

Call Me Maria Study Guide

Call Me Maria by Judith Ortiz Cofer

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Contents

Call Me Maria Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Call Me Maria – Letter to Maria.....	4
More Than You Know Sabes? – An American Dream.....	7
The Power of the Papi-lindo – Love in America.....	9
Life Sciences: The Poem as Seen Under the Microscope – Translating Abuela: I Know Who I Am.....	11
Translating Abuela’s Journal: The Ice Age – Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker.....	13
Characters.....	15
Symbols and Symbolism.....	18
Settings.....	20
Themes and Motifs.....	22
Styles.....	26
Quotes.....	27



Plot Summary

“Call Me Maria” is a young adult novel by Judith Ortiz Cofer which follows the first year in New York that 15 year-old Maria spends after emigrating from Puerto Rico. When the novel begins, Maria is having difficulty adjusting to life in America. She feels lost and lonely outside of her home country, yet looks forward to life as an American with an American education. She has moved there with her father, Papi. Papi himself was born in New York to immigrant parents, but when they returned to Puerto Rico, he went with them. As a result, he never felt at home in Puerto Rico and became depressed. Now, he has returned to his true home country in America. He immediately feels at home, slowly but steadily overcoming his depression.

Maria constantly feels a pull between the new world and the old. She loves learning English, but doesn't want to forget Spanish. She also tries to master Spanglish, a blend of English and Spanish and a language in its own right in the Barrio. Maria admires her father, who now works as an apartment building superintendent, for his hard work and how well-liked he is among the residents. Maria sympathizes with Mr. C., a teacher from the American South, because he misses his home state of Georgia. Maria is also an emerging poet, putting her thoughts and feelings into poetry which earns the approval of her favorite teacher, Mr. Golden, who handles English class. Mr. Golden likens Maria's poetry to Neruda's, who wrote about simple things. Mr. Golden gives Maria a volume of Neruda's poetry, which helps inspire her.

At the same time, Maria's grandmother, Abuela, comes to visit. Abuela dislikes America, and the Barrio especially. To her, it is nothing like home with its beautiful scenery and friendly people. Papi points out to her that no one was ever friendly toward him, saying most made fun of him racially for sounding white and being born in America. Papi knows that many immigrants have a tendency to romanticize and idealize life before America, often forgetting the ugly realities that forced them to leave their homeland in the first place. When Abuela returns home, she leaves behind a journal of her time spent in America, in which she criticizes everything from New York's architecture to the weather to culture such as theater.

In the spring, Maria's mother, Mami, a teacher, comes to visit. Mami stays only very briefly, saying she and Papi will be getting a divorce. Mami does not want to leave Puerto Rico, and has been seeing a fellow teacher named Julio despite still being married. Papi is deeply hurt, but does his best to move on by focusing on work and on Maria. Maria tells Papi he is her hero. Mami offers Maria the chance to come back to live with her and Julio, but Maria insists she is home now. As the spring comes on, Maria begins to grow happier with her life. She especially comes to love learning English, making every new word that she learns her own.



Call Me Maria – Letter to Maria

Summary

It is autumn in the New York barrio. 15 year-old Maria is caught between sadness (where she refers to herself as Maria Triste) and memories of happiness in her native Puerto Rico (where she refers to her old self as Maria Alegre). She remembers how her mother would call her “paloma” for “dove” when Maria was happy, and “ratoncita” for “little mouse” when she was sad. Maria lives in a basement apartment where she looks forward to spring. She longs to sprout like a flower. She lives with her father by his promise that she may do so until she finishes high school and is accepted into a good American university. She knows her father needs her more than her mother. She writes a letter to her mother, Mami, where she admits she misses the Spanish language and the sun. She explains she has only a few friends, and that school is like prison.

Maria reflects on the past. In the past, her father, Papi, was a manager for a beach resort. He, his wife, and Maria stayed on the beach. There, Mami taught Maria how to dance. Maria loved to wear different costumes as a child. Maria also treasured visits with her Abuela, her grandmother. When she was six, Maria’s Papi went to New York to visit relatives. Papi was born and raised in New York to immigrant parents who later returned with Papi to Puerto Rico. Papi always longed to go back to New York, feeling out of place in Puerto Rico. Papi suffered from depression as a result. He had even been hospitalized for it. When Maria turned 14, Mami bought her and Papi tickets to New York. Mami refused to go. Still, Maria hoped it would be a good experience, but it has not been so.

In the present, Maria’s father now works as an apartment building superintendent, and is known as “El Super.” There is little money, and Maria and Papi are sad without Mami. However, whereas Papi has readjusted to life in America easily, Maria is having difficulty. For example, she finds it hard to understand language in the Barrio, a mix of English, Spanish, and slang. The Barrio is an area of the Bronx in New York where many different ethnicities of immigrants have come to settle in America. This mix of English, Spanish, and slang Maria encounters in the Barrio is spoken by Maria’s best friend, Whoopee Dominguez. Whoopee is one of the few bright spots in Maria’s life. Maria has little time for friends or to adjust, since after school she comes straight home to cook, takes messages from tenants for Papi, and does homework. Mami hopes that Maria will have time to come and visit Puerto Rico in the summer. Mami says Maria may come home anytime.

Analysis

“Call Me Maria” is a young adult novel by Judith Ortiz Cofer which follows the first year in New York that 15 year-old Maria spends after emigrating from Puerto Rico. As the novel opens up, the theme of Identity is readily apparent in a negative sense. Maria



feels lost, lonely, and without purpose in New York. She does not know whether she shouldn't be Maria Triste (the sad) or Maria Alegre (the happy). Maria moved to New York with a purpose in mind (so that her father wouldn't be alone) but now she needs a purpose purely for herself.

Likewise, Maria's settling into America is not easy, either. Through Maria's adjusting, and that of the other immigrant people in her neighborhood, the theme of Immigration is encountered. Maria has difficulty figuring out who she is. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico, but now lives in America. She was raised to speak English in addition to Spanish, but has difficulty understanding the blend of English and Spanish the people in the Barrio speak. Likewise, she misses hearing Spanish being spoken all the time. Interestingly, the reason for Papi's return to the United States has to do with being born there. Papi always felt more American than Puerto Rican because he was never from Puerto Rico. Moving to Puerto Rico with his parents became an immigrant experience for Papi which convinced him that home was indeed in America.

There are a few bright spots in Maria's life in America so far. One is that she has a few close, reliable friends including Whoopee. Whoopee always brings a smile to Maria's face. Through Whoopee, the theme of Friendship becomes important. Maria also admires and looks up to her father, who serves as a role model for Maria in terms of his hard work and the respect afforded him. Here, the theme of Family emerges as central to Maria's life in New York. Indeed, it was mostly out of concern for her father that Maria moved to New York in the first place. Additionally, the reader will note the theme of Poetry slowly emerging in this first section of the novel, as several poems written by Maria appear. These poems are about herself, her life so far in New York, and her hopes for the future. The poems themselves are blended into the narrative, which consists of prose and letters to Mami as well.

Discussion Question 1

What are the reasons Maria moves to New York? Which of these is the main reason? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Papi become homesick for America, even though he is born to Puerto Rican parents in New York? What happens as a result?

Discussion Question 3

What are the few bright spots in Maria's life in New York so far? Choose three and explain why these are beneficial to her.



Vocabulary

barrio, triste, alegre, Paloma, ratoncita, Catechism, exasperated, decrepit, tenants, enchanted, papi-lindo, un sueno



More Than You Know Sabes? – An American Dream

Summary

Papi speaks mainly in Spanglish, but he is able to understand numerous variations of English and Spanish as the building's superintendent. Everyone loves Papi, especially because he knows how to sing songs from Puerto Rico which idealize the place. Maria explains her father sings of a place that exists only in the dreams of the immigrants. Maria misses Puerto Rico, but does her best to forget her sadness by hanging out with Whoopee. Whoopee is bright, optimistic, outgoing, and not afraid to give her opinion on things. For example, she makes it a point to wish curses upon a woman who beats her child. However, Whoopee does not believe she is beautiful, even though Maria thinks she is. Whoopee reminds Maria of the kind of woman Frida Kahlo would paint.

For Maria's birthday, Dona Segura gives her a hand-embroidered dreamcatcher with colors that remind Maria of Puerto Rico. Uma and her widowed mother, both from India, live on the first floor of the building and are learning to salsa so they can marry Puerto Rican men. Some Puerto Rican women complain of the smell of spices Uma and her mother cook with, but Maria loves the smells. Uma is thrilled to have the chance at becoming an American, and studies with Maria for an upcoming citizenship test. Meanwhile, Maria relishes English class with Mr. Golden who explains that words are weapons and tools. He praises Maria's ability to write poetry. After school, Maria, Uma, and Whoopee go to the mall. Whoopee insists she doesn't speak Spanglish, but American. Uma reveals she has a crush on Rickie "the Papi-lindo" Moreno. At the movie theatre in the mall, the three friends see the movie "American Beauty."

Analysis

The theme of Immigration remains strong in this section of the novel. Maria goes into greater depth about the variety of dialects spoken in the Barrio, predominantly Spanglish. Among the reasons that Papi is well-loved is because he sings old folk songs from Puerto Rico which idealize the place. Maria knows that the immigrants are imagining their former life in Puerto Rico as they wanted it to be, not as it really was. It is why she comments that the place Papi sings about exists only in their dreams. As time passes, Maria becomes more and more enamored with the English language, especially as it relates to poetry, one of the main themes of the novel. Poetry becomes something Maria loves to do, and provides her with an emotional outlet. It is a talent fostered and encouraged by Mr. Golden. The reader should note that Mr. Golden will become very influential in the development of Maria's love to write poetry.

The theme of Immigration can also be seen through the characters of Uma and her young, widowed mother who both seek Puerto Rican husbands. The difficulties that



immigrants may face even among themselves is seen by the number of Puerto Rican women who complain about the spices the Indian mother and daughter use in their cooking. Immigrants do not always merely encounter difficulty among natural-born citizens of a country, but among themselves as well. Uma herself, however, becomes one of Maria's best friends. Through her, the theme of Friendship is important as she, Maria, and Whoopee often hang out together. During these times, Maria forgets her sadness. As a result, life for Maria in New York's Barrio is far more manageable. Poetry continues to help Maria as well. Maria's gentleness and sensitivity allow her to see the beauty in all things. While Whoopee may not be beautiful physically, Maria believes Whoopee is beautiful for who she is as a person. She can see the inner truth of Whoopee. Seeing the inner truth of anything is essential for a poet. Maria is well-disposed for poetry.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Maria believe Whoopee is beautiful even though Whoopee herself believes she is not? What does this say about Maria in terms of friendship and poetry?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Maria say that the Puerto Rican songs her father sings are about a place that exists only in the dreams of immigrants?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Maria become so enamored with the English language? What does it mean for her?

Vocabulary

muchos problemas, nostalgic, idealized, bodega, repertoire, immortalized, pungent, permeated, declarative, imperative



The Power of the Papi-lindo – Love in America

Summary

The girls anxiously await news from Uma, who reveals that Rickie has promised to call her. Rickie is considered a ladies man, a Latin Lover, dressing well and stealing the hearts of any girls he meets. Despite his promise to Uma, he continues to play the field. Maria decides to confront him about it. Instead of being angry, Rickie puts moves on Maria. She is swept off her feet by his voice and his closeness, but the moment is interrupted when Dona Segura and her granddaughter come outside. When they go, Rickie turns back to Maria, but he is stopped when Whoopee arrives and makes a Tarzan call. At school, Mr. Golden, who sings for a band, has agreed to set one of Maria's poems to music and will be performing it at an assembly.

Maria decides to head outside the barrio on her own, to finally experience more of America. But while shopping, she sets off an alarm. Though he is unable to find any stolen merchandise on Maria, the manager still orders her out of the store. As time passes, Maria realizes she is losing her accent. She also reflects on how fast she has grown up, and how she has changed in America. For example, she no longer uses her second last name. Maria wonders about this as she comes across Uma, who is heartbroken, hoping that she will manage to win Rickie's affections. But Maria knows Rickie—or any Latin Lover—loves no one but himself.

Analysis

Friendship is an important theme in this section of the novel. Uma, Maria, and Whoopee continue to hang out with each other. Both Maria and Whoopee are interested to learn how Uma's crush on Rickie will turn out. When Maria realizes that Rickie (who is just playing the field) has no real interest in anyone but himself, she confronts him in defense of Uma. Maria's loyalty and love of her friend Uma is on clear display as she seeks to protect her friend. Rickie tries to make moves on Maria, but it is Whoopee who finally resolves the situation by intervening on behalf of Maria. Whoopee cares deeply about her friends and will not have Rickie hurting them.

Immigration and Identity become important themes in this section of the novel as well. Maria still feels very much out of place in America. Her decision to venture outside the Barrio ends in disaster as she is falsely accused of shoplifting. Meanwhile, she recognizes she is beginning to lose her Puerto Rican accent, something which the Barrio prizes and struggles to maintain. Maria does not feel fully American, but she no longer feels Puerto Rican, either. Her escape is through poetry. She continues to write poems, and continues to be tutored and encouraged by Mr. Golden. Without realizing it, Maria is beginning to find herself, to understand her identity, through her poetry. In a



way, Maria's drifting away from her native Puerto Rico, her learning of English, her loss of an accent, and her embracing of poetry speak to the idea that she is actually in transition rather than merely being listless. This is essential for the reader to note that being between two places does not mean one is lost. This is certainly the case for Maria.

Discussion Question 1

How does the friendship between Maria, Whoopee, and Uma benefit the three girls where Rickie is concerned? Why is friendship so important regarding Rickie?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Maria is truly lost and listless, or that she is simply in transition? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

What are the signs that Maria is becoming more Americanized? How do these changes affect her? Why?

Vocabulary

apprentice, exclamatory, rotund, articulate, eloquent, tristeza



Life Sciences: The Poem as Seen Under the Microscope – Translating Abuela: I Know Who I Am

Summary

Ms. Coronado is a brilliant science teacher who makes everything she teaches in class interesting. Through Ms. Coronado's lesson on the human body, Maria comes to realize that everyone, beneath their skin, is the same. In English, Mr. Golden explains that poets are often ignored, though they are always working. He tells Maria she is definitely a poet. He has her read some of her poetry to the class. They applaud her. Christmas arrives and Maria's entire building celebrates. Abuela sends Maria childhood photos. Maria sees many common features between herself and her grandmother, including their smile. Mr. C is the math teacher at school. He has a Southern accent, and all the girls have crushes on him. Maria recognizes that Mr. C. misses his home state of Georgia. In class, Mr. C. talks about the importance of circles in math and in the world around them. Maria thinks of how Puerto Rico was like a circle. Mr. C. tells her he understands how she feels missing home, for he can sense homesickness in her as well.

In February, Abuela comes to visit. Abuela does not like the snow or the city. She talks about how warm, friendly, and family-like Puerto Rico is. Papi counters that no one was friendly toward him, that everyone made fun of him for sounding too much like a white person. He says the only difference between New York and Puerto Rico is that in Puerto Rico, the bad news is in Spanish. At that point, the conversation is stopped by a blackout. Who You Are Day arrives at school, where students may dress however they want. The school is very culturally diverse, and not everyone gets along all the time because of it. The principal hopes Who You Are Day will encourage communication. Maria wears her mother's old skirt, her father's sharkskin jacket, platform shoes from Whoopee, her great-grandmother's shawl, and a top made from one of Uma's mother's old saris. Maria considers herself a poem. When Abuela goes home, she leaves behind a notebook full of thoughts so Maria can know who Abuela really is.

Analysis

Immigration remains a central theme in this section of the novel. The reader will note that Maria learns a number of invaluable lessons as she continues to find herself. She comes to truly understand that people, despite their appearances, are all the same. This is reinforced by the silent communication between her and Mr. C. about missing their homes. This understanding of a deeper truth than what seems apparent on the surface is important to Maria's development as poet, and to Maria's nature as a gentle, caring human being. These further her sense of identity as well because she begins to realize



she has something important to say. She is still in a period of transition, not merely between her identity as either American or Puerto Rican, but also as to who she will be as a person regardless as to where she comes from. This can be seen in Maria's outfit for school. It is reflective not merely of culture and heritage, but of the people who have raised her and have befriended her. All of the people who have influenced Maria also influence her choice of outfit. Each person who has had bearing on her life has symbolically earned a part of her outfit.

Maria is reminded of where she has come from by the visit of Abuela. Abuela is not happy to be in the United States. She has nothing but disdain for the country and for the barrio. Abuela, though only a temporary visitor to the United States, reflects most immigrants who romanticize, idealize, and gloss over the bad parts of their homeland. Abuela contends that America is nothing like Puerto Rico and that Puerto Rico is a far better place. Papi, who has had the unique perspective of an American of Puerto Rican descent moving to Puerto Rico, counters that the country has its problems like any other country. He goes on to say that barely anyone was welcoming to him, that racism against him was rampant because many accused him of sounding like a white person, and that the only real difference between Puerto Rico and New York is the language.

Discussion Question 1

What does the outfit that Maria selects for Who You Are Day say about Maria and her identity?

Discussion Question 2

What is important about Mr. C.'s recognition that Maria is homesick? Why does this come to mean so much to Maria, especially in regards to her poetry?

Discussion Question 3

What opinions do Abuela and Papi have about Puerto Rico? Why do they hold these views? Is either one of them right or wrong, or are they both right or wrong? Explain.

Vocabulary

complicated, geometric, subcutaneous, mockery, migrate, timid, melodramatic



Translating Abuela's Journal: The Ice Age – Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker

Summary

Maria works on translating Abuela's journal. Her journal entries are amusingly critical of everything from New York's architecture to theater. The last page of the journal contains a quote from "Don Quixote" which reads, "I know who I am and who I may be if I choose." Maria requests Mr. Golden's help on her poetry, and he agrees to work with her. He tells her she has the gift of metaphor, and gifts her with a copy of Pablo Neruda's poetry collection "Elementary Odes." Maria wonders how she too may become a poet. By reading Neruda's poetry about small and simple things, Maria realizes she can turn simple, everyday things into poetry, such as blue socks, artichokes, and broken things. She writes a poem about her father in his blue uniform on his way out to work while she dreams of being a brown iguana in the sun. The spring finally comes on and warm weather returns. Maria wonders if she will one day become as strong as the barrio women in the building who deal with children and mostly absent men. She also listens to some talk about how much better life was in Puerto Rico, only to have others remind them that beautiful scenery cannot fill an empty stomach. Maria notes how she and her father came to America for different reasons than their neighbors.

In April, Mami comes to visit New York. Maria is thrilled to see her mother, but knows with her neighbors watching she is now on the spot as to whether she will behave more Puerto Rican or as though she is of the Barrio. She knows her mother disapproves of the Barrio. She knows people in the neighborhood make fun of Mami for dressing so well. It does not bother Mami at all. She reveals she and Papi will be getting a divorce, and that she has fallen in love with a coworker, a history teacher named Julio. She asks Maria to come back to Puerto Rico with her. Maria refuses because she has found her home. Papi is saddened by the decision for divorce but carries on. Maria tells him he is her hero. Maria relishes learning English, and determines to make every word her own so that she can use it in a poem.

Analysis

As the novel concludes, Immigration continues to be an important theme. Abuela continues to be overwhelmingly critical of America in her journal entries left behind for Maria. Abuela has taken a position where she will not even give America a chance. Oftentimes in literature, focus is placed on how natural citizens will not give immigrants a chance. In Abuela's case, a mere visitor refuses to give another country a chance. Immigration can also be seen once more in the conversations between residents lamenting the difference between their new lives and their old lives. It is more



romanticization and idealization that masks the truth of how things truly were. As some of the realists note, the beautiful scenery recalled by many is not enough to feed an empty stomach. What does a beautiful landscape matter, they wonder, if someone starves to death? The Barrio may not be beautiful, but it has given immigrants a chance at a better life.

Maria finally comes into her own in this section of the novel. She has come to recognize herself as an American of Puerto Rican birth, and she has come to relish the English language. Thanks to Mr. Golden's help, and the inspiration gleaned from Neruda's poetry, Maria recognizes herself as a poet. While Mr. Golden has asserted this before, it is only now that Maria truly believes she is a poet and that she has something worth saying. She no longer feels lost and is no longer in transition. The theme of Family also returns in this section of the novel as well. Maria learns to her dismay that her mother has been having an affair, and has come to America to divorce Papi. It would appear that the family is breaking apart, but Maria doubles down in defense of her father. When asked to come home to Puerto Rico, Maria realizes she is already home with her father in New York.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Abuela, as well as many other immigrants, refuse to give America a chance despite having worse conditions back home?

Discussion Question 2

How does Maria come to determine that she herself is a poet? What does she hope it will do for her?

Discussion Question 3

When Maria's mother asks her to come home to Puerto Rico, Maria realizes she is already home in New York. Why is this?

Vocabulary

symbolism, metaphor, sweltering, accompaniment, incarnations, blatantly, unabashed, persecution, multifarious, impeccable, guffaw



Characters

Maria

Maria is the main character and narrator of the novel “Call Me Maria” by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Maria is a beautiful 15 year-old native of Puerto Rico who has moved with her father to New York, the land of his birth, to battle his depression and homesickness. Maria greatly admires her father. Maria is also the daughter of Mami and Abuela, both of whom have remained behind in Puerto Rico. Maria is the best friend of Whoopee and Uma. When the novel begins, Maria feels lonely, lost, and as though she has no purpose in life. She feels out of place in New York’s barrio as a Puerto Rican, and has difficulty mastering Spanglish. Nevertheless, Maria is a deeply sensitive girl who sees the beauty in all things. This is translated into the poetry she writes. Her sadness and homesickness are always temporarily done away with when she hangs out with Uma and Whoopee.

Maria’s poetry catches the attention of her English teacher, Mr. Golden, who helps tutor her and encourage her to continue to write. He insists she is a poet. Through his help, Maria comes into her own as a poet, and comes to realize that this is purpose in life. Likewise, she hopes her poetry will be an inspiration to others. Maria comes to relish the English language, and loves learning new words. She also comes to love her life in New York, realizing that home is what one makes it. At the same time, Maria learns that her parents will be getting a divorce. When Mami asks Maria to return home to Puerto Rico, Maria reveals that she is already home.

Papi

Papi is the father of Maria, and husband of Mami, and the son-in-law of Abuela. Born as an American in New York to Puerto Rican parents, Papi immigrated to Puerto Rico when his parents decided to return to their homeland. Papi always felt out of place in Puerto Rico, especially because so many made fun of him racially for sounding white. As a result, Papi has battled depression for years, a condition only cured by his return to his homeland in America. When he returns to America, Maria travels with him. In New York’s Barrio, Papi works as a superintendent for an apartment building, handling repairs and maintenance. People admire him greatly for his hard work and for his ability to sing songs of Puerto Rico. When Papi learns Mami wants a divorce, he is heartbroken but his sadness in work.

Mami

Mami is the wife of Papi, the mother of Maria, and the daughter of Abuela. Mami make her living as a teacher of English. When the novel begins, Mami has no intention of leaving Puerto Rico with Papi to live in the United States. While his away, she begins an



affair with a fellow teacher, Julio. Mami comes to visit New York primarily to have divorce papers signed and to ask Maria to come home to Puerto Rico.

Abuela

Abuela is the mother of Mami, and the grandmother of Maria. Abuela is generally a kind and warm person, but she is always very critical of things. Nowhere is this more apparent when she comes to visit Maria in New York. She even writes down all of her criticisms in a journal, where she makes fun of everything from New York's architecture to the theater. However, Abuela is immensely proud of Maria and the person Maria is turning out to be. This is demonstrated in Abuela's decision to allow Maria to wear her mother's shawl to school.

Whoopee

Whoopee Dominguez is one of Maria's two best friends. Whoopee is an energetic, outgoing, optimistic, and no-nonsense girl who does not hesitate to give her opinions on things. She is a wonderful person and friend to Maria and Uma, protecting them against the advances of Rickie. Whoopee is able to help Maria adjust to life in New York by taking her mind off of the things which trouble her, and simply by spending time with her.

Uma

Uma is an immigrant from India who has come to live with her mother in the barrio. Both Uma and her widowed mother seek Puerto Rican husbands. Uma is best friends with Maria and Whoopee. Uma also falls hard for Rickie Moreno, a Latin Lover who cruelly leads Uma on. Only when Maria and Whoopee intervene on her behalf does Rickie leave Uma alone.

Mr. Golden

Mr. Golden is an English teacher at the school which Maria attends in New York. Mr. Golden is also the front man for a band. As a lyricist for their songs, he takes note of Maria's poetry skills. He becomes a tutor and an inspiration to Maria, encouraging her in her poetry writing. His gift to Maria of the Neruda book of poems "Elementary Odes" also helps to inspire Maria to write poetry.

Mr. C.

Mr. C. is a math teacher at the school which Maria attends. A native of Georgia in the American South, Mr. C.'s accent leads to all the girls having a crush on him and some of the boys trying to imitate him to get in good with the girls. Mr. C. recognizes an unspoken homesickness in Maria, for he himself misses his home state of Georgia



desperately. This helps Maria to realize that even Americans may be homesick and that sensing deeper truths to things is important in poetry.

Rickie

Rickie Moreno, known as a playboy, a ladies' man, a Latin Lover, and the "Papi-Lindo", is a teenage boy who is very self-absorbed, and views girls merely as conquests that bolster his own self-satisfaction. Rickie enjoys playing the field, lauding himself over the girls he pursues. Rickie leads Uma on in the novel until he is confronted by Maria. He attempts to lead Maria on, but is stopped by Whoopee's intervention.

Julio

Julio is a history teacher in Puerto Rico, and is a coworker of Mami. Julio and Mami begin an affair, leading to Mami seeking divorce from Papi. Mami encourages Maria to return home to Puerto Rico to live with her and Julio, but Maria refuses.



Symbols and Symbolism

Letters

Letters are written to Mami from Maria, and to Maria from Mami during the course of the novel. Many of these letters appear throughout the novel. The letters detail the lives of Maria and Mami in their respective countries, as well as their hopes, dreams, fears, and happiness. Maria's early letters, for example, describe how much she misses Puerto Rico, and how much she misses hearing Spanish being spoken by everyone.

Embroidered dreamcatcher

An embroidered dreamcatcher is knit for Maria by Dona Segura. The dreamcatcher includes many beautiful colors which remind Maria of Puerto Rico. The gift is very meaningful to her because not only is it reminiscent of Puerto Rico, but because it is a gift from Dona Segura, a sweet and kind woman who is blind. She is able to see without seeing, much the way that Maria is able to see the deeper truth of things in her poetry.

U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization manual

U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization manual is carried around by Uma throughout the novel. The manual details important information for immigrants seeking to become American citizens. Uma is thrilled to be in America, and is thrilled to become an American citizen. She carries around the manual as though it was a Bible. It is evidence of just how badly some immigrants wish to become full-fledged American citizens.

Photographs of Abuela

Photographs of Abuela are mailed to Maria during Christmas. The photographs feature Abuela when she is 15 years old, the same age that Maria is now. Maria is able to notice many similarities between her and Abuela, including sharing the same smile. The photos cause Maria to wonder who she may be later in her life.

Abuela's journal

Abuela keeps a journal during her visit to the United States in February. She leaves it behind so that Maria may better understand who she is. The journal is hypercritical of the United States, making fun of, condemning, and disapproving of everything from New York's architecture to its culture, such as plays. It demonstrates that Abuela never even gave America a real chance and that she was closed-minded from the start.



"Elementary Odes"

"Elementary Odes" is a collection of poetry by Pablo Neruda given to Maria as a gift by Mr. Golden. Neruda's poems in "Elementary Odes" are beautiful pieces of poetry about very simple subjects, such as blue socks. The book helps Maria to realize that she doesn't have to write about something extravagant to write something beautiful. The poems inspire Maria to continue writing her own poetry and to realize that even the simplest subjects can be the most beautiful.

Divorce papers

Divorce papers are served to Papi by Mami during her visit to New York. The divorce paper delivery is Mami's primary purpose in coming to New York. She spends little time with Maria, opting instead to spend most of her time exploring museums with Julio. The divorce papers help Maria realize that her true home is now in New York with her father.

Maria's Who You Are Day outfit

Maria's Who You Are Day outfit consists of her mother's old skirt, her father's sharkskin jacket, platform shoes from Whoopee, her great-grandmother's shawl, and a top made from one of Uma's mother's old saris. Maria considers herself a poem strung together from many different places. The outfit Maria wears is symbolic of the influence of all of her family members and friends on her own life, helping to complete who she is as a person.

Poems

Poems are written by Maria throughout the novel. They appear at various places throughout the novel, telling parts of the novel and demonstrating the talent and skill Maria has for poetry. Maria's poetry is fostered and encouraged by Mr. Golden, who helps Maria realize her purpose in life is to be a poet. Maria comes to hope her own poems will someday inspire someone else the way that Mr. Golden, and Pablo Neruda's poems, have inspired her.

Songs

Mr. Golden, who sings for a band, comes to recognize the gift Maria has for poetry. As a result, he takes a set of lyrics Maria has written and sets them to music, making a song. This thrills Maria, and helps and encourages her in her writing of poetry.



Settings

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is a tropical territory island nation of the United States between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. It is the homeland of Maria, Mami, and Abuela. It is the country from which Papi's parents originate, and is the country to which Papi moves when his parents decide to return. It is where Papi meets, falls in love with, and marries Mami. It is where Maria is born and raised through the age of 14. While Maria loves Puerto Rico, her American-born father does not. He is not welcome or accepted because he was born in America. As a result, he suffers from depression and decides to move to New York. Maria accompanies him.

The Barrio

The Barrio is an area of the Bronx in New York where many different ethnicities of immigrants have come to settle in America. The Barrio is described as cold, gray, and in many places run-down. It is where Maria and her father come to live in a basement apartment where her father tends to the building as a superintendent. The Barrio is where Maria befriends and hangs out with Whoopee and Uma, and where Maria dreams of spring. Maria at first does not feel at home in the Barrio due to the fact that she is so recently arrived from Spain, and struggles to adapt to local customs and practices, such as the use of Spanglish. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel Maria comes to consider the Barrio home.

School

School is where Maria, Uma, and Whoopee attend classes during the week. There, Mr. C. teaches math, Senora Coronado teaches science, and Mr. Golden teaches English. It is at school under Mr. Golden's guidance that Maria truly comes to embrace the English language, to come into her own as a poet. School is known as a place where kids of many different cultures come together during the day, and do not always get along due to the differences between them. This demonstrates that there is antagonism between immigrant communities as well as friction between natural citizens and immigrants.

Basement apartment

The basement apartment is where Maria and her father live in the Barrio. The windows of the building look out onto the street, affording Maria and her father a view of the calves and feet of people who walk along the sidewalk. The basement apartment is cold and dreary, and makes Maria sad early in the novel because it is not Puerto Rico. Maria ultimately comes to view her apartment as home after she learns her parents will be



divorcing, and after she realizes that her purpose in life is to be a poet. She realizes the apartment is big enough for big dreams, and commits herself to writing poetry about simple subjects.

Unnamed department store

The unnamed department store is located outside the Barrio. It is where Maria first ventures outside of the Barrio alone during the novel. At the department store, Maria accidentally triggers an alarm system and is accused of shoplifting because she is of Hispanic origin. It exemplifies some of the racism that Maria experiences by people outside the Barrio.

Themes and Motifs

Identity

Identity is an important theme in the novel “Call Me Maria” by Judith Ortiz Cofer. A person’s identity, which includes their purpose and how they come to view and understand themselves, is essential to the plot of the novel. In the novel, it is Maria who seeks out her own identity.

When the novel begins, Maria feels lost, lonely, and listless. A recent immigrant from Puerto Rico, she feels strange and out of place in New York. While she knows she lives in America now, she feels a strong pull towards Puerto Rico. Although she can speak Spanish and English, Maria has a difficult time mastering the language of the Barrio, Spanglish. Along with having little time for friends or recreation, and knowing that half her family still lives in Puerto Rico, Maria doesn’t know who she is. She longs to be something beautiful, like a flower emerging through the concrete of the Barrio, but doesn’t understand just what she is meant to be.

Maria slowly transitions through the course of the novel. Her friendship with Whoopee and Uma give her a sense of belonging, a sense of companionship that she did not previously have. Her use of English and Spanglish leads to a slow loss of her Puerto Rican accent. Her English classes with Mr. Golden truly endear her to the English language, and benefit her writing of poetry immensely. Mr. Golden comes to tutor Maria exclusively based on her poetry, and he helps to foster her talent. He assures Maria that she is a poet, and that this is her identity and her purpose in life.

By the end of the novel, Maria has come to accept that she is a poet and belongs in New York. Mr. Golden’s continued guidance cements the understanding Maria has that she is meant to write poetry. She hopes that her poetry will someday help someone else to become a poet or to receive comfort in a time of need. She understands that her poetry will be about simple, everyday things, and finding beauty in even these simple and mundane subjects. Maria also comes to fully consider herself an American when she learns her parents will be divorcing, and her mother remarrying and remaining in Puerto Rico.

Immigration

Immigration is an important theme in the novel “Call Me Maria” by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Immigration involves individuals, or groups of individuals, moving from one place to another for various reasons. In the novel, immigration and the immigration experience are explored through Maria’s eyes, and her own immigration experience.

When the novel begins, Maria’s first year in the United States is underway. Having immigrated from Puerto Rico, Maria finds life in New York difficult for a variety of reasons. Her experience is reflective of the experience of most others in her community



in the Barrio. Maria finds the use of English and Spanglish to be new, since Spanish was spoken almost exclusively back home. Maria also finds the cold weather, and the imposing gray architecture a sharp contrast to the bright sunshine and tropical greenness of Puerto Rico. Unlike most, however, Maria has come to the United States to support her father and garner an American education.

Papi, a native of the United States, has returned to New York from Puerto Rico because he is returning to his homeland. Papi was depressed living in Puerto Rico, the homeland of his parents, because he was racially made fun of for sounding white and being born in America. He never felt truly at home there. Only returning to New York has alleviated his depression. The racism that Papi experienced in Puerto Rico after immigrating is experienced by Maria in the department store in the novel, where she is suspected of shoplifting because she is Hispanic. Despite this, Maria does not let it deter her from attempting to settle in and call America home.

Whereas Papi and Maria have immigrated to the United States for unusual reasons, most of the other immigrants in the Barrio have come for a better life. When that life is not instantly available to them without hard work, they begin to become nostalgic for the past, idealizing and romanticizing their homeland for what they wanted it to be, not for what it actually was. Maria, Papi, and realists in the neighborhood point this out. One realist, for example, says that back in Puerto Rico, beautiful scenery does nothing for an empty stomach. Over time, however, the loneliness and lack of belonging that Maria feels fades as she embraces English, American culture, and life with her father in New York.

Poetry

Poetry is an important theme in the novel “Call Me Maria” by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Poetry is written by Maria throughout the novel. Many of her poems appear throughout the novel, and form a core part of the plot and the telling of the story. Poetry also becomes essential and vital to Maria’s sense of identity and her character.

When the novel begins, Maria dabbles in poetry. It is something she enjoys doing, but doesn’t believe she is very good at. Yet, as the reader recognizes in her poetry and prose, Maria has a talent for poetry. It is a talent that is also recognized by Maria’s English teacher, Mr. Golden. This is important since Maria believes she has no real purpose in life. Mr. Golden assure her that she does, and that her purpose is to be a poet.

Over the course of the school year, Mr. Golden becomes a hero and a mentor to Maria. He helps her with English and with poetry, guiding and fostering her talent. Poetry becomes an emotional outlet for Maria, who is able to express her feelings and thoughts in words. She is also able to sense a deeper truth to things and people around her because of her gentleness and poetic tendencies. For example, while Whoopee may not physically be beautiful, Maria is still able to recognize the beauty in Whoopee.



Despite her progress, Maria worries that her small world means she is not meant for big things in poetry. Mr. Golden assures her this is not true, and gifts her with a copy of Neruda's poetry, "Elementary Odes", which includes poems about simple subjects. This helps Maria to realize that she, too, can write about simple subjects. As a result, Maria truly comes to believe her purpose in life is to write poetry to comfort and inspire others.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel "Call Me Maria" by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Friendship in the novel gives Maria a sense of belonging and companionship that she did not have when first arriving in New York. Maria's friendship with Whoopee and Uma has important benefits and consequences for all three girls.

When Maria arrives in New York, she feels lonely and is always alone. Her friendship with Whoopee and Uma changes that. The three girls quickly become fast friends and spend much of the free time together. Whoopee and Uma give Maria a sense of belonging, helping Maria to feel less lonely and forgetting about her sadness in leaving Puerto Rico. Whoopee and Uma help Maria to assimilate to American culture by doing very American things, such as going to malls and seeing movies.

When Uma falls for Rickie, it is Maria and Whoopee who are there for Uma. Uma is strung along by Rickie, a notorious Latin Lover, it is Maria who confronts Rickie and tells him to leave Uma alone. Maria's sense of loyalty through her friendship with Uma is unquestionable in her defense of Uma. When Rickie sets his sights on Maria, it is Whoopee who intervenes and chases Rickie away, thereby defending Maria.

Despite Whoopee's confident, outgoing, and optimistic nature, she is not very physically attractive. Whoopee herself declares that she is not beautiful, but Maria assures Whoopee she is indeed beauty. Maria helps Whoopee to understand that beauty is not only skin-deep, but is drawn on things much deeper. Whoopee is a good person with a good heart, and this is the true source of her beauty. Indeed, Maria believes Whoopee would be the kind of person Frida Kahlo would paint in one of her compositions. This helps Whoopee to gain confidence about herself.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel "Call Me Maria" by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Family, thematically, includes the mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional and physical support of those who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the way of the traditional nuclear family. Family is seen as both a very positive thing in the novel, but also as something that has its limits.

When the novel begins, Maria has moved to New York in order to be with her father, Papi. Papi, a native New Yorker, has been diagnosed with severe depression living in Puerto Rico. As a result, Papi decides to move to America. He encourages his daughter and wife to come along, but only Maria comes along. Mami declares she will never



leave Puerto Rico, but Papi hopes she will change her mind. Maria decides to go with Papi because she knows he needs her, and she wants to look for him while he recovers. Papi himself reveals that he will do everything to provide Maria with a quality American education, including getting her through college in America.

Papi constantly worries that his wife will leave him. Maria corresponds with Mami by letters throughout the novel, taking comfort in her mother's words and reflecting on happy memories of her family in Puerto Rico. Mami insists that Maria should return home to visit over the summer. Before the summer, Abuela comes to visit Maria in New York. While Abuela is proud of the young woman that Maria is becoming, Abuela spares no expense to criticize and condemn everything about America, from New York's architecture to its theater. Abuela's closed-mindedness helps Maria to keep her mind open to the possibilities of America, knowing there is much to gain from giving the place a chance.

Late in the novel, Mami comes to visit New York. Her visit, however, is not one of family togetherness or for love of family, but out of a desire to break up the family. Mami comes to New York to serve divorce papers to Papi. She spends very little time with Maria, preferring instead to spend her time with Julio, her lover. This weighs heavily on Maria. When Mami invites Maria to return to Puerto Rico, Maria realizes that America is her home now, and her home is one where her father is. Maria feels betrayed by her mother, and this alone is enough reason for her to refuse to return to Puerto Rico. However, her love of America also strengthens her position to remain with her family in New York.



Styles

Point of View

Judith Ortiz Cofer tells her novel “Call Me Maria” in the first person reflective-omniscient narrative mode in the point of view of main character Maria. The novel is told in the form of letters, poetry, and prose, all from the point of view of Maria. Maria relates her experiences as a new immigrant in New York to the reader. The first-person point of view allows the reader great insight into Maria’s deeper thoughts and feelings, which is reflective of Maria’s ability to see the deeper truth in things in the world around her through her poetry. The novel’s narration also assumes a reflective tone as though it was being told by Maria years after the events of the novel took place. As a result, the narration takes on an omniscient aspect in which Maria is able to relate all important information to the reader, contextualizing some things and explaining others. For example, great contextual information is given about Rickie being a Latin Lover, something Maria herself was not fully aware of at the time, but is now aware in her telling of the story.

Language and Meaning

Judith Ortiz Cofer tells her novel “Call Me Maria” in language that is flowing and poetic. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel is composed partly of poems. It is only natural that the language in poems would be poetic. The letters and sections of prose in the novel also adopt a poetic tone, reflective of the natural poetic talents of Maria with written words. Secondly, Maria is herself naturally sensitive, sweet, and insightful into the deeper nature of people and the things around her. She has a natural poetic tendency which is borne out in her writing and descriptions of other people and things around her. The poetic language helps to reinforce the believability and realism of Maria’s character as a poet.

Structure

Judith Ortiz Cofer divides her novel “Call Me Maria” into numerous unnumbered and titled chapters, poems, letters, and segments and vignettes of prose. Some chapters are a few pages long, while some sections of prose are very short and only one or two lines in length. Taken together, the letters, poems, chapters, segments, and vignettes form a cohesive storyline that occurs across Maria’s first year in the United States. The poetry, letters, and prose give the reader a firsthand look at Maria’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The structure of the work—a disparate variety of written sources taken together to form a single story—is reflective of Maria’s observation about the English language and poetry, in which a wide variety of words are taken together to form a single poem.



Quotes

I am a different Maria, no longer the Maria Alegre who was born on a tropical island, and who lived with two parents in a house near the sea until a few months ago, nor like the Maria Triste, the lonely barrio girl of my new American life. I am fifteen years old. Call me Maria.

-- Maria (Call Me Maria paragraph 1)

Importance: When the novel begins, Maria reveals the events of the past few months. She has come to live in America with her father, and is no longer the same girl as before. She is neither happy nor sad, but is simply Maria. She feels as though she is nothing and without a true purpose. It is from this point that Maria will begin to forge her identity as a poet.

I know that spring will come someday even to this barrio. When it does I will break through the concrete and reach for the sun like the first flower of spring.

-- Maria (Like the First Flower paragraph 1)

Importance: Maria's natural lyrical gifts shine through in her poems, letters, and writings. Maria longs to be beautiful, to set herself apart from the gray ugliness of the barrio, and to be like a flower in the spring. However, she must first find a reason to grow, and a purpose for living. She is already on her way, though, as her writing demonstrates.

Because my mother is a teacher of English in the Island, I learned it growing up... I have a thick accent; it makes people in school think I am not good in English. But I know more words than many native English speakers because I need words to survive.

-- Maria (More Than You Know Sabes? paragraph 1)

Importance: Maria's ability to speak English surpasses many fellow immigrants, and even many Americans. Maria has a love of English that surpasses merely needing to learn the language to get by. Since Maria has a gift with poetry, every English word she learns is a treasure to her. Maria has beauty, rather than mere survival in mind when she speaks English.

Home is where you need to be no matter where you are taken, the place that calls to you.

-- Maria (El-Super Hombre paragraph 4)

Importance: Maria struggles to understand just what home is. For most of her life, she considered Puerto Rico home. However, now living in America, she can't consider Puerto Rico home anymore. Nevertheless, she does not feel at home in New York yet. She is between two worlds, trying to figure out where she will finally come to rest.

My father, the barrio piper, sings of an island that exists only in their dreams.

-- What My Father Likes to Eat (Maria paragraph 4)



Importance: Here, Maria speaks about some of the realities of immigration. Many immigrants romanticize and idealize their homeland, conveniently forgetting the reasons why they left (which often include hunger and survival) while blaming America and their present situation for all their ills and sadness. The place these people dream of is a fairy tale, and is not reality.

Words are weapons. Words are tools.

-- Mr. Golden (Golden English: Lessons One and Two and Two-and-a-Half paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Mr. Golden explains to Maria and his class how important words are. Words are powerful things that can have powerful results. For Maria, words are a way to talk about life and beauty, and a way to make people feel these things in ways they have not felt before. Mr. Golden will become crucial in Maria's development as a poet as he helps her to find her voice.

Maria, you are a poet.

-- Mr. Golden (English Declaration: I am the Subject of a Sentence paragraph 4)

Importance: Mr. Golden proves to be the biggest single influence in Maria's development as a poet. He helps her with her English and her poetry, guiding her in the right direction toward better understanding the structure and nature of the language. She excels under his assistance, and her poems begin to take on a deeper and greater significance in her life. She is finding her purpose.

I understand, Maria, says Mr. C., glancing out the window at the snow covering everything now—there is no green in our world today, no hay verde, the color of hope, the color of home, no colors anywhere. I understand, Mr. C. repeats, although I have not spoken a word.

-- Maria and Mr. C. (Math Class: Sharing the Pie paragraph 8)

Importance: Maria comes to realize that she is not the only one missing home. Even those born in America, but who have moved elsewhere in America, may be homesick. This is true of Mr. C., who misses his native state of Georgia. He recognizes an unspoken homesickness in Maria because he is homesick himself. It demonstrates the importance of feelings even without words to Maria, who comes to value the accurate expression of feelings even more. This helps influence her poetry greatly in her use of metaphors and evoking feelings through words that are used.

But how do I become a poet? I live in a small world with few exclamation points and many question marks.

-- Maria (English: I Am the Simple Subject paragraph 5)

Importance: When she worries her world is too small to be a poet of any meaning, Mr. Golden gives Maria a copy of Neruda's "Elemental Poems." These beautiful poems about simple subjects encourage Maria to realize she has important things to say no



matter what the size of her world might be. The poems also inspire Maria to keep writing, no matter how seemingly simple or small her subjects might be.

And maybe someone in my future, someone who needs to know if her world is too small to write about will hold my book in her hands and read my poemas elementales, and say yes, I can be a poet too.

-- Maria (English: I Am the Simple Subject paragraph 6)

Importance: Maria comes into her own in terms of purpose. She is meant to write poetry that is uplifting, hopeful, comforting, and beautiful. Just as Neruda's poems have inspired her, so too does she hope her poetry will help inspire someone else not only to be comforted, but to be a poet as well. This demonstrates how important communicating beautiful things through poetry is to Maria.

We are home.

-- Maria (My Mother, the Rain, El Fin. paragraph 38)

Importance: When Mami comes to visit in New York, she brings devastating news. She and Papi are going to get a divorce. Maria is stunned. She is even more stunned by Mami's request that she come home to Puerto Rico to live with Mami and Mami's boyfriend. Maria refuses. She feels that America is her home now, and she will not return to Puerto Rico.

Each word I make mine is a pearl, a diamond, a ruby, I will someday string into a necklace and wear everywhere, as if I had been born rich in English.

-- Maria (Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker paragraph 2)

Importance: As the novel ends, Maria relishes her life in America and her learning of new words in English. Each word is a treasure to Maria not only because it makes her feel more at home, but because it is another word she can potentially use in a new poem. When the novel began, Maria felt as though she had no purpose and nothing to say in life. Now, she knows she is meant to be a poet, and this is her purpose.