How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents Study Guide

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Álvarez

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Introduction

Julia Alvarez's first novel, the semi-autobiographical *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents,* gamed generally favorable reviews and brought her work to the attention of a wide group of critics and readers. Most reviewers praise the novel's exploration of a Dominican-American family's struggle with assimilation and the resulting clash between Hispanic and American cultures. The novel's collection of fifteen short stones relates, in reverse chronological order, the experiences of the de la Torre-Garcia family: patriarch Carlos (papi), mother Laura (Mami), and their four daughters-Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia. The stories begin in 1989 With Yolanda's visit to her native country, the Dominican Republic, and work backward to 1956, before the family immigrated to New York City. The years in between are filled with the difficult process of acculturation for all members of the family. Donna Rifkind, in the *New York Times Book Review,* writes that Alvarez has "beautifully captured the threshold experiences of the new immigrant, where the past is not yet a memory and the future remains an anxious dream." Jason Zappe similarly notes in *The American Review* that "Alvarez speaks for many families and brings to light the challenges faced by many immigrants. She shows how the tensions of successes and failures don't have to tear families apart."

Author Biography

Julia Alvarez admits that her critically acclaimed novel *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* is a semi-autobiographical account of her family as they struggled to adjust to American culture. Alvarez was born in New York City on March 27. 1950, but soon relocated to the Dominican Republic, where she lived until she was ten. While there, her father, like the novel's patriarch, was forced to flee with his family after he led a failed attempt to oust Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. The family returned to the Bronx, in New York City, where her father started a successful medical practice. Like Yolanda, the main character in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents,* Alvarez turned to books and writing as an escape from her frustrating acculturation experiences. In an interview with Catherine Wiley in *Bloomsbury Review.* Alvarez explains. "I think when I write, I write out of who I am and the questions I need to figure out. A lot of what I have worked through has got to do with coming to this country and losing a homeland and a culture, as a way of making sense."

Alvarez graduated summa cum laude from Middlebury College in Vermont, where she presently teaches, and earned a Masters degree from Syracuse University. She has also taught at the University of Vermont at Burlington, George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and the University of Illinois. Her work includes two more novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *Yof* (1997), and several collections of poetry: *The Housekeeping Book. Homecoming,* and *The Other Side/El Otro Lado.* She has also published a collection of essays, 1998' s *Something to Declare.* She has earned several awards and grants, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant, an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for excellence in multicultural literature. This last award was given for her achievement in her first novel, *How the Gar da Girls Lost Their Accents.*

Plot Summary

Part 1: 1989-1972

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* is a collection of stories that recounts experiences in the lives of four Dominican-American sisters-Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia-and their parents. Alvarez divides the novel into three sections that she presents in reverse chronological order, beginning with a story from 1989 and ending with one from 1956. Collectively, the stories chronicle the difficulties each member of the family faces as he or she tries to adjust to life in America without losing a sense of tradition and heritage.

The first story, "Antojos," focuses on the third daughter, Yolanda, who returns after five years to the Dominican Republic, where she was born, to visit her aunts and cousins. When asked what she wants to do there, she says she has a craving-an *anidja-for* guavas. Ignoring her aunt's warning about bow dangerous it is for women traveling alone, Yolanda drives north to a small village where Jose, a young boy, takes her to find some guavas on the hillside. When she gets a flat tire, Jose goes to search for help. Two men soon approach who offer help, but appear menacing. Remembering her aunt's fears, she blurts out the name of relatives who live nearby. They become respectful after hearing the name and help her change her tire. Jose returns, upset after being hit by a guard who did not believe his story. Yolanda gives him several dollars for his trouble.

In "The Kiss," Sofia, the youngest daughter. carefully plans their father's seventieth birthday party. "For the first time since she had run off with her husband six years ago, she and her father were on speaking terms." Her father is generally pleased with the party, but becomes gradually more withdrawn until they playa guessing game. He is blindfolded as each woman present gives him a kiss and he tries to guess who it is. During the game Sofia gets angry that her father never guesses her name, and so she plants a sensuous kiss on his ear and tells him to guess who it is. His physical pleasure from the kiss angers him and he ends the game.

"Four Girls" explains that while growing up Mami dressed all her daughters alike in different colored versions of what she wore. On special occasions she told a favorite story about each one "as a way of celebrating that daughter." Mami tells a story about Carla wanting red sneakers but not being able to afford them. When a neighbor gives them white ones, her father helps her paint them red. Next she tells a story about Yolanda getting lost in New York City, where they made their new home, and reciting poetry to strangers on a bus. Their mother explains that she does not have a favorite story about Sandra anymore, because she is trying to forget her troubled past, which includes a breakdown in a mental hospital. Finally, while visiting Sofia's new son in the hospital, she tells a stranger how Sofia met the man she married. The entire family comes together for Christmas a week after the baby's birth and the sisters reminisce, especially about their mother telling stories. Their mother concludes with a new story about the latest member of the family.

"Joe" and "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story" both focus on Yolanda, or "Joe" as she is often called in America. The first story opens with Joe in the mental hospital, thinking about her ex-husband John. She had left him and gone back to live with her parents, but started acting strangely, continually quoting famous lines from literary classics. As a result, they put her in the hospital, where she thinks she is falling in love with her therapist, Dr. Payne. She then tells a story about Rudy Elmenhurst, her first love. She met him in college, and soon after they started dating, he wanted to have sexual relations with her. She kept putting him off until he got so angry he left her. Five years later, while in grad school, he drops by her apartment and again wants to have sex. This time she throws him out. In both stories Yolanda relates how she has problems communicating with these men, how words often serve to separate rather than unite them.

Part II: 1970-1960

"A Regular Revolution" explains that after another revolution breaks out on the Island, Papi decides the family will stay in America for good. At first, the four girls are disappointed, since they were poor in America and ostracized at school. Soon, however, when they became Americanized, their parents worry they will lose their heritage and so send them back home to Santo Domingo for the summers. After Mami finds a bag of marijuana in Sofia's room, she decides to keep her back home for a year. While there, Sofia turns into a "Spanish-American princess," according to her sisters, and falls in love with her Cousin, Manuel Gustavo, who takes control of her life. The sisters execute a successful plan to have Sofia caught with him and thus sent back to America.

"Daughter of Invention" details Mami's attempts at invention. She comes up With good ideas sometimes, like wheels on suitcases, but does not have the means to realize them. One day Yoyo (Yolanda) is chosen to give a speech at school. She works hard at it until she feels "she finally sounded like herself in English." Her father, however, objects to what he considers a disrespectful tone and tears it up. Mami intervenes and helps her Write a new, unremarkable one. The next day Papi brings home her own typewriter.

In "Trespass," on the evening that the family celebrates being in America for one year, Carla is homesick Boys in school have called her names and the unfamiliarity of her maturing body makes her uncomfortable. While walking home from school one day, a man calls her over to his car and exposes himself. When the police arrive at her home, Carla is mortified that she has to explain what happened. "Snow" notes that the year before, when they lived in the city, Yolanda was the "only immigrant" in her class and thus sat apart from the other students so she could be tutored. In school they learned about the Cuban Missile Crisis and practiced air-raid drills. One day Yolanda saw dots in the air that she thought were nuclear fallout. She screamed "bomb," and then was told that the dots were snow, something she had never seen before.

"Floor Show" describes a night three months after the family arrived in America, when the family goes out to dinner with Dr. Fanning-the man who helped them escape their

homeland-and ills wife. At the restaurant, Mrs. Fanning gets drunk and flirts with Papi and dances with the entertainers in the floorshow. Later she and her husband buy the girls dolls along with paying for the dinner, which embarrasses Papi.

Part III: 1960-1956

"The Blood of the Conquistadors" begins the section of stories that take place before the family emigrates from the Dominican Republic. One day the secret police come to question Carlos (Papi), but he hides in a secret cubicle in the house. Victor Hubbard, a CIA operative posing as an American consul, arrives and gets rid of the police, promising the family will be out of the country in forty-eight hours. While packing, Sandi recognizes a hole that was opening inside of her, a need "nothing would quite fill," even years after their escape.

"The Human Body" explains that when the sisters were children, they all lived in adjoining houses on property that belonged to their grandparents. After returning from another visit to America, their grandmother gives their cousin Mundin a transparent human body doll, which displays all the body parts, and a ball of clay When Yoyo asks to trade for the clay, Mundin tells her she can have it if she will show him she is "a girl." After she and Sofia show him, he declares, "you're just like dolls." Later they get caught being in the shed, but avoid punishment by saying they were only hiding from the secret police.

In "Still Lives" Sandi takes art classes, along with her other cousins, from Dona Charito. When she turned eight, her parents decided she had artistic abilities. Sandi, however, is "not ready yet to pose as one of the model children of the world" and so is banished from the Dona Charito's house. While outside, she peers into Dona Charito's shed and sees Don Jose, Dona Charito's husband, whom everyone says has gone crazy. He is chained to the wall, sculpting large figures. When he catches her spying on him, she screams and falls, breaking her arm, which gains her a lot of attention. She has lost her ability to draw, however Later, at the nativity pageant, Sandi sees the figures Don Jose was carving, and is thrilled to discover that the face of the Virgin is hers.

"An American Surprise" opens with Papi's return from one of his trips to New York City. The girls listen "with wonder" to his stories about snow and a toy store called "F.A.O. Schwartz" and are delighted with the mechanical toy banks he brings them. After Carla loses interest in hers, Gladys, the family's servant, asks if she can buy it After thinking about the right thing to do, Carla decides to give it to her. Later when Mami finds the bank in Gladys' room, she fires her, even though Carla admits she gave it to her.

The final story, "The Drum," begins with a focus on a toy Yoyo's grandmother, Mamita, brings her from New York. Yoyo plays it constantly until both sticks break. She then bangs it with other things, but the sound is never the same. During this time, Pila comes to work at the house as a laundry maid and tells Yoyo of voodoo spirits and "devil stories." After a few months, Pila runs away with things she has stolen from the house. One day Yoyo finds kittens in the shed but is afraid to take one of them for fear that the

mother will come after her. A stranger she sees crossing their yard tells her not to separate the kitten from its mother for a week. When she hears him shooting birds in the orchard, she feels Justified in taking the kitten, but its mother appears after hearing its cries. Yoyo grabs the kitten and runs inside, but soon, unable to quiet it, she throws it out the window. She never finds out what happened to it, but the mother keeps reappearing in her dreams, crying for her lost kitten. Jumping into the future, Yoyo admits that she now and then still hears "a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life... wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art."

Part 1, 1989-1972, Antojos

Part 1, 1989-1972, Antojos Summary

Yolanda has returned home from the United States and her aunts and cousins have been busily preparing for a party in her honor. The relatives are all babbling around Yolanda, telling about their lives and asking about hers. There is a big cake with many candles to be lit, each one signifying a city in the Dominican Republic where they live. Yolanda has been away for five years and is not sure she is going back, but has told no one of her plans just yet.

The women ask Yolanda what she wants to do while visiting here, and all she can think of is that she would like to eat some guavas and hopes to pick some in a drive north in a few days. This puts the women in a spin because women do not drive by themselves alone anywhere in this country. It is not the United States.

However, two days later Yolanda manages to borrow a Datsun from her aunt and finds herself on the narrow road up the foothills realizing that this is her first moment alone since returning home. Finally, the hills plateau a bit and the road widens, and Yolanda can see a roadside stand up ahead. There are no guavas so she continues on. Before long, Yolanda comes into a small village and pulls up before a cantina. An old woman and a young boy greet her, offering her the best they have but Yolanda simply wants some guavas. The boy knows where they are growing on both sides of the road. He crawls into the car with her and they drive to the spot which is deep in the countryside.

The boy was right. The guavas are more than plentiful and Yolanda eats several right on the spot and she and the boy walk a bit to harvest more. When Yolanda starts to drive away, the car lurches and stops, and she realizes that it has a flat tire. Yolanda offers the boy money if he will run back down the hill for help. In the meantime, two men emerge from the undergrowth, dirty from their work and machetes at the ready. They seem to startle each other. Yolanda tries to tell them in English about her situation, but she ultimately leads them to the car and they fix her tire. The men reluctantly accept her money as a gesture of gratitude.

On the way back down the hill, Yolanda encounters the small boy who is crying. No one believed that a woman would be in a car in the hills, especially at that time of day, so they called him a liar and would not come. Sorry for his trouble Yolanda gives him more than the promised dollar when she deposits him back in town with the old woman. As she heads out again, Yolanda waves goodbye in the rear view mirror, her trunk filled with guavas.

Part 1, 1989-1972, Antojos Analysis

Yolanda has a foot in two cultures. She was born in the Dominican Republic but has lived for the past five years in the United States. It's not clear yet why she has returned

or why she left to begin with. She speaks English now and has American sensibilities, even taking a car out by herself after she's been warned against it. There must be some unrest in the country and that may be revealed yet as important to her story.

The Kiss

The Kiss Summary

Every year, the sisters would visit their father on his birthday. They came without their husbands, fiancés or work. The tradition was that they came home alone. Every November the women turned back into Daddy's little girls for one night. Every year, he gave each of his daughters envelopes padded thick with money even though it was his birthday. This year was to be the man's seventieth birthday. For the first time ever, it was to be held at the home of one of the sisters rather than at the father's house.

Sofia, who is the youngest sister, will be hosting the event at her home in Michigan. She has an infant son and is reluctant to travel. For the first time in six years, Sofia and her father are on speaking terms. She had been the first to leave home and did not continue on to college. Sofia had taken a job as a secretary and was still living at home because her father had threatened to disown her if she moved out. Sofia and her boyfriend went to Colombia on her vacation because they couldn't find the privacy to sleep together in New York. Somehow, when the restrictions were off, the interest died and the couple broke up. Sofia, however, met a German tourist, Otto, during that trip and became romantically involved.

Upon her return to New York, her father could tell that Sofia had been indiscreet while away and they quarreled horribly. Sofia left the house that night and ended up on Otto's doorstep in Germany. They married soon after. Sofia and her father saw each other a few times, such as at the birth of each of her two children and some other social occasions, but the wound was still there.

Sofia hopes that her hosting the party will go a long way toward mending the past and has hired the band and arranged for the cake and all the party things that her father loves. That night, everyone is having a grand time. Even the sons-in-law are attending this year. They shower the old man with gifts and sentiments and play party games but as the evening wears on, there have been too many games and too much drinking. The father is no longer amused but melancholy. He is now seventy years old and he realizes that everyone else in this room will survive him.

The third daughter sees him sitting forlornly and thinks of a game that would amuse him. She blindfolds him with the baby's soft blanket and one of them pecks him on the cheek. The game is for him to name who has kissed him. Of course, his incorrect guessing amuses everyone there.

Sofia has been out of the room tending to her baby. When she sees the game and realizes that not once did her father guess her name, she is furious. She has spent so much time and money to make this party perfect and he didn't even consider calling her name. Sofia swoops in and gives the old man a wet kiss in his ear. The smile instantly leaves his face, the game ends and the party is over.

The Kiss Analysis

Sofia is the youngest of the four daughters in the book. She is rebellious, headstrong and passionate. Her father has always loved her and tried to protect her, but the older she got, the harder that became. He is baffled by her wildness because the other girls were never like that. They spend six estranged years and he feels that he is making a huge concession by leaving New York to come to her house in Michigan and letting the sons-in-law attend his birthday party. However, the father doesn't mention Sofia's name in the kissing game and she is hurt because clearly he is still freezing her out from his affections. To counteract the slight, Sofia makes an outrageous move with the wet kiss in his ear. Her father is immediately offended and immediately knows who has done it. It seems that any chance at reconciliation will be postponed yet again.

The Four Girls

The Four Girls Summary

They have been called *the four girls* all their lives. Not even the oldest can remember a time when they weren't called that. Their mother dressed them in yellow, baby blue, pastel pink and white respectively as a color code to save time. This made laundry day especially efficient but didn't allow for much individuality.

The only deviation had been the year that the oldest, Carla, wanted red sneakers. However, the family was still living on the island and very poor and couldn't buy the red sneakers. One day, a pair of sneakers arrived from the U.S. for the girl down the street. Unfortunately for her, they were the wrong size. Nevertheless, they fit the oldest girl perfectly so she was given the shoes. However, the oldest girl was not content with plain old white sneakers. That night, the mother found the father and the girl in the bathroom painting the sneakers red with her nail polish.

The second daughter, Yolanda, became a teacher although she had wanted to be a poet. Her mother used to go to all her poetry readings and didn't seem to notice that all the poems had an erotic undertone and were addressed to her many lovers. Her mother simply chalked them up to the girl's great imagination.

The mother would like to forget any stories about the third daughter, Sandra, who is blonde and blue-eyed, with a delicate bone structure. The daughter has had a minor breakdown and thinks that her problems all started when she starved herself to look model thin. When the college dean called one day and the parents traveled to the school, they found that their daughter was reading voraciously. Sandra had a list of important books and would cross them off after she had read them. Not that reading is a bad thing, but she felt that she was reverting backwards and would no longer be a human, but a monkey very soon. She could feel her brain changing already.

Sofia, the youngest, has had the problems with her father thinking she is too promiscuous, and has left home. Now the mother stands at the nursery window looking at Sofia's newborn daughter and she flirts with a man who is watching his own daughter through the glass.

The four girls are sitting in Sofia's living room on Christmas morning, while their husbands and parents are still asleep. Sofia is holding her newborn. They are deep into the talk that only sisters talk, in and out of petty grievances balanced by little love taps. Carla is now a psychoanalyst and the others resent her professional pallor on everything. Yolanda is protective about her writing and feels that the others are insensitive about it. Sandra is seeing another man and the others jump to the conclusion that he is a new therapist, not a love interest and Sofia is a mother of one week defending her life to her prying sisters.

The others slowly come awake and join them. Their mother takes her new granddaughter and coos to her. Their father and their husbands follow wishing a Merry Christmas to all of them. The mother comments that now instead of the four girls, there are six. She has included herself and the new baby in the count now.

The Four Girls Analysis

The reader meets the four girls though the stories told by their mother. Their personalities emerge, providing the foundation for the rest of the story. The oldest daughter is used to getting what she wants. The second daughter is the overly sensitive poet. The third daughter has emotional problems. The baby is rebellious and headstrong. The thing that used to bind them-being called the four girls-is no longer appropriate as they have clearly differentiated themselves and are living very distinct lives. What used to be an entity with four beautiful heads lives no more, and it seems that the mother is having the most difficult time letting go of it.

Joe

Joe Summary

Joe is one of Yolanda's nicknames. She also has been called Yo Yo Yo, and sometimes Joey. Yolanda is telling her therapist that she once was in love with John who is the one who uttered the words first, begging Yolanda to marry him as he traced the heart-shaped outline of her face. However, Yolanda is a zany poet and John always has sharp pencils and folds his clothes before lovemaking. He believes in the Real World more than her world of words, and ultimately more than he believed in her.

When she left him, she left a note that said, "I'm going to my folks till my head slash heart clear." She revised the note until it was distilled down to read "Gone to my folks. Joe."

Her parents didn't understand and they didn't know why she talked so much. Words just fell out of her face constantly. She even talked in her sleep. She ranted. She rave and then they took her to see Dr. Payne who thought it best that she be checked into a private facility where he could watch her.

Yolanda did her therapy and arts and crafts and got better and she fantasized about Dr. Payne who imagined that he would be the one who could put all the parts of Yolanda back together again. Yolanda was in love with him but never said a word about it. When it was time for her parents to come back for her, Yolanda found that she was pleased and told her mother that she and John had just never spoken the same language. Her mother always thought they had been so happy.

As best as Joe can tell, she is allergic to love and is determined to get over it. She'll simply build up her immunity to it, that's all. She tries saying it out loud to test herself even in different languages but her heart feels like an empty nest.

Joe Analysis

Yolanda has artistic sensitivities and is painfully aware of the meanings of words. More importantly, she realizes the different meanings when they come out of different mouths. What did John mean when he said love as opposed to what her parents meant when they said the same word? John delighted in her but knew that there were limits to what he could do for her. He couldn't make her happy in her world inside her bubble and she floated off in it too many times for him to really reach her. Her parents never took their eye off her bubble. That made all the difference and that made love.

The Rudy Elmenhurst Story

The Rudy Elmenhurst Story Summary

The four girls had taken turns being the wildest one in the family. Sofia held the title the longest, but Sandi came in a close second. Carla had a few experiences but always explained them away as research for the others. For a few years it was Yolanda who held the title of being the wildest because of so much attention from boys, starting with boarding school. One of Yolanda's teachers had told her that she had a vivacious personality to which she attributed all the attention because Yolanda didn't feel that she was particularly attractive.

At college, Yolanda didn't seem to have the same luck. As soon as she would start to get to know a boy and feel something for him, he would take off. Yolanda soon realized it was because she wouldn't sleep with them and no amount of vivaciousness would help her now.

Then along came Rudy Brodermann Elmenhurst. Yolanda had arrived early at English class the first day of the new term and found no place to hide at the round table that exposed her to all the English jocks who strolled in casually and made ironic remarks like they were asking about the weather. To say Yolanda felt out of place would be a huge understatement. As the class was settling in to listen to the professor's syllabus, in strolled Rudy. Not classically good looking or an athlete, Rudy had a scarred, bad boy face with incredible bedroom eyes.

Taking a seat next to Yolanda, Rudy asked to borrow a pen. All Yolanda could produce was a pencil nub from the bottom of her purse. At the end of class, she was so embarrassed that she ran away so he wouldn't have to return it to her. Later that night, Rudy knocked on Yolanda's door with the pencil nub. Still naïve to masculine strategies at that point, Yolanda wouldn't invite Rudy in, but did agree to lunch the next day. They talked all the way to suppertime and then ate supper together.

The pair began to spend each day together. Yolanda helped Rudy with his poetry assignments and came to realize that she had never written pornographic poetry before. Rudy had to explain each of the metaphors to her and she was in a constant state of blushing.

After a month, Rudy thought that it was time that he and Yolanda should be sleeping together. Yolanda said she just wasn't serious about him and Rudy was in disbelief because he felt that sex should be fun, not serious. Yolanda ran from Rudy's overly eager attentions one night and they broke up right before spring break. Yolanda thought for weeks that he would return and apologize, but that didn't happen. Up until the night of the big spring dance, she thought Rudy would return, but that's when she saw another girl on Rudy's arm from her perch on the dorm steps.

That wasn't the end of Rudy. Five years later while Yolanda was in grad school, Rudy called one night. Apparently, his parents lived in the area and he had seen Yolanda's name in the alumni news and wanted to come over. He showed up with an expensive bottle of wine and after some small talk, declared that he wanted to sleep with Yolanda, thinking that surely she must be over her hang ups by now. Yolanda let him out, watched his car pull away, and then drank the Bordeaux by herself.

The Rudy Elmenhurst Story Analysis

Every girl has a Rudy Elmenhurst in her life. For Yolanda, he is her first real college boyfriend and she is in awe of how easily he moves through life. His sexuality is his badge just like other people have sports or good pedigrees. And she is naïve yet, not only to sexual intimacy, but also to the ways of living in the United States. Her father probably would have beaten Rudy senseless had he known how he was treating his daughter. But Yolanda keeps quiet because she so desperately wants to fit in. Unfortunately, the Rudys of the world appear for each girl and make her doubt herself as a woman and as a person. Thankfully, Yolanda's self esteem is well intact when he reappears and she can now show him the way out.

Part 2, 1970-1960, A Regular Revolution

Part 2, 1970-1960, A Regular Revolution Summary

For almost four years, the girls' parents were in the United States on green cards. Finally, their father became a citizen and they decide to stay. The girls are not at all happy about this. At home on the island, they had many privileges and now they are just like everybody else in the suburbs. After they are away at boarding schools for a couple years, they change their perspectives and can't imagine going back to island life.

About this time, their father's medical practice picks up and he can afford to send the girls to the island for the summers. They could understand a two-week vacation there, but not the whole summer. Their parents, however, want to make sure that their daughters don't completely lose the ways of the old country. Things continue this way until that fateful summer when they volleyed a shot which began the revolution which would change the course of their summers and their lives forever.

The night before they were to leave one summer, the girls were packing when Sofia produces a baggy of marijuana. They are debating over whether to take it or leave it at home when their mother comes into their room. The baggy goes flying and is forgotten until the maid finds it while cleaning one day. Within forty-eight hours, their mother joins them on the island and interrogates each of them. It is finally revealed that it had belonged to Sofia, whose punishment is banishment to the island because she could not be trusted not to yield to temptations found in the U.S.

The other three girls are devastated and mourn for her. By Christmas time six months later, they get word that Sofia has acclimated quite nicely and is even seeing a nice boy. This doesn't bode well for the other three who don't want their fate sealed in the same way. They make plans to visit her and it is true that Sofia has been immersed into the culture. Sofia teases her hair, wears lots of mascara and has matching shoes and purses like many of the girls of the 1960's.

The sisters could endure this but what they can't tolerate is Sofia's boyfriend who tells Sofia what she can eat, wear, read, and nearly everything else. The sister they had known as a rebel has caved in. They know that the boy is pushing Sofia to sleep with him and they don't want her to go the way of all the women of the country--married too young and saddled with too many children. They devise a plan to launch her off the island for good.

It is proper that girls not be outside without an escort, so it is left for Carla, the oldest, to leave the house with Sofia and her boyfriend. After they get to town, Carla would join the others and Sofia, and the boy would take off into the night. They all leave the house according to plan and their cousin fakes an illness that returned them all to the house. When their mother sees that Sofia is not with them, she flies into an outrage and vows that from that moment, they are all going back to the United States, Sofia included.

Sofia is unhappy with their little plan, but they know that she will get over it and be grateful someday that they had saved her for her real life.

Part 2, 1970-1960, A Regular Revolution Analysis

The girls have loyalties to both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. They were at the highest echelon of society on the island and are only middle class in the U.S., but are finding that they like having rights and being in the middle of the 1960's when it all seems so vital. They wage their own personal revolution too, namely the battle for Sofia's life, as well as their own. They have had a taste of women's rights and don't want their baby sister locked into the male-dominated world on the island. Sofia is so spirited that they know it will kill her to spend the rest of her life like that. The sisters risk momentary punishment from their mother in order to spring Sofia out of her situation and back into the life that she will come to love.

Daughter of Invention

Daughter of Invention Summary

Laura, the girls' mother, is always trying to invent something. For years she has shown them little drawings of things that she knows will make lots of money someday: timed-release water capsules for plants, a suitcase on wheels, and instant coffee with creamer already mixed in. The girls humor their mother but tell her that Americans don't need her ideas. They have already invented everything they could ever want.

She continues on, however, quietly sketching the ingenuity that springs to her at all times of the day or night. That is, until one night while reading *The New York Times,* she sees an ad for a suitcase on wheels. Their mother shrieks so loud that their father thinks he is back in the old country and the authorities have just broken in. That is the end of their mother's dreaming and she puts her energy into her husband's medical office and tells herself that there is no time for thinking up silly inventions.

Their mother did get her pad and pencil out one more time, this time to help Yolanda. The girl is to give a speech to a morning assembly in front of all the school and is struggling with the content. None of the ideas she is having seem to work until the night before when she opens a book of Walt Whitman's poems and reads *I celebrate myself and sing myself.* The words move Yolanda and she pours out her heart onto five pages as her parents pace waiting for the result.

Her mother has tears in her eyes when she reads it and pulls Yolanda into her father's room, where he is reading the paper. When Yolanda finishes, she sees from her father's face that he is horrified that she has put such strong opinions on paper and that she intends to speak them in public tomorrow. He immediately grabs the papers and tears them up into tiny pieces. Yolanda is heartbroken, runs to her room, and locks her raging father out. Later on, her mother helps her revise the piece and it is very successful at school the next day.

When her father comes home that night, he gives Yolanda a brand new typewriter with a plastic carrying case with her initials carved into it. Her mother tells Yolanda that she must let bygones be bygones; her father never meant to hurt her. Her mother's days of inventing are over, and she passes the torch to Yolanda and her new typewriter.

Daughter of Invention Analysis

The four girls aren't the only ones who like the independence that women have in America. Their mother knows that she would rather be a free nobody in this country than a rich captive back on the island and she gives life to the dreams of the family. Her inventiveness allows them to adapt easily and helps her husband establish his practice in the new world. The only problem is that the dreams that she helps to become reality always belong to someone else. Their mother tries to make something of her life with

her ideas of inventing something fantastic. Maybe she has already created the most important thing of her life--a strong family of intelligent daughters and a husband who can now face the future without fear.

Trespass

Trespass Summary

On the day that the family has been in the United States for a full year, they have a celebration with a cake and candles. Each of them is to make a wish and Carla secretly wishes that the family will go back home to the island. She misses the wildness of it and she hates the little postage stamp of grass that the family's house sits on in Long Island.

Carla is grateful for one thing however--that she is too old to go to the same school as her sisters do. Even though the public school is just two blocks away, her mother will not allow her to be subjected to the things that they teach in public schools. Carla must take two buses and walk for a mile to reach the Catholic school where she is enrolled. At first, her mother went with her every day, morning and afternoon, to make sure she knew her way to school and home again.

Soon Carla knows the route and is secure in herself but it is not her sense of direction that she needs to fear. After they are out of the nuns' sight, the boys from the school taunt her with derogatory names, telling her to go back where she belongs. They throw rocks at her feet so they won't leave bruises on her skin. Carla endures this because she wants desperately to stay at this new school.

However, one day Carla senses a car following her. It's almost as if the driver is slowing down to look for an address. Only there are no houses or shops on the service road where she is walking from the bus stop. The driver is a man with a red shirt and he rolls down his window and asks her where she is going. Carla is afraid he will ask for directions and is scared because she hasn't lived there very long and her English is still very broken. Carla moves closer to the car; the man wants her to get in and she sees that he is naked from the waist down. Carla runs home to tell her mother who calls the police who come to the house and question Carla and she endures the embarrassment of telling about this man, feeling as if she is the one who has done something wrong.

After that, her mother rides to school with Carla and picks her up in the afternoons. The boys think that she has squealed on them and leave her alone totally but sometimes at night she can imagine them sitting at the foot of her bed jeering at her and telling her to go back where she came from. Carla only wishes that she could.

Trespass Analysis

As the oldest of the four girls, Carla has to venture into new territory in every way. Wanting to be separated from the younger girls, Carla realizes that the separation also means isolation as she explores the route to school and back. Carla is also insecure in her imminent puberty and the incident with the flasher in the car comes at a very vulnerable time for her, forcing her to grow up very fast and feeling that not only her family, but even her own body, has betrayed her.

Snow

Snow Summary

The first year that the family is in New York, Yolanda's teacher, Sister Zoe, tells the class how beautiful the girl's name is and has them repeat it until they get it right. The nun also has Yolanda sit away from the rest of the class so she can tutor her in English without disturbing the rest of the class. Yolanda is not the only disturbance to the classroom that fall. The Cuban missile crisis is imminent and on TV all the time. Sister Zoe has even drawn a huge mushroom on the board and tells them that this is what the bomb would be like, even drawing little flakes spilling out from it to show them the fallout that would kill them.

One morning in December as Yolanda sits at her desk, she looks out at the flakes that were flying in the air and screams "Bomb!" Some of the girls cry and Sister Zoe's look of terror turns soft as she explains to the girl that it is only snow. The nun explains to Yolanda how each flake is irreplaceable and beautiful, just like each person.

Snow Analysis

Yolanda has never seen snow before and it initially seems traumatic just like so many of the things to which she is being initiated in this country. Her Hispanic culture and heritage have set her apart in this new world where she desperately wants to feel at home. Maybe the nun's words will ring true for Yolanda and she will one day blend in as surely as the individual snowflakes were falling, indistinguishable from each other at the end.

Floor Show

Floor Show Summary

The girls' mother has been drilling them for days on how to behave at dinner tonight. Dr. and Mrs. Fanning are treating them to dinner at a fancy Spanish restaurant. Dr. Fanning had helped their father escape from the Dominican Republic and to get a fellowship here when his medical license was not recognized in America. The doctor is helping their father find temporary employment while working on getting his license.

Their father had hosted the doctor and his wife back on the island, but here he is not able to take his family out to dinner and his pride is wounded. He accepts the Fannings' invitation graciously. It is good to be back among the Spanish aromas and the music that fills the restaurant and the girls are glad to see their parents so happy and beautiful for the first time since they arrived here three months ago.

With each cocktail, Mrs. Fanning seems to be enjoying herself more and more. Her husband tries to cut her off but to no avail. The girls and their parents act as if they haven't noticed. Sandi needs to go to the ladies room and her father offers to take her there. Mrs. Fanning also excuses herself from the table and the three follow the waiter's directions. Once they arrive at the vestibule, Mrs. Fanning leans over and kisses her father on the lips. Sandi can only stare and her father is mortified.

When Sandi emerges from the restroom, her father warns her that she is not to speak a word about this. Sandi knows how sensitive her mother has been lately and it would also not work to her father's benefit to insult the Fannings. Sandi keeps her promise and keeps her mouth shut for the rest of the evening. Only after Mrs. Fanning makes a drunken spectacle of herself on stage with the Flamenco dancers, does she consider saying anything. Sandi dislikes this woman very much not only for the embarrassment caused her father but also because Mrs. Fanning has ruined the beauty of the dancers onstage.

When the hostess appears with a basket of Spanish-looking Barbie dolls, Sandi declares that she would like one and the other girls chime in. The doctor buys them as gifts and the three sisters thank them. Sandi makes a display of walking her doll across the table to Mrs. Fanning and having the doll kiss her on the cheek, while Sandi makes a big kissing sound followed by the word *Gracias*.

Floor Show Analysis

Sandi ends the evening with much more power than when she started out. The secret about Mrs. Fanning kissing her father gives her leverage over both of them; although it would be much more destructive to her father should the information get out. Sandi also knows how to wield her power when she demands a doll despite her mother's admonitions. Sandi knows that somehow someone will pay to get her what she wants in

order to keep her quiet and has unwittingly but very quickly learned a lesson very early about secrets, and the power they hold and the price they exact.

Part 3, 1960-1956, The Blood of the Conquistadores

Part 3, 1960-1956, The Blood of the Conquistadores Summary

Their father is getting a drink of water when he first spots the two men walking up to the house. The men are dressed in khaki, sport-reflective sunglasses, and guns in the holsters at their hips and could almost be mistaken for job supervisors if it weren't for the guns.

Their father motions to the cook standing beside him and she sees the men. Making a gesture of silence by holding his finger to his lips their father very slowly moves to the hall where they cannot see him from any window. Finally, their father is able to make a break for it to the bedroom without Yolanda seeing him run by as she plays with her sisters and cousins on the patio.

Once inside the bedroom, their father enters the walk-in closet and the light goes off when he closes the door behind him. He finds the flashlight that has been hidden there and switches it on so that he can see the back of the closet, where he opens a hidden panel. Climbing into the little cubicle behind the panel that has just a little bit of air and light, the girls' father sees a few things that will make him a little more comfortable while he hides--a pillow, some towels, water, aspirin, a sheet and a chamber pot. Feeling around in the small space their father touches the revolver which has been tucked into a dark shirt and pants he can wear to make a nighttime escape. Then he closes the panel and waits.

From his hiding place, their father can hear the cook answer the men's questions as they sit and wait for him. The men have been told at his clinic that he is at home today. The two men question the children, knowing that innocents never lie. Finally, their mother returns from shopping, surprised to find the front gate already open. Her heart drops as she sees the officers standing outside her home.

Their mother calls to Chino, one of their servants, to run to find Don Victor and tell him to come over and pick up his tennis shoes. Effortlessly their mother then shifts into hostess mode and tries to throw the officers off track with her hospitality. They decline anything and she enters the house to find the other two officers who have been questioning her small daughters and the cook about her husband's whereabouts. All their mother will tell the men is that her husband had a tennis game with Don Victor today and should be home soon.

Excusing herself to make snacks, their mother is able to speak privately to the cook who whispers that the girls' father is in his secret hiding place. This news is a relief but their mother is also afraid that somehow these two men will sense that he is close by. She

fixes a tray of snacks and drinks and tends to her children's whining as if it were every day that she has the intrusion of a police state in the living room.

Meanwhile, Don Victor has been tracked down at the brothel where he spends most of his days since coming to this country. The Don is a CIA agent passing for a U.S. ambassador, who has met all the upper class men on the island who are inciting this revolution against the dictator Tujilla. The Don has arranged for the papers so that the doctor and his family can leave the country and they all know that they will not be safe until their plane is in the air.

The family has worked out a code word for any trouble that needs the Don's immediate help- tennis shoes. When the Don hears that the doctor's wife has called for him to come over to pick up his tennis shoes, he knows immediately that there is big trouble and leaves his most recent sweet young thing pouting in the bed.

The doctor's wife is afraid she will say something wrong; the men have been asking her questions for a half hour and she is relieved to see Victor cross in front of the window. Casually informing the policemen that the Don is a U.S. ambassador, she whispers that she has told the officers that the doctor had been playing tennis with him this morning. The Don doesn't miss a beat and approaches the two officers as if they were long lost friends.

The Don offers to fix anything that might be a problem; after all, he and the doctor are close personal friends. In fact, he has arranged for the doctor's papers to accept a fellowship in the United States. Surely, the doctor can't have done anything that would have jeopardized this situation. Unfortunately, this is how his wife finds out that she will be leaving her homeland but she realizes there is no time for melancholy now.

The Don calls the men's supervisor to tell him that his officers have made a mistake by looking for the doctor. One of the men goes to the phone and the supervisor tells him that the officers are to leave the house immediately.

The doctor can hear the men leaving and soon he can feel a rush of air as his wife rescues him from his hiding place inside the wall. The family hurriedly packs and embassy cars come for them to take them to the airport and their trip to the United States.

Part 3, 1960-1956, The Blood of the Conquistadores Analysis

The book has been moving backward in time and finally it becomes clear why the father and mother are so grateful to be in the United States. It is even more apparent why the father does not want to call any attention to them, and why he wants his daughters to behave and not make any trouble. Their father has lived in fear for his life and the lives of his family for so long that he wants to blend into the row of houses on Long Island and just live peacefully. Their father had been a doctor and an important man in the old

country, a descendant of the Conquistadores, brave and fearless. Their blood still courses through his veins and he has done all he can do for the island's revolution for now. It is important that he be saved now so that he can continue to do noble work, which also runs through the blood of his heritage.

The Human Body

The Human Body Summary

At the family compound on the island, the girls' grandparents lived in a big house at the back of the property. Everyone in the family would go there for Sunday dinner when their grandparents were at home. They spend a lot of time in New York now; their grandfather had a position with the United Nations. When they would return from a trip to the U.S., the guardia would inspect their house "for their own protection" and things would always be missing when they left.

Every time they traveled to America, their grandmother would always bring back toys for all her grandchildren. On the last visit, her cousin Mundin received a toy called The Human Body. It was a doll which opened in half at the mid section to reveal colorful plastic organs which would help the young man study to become a doctor someday. Not at all happy with receiving a doll, Mundin did like the big pack of modeling clay that he also received.

Yolanda got a book and a paddle with a rubber ball attached but she yearned for the clay and tried to negotiate with Mundin but he was not swayed. Finally, he struck upon something that would be a satisfactory trade. Mundin wanted to see that Yolanda was really a girl. They proceeded off to the gardener's shed where it was dark and quiet, and Yolanda pulled up her cowgirl skirt, pulled down her panties, and waited for the insults. Mundin simply said that she just looked like a doll baby and that was the end of it. Or so they thought. Mundin's mother and the gardener found them in the shed. Mundin was so scared that he dropped The Human Body doll and all the little organs scattered everywhere. After that, they could never get the doll together again as some of the pieces had been stepped on or lost.

The Human Body Analysis

It has become even more apparent how important this family is in the Dominican Republic. Their grandparents' home sits next to that of the new dictator's and the grandfather is given a position in the United Nations. A life of privilege is a life of suspicion in this country and her grandparents are now happy to take longer trips to New York. The grandmother always showers them with gifts almost as an act of apology for their having been born into this family, which will be certain sorrow if the current regime remains in power. The act of exposure in the gardener's shed symbolizes the end of innocence that is coming very soon for the girls. Their lives will be shattered just like The Human Body doll and nothing will be able to fix the damage.

Still Lives

Still Lives Summary

On the island lived a woman named Dona Charito who is not a native but had married an island man. Dona Charito is from Germany and speaks Spanish with a heavy German accent. Dona Charito and her husband built a house on the island which looked like it belonged in an Alpine village, not this Caribbean island. The girls thought it looked like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel.

Dona Charito had studied art in Europe and the girls' mother thought it would be a good idea for the girls and their cousins to take art lessons. On one Saturday, fourteen children were deposited at the Hansel and Gretel house to begin their art lessons. The woman first gives them a tour of her house, which seemed like the inside of a museum with all its paintings, mostly of still-life pieces.

Finally they were led into the studio where cane backed chairs had been arranged in rows with drawing boards in front of each one. The girls were ready to begin, but first the woman put them through some calisthenics to warm up. Finally, they were able to start, by watching the woman show them how to hold a brush. However, Sandi couldn't wait to put paint to paper and began painting cats on the board in front of her. Sandi's punishment for beginning without permission was to sit in a small, darkened room off the studio and to stay there until the woman came back for her.

Sandi sat still for a short while, but then realized that art lessons shouldn't be this painful and left the little room to find her shoes among the row of fourteen pair that had been left at the front door. Sandi heard a man's cries coming from a shed in the backyard and she was able to roll a tree stump over to the window and looked into the shed where she saw all forms of statues in various stages of completion. There was a carving of a woman laid out on two sawhorses and she could see that someone was underneath it working away. A small naked man emerged who was obviously the artist, chained to the floor through a big iron ring.

When he saw Sandi's face through the window, the naked man lunged at her but his chain kept him in place. Sandi screamed until finally all her cousins came running out of the house to see why Sandi was so alarmed. Sandi had jumped down from her perch, broke her arm, and was being coddled by Dona Charito who saw the end of the art lessons and the fees associated with the fourteen students going down the drain.

Later that night, it was confirmed in the emergency room that Sandi had fractured her arm in three places and was forced to wear a cast for almost a year because it had healed improperly the first time and had to be broken and reset.

That Christmas, the girls went to the National Cathedral for the nativity pageant. To Sandi's shock, there were the carved figures she had seen in the old man's shed. To her

delight, she noticed that the face of the Virgin Mary statue was her own face. The old man had transferred her image to this statue. Sandi touched the virgin's gown and felt glad tidings inside her as the crowds thronged forward.

Still Lives Analysis

The girls and their cousins lived a privileged life on the island and their mother wanted them to have all the cultural advantages they could. When the art lessons became available, all the girls are sent, not just the ones who had shown any interest. It was as if art were a commodity that they could buy and place in front of their children, and they could learn it just by memorizing the alphabet. Clearly, Sandi has an artistic soul and can't wait for the woman's lessons but it ultimately chastised for it. True to form, Sandi released herself from the punishment the woman established and explored to find the naked man carving in the shed. At the time, Sandi was horrified at the sight, but later when she sees the statue at the cathedral, she is somehow consoled when she sees her own face staring out from the Virgin Mary's robe. Perhaps the discomfort of the day and her broken arm were worth the pain if this kind of homage is the result. Sandi was pleased to have suffered what she had for the sake of the art

An American Surprise

An American Surprise Summary

The girls' father returned from another one of his trips to New York, from which he always brings them such wonderful surprises. They anxiously danced around him, but were told that their father is very tired from his trip and they would get their gifts after dinner. Supper was spaghetti which the girls finished quickly in order to get to the main event sooner.

Finally, their father asked the maid, Gladys, to get his briefcase and she came back, holding it as if it were a newborn child. Gladys knew that it held the latest surprises for the girls. Their father took out three tissue-wrapped packages and gave one to each of the girls. Sofia was still a baby and would not get a gift this time. With much flurry, the tissue revealed three cast iron statues. Yolanda's was an old man sitting in a boat while looking at a whale with its jaws open wide. Sandi's was a little girl jumping rope and Carla's was a little girl in a nightgown staring up at some puffy clouds.

The girls were unimpressed, until their father showed them that the iron figures were mechanical banks. All sorts of magical things happened when a coin was deposited and the levers pulled. The jump rope girl would skip rope, the whale would swallow the fisherman's coin, and the girl in her nightgown would ascend halfway to heaven and then back again.

The girls were now pleased with their treasures and showed them off for at least a good week. Gladys was particularly impressed with the little girl ascending to heaven and would produce coins for the mere pleasure of seeing the trick.

Christmas was just a short time away and with all the festivities, the banks were forgotten and placed on shelves in the girls' bedrooms. On Christmas Day, there were mountains of gifts for the girls. Even the household staff received fine wallets with some money inside. That night, while the parents were celebrating at a party next door, Gladys came into Carla's room to tell her good night and mustered the courage to tell Carla that she would buy her bank with the money she had received today. Carla was in a magnanimous mood and told the maid that she could just have the bank.

Unfortunately, their mother noticed that the bank was missing later that week. It was found in Gladys' room, which led to her immediate dismissal. Despite Carla's explanation, her mother wanted the woman removed from her home. Carla found refuge on her father's lap, where they tried the bank just to amuse themselves, but the little girl in the nightgown got stuck somewhere between heaven and earth.

An American Surprise Analysis

The girls were eventually delighted with their iron banks. Since money had never been a concern for them, they were pleased more with the mechanics than the concept of saving all their coins. When the maid Gladys was particularly taken with Carla's bank because she thought it was the Virgin Mary ascending into heaven, it was hard for Carla to deny her and Carla thought that by not accepting Gladys' money, she was doing a good deed for which she couldn't possibly be punished. Carla's mother, however, needed to save face after she accused Gladys of stealing the bank, and had the maid removed from the house even when she was exonerated. Carla learned that there are many lessons in giving and receiving that Christmas season.

The Drum

The Drum Summary

Yolanda's grandmother brought back a drum for her from her most recent trip to New York--just the thing for the girl who liked to make herself known. Her mother's exasperated pleas for her to play it outdoors only made her grandmother smile a little. The grandmother told Yolanda that the drum came from a magical store, F.A.O. Schwarz, where she promised to take the girl one day.

Yolanda was happy with beating her drum outside until she lost one drumstick and the other one broke. Wooden spoon handles and sticks just didn't make the same sound but Yolanda continued to wear her drum on its strap so that it bounced on her hip like an acoustic desperado. One day, she wandered into the old coal shed at the back of the property knowing that she was testing her luck as the maids in the house told her that that was where the devil hung out.

All Yolanda could see was coal when she looked down into the barrels until she came to one from which little purring sounds emanated and she looked down into the faces of a newborn litter of kittens. Yolanda didn't touch any of them because she had been told that a mother could tell if you had and she would leave them to die. Yolanda had spotted one with white paws and wanted it so desperately that she went back out into the yard to think.

It so happened that a man and his dog were striding across the back area of the property and Yolanda asked him about the validity of this mother cat rumor and he told her that she should wait at least a week before removing the kitten from the litter. The man walked on down to the orange grove and she soon heard gunshots that made the mother cat leap away from the coal shed. Yolanda took this opportunity to go back in and pick up her kitten which she would name Schwarz, and console it.

As she left the shed with the kitten, Yolanda could see the mother cat ahead of her in the grass and knew that the kitten's meows would soon give her away so she lifted the lid of her drum and placed the kitten inside. Even with her light drumming, the mother cat could hear the muffled sounds of her kitten and chased Yolanda to the door of the house. The cat sat out there all day until finally Yolanda could take it no more and threw the kitten out a window. Yolanda kept checking throughout the day and finally the wounded kitten was gone.

That night, and for many nights afterward, the mother cat sat on the edge of Yolanda's bed and stared at her through the mosquito netting. The cat came back into her dreams off and on for years even after she had moved to New York.

The Drum Analysis

Yolanda learned the lessons of nature, both human and animal, with her experience with the cat. Yolanda was quite content to let the kitten stay with its mother for a week until she took it for her own but when she realized that this advice was given to her by a man who is hunting defenseless creatures, Yolanda had to wonder how sound the advice was, and rushed to console the kitten. Unfortunately, Yolanda's attempt at comfort caused the kitten's demise, and she is haunted literally and figuratively over the incident for years, learning that you simply can't remove a child from its environment until it's ready, and she will soon learn that lesson as it applies to her family's angst-ridden move to the United States.

Characters

La Bruja

"La Bruja" ("The Witch"), as the girls call her, is the racist woman who lives in the apartment underneath the family in New York City. She calls them "spics" and tells them to "go back to where you came from."

Carlos

Child of Sofia and Otto. His birth-the first boy in two generations-helps reunite Papi and Sofia.

Dona Charito

A German woman who lives in the same neighborhood as the family in the Dominican Republic. "She was an Islander only by her marriage to Don Jose," having met him in Madrid on a tour of the Prado, the national museum. Dona Charito is an artist who requires strict obedience to her teaching methods when she conducts art classes for the cousins. She did not want to take students at first, but payment in American dollars changed her mind. Many consider her husband Don Jose to be crazy, a judgment that appears to be confirmed when Sandi discovers him chained to the wall, carving statues.

Chucha

Chucha, the family's devoted Haitian cook, practices Voodoo and often casts spells to ward off evil spirits. She was taken in by Laura's parents during the massacre of black Haitians engineered by the Dominican dictator Trujillo. Her dark skin and spells cause the other maids to avoid her and look down on her. Nevertheless, she has been with the family so long that she gets her way as often as not. She narrates the very last portion of "The Blood of the Conquistadors."

Edmundo Alejandro de la Torre Rodriguez

See Mundin de la Torre

Carmen de la Torre

The girls' aunt, who married Tio Mundo. Tia Carmen is the "reigning head of the family." Hers is the largest house in the family compound since she is the widow of the head of the clan. When the girls come back to visit the island, they stay with her. After Fifi's

escapade with Manuel Gustavo threatens the girls' visits, it is "Tia Carmen's love [that] revives our old homesickness."

Edmundo Antonio de la Torre

Don Edmundo Antonio de la Torre, the girls' maternal grandfather, is a "kindly, educated" man who "entertained no political ambitions." Yet Trujillo forced him to accept a "bogus" diplomatic post, which Papito reluctantly accepted in order to appease his hypochondriac wife. The family referred to him as a saint, due largely to his patience with his wife.

Flor de la Torre

The cousins refer to Tia Fior, the wife of Tio Arturo, as "the politician" because she flashes a broad smile "no matter the circumstances." Fior wants no part of the sisters' consciousness-raising, telling them, "Look at me, I'm a queen ..... I can sleep until noon, if I want. I'm going to protest for my *rights?"*

Lucinda de la Torre

The eldest child of Tio Mundo and Tia Carmen, Lucinda is the cousin "who has never minced her words." She helps the older sisters help thwart the romance of Sofia and Manuel Gustavo, knowing that the once-independent Sofia could end up stuck on the island. Nevertheless, as an adult Lucinda adopts the island taste and "looks like a Dominican magazine model."

Mimi de la Torre

Tia Mimi is the unmarried daughter of Papito and Mamita, and is known as "the genius in the family." She spent two years at an American college, and the family fears she has been spoiled for marriage because she is still single at twenty-eight. She has a great love of reading which inspires Yolanda.

Mundin de la Torre

When the sisters are living on the island with their cousins, Mundin is most often paired with Yolanda. The two get in trouble for being in the gardener's shed, where Yolanda has promised to "show him [she's] a girl" in exchange for his modeling clay. When the sisters are older and they come back to visit Santo Domingo, Mundin takes them out and shows them the motel where lovers go.

When he is in college in America, the sisters insist, "he's one of us ... but back on the Island, he struts and turns macho."

Yolanda Laura Maria Rochet de la Torre

Dona Yolanda Laura Maria Rochet de la Torre, the girls' grandmother, is known for her willfulness and "tyrannical constitution." She convinces her husband to accept the "bogus" foreign post because she likes to make shopping trips to New York City. Her inability to deal with her fading beauty causes her to become ill in later years.

Rudy Elmenhurst

Rudolf Brodermann Elmenhurst, the third, is the shallow, insensitive college boy who becomes Yolanda's first love. She admires his "ironic self-assured face" and his quick thinking when he tries to ask her out. They see each other constantly for a whole term, while Rudy tries to take advantage of the "hot-blooded" woman he believes Yolanda should be. Yolanda is a shy virgin, however, and he leaves her when she won't have sex with him, which fills her with self-doubt. When he returns five years later demanding the same thing, Yolanda happily throws him out.

Dr. Fanning

Dr Fanning is Papi's generous American benefactor. He found the medical fellowship for Papi so he could leave the Dominican Republic and tries to help him find work in New York. He has little patience, though, with his wife when she drinks too much. The Garcias relationship with the Fannings illustrates their drastic change in social status: while in Santo Domningo, the Fannings stayed in the family compound and the Garcias "treated them like royalty." In the States, however, Dr. Garcia is embarrassed by his new beholden relationship with the Fannings.

Sylvia Fanning

Sylvia is the boisterous and hard-drinking wife of Dr. Fanning. Sandi is not sure why the handsome Dr. Fanning has married this "plain, bucktoothed woman." When she drinks, she gets flirtatious and uninhibited. At dinner, she flirts with Papi and gets up on stage to dance with the entertainers. She is also very generous, offering to buy the girls dolls, although she is blind to the discomfort this causes Mami and Papi

Dr. Carlos Garcia

Youngest of his father's thirty-five children, Papi becomes a successful doctor in America after he narrowly escapes persecution in his homeland. However, his daughters consider him to be "heavy duty old world." Even when his girls are successful adults, he feels the need to protect and look after them, giving them cash on his birthday. Although his dreams are filled with his fears of being harassed by the secret police as he was back in the Dominican Republic, he is still homesick for his homeland.

He "stubbornly clings to the memories and accents of the old world." When the situation on the island calms down, he wants to move back, even though "for the rest of his life, he would be haunted by blood in the streets and late night disappearances."

Laura de la Torre Garcia

When Mami comes to America, she has "her own little revolution brewing" against traditional Latino concepts of a woman's place. As she takes adult courses in real estate and international economics and business management, she dreams "of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself." She "still did lip service to the old ways," but at the same time, she nibbled "away at forbidden fruit." Mami does not want to move back "to the old country where... she was only a wife and a mother ..... Better an independent nobody than a high-class house slave." She is also a very proud woman, who continually scribbles her inventions on notepads, insisting, "she would show them. She would prove to these Americans what a smart woman could do with a pencil and pad." Yet Mami sometimes embarrasses her daughters with her "old world" ways.

She often speaks in malapropos ("It takes two to tangle, you know") and her matching shoes and bag disqualify her as a "girlfriend parent" and so is considered a "real failure of a Mom." In her article in the *American Book Review,* Elizabeth Starcevic writes, "she merges the self-confidence of her wealthy background with a receptivity toward the new challenges. Energetic and intelligent, she is always thinking of new inventions. Her creativity is stymied, yet she finds other outlets in the activities of her children and her husband. She is a vivid, alive character whose contributions to the necessary adjustments of her new life are both critiqued and appreciated by her daughters."

Manuel Gustavo Garcia

Manuel Gustavo is the traditionally macho, illegitimate child of Papi's brother, Tio Orlando. When Sofia falls in love with him after she is sent to live with her aunt in Santo Domingo, he tries to take complete control of her life. Sofia's sisters consider him "a tyrant, a mini Papi and Marin rolled into one" and so hatch a plot to save Sofia from him.

Carla Garcia de fa Torre

Carla, the oldest sister, is thirty-one and a child psychologist when the novel opens. She feels the need to continually analyze those around her in order to make sense of her world. She insists her mother did not give her enough attention when she was a child, as explained in her autobiographical paper, "I Was There Too." She claims that the color system her mother used to clothe her daughters "weakened [their] identity differentiation abilities and made them forever unclear about personality boundaries." She also "intimated that [Mami] was a mild anal retentive personality." After moving to America, Carla has difficulty adjusting to her new school. Her discomfort over her maturing body adds to her sense of displacement. Even after Mami accompanies her to school

because of the pervert who exposed himself to her, Carla is haunted by the taunts of classmates.

Fiji Garcia de la Torre

See Sofia Garcia de la Torre

Joe Garcia de la Torre

See Yolanda Garcia de la Torre

Lolo Garda

See Dr. Carlos Garda

Sandi Garcia de la Torre

See Sandra Garda de la Torre

Sandra Garda de la Torre

Sandra is considered to be "the pretty one," with "blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin, everything going for her!" Although her lighter skin confers prestige, she wants to be darker like her sisters. While at graduate school, she becomes anorexic and suffers a breakdown. She thinks she is turning into a monkey and so she reads a lot of books to try and retain her humanness. When she is eight, her parents decide she has artistic abilities and so send her for instruction. Sandi's independent spirit surfaces, however, and she rebels against the strict art teacher. She is "not ready yet to pose as one of the model children of the world." Looking back on the time she had broken her arm, she notes, "months of pampering and the ridicule of my Cousins had turned me inward ..... I was sullen and dependent on my mother's sole attention, tender-hearted, and whiney." Sandi no longer draws, but she is still spirited: she is the one who requests Cokes and Barbies from the Fannings during their dinner, despite her mother's warnings not to.

Sofia Garcia de la Torre

Sofia, the youngest daughter, is twenty-six when the novel opens. She was always considered the maverick out of all the sisters, although her mother considers her to be lucky. Unlike her sisters, she drops out of college. Her Americanization, especially her lack of sexual restraint, angers her father and causes tension between them. Her hasty and impulsive marriage to a German she met while on vacation causes a further rift

between them, and Papi refuses to speak to her for several years. Her need for her father's attention, though, is evident when she works hard to plan a special party for his seventieth birthday. Yet, she retains "old antagonism toward her father." She also proves herself to be impressionable, at least when she is young. After her mother finds some marijuana stashed in her room, she is sent to live with her relatives in Santo Domingo where she becomes a "Spanish-American princess," according to her sisters, as many of her Cousins had done. She also falls in love with a traditionally macho man whom she lets run her life, until she is "rescued" by her sisters.

Yolanda Garcia de la Torre

When the novel opens, Yolanda Garda de la Torre is confused about where she belongs. When she returns to the Dominican Republic for a visit, her cousins consider her to be "like one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go so as to do dubious good in the world." She refuses to be a "Spanish-American princess" like her cousins, yet she has not yet been able to find an alternate definition for herself. Deciding that "she has never felt at home in the States," she returns to her homeland for a visit, wondering if she can find a place there, but the land seems strange to her. She had hoped to be a poet, but she has not been able to write much lately. Like her sisters, Yolanda felt alienated from her classmates while she was growing up. The narrator describes her as "caught between the woman's libber and the Catholic senorita." She feels that she is a "peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles." In college she curses her immigrant origins because she feels she doesn't fit in with everyone else in the experimental 1960s she refuses drugs and sex. At the end of the novel, she admits that taking a kitten away from its mother when she was young haunts her still, and that a similar violation "lies at the center of my art."

Yoyo Garcia de la Torre

See Yolanda Garda de la Torre

Gladys

The family's outgoing pantry maid in Santo Domingo. Gladys wants to go to New York to become an actress, but Mami looks down on her as "only a country girl." Carla enjoys her singing and her company. After Carla gives Gladys her toy bank, Mami and Papi find out and fire her.

Victor Hubbard

A Yale classmate of Tio Mundo's, Victor Hubbard poses as an American consul at the American Embassy, but he is really working for the CIA. He was sent to the Dominican Republic to groom "every firebrand among the upper-class fellas" for revolution and has

been trying to protect the men in the de la Torre family. He helps the family escape to New York. In his spare time, he has sex with young island women.

John

Yolanda's first husband. He seemed to be in love with her but continually tried to categorize her.

Mami

See Laura de la Torre Garcia

Mamita

See Yolanda Laura Maria Rochet de la Torre

Nivea

Nivea is one of the family's maids, a "blackblack" whose mother named her after the American face cream she used in hope of lightening her baby's skin. Nivea's complaints "were bitter and snuck up on you even during the nicest conversations."

Otto

Sofia's husband, considered the "jolly, good-natured one among the brothers-in-law" The sisters call him "the camp counselor." Mami's favorite story about Sofia involves how she met Otto, a German chemist, at a market in South America. Ironically, it was his involvement with Fifi that led to her falling out with Papi.

Papi

See Dr. Carlos Garcia

Papito

See Edmundo Antonio de la Torre

Dr. Payne

Yolanda's therapist. She thinks she is falling in love with him.

Pila

Pila, the family's Haitian laundry maid in Santo Domingo, fascinates the sisters because she has one eye, mottled skin, and brings spirits and "story devils" to the house. She steals from the family and soon after leaves.

Themes

Culture Clash

The themes of culture clash, custom and tradition, and change and transformation together form the novel's major conflict. All the members of the de la Torre-Garcia family experience a clash between the fast-paced American way of life and the more conservative Latin culture of the Dominican Republic. The clash stems from the conflict between their desire to retain the customs and traditions of their homeland and their need to affect some change in order to adapt to their new surroundings in New York City. When they first move to America, each family member feels strong links to the traditions of their homeland. The girls especially have a hard time adapting to life in America, at least at first. Before they immigrated, their only sense of America came from Papi's presents, which prompted them to think that it must be a wondrous place where all the children played with expensive toys. After they immigrated, however, they discovered a place where language and skin color could prevent a smooth assimilation. As recalled in Carla's story "Trespass," the changes they undergo to fit in are not always comfortable: "[The boys] were disclosing her secret shame: her body was changing. The girl she had been back home in

Spanish was being shed. In her place-almost as if the boys' ugly words and taunts had the power of spells-was a halty, breast-budding grownup no one would ever love."

American Dream

Closely linked to the central conflict revolving around the clash of cultures the family experiences is Papi's and Mami's pursuit of the American dream of success. This pursuit is one of the reasons why both understand the need to adapt to their new home. The family enjoyed the benefits of their upper-class status in Santo Domingo, but when they relocated to the United States, they lived in relative poverty in a poor section of New York City. Their poverty in their early years in America especially embarrasses Papi His self-confidence and insistence on being treated as head of the family returns, however, when he establishes a successful medical practice in New York As the novel progresses, it is interesting to observe the similarities and differences in class conflicts as the Garcias experience them in the United States and in the Dominican Republic The recollection of their previous socioeconomic standing makes their American transition especially hard. As Sandi recalls, her mother says that without their grandfather's help, "'we would have to go on welfare.' Welfare, they knew, was what people in this country got so they wouldn't turn into beggars like those outside La Catedral back home."

Limitations and Opportunities

The family discovers the opportunity in America to move from one social class to another something that was much more difficult in Santo Domingo. Yet the de la Torre-

Garcia family is limited by the color of their skin, which ironically enabled them to achieve a higher status in their homeland. Their skin was lighter than the neighboring Haitians, who were relegated to servant positions. As children, the Garda girls find themselves picked upon, insulted, and stereotyped because of their accent, their names, and their appearance Yet their father knows that America can provide more opportunity for his children than the Dominican Republic could, and he is "so ambitious for presidents and geniuses in the family." Indeed, three of his daughters are professional, college-educated women.

Race and Racism

The racism inherent in American society creates one of the main limitations the family faces when they first arrive in the United States. The woman who lives below them in the city calls them "spics" and insists they "go back to where [they] came from." Yolanda's first boyfriend, Rudy, stereotypes her as "hot-blooded, being Spanish and all," and then dumps her when she refuses to sleep with him. Racism, of course, had previously provided an opportunity to be part of the upper class in Santo Domingo. The family also engages in its own subtle form of racism when the members often praise the lighter skin of offspring they claim have acquired their Swedish great-great-grandmother's genes.

Difference

Feelings of difference, especially within the girls, result from the culture clash and racism experienced by the family. At school, Carla and Yolanda feel isolated from their classmates, who tease them about the color of their skin and their faulty English. After losing Rudy Elmenhurst's affections, Yolanda worries that she will always be different and alone: "I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles."

Search for Self

As a result of their feelings of difference and alienation, the girls embark on a search for self. As they slowly adapt to their surroundings, they become "Americanized," which angers their father, who wants them to retain their ties to the "old world." Yet, they do not completely feel at home in America, and this lack of a strong sense of self and place causes future problems in relationships with others. Carla, the eldest, believes that by dressing the sisters alike, their mother "had weakened the four girls' identity differentiation abilities and made them forever unclear about personality boundaries." Determining the self is a never-ending process, however, as Dr. Payne reminds Yolanda: "We constantly have to redefine the things that are important to us. It's okay not to know." The maturation process each girl must go through complicates the search for self. Changes in their bodies and experiences with the opposite sex often leave them feeling confused.

Sex Roles

Part of this development process involves determining sex roles, which becomes complicated by the vastly different definitions Latin and American societies impose on men and women. An example of cultural differences in this area occurs when Sofia falls in love with a traditionally macho man in Santo Domingo. He believes it is his role to supervise his women, and Sofia allows him to control her every move almost without question. Her sisters, who have at this point become modem American women, rescue her from what they consider to be unacceptable sexism. Their mother also appreciates the freedom women enjoy in America. She admits that she does not want to move back "to the old country where.. she was only a wife and a mother. Better an independent nobody than a high-class house-slave."

Style

Point of View

The point of view of a piece of fiction is the perspective from which the story is told. A third person narrator relates most of the stories in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents,* referring to characters as "he" or "she." For the most part, tills narrator is omniscient, or "all-knowing," able to reveal the thoughts of all the characters in the story. There are stories or portions of stories, however, when one or another of the sisters takes over the narration, making it first person ("I"). Yolanda, the poet and writer, is the sister who most often takes the role of narrator.

Setting

The setting of a novel is the time, place, and society in which the story takes place. The novel's dual settings-the Bronx in New York City and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic provide the perfect setting for a study on the problems associated with immigration, assimilation, and acculturation. Each place represents a unique culture that strongly influences all the members of the de la Torre-Garcia family. The most influential historical details include the rebellion against the tyrannical regime of Rafael Trujillo Molina and the American age of experimentation in the 1960s. Both events symbolize the struggle between tradition and change, and dominance and rebellion that figure so prominently in the novel.

Structure

Alvarez's unique structure in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* illustrates the struggle the girls endure in their search for identity. The novel consists of fifteen short stories that sometimes center on one family member and sometimes on several. The shifting perspectives provide only fragments of each character's life, never presenting a clear portrait of anyone of them. In an interview with Catherine Wiley in the *Bloomsbury Review,* Alvarez says she was thinking "relationally" when she structured the novel. "I was talking about the plot as a quilt, which is a way that I think a lot of women experience plot, as opposed to the hero directed on his adventures and conquering things and getting a prize, at all odds doing what he needs to do."

Symbols/Imagery

A symbol is an object, character, or image that stands for something else while still retaining its original meaning The title of the novel contains a symbol that figures prominently in the novel's main theme. The Garcia girls are continually facing the conflict between losing their Latin heritage and gaining acceptance in America. Their accents are symbolic of that heritage, and losing them would be the first sure sign of

acculturation. Some characters also act as symbols. Mrs Fanning becomes a symbol of the unrestrained American lifestyle when she drinks too much, flirts with Papi, and then dances with the entertainers at a supper club. Manuel Gustavo becomes a symbol of the Latin conception of a woman's place He takes full control of Sofia's life, determining that she is unable to make decisions for herself.

Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is a German term meaning "novel of development" and is also known as a "Coming of Age" or "Apprenticeship" novel. *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* can be considered a female *Bildungsroman* since it traces the maturation process of all the de la Torre-Garcia daughters. Cecilia Rodriquez Milanes, in her article in the *Women's Review of Books,* notes that the novel "is not simply about adjustment and acculturation. It is about its protagonists' precarious coming of age as Latinas in the United States and *gringas* in Santo Domingo."

Historical Context

The Dominican Republic and Trujillo's Regime

The Dominican Republic is a Caribbean nation that occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island Hispaniola, located between the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492, and Hispaniola was the site of the first Spanish settlement in the New World. The western part of the island was settled by the French and the entire island was conquered by 1795. The French imported large numbers of African slaves to work their sugar plantations, until a rebellion led to independence for the island, now known as Haiti. The Spanish-speaking inhabitants declared their own independence in 1844, and called their new nation the Dominican Republic. Because the country was rich in agricultural products such as sugar cane, cocoa, and coffee, many American companies had economic interests in the Dominican Republic. As a result, the United States often wielded great influence over the country; they established partial control of the Dominican economy in 1905, and sent the U.S. Marines to quell unrest in 1916. This occupation lasted until 1924.

A general in the Dominican Army, Rafael Trujillo Molina was a leader in the military coup against Dominican President Horacio Vasquez in 1930. He ran for president unopposed later that year, and established a dictatorship. Border clashes with Haiti continued during the early years of his regime and in response, in 1937, Trujillo ordered Dominican troops to massacre thousands of immigrant Haitians. Although his government was cruel and civil liberties were severely curtailed, Trujillo suppressed domestic revolt by implementing improvements in roads, agriculture, sanitation, and education. In 1959 exiled Dominicans based in Cuba made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Trujillo. In 1960, the Organization of American States (OAS) found Trujillo guilty of planning the assassination of the President of Venezuela and so imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on his regime. Trujillo was assassinated in 1961. The first free elections in nearly forty years brought leftist Juan Bosch the presidency in 1962. The military opposed his reforms, however, and overthrew his government in 1963. A civil war broke out in 1965, and U.S. troops once again intervened to restore the status quo. A new constitution was ratified in 1966, and since then presidential elections have been held every four years. The turmoil of the early 1960s, including visits by Trujillo's secret police, are often referred to in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.*

The ethnic makeup of the Dominican Republic also provides an interesting insight into the novel. Since the original native inhabitants were either driven off or absorbed within the first hundred years of European occupation. most Dominicans are of European, African, or mixed ancestry. While almost three-quarters of the population come from a mixed background, those of European ancestry are more likely to belong to the economic upper class. The all-black Haitian minority, conversely. are more likely to live below the poverty line. The importance of family background, including name and color, to social standing can be seen in various sections of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Ac cents.*

The Cold War

Soon after World War n. Russian leader Joseph Stalin set up satellite communist states in Eastern Europe and Asia. The "cold war" had begun, ushering in a new age of warfare and fear triggered by several circumstances: the United States' and the Soviet Union's emergence as superpowers; each country's ability to use the atomic bomb; and communist expansion and American determination to check it. The Cold War induced anxiety among Americans, who feared both annihilation by the Russians and the spread of communism at home. Panic reached the inner city and suburbia as children practiced air raid drills in school and many families built bomb shelters. Americans were encouraged to stereotype all Russians as barbarians and atheists who were plotting to overthrow the U.S. government. This paranoid atmosphere encouraged Americans to conform to the traditional values of church. home, and country. Yet, during this time voices of protest began to emerge. Some refused to succumb to the anti-Communist hysteria. Others began to rebel against a system that encouraged discrimination and social and economic inequality. All these various concerns are experienced by the Garda family during the course of the novel.

The Women's Movement

In the 1960s the Women's Movement reemerged and gained most of its strength in the United States. The National Organization for Women (NOW), formed in 1966, and other groups like the National Women's Political Caucus gained support for abortion reform, federally supported child care centers, equal pay for women, and the removal of educational, political, and social barriers to women. Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisolm, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and others helped influence Congress to pass the Equal Rights Amendment bill in 1972 that banned sex discrimination at the national level (the amendment failed to be ratified by the states, however, and never became law) The increasing consciousness of women's roles, both at home and in Santo Domingo, are reflected in the various actions of the Garcia women, including Mami.

The Backlash against Multiculturalism

As women and blacks made political gains in the 1960s, Hispanics, gays, and other cultural groups fought to bring their own concerns to the fore in the 1970s. Ethnic roots, while always a matter of individual pride, became fashionable as the success of the 1977 television miniseries *Roots* drove scores of Americans to research their own genealogical and cultural heritage. Various departments devoted to ethnic studies emerged as major universities looked to expand history and literature studies beyond the canon of "dead white males" that had dominated academia until that point. The 1980s, however, were a much more conservative era, and a backlash sprang up against what Critics called "special treatment" of minority groups. Immigrant groups were often singled out as receiving special treatment, as conservatives lobbied against affirmative action programs, bilingual education, and government benefits for legal immigrants and worked to establish English as the single "official" language of the United States. This

climate persisted into the early 1990s, when *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* was published. As a work showing the struggles and successes of an immigrant family in the United States, it provides an interesting response to the backlash against multiculturalism of the time.

Critical Overview

Since its publication in 1991, most critics have responded positively to Julia Alvarez's novel *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.* This first novel received the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was named by both the American Library Association and the *New York Times Book Review* as a Notable Book of 1991. Many have praised Alvarez's insightful and sympathetic portrait of family life amidst the pressures of adapting to a new culture Ian Stavans considers the novel "a brilliant debut," and claims in his *Commonweal* review that "Alvarez has an acute eye for the secret complexities that permeate family life ..... [The Garda de la Torre family's] rejection of the native background. . is told with humor and has a sense of unrecoverable loss because, for as much as the Garcia sisters want to become American, they remain conscious of the advantages of their Dominican selves. Hence, Alvarez's is a chronicle of the ambivalence with which Hispanics adapt to Anglo-Saxon idiosyncrasies." Donna Rifkind writes in the *New York Times Book Review* that the author has, "to her great credit, beautifully captured the threshold experience of the new immigrant, where the past is not yet a memory and the future remains an anxious dream." Cecilia Rodriquez Milanes, in her article in the *Women's Review of Books,* finds a second important theme in the novel. She notes that it "is not simply about adjustment and acculturation. It is about its protagonists' precarious coming of age as Latinas in the United States and *gringas* in Santo Domingo".

In the same *Commonweal* article, Stavans argues that the novel "holds a unique place in the context of the ethnic literature from which it emerges" He notes that the novel does not contain ethnic stereotypes caught up in drug addiction and poverty. The Garcia de la Torre family has its roots in the Spanish *conquistadors* and becomes financially successful in their new homeland. Stavans also praises the novel's breadth. "Through the Garcia family's sorrow and happiness, through the spiritual and quotidian search that leads to their voluntary exile in the United States, the dramatic changes of an entire era are recorded."

Some critics, however, have found fault with Alvarez's narrative structure and characterizations. Stavans describes the novel as "imperfect and at times unbalanced." In her mixed review, Rifkind insists Alvarez's "goal... of translating her characters' voices into an unhackneyed American idiom has gone unrealized. The Garcia girls may indeed have lost their accents, but in her first book of fiction Julia Alvarez has not yet quite found a voice." Elizabeth Starcevic concurs with this assessment in the *American Book Review,* finding the book "uneven," and determines that "its organization into individual stories highlights this. The author has not really found consistently developed voices."

Others, though, have praised Alvarez's construction. Stephen Henighan notes in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* that *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* is a "humane, gracefully written novel." Juan D. Bruce-Novoa sees "maturity and technical polish" in the novel and concludes in his *World Literature Today* review that it is "a most entertaining, significant contribution to U.S. Latino literature."

Alvarez has also gained critical praise for her poetry collections: *The Housekeeping Book* (1984), *Homecoming* (1984; revised edition, 1995), and *The Other Side/El Otro Lodo* (1995). Her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies,* (1994) focuses on the true story of the Mirabal sisters and the tragic consequences of their denunciation of Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Her third novel *Yo,* is a continuation of the story of Yolanda Garcia, central character of *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents. Butterflies* was nominated for the 1995 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Wendy Perkins, an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, has published articles on several twentieth-century authors. In this essay she argues that Alvarez's effective structuring of the stories in How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents *reinforces the novel's focus on the problems inherent in the immigrant experience.*

Many critics have praised Julia Alvarez's sensitive and adept portrait of a family's struggle with assimilation in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.* Donna Rifkind, in the *New York Times Book Review,* wrote that Alvarez "beautifully captured the threshold experiences of the new immigrant, where the past is not yet a memory and the future remains an anxious dream." Jason Zappe noted in the *American Review* that "Alvarez speaks for many families and brings to light the challenges faced by many immigrants. She shows how the tensions of successes and failures don't have to tear families apart." Some critics, however, find fault with the novel's narrative structure. In an article published in *Commonweal,* Ian Stavan considered the novel "imperfect and at times unbalanced." Elizabeth Starcevic, in the *American Book Review,* determined the book to be "uneven," arguing that "its organization into individual stories highlights this. The author has not really found consistently developed voices." Alvarez in fact does present only fragmented voices in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.* This structural fragmentation, however, skillfully reinforces the novel's main point-that the difficult process of acculturation can result in feelings of dislocation and a fragmented sense of self.

How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents consists of fifteen short stories that focus on different members of the Dominican-American de la Torre García family, especially on the four daughters, as they leave their native Santo Domingo and resettle in New York City. The narrative's shifting perspective provides only fragments of the girls' experiences as each struggles to assimilate to a new home while being caught up in the resulting clash between Hispanic and American culture. This structure highlights the Garcia girls' inability to discover and maintain a strong identity in either place.

The reverse chronological order of the narrative also helps to further deconstruct any sense of self. The stories begin in 1989 with Yolanda's return visit to Santo Domingo and work backward to 1956, before the family immigrates to New York City. The novel ends with a story told by Yolanda about her experiences as a young girl in Santo Domingo. These two stories serve as an effective narrative frame for the family's experiences in both locations. The first story relates Yolanda's present sense of displacement both in America and in Santo Domingo. Her immigration experience has left her, as with the other members of her family, with a sense of not fitting in to either culture. By ending the novel with Yolanda's story of her life back in Santo Domingo, where she felt a surer sense of who she was, Alvarez effectively illuminates how Yolanda's identity, as well as that of each member of her family, deconstructs as a result of the acculturation process she experiences in America.

The title of the opening chapter, "Antojos," serves as a symbol of Yolanda's and her sister's feelings of displacement. When Yolanda returns to Santa Domingo for a visit, she is not sure she wants to return to America. While there, she feels a craving-an *antojo-for* guavas. She eventually finds the guavas, but the experience is far from satisfying. During her search for the fruit, she encounters a more pronounced sense of class conflict and sexism than she has found in America. Thus Yolanda is in effect caught between two cultures: she looks to her homeland to provide her with a more complete sense of herself, but at the same time, recognizes that she has been Americanized enough to be unable to return to a more traditional way of life.

In the final chapter, "The Drum," Yolanda relates a story from 1956, when she was a young self-assured girl in Santo Domingo. When Yolanda, or Yoyo as her family calls her, is given a toy drum by her grandmother, she bangs furiously and confidently on it. She soon, however, breaks the drumsticks and is unable to find anything to replace them that will provide the exact same sound she enjoyed. The narrative then shifts to Yoyo's admission that during that time, she took a newborn kitten away from its mother. Afterwards, the mother keeps reappearing in her dreams, crying for her lost kitten. The two experiences related in this story symbolize in a condensed form the difficult progression the girls have made from the Dominican Republic to America. Like her sisters, Yoyo, in her homeland, felt a sure sense of identity and place as she announced herself to the world with her confident drumbeats. Yet, like the kitten, Yolanda and her sisters have been wrenched from the security of their home. Jumping into the future in that final story, Yoyo, now a writer, admits that she now and then still hears "a black furred thing lurking in the comers of my life... wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art." That "violation," the separation of the girls from their culture and thus their identity, becomes the heart of the novel.

In the Dominican Republic, the girls grew up in a communal atmosphere. They lived and played in a family compound made up of aunts, uncles, and cousins. This sense of community, of being part of a group, provided them with a strong sense of identity. Part of that identity came from their feelings of superiority over the Haitians who are relegated to the lower class in the Dominican Republic. In an article in *Essence,* Alvarez admitted, "Growing up in the Dominican Republic, my cousins and I were always encouraged to stay out of the sun so we wouldn't 'look like Haitians.'" When the girls immigrate to America, however, the situation is ironically reversed when they are ostracized, in large part, for the color of their skin.

Donna Rifkind, in her review of the novel in the *New York Times Book Review,* explained that the girls lose a sense of communal identity when they leave Santo Domingo for New York City. She wrote: "With the Garda girls' new-world individuality comes the pain of discrimination, the greenhorn's terror. Their characters are forged amid the taunts of schoolmates, who raise questions about identity in a language they barely understand."

Alvarez's stories present glimpses of the family's often painful assimilation experiences. Their first encounter with discrimination occurs when they move into an apartment in the city. The woman who lives beneath the family calls them "spies" and insists they "go

back to where [they] came from." Later, schoolmates attack the girls with racist epithets and critiques of their faulty English. Their reduced economic status in America adds to their sense of inferiority. Even as the girls become "Americanized," their old-world parents remain an embarrassment to them. Their mother's frequent malaprops ("It takes two to tangle, you know") and her matching shoes and bag disqualify her as an "American Mom" and thus help frustrate the girls' efforts to fit in.

The stories also chronicle the clash between the traditional Latin culture and American culture, notably during the experimental 1960s, and how that clash contributes to the girls' sense of confusion and dislocation. Yolanda especially feels "caught between the woman's libber and the Catholic senorita." While at college she refuses to experiment with drugs and sex, yet at the same time, strives to become accepted by the group. She decides that she is a "peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles,"_ and as a result has no clear identity.

When the girls return to Santo Domingo on visits, their partial Americanization prevents them from feeling a part of their old community The youthful Sofia falls in love with a cousin while spending a year back home and begins to fall into a traditional relationship with him, but sometimes balks at his dominant position. When her sisters arrive, they swiftly engineer a plan to "rescue" their sister from such a conventional fate. Yet in America, the sisters often seem unable to maintain successful relationships, due, for the most part, to their inability to gain a clear vision of themselves.

In an interview with Catherine Wiley in the *Bloomsbury Review,* Alvarez said she was thinking "relationally" when she structured the novel. "I was talking about the plot as a quilt, which is a way that I think a lot of women experience plot, as opposed to the hero directed on his adventures and conquering things and getting a prize, at all odds doing what he needs to do." Alvarez's "quilting" in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* effectively portrays the Garcia girls struggle to stitch together the fragmented pieces of their lives and to try and rediscover a true sense of self and place.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In this article, Alvarez discusses her career as a Latino writer.

In 1991, Julia Alvarez made a resounding splash on the literary scene with her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents,* whose narrators, the four vibrant and distinctive Garcia siblings, captivated readers and critics. Like their author, the characters emigrated to middle-class Queens, N.Y., from the Dominican Republic, and the novel provided a keen look at the island social structure they wistfully remember and the political turmoil they escaped.

The second-oldest sister, Yolanda, now a well known author, is the protagonist of Alvarez's third novel, *'Yo',* out next month from Algonquin. Alvarez brings to Yo's portrait an empathy of shared experiences, anxieties and hopes.

In 1960 at the age of 10, Alvarez fled the Dominican Republic with her parents and three sisters (her father was involved in the underground against the dictator Raphael Trujillo). She has since roamed this country, teaching writing in far-flung schools and communities, before finally putting down roots in Middlebury, Vt., and writing two books of poetry and three novels, including 1994's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Algonquin).

A current exhibit at the New York Public Library, "The Hand of the Poet from John Donne to Julia Alvarez,"' displays snapshots of the author in the Dominican Republic (she travels there at least once a year), riding horseback, dancing the meringue and obstreperously bartering for plantains. When *PW* catches up with Alvarez, it is in

the rare-book room of the Middlebury College library, where a standing-room-only audience has gathered to hear her read from the new novel. Brushing unruly, dark bangs from her lively face, her voice inflected by a faint Latin twang, she shows few signs of the butterflies fluttering in her stomach, induced by the prospect of reciting her work on her own turf.

"I couldn't sleep last night before this reading,"' she confesses, later ushering *PW* into the living room of her secluded ranch house, which is brimming with plants, cacti and photographs of her extended family. Alvarez, who first came to Middlebury to attend the Breadloaf Writers' Conference as an undergraduate in the late 1960s and is now a tenured professor of English, has lived here permanently since 1988, and it is here that she met her husband, an ophthalmologist. Yet she expresses ambivalence at the thought of becoming something of a local fixture.

"I see myself marginally in the academic community, which I think in part is good for a writer, because it keeps you on your toes,"' she says. "When I first moved here, people would come up to me and say things that I hadn't told them. Or remark upon things that I didn't know they knew. I didn't realize that everything's connected. There's no anonymity. The good part of that is, as a friend said, 'Julia, you've always wanted roots. But now you realize that once there are roots, there are worms in the soil.'"

In conversation, Alvarez is an ebullient blend of insecurities, tart anecdotes and spitfire judgments, often punctuated by a deep, chesty laugh. Scooping up an obese marmalade cat named Lucia, she babbles half in English and half in Spanish into its fur, then offers us a glass of Wine and sits cross-legged on a leather ottoman, recalling the tumult of a childhood bifurcated by conflicting cultural milieus.

"I grew up in that generation of women thinking I would keep house. Especially with my Latino background, I wasn't even expected to go to college," she says. "I had never been raised to have a public voice."

Herself the second-oldest, Alvarez was sent to boarding school in her early teens under the protective wing of her older sister. "My parents were afraid of public school. I think they were just afraid in general of this country. So I went away to school and was on the move and not living at home since I was 13 years old."

Like many political refugees, Alvarez soon found the displacements of language and geography to be the stuff of art As an adolescent, she says, the act of writing helped to allay the pain of acculturation and the stigma of being an outsider. "I came late into the language but I came early into the profession. In high school, I fell in love with how words can make you feel complete in a way that I hadn't felt complete since leaving the Island. Early on, I fell in love with books, which I didn't have at all growing up. In the Dominican Republic, I was a nonreader in what was basically an oral culture and I hated books, school, anything that had to do with work.'"

Alvarez went to Connecticut College, but after winning the school's poetry prize, she departed for Breadloaf and Middlebury, where she earned her B.A. in 1971. After an M.F.A at Syracuse University, she lit out for the heartland, taking a job with the Kentucky Arts Commission as a traveling poet-in-residence. For two years, Alvarez traversed the back roads of the Bluegrass State, with *Leaves of Grass* as her Baedeker. "I would just pack up my car I had a little Volkswagen. My whole car was a file system. Everything I owned was in there.

"In some communities I'd give workshops or talk at night in the local church. I loved it. I felt like the Whitman poem where he travels throughout the country and now will do nothing but listen. I was listening. I was seeing the inside of so many places and so many people, from the Mennonites of Southern Kentucky to the people of Appalachia who thought I had come to do something with poultry.'"

When that job ended, other teaching jobs beckoned, and Alvarez careened around the country for more than a decade. "I was a migrant poet," she laughs. "I would go anywhere.'"

With no fixed address, Alvarez gradually assembled her first collection of poetry, which Breadloaf director Bob Pack placed with Grove. Aptly called *Homecomings,* it featured a 33-sonnet sequence called "33," which portrays the emotional vertigo Alvarez suffered on her 33rd birthday, facing middle age without a secure Job, a family of her own or a career blueprint to sustain her. Alvarez nevertheless greeted the book's publication, in

1984, with great trepidation. "It was scary," she says. "I thought 'Oh, my God, what if my parents read this? There are love affairs in here. Maybe I can go out and buy all the copies.'"

She has since reprinted *Homecomings* and issued another book of verse with Dutton *(The Other Side,* 1995). Now, however, she writes poetry less frequently than fiction. "I think what's hard for me about writing poetry is that it is so naked," Alvarez explains. In retrospect, it's not surprising that her emergence as a novelist coincided with her first tenure-track job at Middlebury. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents,* a novel displaying a historical sweep and mobility of voice not found in her poetry, was a natural next step after years of rootlessness.

"It used to turn me off, the idea of writing something bigger than a poem," she reflects. "But you grow as a writer and you start to imagine other possibilities."

Susan Bergholz, certainly the most influential agent of Latino fiction, whose clients include Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros and Denise Chavez, has represented Alvarez Since placing *Garcia Girls* with Shannon Ravenel at Algonquin. As Alvarez remembers, Bergholz approached her at a reading she gave in New York after winning a 1986 G E. Foundation Award for Younger Writers. "She was interested in my work, so I sent her a bunch of things. She really plugged away at that stuff, sending it around and talking to people and finally she landed Shannon. I'm very grateful to Susan as the person who really fought that battle for me, which-because of my background and because of my self-doubt-I probably would not have fought for myself."

Yet when *Garcia Girls* first reached Ravenel, "there was no book there," Alvarez says. "I sent portions of it to Shannon and she said: 'There's a bigger story here you're trying to tell'"

Today Alvarez can't imagine publishing with a larger house at any price, provided that Ravenel stays put. "Shannon helped form me as a writer. She often helps me to think of how to put my books together. Sometimes, I'll say, 'our book' and she'll say, 'Julia, it's your book.' Maybe a place could initially offer you more money or more razzmatazz. But 1 was 41 when *Garcia Girls* came out. If I were writing to make a whole lot of money, I would have given this craft up a long time ago. I'm doing the writing because it's the way I understand my life. It's what I do and I want a place that is sympatico to that."

Alvarez's trajectory as a novelist has hardly followed a predictable scheme. Her second novel revisits the last days of the Trujillo regime and retells the story of the three Mirabal sisters, Patricia, Minerva and Maria Teresa-actual political dissidents called Las Mariposas (the Butterflies)who in 1960 were murdered by Trujillo's henchmen. The event galvanized the political insurrection that led to Trujillo's assassination in 1961. "It's always been a story I wanted to tell. But I didn't know how to do it. They seemed to me such enormous, mythical figures. I didn't know how to touch them and make them real I thought it would be a sacrilege even to do that in some people's eyes. But I knew it was a story I wanted to tell."

Alvarez had previously tackled the subject in an essay in a small press book on heroic women, but in returning to the island to research the novel, she made an astonishing discovery: there were, in fact, four sisters, and the eldest, Dede, had survived and was still living in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez interviewed Dede and began to piece together the minutiae of the sisters' lives. "I understand the politics of a four-daughter family with no boys in a Latino culture," she notes.

All of Alvarez's novels are constructed from multiple viewpoints, ranging freely from sassy gossip to animated autobiography, but always concealing a forceful political undercurrent. She attributes her interest in voice to the storytelling traditions of Dominican life. "We didn't have TV, we didn't have books. It was just what people did. That was our newspaper."

Yo, of course, means "I" in Spanish, but Alvarez has shrewdly left the self at the center of the novel absent. Yolanda Isn't granted a voice in the novel. Instead, Alvarez builds the book around the memories of those who have suffered the manipulations of the budding author. The liberty a writer takes with her family and background is a subject of increasing importance to Alvarez as her books grow more popular. "My sisters had a hard time with *Garcia Girls.* But I think they're proud of me, and I think the books have helped them understand their lives better. Sometimes they will remember something that I think I invented. Now it's almost like the stories in that book are part of the memory pool."

In 1993, *Vanity Fair* ran a splashy profile of Alvarez, Castillo, Cisneros and Chavez (all are indeed friends) under the rubric "Los Girlfriends," portraying a cliquish set of Latina writers sharing the same literary concerns and themes. It's precisely such hype and labeling that *Yof* set out to interrogate. "One thing I didn't like about it from the beginning, which didn't have to do with the people involved, is I thought how I would feel if I was a Latino writer and I saw *the* Girlfriends and these are the [only] Latino writers. I felt there should have been 100 writers on either side of us. Not that I think it was a terrible thing. I just wonder and worry about what all of this publicity and labeling comes to."

Discussing the extravagant antics of book marketing, the 22-city tour she is about to embark on and the persistent film interest in her work *(Butterflies* has been optioned to Phoenix Pictures), Alvarez grows antsy. "As you talk, I realize I am always that immigrant. This, too, I am experiencing and watching. But I don't put faith in it. In a minute, it can be swept away." She needn't worry. Once an author without an address, a language or a homeland to call her own, Alvarez now has a loyal readership that in years to come will undoubtedly only grow larger.

Source: Jonathan Ring, "Julia Alvarez: Books That Cross Borders," in *Publishers Weekly,* December 16, 1996, pp. 38-9.

Critical Essay #3

The following review praises How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, *alternately describing the novel as "a tour de force, " "delightful," and "brilliant.* "

In the mood for a Dominican author writing in English? You are likely to find only one: Julia Alvarez, who left her country at ten and now lives and teaches at Middlebury College. Besides a book of poetry published in 1986 (intriguingly titled *Homecoming),* she is the writer of this delightful novel, a tour de force that holds a unique place in the context of the ethnic literature from which it emerges. In the age of affirmative action in life and literature, those looking for themes like drug addiction, poverty, and Hispanic stereotypes are in for a surprise. Much in the tradition of nineteenth-century Russian realism, and in the line of the genuine "porcelain" narrative creations of Nina Berberova, *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents* has as its protagonist the Garda de la Torre, a rich family in Santo Domingo and its surroundings whose genealogical tree reaches back to the Spanish *conquistadors.* Through the Garda family's sorrow and happiness, through the spiritual and quotidian search that leads to their voluntary exile in the United States, the dramatic changes of an entire era are recorded. Energetic, curious, and bellicose, their collective plight is a struggle to keep up with the times, and also, an adjustment to a culture that isn't theirs.

The plot focuses on the relationship of four Sisters: Carla, Sandra (Sandi), Yolanda (Yo, Yoyo, or Joe), and Sofia (Fifi) Their aristocratic upbringing as S.A P.s-Spanish American Princesses-takes them from their "savage Caribbean island" to prestigious schools in New England and from there to an existence as middle-class citizens in the Bronx.

They undergo discrimination and suffer from linguistic misunderstandings. They iron their hair according to the latest fashion and buy bell-bottom pants with fringe. As women in difficult marriages and troubled breakups, theirs is the customary rite of passage of immigrants assimilating into another reality. Their rejection of the native background, nevertheless, is told with humor and has a sense of unrecoverable loss because, for as much as the Garcia sisters want to become American, they remain conscious of the advantages of their Dominican selves Hence, Alvarez's is a chronicle of the ambivalence with which Hispanics adapt to Anglo-Saxon idiosyncrasies.

Made of fifteen self-contained chapters collected in three symmetrical parts, more than a novel the volume ought to be read as a collection of interrelated stories Each segment reads as an independent unit, with the same set of characters recurring time and again in different epochs and places. As a whole, the narrative spans three decades, the first chapter beginning in 1988 and the last reaching as far back as 1956 Similar to some plots by the Cuban musicologist Alejo Carpentier and the British playwright Harold Pinter, the Garcia girls, as if on a Journey back to the source, navigate from maturity to adolescence, from knowledge to naiveté, from light to darkness-that is, their lives are perceived in reverse. In the process, the characters slowly deconstruct their personalities and reflect upon their Catholic education at home in the hands of a "respectable," highly schematic father. In his 1982 autobiography *Hunger for Memory,*

Richard Rodriguez, while attacking bilingual education, discussed the impairment of the native tongue and the acquisition of the "father" tongue, English. Because Alvarez is uninterested in such meditations, her book, in spite of the title, isn't about language. Here and there the narrative does offer insightful reflections on the transition from an ancestral vehicle of communication to an active, convenient one. Yet the idea of "losing" one's accent is nothing but a metaphor: a symbol of cultural abandonment.

A secondary leitmotif also colors the plot that of the coming of age of a candid female writer and her indomitable need to describe, in literary terms, her feelings and immediate milieu. Yoyo, the author's alter ego, is a sensible, extroverted adolescent who loves to write poetry. In "Daughter of Invention," perhaps the volume's best story and one recalling Ralph Ellison's first chapter of *Invisible Man,* she is asked to deliver a commencement speech. Her mother helps her out. In search of inspiration, Yoyo finds Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* in particular "Song of Myself," and writes a speech celebrating her egotism, her excessive self-interest. The theme infuriates her father. In a rage of anger, he tears up the manuscript. But the mother's support encourages the girl to deliver the speech, which she does quite successfully. She is praised by her own repentant father with a gift of a personal typewriter.

Obviously, as a whole *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accent* is Yoyo's product. Although its content is told by shifting narrators, she is the soul inside the text. She contrasts and ponders. She is puzzled and flabbergasted by the circumstances around her. The world gains and loses its coherence in her mind. In an illuminating segment about Pila, a bizarre maid with voodoo powers who inspired nightmares, Yoyo writes about her first discovery of things Dominican. Hers is a story of wonder and disbelief. Accustomed to a certain climate of order and to the rules set forth by her parents, she is disoriented by the behavior of the maid. After a series of mishaps that involve a cat and strange tales by a grandmother, the section concludes:

[After those experiences] we moved to the United States I saw snow. I solved the riddle of an outdoors made mostly of concrete in New York. My grandmother grew so old she could not remember who she was I went away to school. I read books. You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits what's left in the hollow of my story? I began to write, the story of Pila, the story of my grand mother I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear [pila], a black furred thing lurking in the comers of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art.

The entire volume is a gathering of memories, a literary attempt to make sense of the past. Alvarez has an acute eye for the secret complexities that permeate family life. Although once in a while she steps into melodrama, her descriptions are full of pathos. The political reality in the Dominican Republic, although never at center stage, marks the background. The repressive thirty-year-long Trujillo dictatorship, which culminated with the leader's assassination in 1961, makes the Garcias happy but complicates their lives. The democratic elections that brought Juan Bosch into power bring a period of

tranquility, interrupted by the 1965 civil war that brought the U.S. intervention and ended in the election, supervised by the Organization of American States, of Joaquin Balaguer. The family is pushed to an exile that makes its religious faith stumble and its traditions collapse. Yet *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents,* unlike scores of narratives from south of the Rio Grande, is free from an anti-American message: in Tennessee Williams's terms, its primary concern is a minuscule glass menagerie, the fragile life of a group of individuals swept by epic events they constantly fight to ignore.

While imperfect and at times unbalanced, this is a brilliant debut-an important addition to the canon of Hispanic letters in the U.S. By choosing to write for an English-speaking audience, Alvarez is confessing her own loyalty: albeit reluctantly, she is in the process of losing her accent. Still, the accent refuses to die.

Source: Ian Stavans, a review of How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, in *Commonweal,* Vol. CXIX, No.7, Aprill0, 1992, pp. 23-5.

Critical Essay #4

The following excerpt offers a mixed review of How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, *ultimately concluding that "we feel included in their lively passionate world. and we want more.* "

It is the vices of the Garcia girls, the four lovely daughters of Mami and Papi Garcia, who singly and in chorus offer the shifting choral poem that recounts their life as "strangers in a strange land." (Julia Alvarez left the Dominican Republic when she was ten years old. She published *Homecoming,* her first book of poetry, in 1986.) Privileged children of a privileged Dominican upper-class family, they are forced to leave their idyllic family compound to come and live in New York. Their father, Carlos Garcia, one of thirty-three children, is a well-established professional in his country. Their mother, Laura de la Torre, traces her heritage back to the conquistadors and never forgets to mention a Swedish grandmother among her ancestors. Her father, a representative from the Dominican Republic to the United Nations, is involved in national politics, but with a difficult and complex relationship to the reigning dictator Rafael Trujillo. Carlos Garcia and many of his relatives and friends become involved in an attempt to overthrow Trujillo that is at first supported and then abandoned by the United States. Garcia is aided in his flight from his homeland by one of the Americans who implement this policy of fluctuating imperialism.

The threads of politics, race, and class surface often in this circular depiction of the Garcia family's life in the United States. Beginning and ending in the Dominican Republic, in a quest to perhaps go home again, the stories unfurl from the present to the past, from 1989 to 1959. They are grouped in three sections with five stories each. Weaving together the life "before" and the life "after," these histories of Immigrant experience are filled with humor, love, and intimate detail.

The shock felt by the girls when they abruptly change their life circumstances seems unbearable at first. Initially in limbo and wishing to return to their home, the girls experience racism, sexism, perversion, and a poverty that they were totally unused to. Isolated by language, they bond together within their already clannish patriarchal family, which is also being bombarded by the demands of the new world Traditional roles are challenged, and upheaval permeates their interactions.

Although Carlos Garcia is drawn as the patriarch and all the girls seek his approval, it is Laura de la Torre who plays the significant role as a mediator between two cultures. Educated in the United States, she merges the self-confidence of her wealthy background with a receptivity toward the new challenges. Energetic and intelligent, she is always thinking of new inventions. Her creativity is stymied, yet she finds other outlets in the activities of her children and her husband. She is a vivid, alive character whose contributions to the necessary adjustments of her new life are both critiqued and appreciated by her daughters. Through her stories about them we discover their accomplishments and their defeats, their adventures and professional advances. When Mami tells their story, each girl feels herself to be the favorite.

Carla, Yolanda, Sandra, and Sofia Garcia grow up in a tumultuous period in the United States. This is the time of the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, drugs, and feminism. While trying to negotiate the strict limits imposed on them by their parents, the sisters develop as a group and individually. "The four girls,"_ as they are called, constantly see themselves as part of a similarly dressed collective, understanding only later that this made their mother's life easier while making them miserable. Their parents, while appreciated and loved, were not really able to guide them in their new tasks. Indeed, the cultures often seem to war against each other as the girls are told to be good, Catholic, respectful, unsullied Virgins in an atmosphere that pushes for new mores and individualistic attitudes. They are sent to prep school in Boston and later go on to college. Marriages, divorces, breakdowns, and careers all form part of the adjustment. At least one, Yolanda, the poet, the writer whose voice is perhaps the strongest throughout the novel, decides as an adult to consider spending some time in the Dominican Republic and perhaps discovering at last her real home. There is overlay, however, in the cultural clashes. On one of their visits, these "American" sisters, who no longer fit as Dominicans, unite to rescue Sofia, the youngest. Having fallen in love and become empty-headed almost simultaneously, she is ready to go off to a motel with her macho cousin, who believes that using condoms is an offense to his manhood.

In these visits and in their memories of their birthplace, we learn of the prejudices toward Haitians and darker-skinned country girls who are both needed and looked down upon. The portrayal of Chucha, the ancient Haitian servant, who is feared for her temper, her voodoo spells, and her practice of sleeping in a coffin, offers a glimpse into the historical complexity of the relationships of the two countries that share the island of Hispaniola Comfort and ease that are taken for granted are provided by a series of servants who may spend their entire lives in the compound. Their livelihood depends on the whims of the employer, and one of the Garcias' maids is abruptly dismissed for having one of the children's toys in her possession even though Carla had given it to her as a gift.

The class privilege that was abruptly disturbed by the failed coup attempt does not disappear completely in the new world. Carlos Garcia obtains a job immediately through his American benefactor Dr. Fanning. Little by little he is able to establish a practice and to provide ever greater comfort for his family. The Garcias are helped as well by Mrs. Garcia's father. It is on a special evening out With the Fannings that we see the problematic relationship of U.S. neocolonialism replayed and that Sandi learns the power of emotional blackmail.

Scenes of pain and hardship but also of great humor are found throughout the novel. We listen to Laura Garcia describe finding her husband and Carla in the bathroom painting white sneakers red with nail polish. Or, shades of magical realism, we watch Sandi discover one of the island's famous sculptors, naked and chained, in a shed strewn with giant figures in wood. Eventually she sees that he has sculpted her face on the statue of the virgin for the annual nativity crèche. Banding together, the sisters play on the names of their family in Santo Domingo, translating them literally so that they sound silly in English.

Language is a central feature of the book, beginning with the title. From Mrs. Garcia's "mixed-up idioms that showed she was green behind the ears,"' to Yolanda's poetry, to the author, the girls, the mother and the father, all the aunts who want them to speak Spanish, the nuns and the police who want them to speak English, all the characters talk about language.

These are stories about relationships. Women are at the center, and we see the world through their eyes but also hear of it through their mouths. These are people of an oral tradition, and even though they have moved on to a writing stage, the power of the voice is what carries them. The book is uneven, and its organization into individual stories highlights this. The author has not really found consistently developed voices. Nevertheless, as we are pulled backward toward the moment when these Dominicans will become immigrants, we are pulled into the world of this family, we are drawn into their hopes and their dreams and their strategies for living, and we are glad. We enjoy what we learn, we enjoy the music of this chorus, we feel included in their lively, passionate world, and we want more.

Source: Elizabeth Starcevic, a review of *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents,* in *American Book Review,* Vol. 14, No 3, August-September, 1992, pg. 15.

Topics for Further Study

Research the regime of Rafael Trujillo and describe what it was like to live under his dictatorship.

Investigate the culture of the late 1960s, especially as it appeared on college campuses. Explain how this culture could create added pressures for the Garcia sisters.

Research the status of women in Latin culture and American culture in the 1970s and 1980s. How do these differences affect the women in the novel?

Read another work on the immigrant experience, written by an author from another culture, and compare it to the experiences related in *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.*

What Do I Read Next?

Alvarez's *Yo'* (1997) is a continuation of the story of Yolanda Garcia, the poetic sister of *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.*

Something to Declare (1998) is Alvarez's collection of essays on her struggles to integrate two cultures

The Joy Luck Club, published in 1989, is Amy Tan's chronicle of the lives of four Chinese-American women and their families, who pass down the stories of their heritage.

The House on Mango Street (1983), by Sandra Cisneros, is a collection of episodes in a young Mexican American girl's life as she is caught between two cultures.

Mexican writer Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) chronicles the tensions between a Latin woman and her family.

Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* (1976) explores the Asian immigrant experience in America.

Further Study

Julia Alvarez, "Black behind the Ears," in *Essence,* Vol. 23, No 10, February, 1993, p. 42, 129, 132.

Alvarez talks about her Latin heritage and growing up in the Dominican Republic

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 93, Gale, 1996, pp. 1-20.

A collection of Critical excerpts on Alvarez's work, including *How the Garda Girls Lost Their Accents.*

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Novels for Students

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

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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