish conquistadors and the Taínos who inhabited the island during the 1500s gave rise to a wave of letters, annals, and poems in Spanish, reporting on the newly discovered place and people. Spanish became the primary language of Puerto Rico, but was enriched and expanded by the Indian vocabulary, which, according to Arturo Morales Carrión in *Puerto Rico, A Political and Cultural History,* "give[s] the Spanish language of the conquistadores a touch of Indian color and a new vision of man and life in a setting unknown to the European before the discovery of America." He continues, "The vocabulary of Taíno origin gives a special flavor and color to the Spanish language by recalling the prehistory of the Caribbean," which persists today in both geographical names and everyday language. "The oral literature of the island offers glimpses of pre-Colombian Indian poetry in anecdotes, proverbs and legends." The oral tradition has given rise to the contemporary tradition of the jíbaro storyteller, or rural Puerto Rican. Carrión writes that "The jíbaro and the slum dweller continue to tell stories orally, in which daily life and nightmares and dreams become legends that beautify the reality of the island's past and present."

Carrión writes, "From the late sixteenth century until 1897, traditions and customs carried the imprint of the Catholic religion with traces of Taíno and African elements." Catholic religious mysticism combined with the forces of African and Indian spiritualism contribute to the Latin American blend of the real with the fantastic in both written and oral literature, known as magical realism. Of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Puerto Rico Carrión writes, "Country folklore, municipal festivities, and the plantation became the focus of attention for the artist, the poet, the storyteller, and the anonymous bard, while the intellectual began to challenge colonialism in its different aspects." Since colonization of Puerto Rico by Spain, Spanish has been the primary language of the island, but the American presence since 1917 has influenced the language and literature as well; the majority of its people are bilingual. The thematic content of the current oral and written traditions, as well as the recent reemergence of Taíno vocabulary, reflect and chronicle a strong overall impression of cultural resistance. The fact that such a large part of the Puerto Rican population migrates back and forth between the U.S. mainland and the island is also motivation to keep Puerto Rican culture alive in a world divided by a conflicted national identity. This struggle for Puerto Rican identity is embodied not only in Ortiz Cofer's work, but in other Puerto Ricans' as well, in the metaphor of the island for the self□separate from a larger body, yet inextricably a part of it.

Critical Overview

Like most of Ortiz Cofer's work, *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* has been met with both critical and popular success. The collection was awarded the Horn Book Farfare Award and the Hungry Mind Book of Distinction award, as well as listings with *Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Readers* and *Best Books for Young Adults.* Hazel Rochman, in her review for *Booklist*, writes, "The contemporary teenage voices are candid, funny, weary, and irreverent in these stories about immigrant kids caught between their Puerto Rican families and the pull and push of the American dream." In her review for *Horn Book* Nancy Vasilakis agrees, writing, "The Caribbean flavor of the tales gives them their color and freshness, but the narratives have universal resonance in the vitality, the brashness, the self-centered hopefulness and the angst expressed by the teens."

Sensitivity to voice has been the cornerstone of critique of Ortiz Cofer's work; whether discussing her poetry or her prose, critics have always emphasized its authenticity. Vasilakis writes that "the teenagers [in *An Island Like you*] speak in characteristic yet very distinct voices and appear in each others' stories the way neighbors step in and out of each others' lives." Rochman asserts that "the teen narrators sometimes sound too articulate, their metaphors overexplained, but no neat resolutions are offered, and the metaphors can get it just right." In Bishop's words, "Cofer's writing is lively, and the characters are memorable. . . . The voices in these stories ring true, as do the stories themselves."

In his book *Dance between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States*, William Luís discusses Ortiz Cofer in the context of other Puerto Rican authors. He writes that Ortiz Cofer's work "touches upon some of the themes of other [Puerto Rican] writers, but she expresses them from a less marginal perspective, in a language that is more polished and mainstream." He continues that, unlike some other Puerto Rican writers, "she is not preoccupied with the exploitation of the Puerto Rican masses who traveled to the United States, as she is with writing about more personal concerns." In keeping with this view, Bishop writes that the "the adolescents in these stories are often reconciling two cultural traditions, and two languages, but Cofer takes this as a given and focuses on the individuals and their everyday problems and concerns." The consensus is that Ortiz Cofer manages to give authentic voice to the experience of Puerto Rican young people in such a way that her stories hold universal appeal.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Lynch is a freelance writer in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she explores the way the main character in "Bad Influence" negotiates the boundaries between childhood and adulthood and between New Jersey and Puerto Rico.

The collection *An Island Like You* opens with a poem entitled "Day in the Barrio". This poem describes life in the New Jersey neighborhood that Rita, the main character in the story "Bad Influence" calls home, a place humming with noise, people, and activity. In its color and music it is reminiscent of Puerto Rico, while in its urbanity it is entirely mainland U.S. The last four lines of the poem sum up the unifying theme of the stories that follow:

Keeping company with the pigeons, you watch the
people below / Flowing in currents on the street where
you live / Each one alone in a crowd, / Each one an
island like you.

The island metaphor for the mainland Puerto Rican is an apt one, in that it speaks to the interplay between the community and the individual in a displaced island culture. Judith Ortiz Cofer, in her memoir *Silent Dancing*, discusses the way that being a part of two cultures makes one feel an outsider in both worlds. She writes, "Being the outsiders had turned my brother and me into cultural chameleons." As a fifteen-year-old on the cusp of adulthood, Rita, like the author, struggles to negotiate both the border between two cultures and the line between childhood and adulthood.

At its most basic, "Bad Influence" is the story of a teenager at odds with the adult world, who in the course of a summer, comes to terms with that world. At the onset of her summer, exiled from her home and friends to Puerto Rico, Rita resents and criticizes her grandparents. Over time she finds them insightful, spirited, and kind people; she learns from them and adjusts to their world, and, as a result, takes a step toward adulthood. The search for identity Rita undergoes is a universal theme for teenagers, whatever the circumstance, and Rita is like most adolescents. Her critical evaluations of her grandparents and her parents are typical of any teenager sifting through his or her personal legacies, in an effort to accept and incorporate what they choose and reject the rest. Nancy Vasilakis, in her review of *An Island Like You* for *Horn Book,* relates the critical consensus that "the narratives have a universal resonance in the vitality, the brashness, the self-centered hopefulness, and the angst expressed by the teens as they tell of friendships formed, romances failed, and worries over work, family, and school." Rita's struggle, however, is as much a search for individuality as she approaches adulthood as it is an effort to negotiate two cultures.

"Bad Influence" opens with Rita's preconception of summer on the island. She begins, "When I was sent to spend the summer at my grandparents' house in Puerto Rico, I knew it was going to be strange, but I didn't know how strange." Emphasis on the word strange calls to mind different interpretations of the word: on one hand bizarre or

unusual, on the other foreign or other than oneself. Both function in the story, as Rita sees her grandparents' world as not only odd and nonsensical at times, but finds Puerto Rican culture alien and treats it as something that doesn't belong to her, as an antiquated, foreign world. Notably, she calls Spanish "not my best language." Rita identifies with her current home - Paterson, New Jersey - where her priorities are typical of her peers (boys, sports, and her friends), and in contrast, Puerto Rico holds little appeal. In fact she goes so far as to call it "my parents' Island," separating it from herself and indicating the gulf between her generation and theirs.

When she gets off the plane, Rita's first reaction is to the heat, which she finds stifling and oppressive. In her typically hyperbolic words, "When I stepped off that airplane in San Juan, it was like I had opened an oven door. I was immediately drenched in sweat, and felt like I was breathing water." The ladies at the airport fan their shiny faces and argue over who carries her luggage, and Rita is mortified. The hot, humid climate operates as a metaphor for Puerto Rico in general: people are too hot, too dramatic, and too loud for Rita's taste. She alludes repeatedly to the fact that everyone in Puerto Rico drinks hot *cafe con leche*, a combination she finds too warm and rich for the heat of the island, and an apt metaphor for her reaction to all things Puerto Rican. The closeness of the weather is akin to the closeness of people on the island, an intimacy that Rita hates when she first arrives. Puerto Ricans are much more comfortable with intimate contact than Rita is; she mentions several times that Mama Ana sits "real close to me." According to Rita, her parents would never dream of barging into her room the way her grandmother does to wake her in the morning, and she is compelled to discuss her need for privacy with her grandfather when she wakes to find he has opened her window during her nap. She describes her past attempt to call a friend on the mainland, when her conversation was scrutinized and translated by the people around her. Her mother's explanation is that "people on the Island did not see as much need for privacy as people who lived on the mainland."

Rita's grandmother and her neighbors watch telenovelas with unbarred enthusiasm, and participate in the drama as if they were their own communities. After watching one such soap opera with Mama Ana, Rita speculates about her grandparents' relationship to reality. She reports authoritatively, "Neither one of the old guys could tell the difference between fantasy and reality - Papa with his dream-reading and Mama with her telenovelas." When she learns of her grandfather's gifts as a spiritualist, she mockingly calls her grandparents a Ghostbuster duo. At one point, when the three of them visit Angela and her mother, her grandfather goes into a trance to meditate on the situation, and Mama Ana behaves as if nothing is out of the ordinary. Rita takes this as evidence of their craziness, but neglects to consider the way cultural assumptions color her own behavior. For example, she likens her grandparents' spiritist work to television shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek,* and to rumors she has heard about Haitian voodoo priests in her neighborhood. These cultural references reflect the mass of information she considers normal or native to the U.S. mainland, and comprise her own set of cultural assumptions. Rita is so absorbed in her own, very American view of the world that she cannot help but judge her grandparents' assumption that the spiritual or mystical is a part of everyday life. When she hyperbolically suggests that she would

probably go home as one of the walking dead, Rita shows herself to be as dramatic as the grandparents she mocks.

The day Rita spends at the beach outside Angela's house marks the beginning of her transformation in attitude toward her grandparents, as well as the beginning of transformation in Angela's life. Mama Ana presses Rita to invite Angela to picnic on the beach with them and ends up inviting her to Rita's fifteenth birthday party. In facilitating the connection between the girls, Rita's grandparents succeed in both drawing Angela out of her chilled home and forming a connection for Rita. This connection serves as a bridge for Rita into the world of Puerto Rico. Like Rita and many other Puerto Ricans of their generation, Angela is a person who navigates both island and mainland cultures, since her father lives in New York. In each other's company the girls can speak English and discuss the issues in their lives too private to share with adults. This forum for self-evaluation helps Rita grow out of her infatuation with Johnny Ruiz and see the humor in the situation, as she and Angela speculate that Johnny may be under the spell of a *mala influencia* himself. This kind of peer contact offers Rita the opportunity to honor the part of herself that belongs to the U.S. mainland, while she is immersed in the Puerto Rican.

By the end of the story, Rita characterizes her experience by reporting "I'd had one of the best summers of my life with Angela, and I was even really getting to know my grandparents - the Ghostbusting magnificent duo." Her time on the island has provided her with a new friend and helped her build a bridge between herself and her grandparents, marked by her use of the word magnificent. At her birthday party she notices the way her grandfather makes his way around, "looking at each guest with his kind brown eyes," as if he really does see into their hearts. Over the course of the summer she learns from him how to do the same, to observe how people really feel, and eventually she considers herself a medium in her own right. Rita's assessment of her grandmother is transformed as well; about the woman she previously characterizes as overly gregarious, dramatic, and smothering she says, "She had this talent for turning every day into a sort of party." The time they spend together, shopping for Rita's party dress or cooking crab at the beach, helps bridge the gap in their relationship and their cultures. In a sense they heal the chilliness that Rita brought with her to the island, and this maternal healing extends to Rita's mother as well. When Rita and her grandparents pick up the family from the airport at the end of summer, Rita at first holds back from her mother, deliberately making her suffer for the summer punishment, but then holds her hand in the car, their differences behind them. Thus the healing between Angela and her mother is mirrored in Rita and her mother, thanks to the warm attention of Rita's grandparents.

"Bad Influence" closes with Rita speculating on how she and her friend can get together and meet boys in the fall. Although her summer has helped her bridge the gap between the Puerto Rican and the American in herself, she has by no means lost the part of herself that identifies with Paterson, New Jersey. Rita is every bit the teenager she was when she arrived: caustic, authoritative, and opinionated. Having acclimated to life on the island and come to know her grandparents, Rita is a better integrated version of herself; more at ease in both worlds, she has forged her own identity.

Source: Jennifer Lynch, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, with a specialization in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of culture shock in Ortiz Cofer's story "Bad Influence."

In Ortiz Cofer's short story "Bad Influence" the narrator and main character, Rita, is sent from her home in New Jersey to spend the summer with her relatives in Puerto Rico. Rita, who is almost fifteen, and her best friend had been caught attempting to sleep overnight with their boyfriends. Although nothing "happened" between the two girls and their boyfriends that night, their parents still believe the boys to be a "bad influence" on them. In order to keep her away from her boyfriend, Rita's parents give her the choice of spending her summer in a convent or in Puerto Rico. Choosing what she feels to be the lesser of two evils, Rita opts for "*arroz y habichuelas* with the old people in the countryside of my parents' Island." Once in Puerto Rico, Rita experiences various forms of culture shock□meaning that she has trouble adjusting to the habits, customs, and living conditions of a culture which is mostly foreign to her. Although she had spent many summer vacations there in the past with her parents, she had always been surrounded by cousins and preoccupied with playing on the beach. Now, for the first time, she is left to confront this foreign culture by herself. As narrator of the story, Rita uses humor as a means of dealing with her culture shock. In addition, she tries to make sense of things which are foreign to her by relating them back to more familiar elements of popular American culture.

One of the immediate elements of Puerto Rico which Rita must adjust to is the heat. Rita uses exaggeration, figurative language, and humor in order to describe the heat of the Island and its effect on her. As soon as she steps off the airplane in San Juan, the heat strikes her "like I had opened an oven door." Riding in the car from the airport in what she emphasizes is an "un-air-conditioned" car, Rita somewhat humorously attempts to deal with the heat by "practicing Zen." She explains that, "I had been reading about it in a magazine on the airplane, about how to lower your blood pressure by concentrating on your breathing, so I decided to give it a try." This, however, leads to a humorous misunderstanding between Rita and her relatives which she allows them to maintain throughout her visit. Hearing her attempt at Zen-like breathing, her relatives assume that she must have asthma. At her grandparents house, Rita refers to the extreme heat once again; she mentions with a degree of irony that, "Of course, there was no AC"□air conditioning. Again resorting to exaggeration and humor as a means of dealing with her discomfort in the heat, Rita goes to her room, puts a pillow over her head, and "decided to commit suicide by sweating to death."

Rita is additionally disconcerted by the lack of technological devices generally taken for granted in the United States. Because her grandparents do not own a telephone, Rita states ironically that "AT[and]T had not yet sold my grandparents on the concept of high-tech communications."

Another element of life on the island which Rita finds difficult to adjust to is the lack of "privacy." She adopts an ironic tone in describing the crowd of relatives who have come to pick her up at the airport as "my welcoming committee"□a phrase which usually refers to the greeting of an important person on some official occasion. When she decides to call her mother, Rita must use the phone at a neighbor's house, with "a nice fat woman who watched you while you talked." It is in fact impossible for Rita to have a private telephone conversation while on the Island; she explains that, when she had tried to make a phone call the previous summer at the same neighbor's house, "There had been a conversation going on in the same room where I was using the phone, a running commentary on what I was saying in English as understood by her granddaughter. They had both thought that eavesdropping on me was a good way to practice their English." Rita's mother had explained this to her as a cultural difference, as "people on the Island did not see as much need for privacy as people who lived on the mainland." Not only do they not seem to need privacy, but, as Rita's mother had explained, "Keeping secrets among friends is considered offensive." One morning Rita's grandparents come into her room without warning, and Rita observes, "It had been years since my own parents had dared to barge into my bedroom."

Along with the lack of privacy, the level of noise which surrounds Rita among her relatives in Puerto Rico is also difficult for her to adjust to. When her grandmother turns on the TV to watch her telenovela, or soap opera, Rita describes the theme music for the show as "violins wailing like cats mating." Her family members in Puerto Rico seem to have a tendency to play the TV and the radio at higher levels than what Rita is used to in the States. She sarcastically mentions that "I had always suspected that all my Puerto Rican relatives were a little bit deaf." After Rita is told that she and her grandparents must wake up early one morning, she explains, "'Getting up with the chickens' meant that both my grandparents were up and talking at the top of their lungs by about four in the morning." Rita again uses exaggeration in noting that the muffler of her grandparents' car "must have woken up half the island." Rita's use of sarcasm in dealing with the unaccustomed noise of her family life in Puerto Rico is summed up by her rhetorical question, "Why doesn't anyone ever mention noise pollution around here?"

As is the experience of most people in a foreign culture, Rita finds some of the food and methods of food preparation among her relatives on the island to be unpleasant and even disturbing to her. Rita expresses her dislike of the "cafe con leche" which is imposed upon her during her visit in a tone of exasperated irony. Rita describes the drink, which she hates, as "like ultra-sweet milk with a little coffee added for color or something." She goes on to note, "Nobody here asks you if you want cream or sugar in your coffee: the coffee is 99 percent cream and sugar. Take it or leave it."

Strangest of all for Rita are her grandparents' ideas about spirituality, which she interprets as an inability to distinguish between "reality" and "fantasy." Rita tries to make sense of some of the customs of Puerto Rico which seem most bizarre to her by referring to elements of popular American culture, such as movies and TV shows. For example, her grandfather explains to her that his pet rooster, Ramon, likes to sing "when the spirit moves him," and Rita thinks, "I could not believe what I was hearing. It

was like I was in a 'Star Trek' rerun where reality is being controlled by an alien, and you don't know why weird things are happening all around you until the end of the show." When her grandmother discusses the characters on her telenovelas as if they were real people, Rita thinks, "It was really going to be 'The Twilight Zone' around here. Neither one of the old guys could tell the difference between fantasy and reality Papá with his dream-reading and Mamá with her telenovelas." Their perceptions and beliefs seem so strange to her that she describes herself as "spending three months with two batty old people and one demented rooster."

Rita's grandparents begin to seem even more bizarre to her when they explain that Papá Juan, her grandfather, is "a medium, a spiritualist," who has been called to "exorcise demons" from someone's home. This concept is so foreign, unbelievable, and downright disturbing to Rita that she can only make sense of it in terms of the little she has heard in the States about "voodoo priests." "

> Does he sacrifice chickens and goats?" I had heard about these voodoo priests who went into trances and poured blood and feathers all over everybody in secret ceremonies. There was a black man from Haiti in our neighborhood who people said could even call back the dead and make them his zombie slaves. . . . What had my own mother sent me into? I would probably be sent back to Paterson as one of the walking dead.

Her grandparents' spiritual beliefs seem so foreign and incomprehensible to Rita that she thinks, "I really should have been given an instruction manual before being sent here on my own." Rita's sense of humor about her grandparents' beliefs, however, comes through when she describes their preparations for the spiritual healing in terms which refer to an extremely frivolous element of popular American culture she refers to her grandfather's holy water and other religious paraphernalia as "Ghostbuster equipment," evoking the Hollywood *Ghostbusters* movie series. As they wait on the beach for her grandfather's visit to the woman and her daughter who have called him in as a spiritual healer, Rita continues to think of these beliefs in terms which are disdainful. She thinks of her grandfather as "the local medicine man," and his spiritual practice as "mumbo-jumbo." Rita again mentions an element of popular American culture a movie from the 1970s in describing how she imagines the sick girl in the house where Papá Juan has gone to clean out the evil spirits; Rita thinks of her as "the girl from *The Exorcist.*"

Once Rita has actually met the sick girl, Angela, they immediately befriend one another, and Rita's visit to the Island takes a turn for the better. Rita is able to bond with Angela when she learns that Angela does not take Papá Juan's spiritual cleansing practices any more seriously than Rita did. By the end of the story, however, Rita becomes more open to her grandfather's spiritual beliefs. She describes herself as "taking medium lessons" from her grandparents, whom she now refers to in more positive, although still sarcastic, terms as "the Ghostbusting magnificent duo." Through her grandfather's role as a

medium or spiritualist, Rita has learned to be more sensitive to the feelings and needs of other people.

Rita's experience of culture shock in visiting her grandparents becomes an unexpected opportunity for changing her perspective on her own life. Rita ends her narration on an upbeat note, which both acknowledges the "good influence" of her grandparents and maintains her characteristic sense of irony, when she claims that she has become "a mind reader myself."

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Metzger is a Ph.D. specializing in literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the English department and an adjunct professor in the University Honors Program. In this essay, she discusses how Judith Ortiz Cofer uses the grandfather's spirituality to envelop the teenage protagonist of "Bad Influence" in the heritage and traditions of Puerto Rico.

In her short story "Bad Influence," Judith Ortiz Cofer uses spirituality to help define the family relationship. The young granddaughter is initially unprepared for life in Puerto Rico. She sees herself as a modern, American teenager and her Puerto Rican relatives as antiquated relics of another time and place. Ultimately, it is the grandfather's spirituality that gives direction to Rita's life, first by introducing her to the spirituality of the island, and second by reinforcing a set of morals and expectations by which the people live. Both of these ideas are incorporated into the island heritage that the grandparents pass on to their granddaughter. By the end of her summer, Rita has a new appreciation for her family and her heritage, and she has grown into a more responsible and responsive teenager who accepts and understands the importance of the island's legacy.

In using spirituality, Ortiz Cofer is employing an element of Latin American literature which is often defined by its reliance on magical realism or, in this case, symbolic spirituality. Much of the time, this means that the writer blends together naturalism and supernaturalism seamlessly. Often the literature of Latin America incorporates folktales and legends into the text, making the legends appear a natural part of the author's work. This is the case with Ortiz Cofer's work, which incorporates the grandfather's spirituality and the island's traditional reliance upon such people into Rita's coming-of-age story. Magical realism erases the borders between the characters' reality, the explicable and the inexplicable, and the natural world and the magical world.

Traditional Western literature relies upon literary realism, as it has for more than one hundred years. This traditional realism is what Rita is accustomed to prior to her visit to Puerto Rico. In her American world, healing is given over to conventional medicine and doctors. As is the case with traditional literary realism, which attempts to create a story and characters that are plausible, Rita's New Jersey life is explained as representative of an American teenager's life. In New Jersey, she is a rebellious teenager, easily identifiable to Ortiz Cofer's readers. In contrast, Latin American literature attempts to portray the unusual, the spiritual, and the mystical as ordinary facets of the character's lives, as with the grandfather's journey to heal the evil that permeates Angela's life. For the reader, magical realism requires an acceptance of the coexistence of the real and the imaginary. The author posits these magical events as authentic, with the supernatural events being interwoven seamlessly into the narration. For Ortiz Cofer, this means that the grandfather's spirituality and healing are interwoven into the story as essentially ordinary parts of the island's life. There is nothing exceptional about what he does for his neighbors; the reader accepts this because the author accepts it.

For the people of Puerto Rico, magical realism is an ordinary, accepted, and unquestioned part of their lives. In a 1994 interview with Rafael Ocasio, Ortiz Cofer remarked, "When I write about *espiritismo* [the spiritual healing that Rita's grandfather practices], I am writing about an ordinary, everyday thing that most Puerto Ricans live with." Ortiz Cofer revealed that her own grandfather, who was an *espiritismo,* saw nothing extraordinary or magical about what he did. In this interview, Ortiz Cofer pointed out that when she uses this spiritual tradition in her writing, "there is nothing there that cannot be explained through natural law." For instance, Rita's grandfather seeks to modify his subject's behavior through common sense, rather than cast any spells that change their lives. He employs special teas and prayers, but he also convinces the mother that she must banish her evil boyfriend. As a result, the grandfather's reputation as an *espiritismo,* and the weight afforded his reputation, actually create the healing. In her text, Ortiz Cofer blends the spiritual with morality. Angela is cured, not only because Rita's grandfather appears to work his magic, but also because the cause of her misery is banished. The spiritual teas may also have a role - it is never clear that they do not - and yet, Angela is also healed because her mother banishes her abusive boyfriend. The two influences - the grandfather's spirituality and the mother's actions - work together to resolve the problem. In a sense, spirituality and the appearance of magic give people control. Angela gets her health and life back again because her mother assumes control over her actions. But she is only able to act when the grandfather offers an impetus to do so. The healer's teas and prayers provide that impetus. Consequently, Rita learns to appreciate what her grandfather does when he sets out to heal someone.

Ortiz Cofer does see a difference in how she uses magical realism that makes her use of this rhetorical tradition different from that of other Latin American writers. She told Ocasio that the *espiritismo* are magical "only in that they provide this necessary service and they are connected to the realm of the supernatural." She added that she does not ask her readers to suspend belief in the same way that many Latin American magical realists do. But her distinction is very slight, since the defining element of magical realism is that the reader simply accepts these events as an ordinary part of the character's lives. However, the spirituality found in "Bad Influence" can easily be explained by other means, such as religious or social influences that shape the character's behavior, and so the presence of the *espiritismo* has less importance than it would in a work by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a leading practitioner of magical realism.

The use of the *espiritismo* is Ortiz Cofer's attempt to live her heritage and to keep it alive for her readers. She told Ocasio that although she lives in Georgia, she has not "stopped relating to the Puerto Rican experience." This is her heritage and it is the heritage that the author also provides for her protagonist, Rita. In the United States, family and friends might intervene to deal with the abusive boyfriend who causes Angela's anorexia. But in Puerto Rico, Angela tells Rita that "it took someone with special powers to drive out the bad influence in my house." The healing of Angela's illness could not have occurred without the *espiritismo,* who orchestrated the evil boyfriend's removal. Was it magic? Probably not, but it was magical in its efficiency. In her summer in Puerto Rico, much of Rita's growth derives from her understanding and acceptance of her grandparents' traditions. In accepting these traditions, and most importantly the tradition of the *espiritismo,* Rita grows into her family's heritage. She

leaves behind the New Jersey teenager and recognizes that she is a product of both American and Puerto Rican influences.

Oftentimes, in Latin American literature, magical realism exists in a woman's sphere, as it does in Isabel Allende's novels, but in "Bad Influence," Ortiz Cofer uses magical realism to provide an intergenerational link, rather than a connection between mothers and daughters. Where Allende uses storytelling and magic as interwoven representations of women's lives, Ortiz Cofer uses these two traditions to connect Rita to her Puerto Rican birthright. In "Bad Influence," storytelling and magic are not the exclusive property of women, since Rita's grandfather also possesses this gift. At the story's conclusion, Rita reveals she that has been getting to know her grandparents, and she says, "I had been taking medium lessons from them lately, and had learned a few tricks, like how to look really closely at people and see whether something was bothering them." There is no magic in listening to and paying attention to those with whom Rita comes in contact. But what is new is that she is reaching beyond her own self-absorbed teenage life to appreciate that she needs to show consideration for others, that empathy and compassion are important elements of everyone's life. These are values that her grandparents, and especially her grandfather's *espiritismo,* have taught her. In this way, the traditions of her parents and grandparents are passed down from one generation to the next. This is what Ortiz Cofer suggests is her intention - to keep Puerto Rico alive in her life and to teach its traditions to her readers.

In an earlier interview with Rafael Ocasio, Ortiz Cofer emphasized how important the traditions of Puerto Rico were in her life, and how profoundly those traditions have influenced her writing. In both 1990 and 1992, Ortiz Cofer said that she could not separate her background from her writing and that "the oral traditions of my grandmother's house, the folktales, family stories, gossip or myths often repeated to teach a lesson or make a point educated me and became intrinsic in my writing." It is clear that the stories that Rita's grandparents tell her, the gossip and the myths that permeate their lives, and the folktales that define the role of the *espiritismo* have an important influence on Rita's life - just as they did on Ortiz Cofer's life. Rita learns important lessons about truthfulness, assuming responsibility, and an understanding of the significance of family. By the end of this short story, the young protagonist emerges on the cusp on adulthood. It is her heritage that gives her the means to accomplish this growth.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Critics have noted that Ortiz Cofer's writing emphasizes individual, personal experience. As such, her writing has a more universal, mainstream appeal than the works of some other Puerto Rican authors, which emphasize the exploitation of the Puerto Rican masses. With this in mind, argue your opinion about the role of the personal and the political in fiction.

Although Rita is critical of her grandparents' world when she arrives on the island, she is a product of both urban New Jersey and rural Puerto Rico. Discuss how Rita's bicultural influences are evidenced in the text.

Research the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico since 1950. How is Rita typical or atypical of late-twentieth-century Puerto Ricans?

Ortiz Cofer uses Spanish vocabulary in her narrative in such a way that it is easily comprehensible to non-Spanish speakers. How does she use English/American allusions in a similar way, and what effect does this have upon the narrative?

What Do I Read Next?

The Puerto Ricans, 1943-1973 (1973) is a chronology and fact book that explores political, cultural, and legal issues inherent in the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. It was compiled and edited by Francesco Cordasco with Eugene Bucchioni.

Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History Puertorriquenas (1998) is a collection of vignettes by Aurora Levins Morales. The stories are comprised of herbal lore from the broad range of women who make up Puerto Rico.

The Line of the Sun (1989) is Judith Ortiz Cofer's first novel and was released to great critical acclaim. It chronicles three generations of a Puerto Rican family through the eyes of Marisol, the youngest of the generations.

The Year of Our Revolution: New and Selected Short Stories and Poems (1998) is Ortiz Cofer's collection of poetry and short stories geared toward adults.

In *Puerto Rican Tales: Legends of Spanish Colonial Times*, Cayetano Coll y Toste relates twelve Puerto Rican legends of early encounters between the Spanish and native people. The collection is geared toward young people, and is translated and adapted by Jose Ramírez-Rivera.

Reclaiming Medusa (1997) is a collection of stories by and about Puerto Rican women reclaiming their power and challenging racism, sexism, and machismo. It was edited by Diana L. Velez.

Further Study

Ortiz Cofer, Judith, contributor, *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the U.S.A.*, Open Hand, 1991.

A literary and cultural analysis of contemporary Puerto Rican authors writing from the U.S. mainland.

Sedillo Lopez, Antoinette, *Latino Communities: Emerging Voices, Political, Social, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, University of New Mexico Press, Garland Series, 1998.

An analysis of contemporary Latin American influences, including artistic movements; it includes an in depth discussion of magical realism.

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Ocasio, Rafael, "The Infinite Variety of the Puerto Rican Reality: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer," in *Callaloo*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Summer, 1994, pp. 730-42.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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