

# **The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-portrait Study Guide**

**The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-portrait by Frida Kahlo**

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# Plot Summary

The Diary of Frida Kahlo contains reproduction of Mexican artist and intellectual Frida Kahlo's "journal in-time," or private diary that she wrote for approximately the last ten years of her life, from 1943 to 1954.

An Introduction by noted Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes describes the one time that he saw Frida Kahlo in the flesh at a performance in Mexico City. Fuentes goes on to speak about the cultural and historical context that shaped Kahlo. The many things that impacted Kahlo's work include the Mexican Revolution, Pre-Columbian South American culture and iconography, her grandfather who was a photographer, and the Communist revolutionary movement, among other things.

Unfortunately, the biggest impact on Kahlo's writing and art was her almost constant agony suffered as a result of a streetcar accident she suffered as a young woman. This accident, which nearly killed her, left her body broken and she required dozens of surgeries in the decades following.

The journal itself is a collection of doodles, poems, letters, sketches of what would later become full paintings, and cryptic little phrases and notes. A frequent topic is Kahlo's love for Diego Rivera, her husband and famous Mexican muralist. Kahlo's writing is highly fragmentary and rarely makes literal sense. Rather, Kahlo depends more upon "automatic writing" techniques, in which she makes free associations between words, letting her imagination dictate the text.

The diary is half-writing and half-image. Images include Aztec-style pyramids, figures with wings, monstrous amalgamations of nude bodies, and Kahlo's own dogs. Images also include many self-portraits that made Kahlo famous. Kahlo might show herself in a pool of blood, or cut off at the midsection, shattered, or with her organs external to her body. These paintings depict and understand her own pain and despair at her multiple physical infirmities. A specific body part that she continually depicts is the right foot. This foot is a particular problem for Kahlo. As the journal nears its end, Kahlo learns that her gangrenous foot must be amputated. Kahlo frequently draws the foot or her own figure missing the foot as a way to deal with the obvious trauma of amputation.

As the journal goes on, there is a detectable slide in Kahlo's mood as she slips further into illness and closer to her own mortality. Her handwriting even gets sloppy during particularly difficult episodes and in certain dark moods, Kahlo paints very bleak images of rot and death. The final image of the diary and presumably of Kahlo's life is a chaotic maelstrom of color surrounding an angel figure with wings.



# Introduction by Carlos Fuentes

## Introduction by Carlos Fuentes Summary and Analysis

Author Carlos Fuentes recalls one time that he saw artist Frida Kahlo in the flesh at a concert in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Fuentes briefly describes the building's history, whose construction began in 1905 and finished in 1934. Its interior is in the Art Deco style that was typical of the period it was built in, including walls decorated by famous Mexican muralists.

Despite all its fineries however, the presence of Kahlo in the auditorium astounds all assembled. She is a "broken Cleopatra," hiding her shriveled body and numerous physical maladies under spectacular layers of jewels and petticoats. Fuentes wonders if Kahlo is an Aztec goddess.

Fuentes establishes the historical context that Kahlo existed in. Prior to her birth in 1913, there was the great "Pax Porfiriana" or a period of peace that lasted for thirty years under Porfirio Diaz. Then in 1910 came the Mexican revolution. "Mexico is a country that has been made by its wounds" (pg. 8), dating back to Cortes' invasion and conquest of the Aztecs. From Spanish and Indian cultures, the mestizo culture emerges. Mexico endures centuries of violence and civil war. Fuentes compares Mexico's own schisms to Kahlo and her broken body. However, Kahlo is able to find the humor, the mirth, the jest, the resilience, amid the tragedy, and this trait is also distinctly Mexican.

Kahlo's tragedies start early. At age seven, she develops polio and is ridiculed at school as "Frida pata de palo," or Frida the pegleg for her awkward gait. She responds with humor. She grows up at a time of upheaval, when intellectuals in Spain embrace the philosophy of Henri Bergson called the "vital impulse." Frida, too, embraces this spirit and joins a group called Las Cachuchas or The Caps. Kahlo is a "prankish spirit" at school.

In September 1925, she is involved in a near-fatal bus accident. Her spine, collarbone, pelvis break, and her leg suffers eleven fractures. She begins to paint in her long bedridden recovery from this accident. Fuentes states that Kahlo's chief subject is pain. She tries to translate the constant pain that she feels into art.

Fuentes delves into Kahlo's influences. There is Guillermo Kahlo who is her photographer father. Next is the "retablo" or Mexican devotional painting of the kind that adorn many churches. Third is Jose Guadalupe Posada who is a well-known Mexican graphic artist. Additionally, Kahlo draws from Hieronymous Bosch and Rene Magritte.

Kahlo becomes known for painting self-portraits. She states, "I paint myself because I am alone. I am the subject I know best." Kahlo develops her own brand of Surrealism where she has the "capacity to convoke a whole universe out of the bits and fragments



of her own self and out of the persistent traditions of her own culture" (pg. 15.) In a way, Fuentes contends, Kahlo's art is beautiful, in that it traces self-knowledge.

Politically, Kahlo is attracted to Communism and Marxism. Surrealism shares with Marxism a kind of utopian vision, a return of humankind to "its pristine origin." Like many young intellectuals of her time, Kahlo declares herself to be a Communist. There is a movement led by Alejandro Gomez Arias to challenge the one-party political system in Mexico. Kahlo's politics cannot be separated from her lifelong love affair with Diego Rivera, the muralist. They have a stormy relationship: Rivera cheats on her, she cheats in return, he becomes enraged at her cheating. Like Kahlo, Rivera has a lifelong association with Communism. Marx, Stalin, and Lenin figures factor in to a lot of Kahlo's later paintings.

Despite all the politics, however, there is a humor in Kahlo that transcends all other considerations, and her Diary is a good example. Kahlo is irreverent, silly, rebellious, and she uses puns and other literary devices alongside paintings. Humor allows her to escape the confined world of the Mexican intellectuals. Her famously ostentatious dress that hid her broken body is also a form of humor, as well as a kind of defiance of death. Fuentes finally compares Kahlo to Franz Kafka, and not only because they have the same initials. Kahlo and Kafka are united in their preoccupation with pain.



# Essay by Sarah M. Lowe

## Essay by Sarah M. Lowe Summary and Analysis

Reading through Kahlo's Diary is an "act of transgression." Her journal was never meant to be seen by the public. It is private and intimate.

The Diary is not an accounting of the self in the context of history like most diaries, but simply Kahlo's "self" trying to understand itself. It is a "journal in-time," a record written by someone just for him or herself. It is a repository for feelings and images and a place for firsthand observations and immediate reactions. Thus the Diary must be "approached with some trepidation" because the artist is not trying to make art.

Kahlo begins the diary in the mid 1940s, when she is thirty-six years old. Her father died a few years earlier and she had divorced and then married Diego Rivera five years earlier. Her health at this point is rapidly deteriorating and she has had several spinal and other surgeries. By this time, she has enjoyed considerable success as an artist and she is known as a Surrealist. However, Lowe notes Kahlo was not strongly aligned with the self-proclaimed leader of Surrealism, Andre Breton.

Kahlo's Diary is an exercise often times in "automatic drawing," in which the subconscious rather than conscious minds dredges up images. She uses spilled ink and a variety of media, including colored pencils, crayons, and more to render images.

Several themes emerge in the Diary. First and foremost is her love for Diego Rivera, expressed as love letters and paintings dedicated to Diego. Kahlo also refers to elements of Mexican culture. There are indigenous costumes, rings, necklaces, and headdresses that evoke a bygone Mexican era, particularly the Aztec era. Kahlo feels strongly linked to her Mexican ancestors and she appropriates words and images of the Aztecs as well as the Olmecs and Toltecs.

Kahlo links Communism with the Aztec culture, specifically. Lowe states Kahlo's obsession with Communism was less political than it was religious. Kahlo, with Communism, is searching for meaning and for "'pillars' that could support her faith" (pg. 28.)

Lastly, a "regression" in the diary is unmistakable as Kahlo slips deeper and deeper into ill health. A good part of the diary chronicles her discussions with doctors, her quest for cures, and her resilience when those cures are not effective.

Despite her maladies, Kahlo displays a wit and "black humor" that is "unquenchable." Amid her pain there is great strength.



## Pages 33 to 57

### Pages 33 to 57 Summary and Analysis

The first page of the diary is a kind of title page. It reads "Pint de 1916" or Painted in 1916 and says "an overt prevarication proclaiming her lack of concern for 'rational facts'" (pg. 202.) Around a strange photograph of Kahlo, there is an ornamental frame, a bird, and flower wreaths.

The next three pages are "free association" poems, written in a stream of consciousness manner. There is no obvious pattern or rhythm to the poetry, but short phrases, evocative words, and random adjectives and nouns where "Kahlo's collection of words often makes no literal sense but is highly effective on a subliminal level" (pg. 203.) Collection of words may suggest smells, tastes, and sights.

The next page is a love letter addressed to husband Diego Rivera. To discern an obvious meaning, as with the stream of consciousness poetry is difficult, and line by line, there does not seem to be much in the way of rational sense. Kahlo speaks of feeling that she is trapped and there is "all this madness." Perhaps as a remedy to this jumble of bad emotion, she asks Diego to give her "grace, your light and your warmth." A scratched-out line in the poem reminds the reader that this is a private journal that Kahlo never intended to be read. The love letter is followed by another long column of free association poetry, filled with such phrases as "winged with motors," "curious morning," and "tumbling rubbish."

The next page is an ink drawing filled with dots connected with lines, like a child's connect-the-dots exercise. However, "a second glance reveals an array of suggestive forms that are never completely legible" (pg. 207.) These include a solar system, a skyscraper's window, and an eye.

The next few pages, labeled "Carta" is a letter. The notes inform the reader that it is written to Jacqueline Lamba, whom Kahlo met in 1938. Lamba is a fellow Surrealist. Like her poetry, Kahlo's letter is less about meaning than about describing sensations and playing with words. The pair enjoyed time together in Paris and her language, which is often fragmentary and incoherent, "conveys a sense of shared experience and an intimate communication" (pg. 208.)

In another page, Kahlo is inspired by the different colors of her colored pencils to write bits of poetry in different colors and ponder the meaning of the colors. Green is "good warm light" while magenta is the color of "leaves becoming earth."

Another eight-page love letter to Rivera follows. While still cryptic and metaphoric, this letter contains some sexually suggestive images such as "my body is filled with you for days and days," and "all my joy is to feel life spring from your flower-fountain."



A following page is written in "the color of dried blood" and features a "somewhat unsteady hand," leading Lowe to conclude that an "aura of illness...permeates the page" (pg. 217.) Once again, it is addressed to Rivera. In one part of the letter, she celebrates a gift she receives for her birthday, saying the gift has made her "sing."

The next drawing is labeled "Xocolatl," which is the Nahuatl word for the cocoa plant. Appropriately, the drawing is brown like chocolate, and it has twigs and leaves growing from a center block.

The next page is a list of a bunch of words that start with the letter 'A.' True to form, it is free-form and likely the product of whatever popped into Kahlo's head.

The next page shows two figures joined close together, labeled "Strange Couple from the Land of the Dot and Line," further identified as "One-Eye" and "Nefersis." Lowe suggests that the image and the name Nefersis brings to mind "Nefertiti and her consort, Akhenaten" (pg. 220.) Kahlo identifies with Nefertiti as a strong female figure.

The next page is a "portrait of Neferunico," whom is identified as the son of One-Eye and Nefersis. Lowe identifies it as a self-portrait, complete with Kahlo's trademark uni-brow.

Kahlo extends this strange family with another drawing of Neferunico's brother Neferdos, combining Hindu, Aztec, and Egyptian symbology.

The next few pages are drawings in which sexual and other organs are strewn about the scene in a "lewd" manner. A multi-teated dog recalls "the legend of Romulus and Remus." A subsequent drawing, labeled "Dance to the Sun," is a happier drawing with a series of dancing, jubilant animal figures.



# Pages 58 to 83

## Pages 58 to 83 Summary and Analysis

A drawing depicts two bull's heads facing opposite directions. The minotaur, half-man and half-bull creature from Greek mythology, is a Surrealist icon borrowed by Picasso, representing "unleashed brutality" (pg. 224.) Kahlo plays with the idea of the hybrid or the hermaphrodite. She enjoys images of two creatures merging into one. One face looks left at the profile of a woman, while the other looks right at a broken-up figure of Kahlo, which is labeled "I am Disintegration."

Kahlo next depicts a multi-limbed monster made out of nude women and random sexual organs. It is interesting to note that "Kahlo's nude women are virtually never shown as objects of desire" (pg. 225.)

Next, in a nod to Picasso's multiple perspective style, Kahlo draws a self-portrait from both the front and side. To Lowe, the face "masks pain." There are symbols around the head, including a yin-yang sign, a griffin, an Egyptian bird.

The next page is "one of Kahlo's most illuminating statements with respect to her own creativity." She compares ink to blood and perhaps both substances are "vital" liquids because without the act of creation, the artist would wither away. At the end, Kahlo asks, "What would I do without the absurd and the ephemeral?"

The next pages "reiterate the theme of creation" (pg. 228.) "Desire" is described as "the one who gave birth to herself." Kahlo was unable to carry a child, but through her art she is able to fantasize about such an event, in a manner of speaking.

A subsequent image recalls her "large-scale painting *The Two Fridas* (1939)" (pg. 230.) The author continues that "the drawing elicits a feeling of nostalgia by evoking the faded glory of a Renaissance drawing" (pg. 230.) More cryptic phrases accompany the two faces of the image, which speaks to someone, probably Rivera, about their love, saying, "You love. Love me as the center. Me as yourself." A subsequent entry dated January 22, 1947, also expresses a profound love, where she says, "You rain on me-I sky you, You're the fineness, childhood, life-my love."

The next image is labeled "still life," and Lowe explains that this type of painting is translated in Spanish as "naturaleza muerta" or literally "dead nature." There are two vessels shown and one has a human face on it. A disembodied hand hanging by the vessels "is a striking metaphor for Kahlo's increasing weakness and inability to function" (pg. 233.)

The next pages talk about Diego and how Kahlo wants to give him all the energy that he needs to live. She would die for him. Diego is the beginning, the end, and the universe to her. On the last page of this sequence, Kahlo seems to come to her senses,



admitting that Diego is not for her alone and that "he belongs to himself." Random ink blots and an unsteady hand remind the reader that Kahlo is struggling physically.

The next scene shows a foot made from an ink splotch, amid an icy landscape. The author points out that "visual references to feet, specifically Kahlo's right foot, are frequent throughout the diary: it is the one she suffered from most" (pg. 236.)



## Pages 84 to 107

### Pages 84 to 107 Summary and Analysis

Kahlo creates an "Eyesaurus," or a green beast with a large unicorn-like horn, whose "composite form and name recall the many creatures that populate Pre-Columbian myths" (pg. 237.)

Kahlo next draws her right foot. Since 1932, this foot has been "plagued with trophic ulcers" (pg. 238.) The way she colors the outline of the foot makes it look bloated and deformed. Below the foot is a phoenix-like creature engulfed in flames, perhaps Kahlo's promise to herself that she would rise above the pain of her foot. In the next drawing, an angel appears to be surrounded by celestial stars, but upon closer inspection the stars are spermatozoa.

In the next entry, Kahlo talks about pain, which is a common theme. She offers that "tragedy is the most ridiculous thing 'man' has but I'm sure that animals suffer, and yet they do not exhibit their 'pain'."

In the next entry, Kahlo has taken a real and erotic photograph of a half-naked woman and then defaced the image by replacing the woman's face with her own grotesque face. Opposite the entry, the name "Sadja" appears, one of Kahlo's signatures. It is a combination of two Sanskrit words where "sadha" means heaven and earth and "sadya" means genuine (pg. 240.)

In the next image, Kahlo turns the diary sideways to provide a horizontal canvas. She draws dancers undulating in a crowded space. The author points out that "Kahlo emphasizes the essence of their movement by using strong diagonals and heavy black parallel lines" (pg. 241.)

The next image is noteworthy because it is one of the few sketches of the diary that Kahlo expanded into an oil painting. It is called "1947 August Heaven the earth Me and Diego." The author says that "Kahlo sits on the lap of Mexico, personified as a woman; on her lap lies the baby Diego. The three of them are embraced by a beneficent Buddha-like representing the Universe" (pg. 241.)

The next entries were written shortly after Kahlo's 40th birthday. Her writing is particularly sloppy and probably a result of pain killers after an operation. She talks about being behind "the curtain of madness," where she would "build my world." She also talks about revolution as "the harmony of form and color."

The next entry celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. She makes reference to a "Tree of Hope," or a portion of lyrics from a song she enjoys.

The next pages are devoted to a story called "The Origin of the Two Fridas: Memory." Kahlo recounts a childhood memory, in which she develops an imaginary friend at the



age of six. She draws a "door" in the fogged breath on a window to enter her world of the imagination. Her friend is characterized by "joyfulness." She spends an inestimable amount of time in this world with her friend and then she returns to the normal world, erasing all evidence of the fantasy world by wiping the door clean.



# Pages 108 to 131

## Pages 108 to 131 Summary and Analysis

Kahlo draws the image of a naked angel surrounded by bubbles with the word "sueno" or sleep printed over and over again throughout the image.

Kahlo next makes reference to Dr. Juan Farill, "a true man of science," thanking him in a brief note. Farill is her doctor who guides her through her many operations. Kahlo describes seven operations she has in the years 1950 and 1951 to her spinal column. She must wear a "plaster corset" at all times. She describes her despair but at the same time her willingness to continue to live and paint. She wants to change her art in order to better serve the Communist party and advance their movement.

The "anthropomorphic vase" that Kahlo drew earlier as part of a still life makes a return in two images. This time, the two vases are shattered and broken and the faces are crying. These are signs of Kahlo's own pain and suffering.

In another entry, Kahlo expresses her love for Communism and she states that she understands the struggle of Lenin, Engels, Marx, Mao, and other "pillars of the new Communist world." She expresses her desire to paint again in order to further the Communist ideal. She dubs her newest work "revolutionary realism," because now she paints to serve the revolution. She states that Asians, Mexicans, and blacks are united in their oppression by white capitalist countries like the United States and England. In a subsequent entry, Kahlo laments the passing of Stalin, stating "the whole universe has lost its balance" with his death.

On another page, the image of a speckled foot again recalls Kahlo's infirmity. Below are the slogans "Viva Stalin" and "Viva Diego."

The next two pages are devoted to Rivera. Kahlo draws a winged figure and states that Diego's love has given her wings where "you keep me company. You lull me to sleep and make me come alive."

# Pages 131 to 155

## Pages 131 to 155 Summary and Analysis

With the next two images, the author points out that "Kahlo pairs a powerful modern political system-Communism-with an ancient, longer-lived regime-the Aztec empire" (pg. 261.) The familiar Soviet hammer-and-sickle symbol dominates one image, along with the names of Kahlo's heroes-Engels, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. In the Aztec image, the words "Moon" and "Sun" "relate to the two ancient Aztec pyramids at the site of Teotihuacan" (pg. 261.) The image is dominated by the figure of a woman in a dress and unsure if it is a self-portrait, Kahlo writes "yo?" or "me" below the figure.

Switching gears, Kahlo next paints a few skulls and dancing skeletons, "muertes" or the dead to be part of the popular iconography for the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrated November 2.

The next somber image is painted from a "worm's-eye view," down in the ground. Roots resembling flames engulfing a coffin shape on the top half of the image. While the dancing skeletons in the previous image make fun of death, this image treats it with grave seriousness.

The next few pages pay tribute to Isabel Villasenor, a poet friend of Kahlo's who had just died. Kahlo writes an elegy addressed to Villasenor, stating that "all that remains of you is still alive" referring to her daughter Olinka, her friends, and her legacy. She draws a deer in memory of Villasenor. Lowe explains the deer has special meaning to Kahlo, being associated with the right foot specifically in Pre-Columbian mythology (265).

Kahlo next turns her attention to artistic concerns. She draws a small still life, and talks about the "Golden Section" or "Golden Mean" long held as an aesthetically pleasing proportion for artists to adhere to in their work. She next writes down a recipe for a paint that uses damar gum.

Kahlo next draws a picture of her dog named Mr. Xolotl, which is an appropriate name because Xolotl was the "dog-headed aspect of Quetzalcoatl" (pg. 268). Quetzalcoatl was an Aztec god. As Lowe explains, the idea of the "animal alter-ego" is strong in Aztec culture, and Kahlo often draws animals alongside herself in self-portraits.

Another self-portrait with uni-brow shows Kahlo naked and in flames, with wings with heavy lines through them. The caption asks, "Are you leaving? No," is probably a reference to Kahlo feeling sick and wondering if her time has come.

Another disturbing image, in which Kahlo laments that "everything [is] upside down," shows Kahlo but her lower extremities have melted into the ground into a pool of blood and rot.



In a subsequent entry, Kahlo writes a poem referring to "La nina Mariana," or the child Mariana. This refers to Mariana Morilla Safa, whom Kahlo painted in 1944. Kahlo again refers to the Tree of Hope and to Diego, along with some other evocative and nonsensical terms.

In the next poem, addressed simply to "H," Kahlo warns "H" that "You are killing yourself!" and wonders if it is "my fault?" Kahlo admits guilt for the suffering of this "H" person.

The next image, perhaps one of the very few in the journal that looks like a preconceived painting and not a doodle, shows two disembodied feet up to the shins on a table, in the manner of a still life. Unfortunately, by this time, Kahlo's gangrenous right foot got bad enough to have to be amputated and this image is an obvious reference to that traumatic event that is yet to be. Kahlo states "Feet, what do I need them for / If I have wings to fly." The image of the feet "is premonitory and liberating, as if by visualizing her greatest fear, Kahlo could exorcise her dread of it" (pg. 274.)

A subsequent image, showing an Aztec pyramid and a blazing sun crashing down into it. It is labeled "Ruins," and perhaps is also in reference to Kahlo's trauma of losing her foot. She feels in ruins. In an entry labeled July 1953, Kahlo begs to have one of her many "wings" cut off instead of her foot.



# Pages 156 to 183

## Pages 156 to 183 Summary and Analysis

Kahlo writes an ode to one of her influences, Hieronymus Bosch, calling him a "wonderful painter" as well as a "fantastic man of genius." She also mentions Brueghel, another Northern painter.

The next image shows a headless and nude woman. Her spinal column is exposed and shattered and she has wings instead of arms. A pigeon is atop this headless monster and writing at the bottom indicates that the "pigeon made mistakes. It made mistakes." This is a line that is repeated on subsequent pages. Perhaps Kahlo regrets that she was born and considers herself a mistake of nature.

Kahlo next writes about the doctors telling her about the need to amputate her leg. She is worried but also feels it would be a sort of relief. She again mentions her love for Diego Rivera.

The next page says "February 1954," which is several months after Kahlo's leg was amputated in August 1953. She says that she feels like committing suicide and she has never suffered so much in her life. Rivera will not let her commit suicide. A subsequent entry, in March, shows Kahlo in brighter spirits, saying she has "achieved a lot," and that her "will is strong." She thanks her doctors for all of their efforts.

After a little sketch of her dog, Miss Capulina, Kahlo again takes time to thank all her doctors, as well as friend Teresa Proenza and nurse Judith Ferreto. She also thanks the people of the Soviet Union, China, Czechoslovakia, and Mexico "above all." At the time, all of these countries were Communist.

Kahlo next begins a six-page autobiographical account titled "Outline of my life." Her handwriting is quite unsteady. She states that she was born in 1910 in Coyoacan. She talks of her grandparents who were born in Hungary. They moved to Germany and had Kahlo's father, who emigrated to Mexico and married a Mexican woman. After his wife died, Kahlo's father remarried Kahlo's mother, Matilde Calderon y Gonzalez. She then talks about her maternal grandparents, stating their names. Her grandfather was a photographer.

Her childhood was pleasant, although Kahlo's father was sickly. At the age of four, Kahlo witnessed a clash between Zapata and Carranza revolutionary groups in the Mexican Revolution. Kahlo's mother tended to wounded Zapatistas. At thirteen, Kahlo said that she joined the Communist youth. She recalls hearing the bullets of war in 1914 screeching past her ears.

Kahlo next draws another self-portrait where her "stance and large round breasts denote Kahlo as Superwoman. But doubt lingers, for example, in the ambiguous gesture of her arms: do they signify joy or resignation?" (pg. 284.)





The next entry is Kahlo's final written entry. After having recovered from an unknown setback, Kahlo again thanks her medical team for their hard work.

Kahlo next draws yet another self-portrait. This time, arrows point to the parts of her nude body to indicate where she has had operations. It is a very clinical and detached approach to her pain.

Another painting, described as "eerie," departs from Kahlo's trademark style. It features broad black lines, shaping a simple adobe house and a horse in front of it. The image is very flat and with "a few brushstrokes Kahlo has rendered an incredibly oppressive scene" (pg. 287.)

The last two pages in the diary are presumably the last image Kahlo ever made. It is wild with random dashes of color. Kahlo returns to her "wing" motif by showing a figure with wings on the right page. The figure is leaving a trail that perhaps is made of blood. Lowe interprets the image that the "death mocked but also feared, the end she longed for but fought valiantly against, is upon her" (pg. 287.)



# Characters

## Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is a celebrated Mexican painter and intellectual of the first half of the 20th century. This diary represents Kahlo's private journal that she maintains from age of thirty-six to her death in 1954. Kahlo endures a famously difficult life where she contracts polio at age seven and at age eighteen, she nearly dies in a streetcar accident. This accident, in which her spinal column is broken in several places and her leg shattered, leaves her a lifelong semi-cripple. The rest of her life is characterized by deteriorating health as a result of dozens of spinal and other surgeries. She was in near-constant pain. Bedridden from her streetcar accident, Kahlo decided to paint in bed, beginning her career as a painter.

Kahlo is heavily influenced by Surrealist art. Her paintings are a way to understand herself and she is well known for her many self-portraits that incorporate Surrealist elements, such as internal organs exposed outside of her body. Despite her suffering, Kahlo is also capable of humor and silliness, which is appropriate given her Surrealist influence.

Kahlo meets Diego Rivera as a young woman and marries him, starting a tumultuous lifelong love affair with the older man and famous muralist. Many of the diary pages are devoted to or addressed to Rivera, expressing Kahlo's undying love for the man and how Rivera completes her and gives her the will to live.

## Diego Rivera

Diego Rivera is a famous Mexican muralist. Rivera meets Kahlo when he is painting a mural on commission and she falls in love with him, marrying him a few years later.

They share a love of art as well as a love for Communism. Rivera is a lifelong and fervent Communist who at one point helps to hide Trotsky in Mexico. He falls in and out of favor with the official Communist party. His intellectual love of the ideals of Communism seem to contradict the actions he takes. For example, he receives handsome sums of money from capitalists as payment to paint murals and this is the reason why he has a sort of love-hate relationship with the official party.

Rivera is an infamous womanizer and his marriage to Kahlo does not prevent him from carrying on multiple love affairs. Kahlo becomes so fed up with Rivera that she divorces him in 1939 but they remarry a year later. Rivera's adultery prompts Kahlo to initiate her own handful of affairs over the year.

Rivera and Kahlo's relationship could be described as tumultuous, but what never is questioned throughout Kahlo's diary is her undying love for Rivera. Many pages in the diary are addressed to Diego or are about Kahlo's passion for the man.



## **Carlos Fuentes**

Carlos Fuentes is a noted Mexican novelist and intellectual. He writes the Introduction to the diary, laying out Kahlo's historical and cultural context and notes Kahlo's many artistic influences.

## **Sarah M. Lowe**

Sarah M. Lowe provides a beginning essay about Kahlo and her diary and also provides commentary throughout. She links otherwise cryptic diary pages with specific events and people in Kahlo's life.

## **Guillermo Kahlo**

Guillermo Kahlo is Frida Kahlo's grandfather and a noted photographer. Fuentes cites Guillermo as a key influence on Frida's artistic philosophy.

## **The Pillars of Communism**

At one point, Kahlo refers to the Pillars of Communism as prominent figures in the history of Communism that are Kahlo's heroes. They are Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin.

## **Hieronymus Bosch**

Hieronymus Bosch is a famous European painter known for his fantastic and allegorical paintings. Kahlo is heavily influenced by his work and in one entry, she praises him as a man of genius.

## **Mariana Morilla Safa**

Mariana is a young girl whom Kahlo painted in 1944. Kahlo makes reference to her in one of her free association poems.

## **Isabel Villasenor**

Isabel Villasenor is a close friend of Kahlo's who dies. Kahlo writes a poem in her memory.

## **Dr. Juan Farill**

Dr. Juan Farill is Kahlo's attending doctor and the doctor she trusts the most in regards to the medical decisions she has to make. At several points later in the journal, Kahlo thanks Farill for his hard work and diligence.



# Objects/Places

## The Right Foot

Kahlo frequently depicts a right foot in her paintings. This is an obvious reference to her own diseased foot. The foot develops gangrene and it must be amputated shortly before Kahlo's death.

## Communism

Kahlo is a lifelong member of the Communist party. She believes Communism presents a powerful opportunity to better mankind and she wants her work to advance the Communist movement.

## The Mexican Revolution

Kahlo grew up during the Mexican Revolution. She even claimed she was born in 1910 instead of her real birth date of 1907 in order to match her birth date to the beginning of the Mexican Revolution.

## Outline of My Life

Kahlo writes a six-page autobiography of her earliest years called Outline of My Life. Biographers have relied on this piece of her journal for insight.

## Stream of Consciousness

Kahlo uses this Modernist technique for much of her writing and poetry. Her poetry makes no literal sense and instead, meanings are forged by the association one word has to the next word.

## Muertes

Muertes or literally "the dead," are animated skeleton figures that are popular symbols of Mexico's Day of the Dead holiday. Kahlo draws jubilant muertes as a way to sort of mock and trivialize death.

## Yin-Yang Symbol

Yin-Yang symbols abound in Kahlo's diary. Kahlo enjoys the symbol in its advocacy of equality and for its sense of duality. This is a theme which pervades her art.



## **The Aztec Pyramid**

The iconic step-style pyramid of the Aztecs makes its way into many pages of the journal. Mexican intellectuals of Kahlo's time were keen to discover their native Indian ancestry and Kahlo is no exception.

## **Mr. Xolotl**

Mr. Xolotl is one of Kahlo's many adored dogs. He has an appropriate name because Xolotl was the dog-headed aspect of Aztec god Quetzalcoatl and Kahlo has a special interest in Aztec culture.

## **The Golden Section**

Also called the Golden Mean, this is a long-held artists' guideline. It establishes an aesthetically pleasing ideal proportion for artists to adhere to in their work.



# Themes

## Truth is Self-Knowledge

In the Introduction, Carlos Fuentes explains that artists seek truth and that Kahlo is no exception. Kahlo equates truth with self-knowledge and according to her, this is the subject that she knows best. So many of the figures in Kahlo's diary pages are depictions of herself and many of her poems, doodlings, and cryptic phrases are ways to explore her own personal universe.

Unfortunately for Kahlo, this means paying particular attention to pain and the nature of her own mortality, given her long history of surgical procedures stemming mostly from a near-fatal streetcar accident she suffered in 1925. She has conflicting feelings about death. For example, she paints jubilant and dancing skeletons in one page, mocking and trivializing death, but in the next painting she draws roots underground as flames that consume a coffin, demonstrating her fear of death. Kahlo vacillates between inviting death where it brings cessation to her pain and despair and fighting for her life and all the joys of living.

Toward the end of the journal, Kahlo gives particular attention to images of her own foot. Around this time, her foot is gangrenous and she learns that it must be amputated. She might use splotches of paint to show the foot as malformed or she draws a disembodied foot on a table like a still life. She also draws figures with missing feet or with lines through the knee where she got amputated.

## Communism

Since her early teenage years, Kahlo has identified herself as a Communist. She believes that white people from capitalist places like the United States and Europe have engaged in a systematic enslavement and oppression of minorities like Mexicans, Asians, and blacks. Communism, to Kahlo's mind, offers an opportunity for true equality in the world and an opportunity for the working people of oppressed and impoverished countries to rise up and take the wealth and resources that are rightfully theirs. She holds as her heroes such figures as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, and Stalin. Many pages in the diary are filled with these names, or such phrases as "Viva Stalin" or "Long Live Stalin."

Moreover, though she feels she has not done so in her early years, Kahlo expresses a wish to channel her artistic abilities into art that glorifies Communism and advances the revolutionary movement. She calls her new art "revolutionary realism," and she begins to interpret her interests and art through the prism of politics.

Commentator Sarah M. Lowe looks at Kahlo's affection for Communism at a deeper level. To Lowe, Kahlo sees Communism as the equivalent of a religion. Kahlo finds comfort in the promise of Communism and when modern medicine fails to cure her of

her many maladies, she turns to Communism. As a left-wing radical intellectual, Kahlo does not or cannot embrace traditional religion, but nevertheless she has a need for the comfort and certainty associated with religion. Hence, she shapes the Communist movement to suit her emotional and intellectual needs.

## Playfulness

From the title page of the diary, Kahlo displays a certain playfulness. She is not above humorous incongruities, puns, and a sense of silliness. Her title page indicates the diary was "Painted in 1916," which is obviously false, and it shows a photograph of Kahlo looking like she is dead surrounded by funerary-type wreaths. Kahlo inverts expectations and instead of an introduction as a new beginning, this one has a mock ending and a pseudo-memorial.

Playfulness is also an important part of Kahlo's style of poetry that issues forth in a stream of consciousness. Kahlo is not interested in any literal sense or story progression. Instead, she free associates, forging connections between words based on a willingness to write down whatever might pop into her head. Kahlo implicitly trusts her unconscious instincts. This trust pervades all of her work. With images as well as text, Kahlo is not afraid to "play around," and indeed the diary is full of doodlings and half-thought out ideas. She might randomly make an ink splotch and then draw a foot around the splotch. She draws and writes in a variety of colors. She draws a figure and then below it writes "yo?" meaning "me?" and is unsure of even her own intentions. She creates an alter-ego called Sadjá, which she uses as a signature in several pages. She delights in puns. In one image of a man with a large headdress on, she plays on the Spanish verb 'tocar,' which can mean either "to be crazy" or "to arrange a headdress." Kahlo states the man is "Not as Mad as a Hatter." All of these characteristics point to a silly streak that enlivens Kahlo's work, which is remarkable considering how much physical misery she endured in life.





# Style

## Perspective

Frida Kahlo is a Mexican artist and intellectual. She is strongly influenced by the Surrealist tradition in art and a lot of her art borrows from this tradition. Diary pages are full of fantastic creatures like angels and impossible circumstances, like monsters made from nude women, or body parts littering a field. Kahlo delights in playful "automatic writing," in which she writes whatever happens to enter her head. At other times, she might play association games where one word evokes another and these words are strung together into free-form poetry. Kahlo also believes that truth is self-knowledge, and so many of the figures in her work represent herself to one degree or another.

Kahlo is deeply involved in the Communist movement. She believes Communism to be the wave of the future and the promise of a better life for all. She frequently heaps praise upon Communism's founders and famous proponents such as Mao, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. When Russian leader Joseph Stalin dies, Kahlo mourns his passing. Kahlo hopes to use her art to further the Communist movement, and she refers to what she's attempting as "revolutionary realism."

As Carlos Fuentes explains in his Introduction, Kahlo deeply explores the reality of her own pain. From self-portraits in which her spinal column is exposed and depicted as a shattered Roman-style column, to frequent images of blood, death, and transformation, Kahlo is interested in a kind of cathartic release of all of her pain through her art.

## Tone

As might be expected from a private journal that spans years, the tone varies throughout the book. The tone could be said to most closely mirror Kahlo's state of mental and physical health at the time of the writing. Kahlo's history of physical maladies is well documented, starting with her contraction of polio at age seven and continuing to a horrible streetcar accident as a young woman. She undergoes surgery after surgery, and by all accounts spends much of her time bedridden and in pain. Nevertheless, Kahlo displays a remarkable tenacity in dealing with her multitude of physical problems. Some of her entries are upbeat and playful where she might show one of her dogs playing or the sun shining over an Aztec pyramid. At other times, Kahlo is clearly in a dark mood, despairing over her pain and probably thinking death would be a sweet release from her suffering. At these times, Kahlo's text might be especially fragmentary and written with an unsteady hand or her art may be "angrily" or sloppily applied to the page as ink splotches and messy dashes of paint. The subject matter often reflects her dark mood. She might show herself shattered or bleeding and there are pages full of blood-red paint and dark rot, as well as roots that look like tentacles or flames that consume her figure.



## Structure

The Diary of Frida Kahlo is a colorful page for page reproduction of Frida Kahlo's "journal in-time," or private diary that she never intended for public consumption. Kahlo started the diary in the mid 1940s when she was thirty-six years old and kept it going, although she missed months at a time with her frequent serious illnesses, until a few days before her death in 1954.

There is an introduction by Carlos Fuentes who is a famous and well-respected Mexican novelist. Fuentes establishes the historical context in which Kahlo lived and he provides some insights as to her art, her personality, and the private life that influenced her art. Next in the book is an essay by Sarah M. Lowe, who provides additional thoughts about Kahlo and the diary.

The reproduced diary pages appear next. Given the reality of a diary that is only infrequently updated, there is little order or structure from one entry to the next. Kahlo frequently writes love letters addressed to her husband, Diego Rivera. Otherwise, Kahlo engages in some poetry written in the style of stream of consciousness with random phrases accompanied by quirky doodlings and sketches. These pictures fall short of the work Kahlo might have put into one of her full-fledged paintings.

Following the diary pages, the pages are translated and Sarah M. Lowe provides a commentary on most of the pages. Ending the book is a chronology of Kahlo's life.



## Quotes

"Frida Kahlo is one of the greatest speakers for pain in a century that has known, perhaps not more suffering than other times, but certainly a more unjustified and therefore shameful, cynical and publicized, programmed, irrational, and deliberate form of suffering than ever" (Introduction, pg. 12.)

"There is a humor in Kahlo that transcends politics and even aesthetics, tickling the ribs of life itself" (Introduction, pg. 21.)

"Reading through Frida Kahlo's diary is unquestionably an act of transgression, an undertaking inevitably charged with an element of voyeurism" (Essay, pg. 25.)

"Despite the pain and anguish Kahlo freely and openly expressed in her diary, her unquenchable thirst for life reveals itself. Her wit and alegria, her sense of irony and black humor all emerge here." (Essay, pg. 29.)

"warble-gance-neck, vine / black hair silk girl wind / father grief pirate salive / hay clamp consumption lively" (Plate 5, pg. 203.)

"Diego: Nothing compares to your hands / nothing like the green-gold of / your eyes. My body is filled with you for days and days. you are the mirror of the night" (Plate 17, pg. 213.)

"Who would say that stains live and help one to live? Ink, blood, odor. I don't know what ink he would use so eager to leave his mark in such a way. I respect his entreaty and I'll do what I can to escape from my world" (Plate 47, pg. 227.)

"You rain on me-I sky you / You're the fineness, childhood, life-my love-little boy-old man / mother and center-blue-tenderness-I hand you my universe and you live me" (Plate 55, pg. 232.)

"Revolution is the harmony of form and color and everything exists, and moves, under only one law = life = Nobody is separate from anybody else. Nobody fights for himself. Everything is all and one" (Plate 77, pg. 243.)

"No one is more than a function-or part of a total function. Life goes by, and sets paths, which are not traveled in vain. But no one can stop 'freely' to play by the wayside, because he will delay or upset the general atomic journey" (Plate 87, pg. 248.)

"I've been sick for a year now. Seven operations on my spinal column. Doctor Farill saved me. He brought me back the joy of life. I am still in the wheelchair, and I don't know if I'll be able to walk again soon" (Plate 95, pg. 252.)

"They amputated my leg six months ago / It seemed to me centuries of torture and at times I nearly went crazy. I still feel like committing suicide / Diego prevents me from

doing it in the vain belief that maybe he will need me. He has told me so and I believe him. But I have never suffered so much in my life" (Plate 144, pg. 278.)



## Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of feet images in Kahlo's work?

What is Kahlo's relationship with Communism? What is she hoping to do with her art in relation to Communism?

What is a journal in-time? Why is reading one an "act of transgression" according to Lowe?

What happens to Kahlo in September 1925, and how does it lead her to becoming an artist?

Kahlo frequently draws a Chinese yin-yang symbol in her doodlings. What is the significance of the yin-yang symbol to Kahlo?

According to Carlos Fuentes' introduction, what justification does Kahlo give for making herself her primary subject?

Describe the poetry that Kahlo writes. How is it structured?