In the Name of Salome Short Guide

In the Name of Salome by Julia Álvarez

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Contents

In the Name of Salome Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....4

Techniques....6

Themes....8

Key Questions....11

Literary Precedents....13

Related Titles....14

Copyright Information....15

Characters

Alvarez populates this novel with a huge cast of characters. They are predominantly comprised of several generations of a few Dominican families, primarily the Henriquez and the Urena families, but they extend to include those whose fortunes are intertwined with the country and the principal characters. The major characters include Salome Urena; her parents, Gregoria and Nicolas; her aunt Ana; and her sister, Ramona. Salome and her husband, Francisco Henriquez (Pancho or Papancho), a poet and politician who served as president of the Dominican Republic for four months, have four children: Francisco (Fran); Pedro (Pibin), who is the Norton Lecturer at Harvard in Latin American Studies in 1941; Maximiliano; and Camila, a professor of Spanish language and literature and the narrative voice of half of the chapters of the book. In addition, there is Pancho's "French" family, about whom Camila speculates, especially when she meets a French woman.

Then there is a woman who became Camila's stepmother after Salome's death, Natividad "Tivisita" Lauranzon, with whom Pancho has five children, including Rodolfo.

Most of these characters emerge as important but two dimensional figures, serving to provide familial, communal, and political background and context. But three major characters occupy center stage and are developed in a variety of ways out of the historical documents and oral traditions available to Alvarez (for Alvarez based many of the characters in this book on real people). Salome, Pancho, and Camila are developed through dialogue, through extensive quoting of the creative and epistolary work of their own hands and in their own voices and through their actions in dramatic scenes. For instance, Salome's courage and strength of character are revealed in scenes of her domestic life with her older (and unmarried) sister Ramona during the years when Salome sacrifices nearly everything to support Pancho's medical studies in Paris. Her personal qualities of courage and sacrifice are, of course, thematically related to her function as the poet laureate of the struggle for la patria. But this sacrifice extends not only to her efforts to give birth to a genuine homeland but also to her courageous and forgiving reconciliation with Pancho, one result of which is the birth of Camila, and her holding on to her life for three more years before succumbing finally to tuberculosis. Camila's trials likewise display her many strengths, talents, and courage. Both mother and daughter support "the revolution," both seeking through their poetry and their teaching to empower and free the exploited, especially the women of all cultures. Camila's brushes with romantic love, especially in the persons of the stuttering but talented and sensitive sculptor, Domingo, and the dashing young military attache, Scott Andrews, are, finally, unfulfilled, and she lives the life of a single (and celibate) woman. However, she does have a "special relationship" with Marion, her best friend, who would also like to have been her lover. Salome and Camila are also connected by the statement, "You can count on me," a motto that characterizes their sense of duty and responsibility and which each utters to a man who is or should be very significant in their lives.

Social Concerns

Julia Alvarez is a "serious" writer, one who deals with themes and issues connecting the individual, the family, the community, and the state; in her work, the health and condition of the individual seems always to be a reflection in some useful and meaningful way of the others. The place and function of the artist and the politician and the ways in which the creative and the political impulses come together in poetry and pedagogy play a large role in this, Alvarez's fourth novel, even more strongly than in her three earlier novels. The nature of a Dominican homeland, la patria, occupies center stage, with Alvarez clearly arguing that the enormous difficulties of creating a working state, a democracy, a true homeland, are intimately tied to the sexual habits of so many upper-class Dominican men. She connects political tyranny with the machismo that creates habits of secrecy and betrayal at the family level. One of the many consequences of this habitual behavior is that broken or partial families are headed by women who usually have insufficient resources. However, another consequence of these social facts is that women emerge in Alvarez's fiction as strong; they are strong enough to carry on revolutions and strong enough to survive the patriarchy (but not, to be sure, without significant damage and cost). The dream of la patria will never, in her view, be realized so long as the male leaders of the revolution(s) subscribe to the pervasive cultural practice of male sexual license.

For far too long, males have attempted to control female sexuality by opposing women's free education, birth control, travel, and employment. The result ultimately is the abuse, both physical and psychological, of women and children. Alvarez weaves these issues deftly into the fabric of the plot as part of the cultural background and only occasionally brings them to the foreground as they are so naturally a part of the early twentieth-century context of the novel. She reveals the pervasiveness of male control with the character of Salome's husband, Pancho, who edits, alters, recites, and controls her poetry; in fact, he appropriates Salome's voice. So long as her poetry is revolutionary on the level of state politics, it is acceptable to him, and he takes great pride in it, but when it begins to emerge as part of a feminist declaration of sexual passion and equality, then he and other men, including Camila's brothers as well as Salome's internalized censor, repress it.

Alvarez subtly reveals how religious and cultural traditions of the Hispanic people in the Caribbean forge the chains of male sexual oppression of women and how difficult it is to throw these restraints off. Alvarez returns again and again to this theme in her work precisely because of the difficult challenges it poses for all women. A fiery and angry passion burns beneath the controlled prose of her fiction, poetry, and essays.

The solution Alvarez proposes derives from the idea and practice of education.

Salome founds the first school for higher education for women, the Institute de Senoritas, in 1881. Both Camila and Salome are teachers for major portions of their lives.

Both are engaged in teaching language (the mother tongue), the ideas expressed in that tongue, and the relationship between one's language and the idea of the homeland, of la patria. A large number of scenes in the novel occur in classrooms, whether in Salome's Dominican classrooms or in Camila's classrooms at Vassar and in Cuba. The final scene of the work, one of the most powerful and moving of the entire novel, shows Camila, blind and nearly eighty, guiding a small boy's hands over the carving of her name on her own tombstone, saying the letters and the words of her own name, until the boy, trying "again and again, until he gets it right" learns the connection between sound, meaning, letters, and their shapes.

Closely connected with the themes and issues surrounding education and literacy is the work of the poet and the function of poetry in creating la patria. In times of political and personal stress, Camila turns to her mother's poetry because poetry is centering and clarifying. Alvarez herself likes 208 to begin her workday by reading poetry to "tune her ear" to the truth and beauty of language and thus to the truth of what she writes.

Other important social issues crowd this novel, especially the racial consequences of the Spanish empire building. After the Conquest, the European diseases brought by Columbus and those who followed decimated the indigenous populations. Subsequently, the Spanish began the wholesale importation of African slaves to do the heavy work of empire building. And thus began the deeply rooted history of race and racism in the Dominican Republic, issues that go deep into the modern history of the region. Four hundred years after Columbus, another kind of imperialism, "yanqui imperialism," began to be practiced by the United States in Central and South America. Beginning most clearly with the United States' overthrow of Spanish rule through the purchase and conquest of what is now the western United States and continuing with the Spanish American War of 1895 right on through present-day United States interventions throughout the hemisphere, United States foreign policy has attempted to annex, control, or influence much of Central America. As a consequence, the United States has a nearly unbroken history of supporting dictators in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Haiti, Puerto Rico and other areas, often to the detriment of the people in these countries and, ultimately, to the larger interests of the United States. Alvarez embeds these social issues in the lives and actions of her characters as they move through their domestic relationships, their individual encounters, and in their participation in the politics of the time. Thus, the inevitable and inseparable relationship between larger political issues and intensely personal and emotional individual issues is always clear and compelling. La patria can never be successfully formed so long as individuals and nations are governed by the politics of machismo and complicated by racism.

Techniques

Alvarez has always found multiple points of view not merely compatible but necessary to record and express the nuances of theme and character. She tells this story from the point of view of a mother, Salome, and her daughter, Camila. Sometimes the point of view is simply limited omniscient, sometimes it seems to be first-person interior, and sometimes it is an unlimited om niscient point of view. Her strategy undoubtedly owes much to her basing the work extensively on historical documents, including the diary of Pedro Henriquez Urena, editions of Salome's poetry, and editions of the Henriquez Urena family correspondence. It is helpful to note that Alvarez has worked very successfully in this mode before, especially with In the Time of the Butterflies, blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction to create a compelling and coherent and "true" work of art.

Camila is sixty-six in the prologue, the point at which Alvarez begins the novel. It opens with a striking physical description of her as "a tall, elegant woman with a soft brown color to her skin (southern Italian? a Mediterranean Jew? a light-skinned Negro woman who has been allowed to pass by virtue of her advanced degrees?)" that immediately connects character with theme.

She alternates with her mother, Salome, as the narrative point of view in alternating chapters, as signaled by the chapter headings. The novel is divided into four larger sections, including the prologue and epilogue. The chapters within each section likewise alternate between Spanish titles and English titles; that is, there are two chapter ones, two chapter twos, etc. The first chapter in each subsection is Salome's and thus has Spanish titles; the second chapter in each subsection is Camila's and thus has English titles. Both prologue and epilogue are presented from the point of view of Camila. In the epilogue, Camila speaks what must be taken as Alvarez's statements about her structural intention: Camila says, I longed for her [Salome] . . . . I tried all kinds of strategies. I learned her story. I put it side by side with my own. I wove our two lives together as strong as a rope and with it I pulled myself out of the pit of depression and self-doubt. But no matter what I tried, she was still gone. Until, at last I found her the only place we ever find the dead: among the living.

The alternating chapters and voices comprise a structural device of great thematic significance. With it, Alvarez unites the work of the generations and explains one in terms of the other. But it is not a simple historical ploy. Rather, it draws attention to the imaginative interplay among the generations who, if they listen, learn not only the lessons of politics and political activism but also the lessons of the heart, of the emotions and hopes and struggles and dreams of each generation. The Greeks said that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children; while true in many senses, Alvarez takes the principle a step further and shows by this complex yet carefully distinct structuring that the influences of the older generations are powerful precisely in their layering, in their emotional impacts, and in the artifacts with which they communicate to the newer generations. History and influence are complex matters; Alvarez creates a satisfying and suggestive structure that demonstrates the strength

that results from the interweaving of the past generation's stories and thoughts with the lives of the present generation. The structure also suggests that without that interweaving the present generation will always be lacking, incomplete, shallow, and insufficient. Camila, as was her mother, is a teacher, a repetition that argues for the indispensable role of teachers (and poets) in creating la patria, the homeland.

As in her other fiction, poetry, and essays, Alvarez argues that writing matters because it takes us out of ourselves and into the lives and worlds of others, knitting us together as a human species; yet, difficult and awful as it is, the writer must struggle to find her own voice. In Salome, however, more than in any of her other works (except In the Time of the Butterflies where the story of the Mirabal sisters records directly the immense sacrifice and courage of these women in opposing the tyranny of Trujillo), the writing compellingly combines the personal and the political.

Themes

A poet has the gift not only for recording the inner life of the individual but also for recording and shaping the aspirations of a people for liberty and a homeland. Camila lauds her mother, Salome, for speaking out against tyranny; however, throughout the sections of the novel in Salome's voice, Alvarez develops a character who speaks out not only against tyranny but also for personal passion and the power of love, speaking out of the pain of emotional and sexual betrayal that she had previously endured in silence. Salome, although torn between her duty to bring about the birth of la patria on the one hand and her duty and her devotion to her children on the other, finds some resolution of these twin claims when she realizes that state politics and sexual politics are intimately connected.

How can a country liberate itself if it enslaves its female residents? How can a homeland be proclaimed if the women lack the freedom and the means to be as free with their emotional and sexual lives as the men?

Thus, Salome devotes herself passionately to educating the young ladies who come to the school she creates in her home. And she writes to stir her readers to noble actions despite the repression that Salome, and later Camila, operates under. In fact, Camila, in her role as college professor and guardian of her mother's legacy, has had "All her life . . . to think first of her words' effect on the important roles her father and brothers and uncles and cousins were playing in the world." Thus, "it is a mystery how the heart gets free," just as it is a mystery how the homeland gets free.

On the other hand, poetry is centering and clarifying, and it provides connections to important values. The poet is at her best when she has the power to say "what we all feel and don't have the courage to speak."

Finally, it is the language, the words, that create "who we are." The real revolution, as Camila muses, can be won "only by the imagination," only through "the struggle to see and the struggle to love the flawed thing we see—what other struggle is there?"

Thus, in the characters of Salome and Camila, Alvarez strongly connects a number of themes and social issues: literacy, language, poetry, seeing, revolution, and la patria.

Only in the struggle to see, to create, to find and know the words, and to teach the words—only in this continuing, ongoing struggle—can la patria, a true homeland, ever be created. As the final scene in the novel makes clear, one must make the attempt again and again and again until one gets it right.

The parallel, or second, family theme occurs throughout Alvarez's four novels and addresses the serious and consequential social issue of institutionalized male sexual infidelity. Offered as the "custom of the country," the practice of a man's creating and keeping a second and perhaps even a third family is portrayed and attacked as a practice by men to demonstrate their virility and, perhaps, their economic prowess as

well. Such arrangements apparently have been and continue to be widespread in Latin America. Alvarez attacks the practice not only by showing its effects on the women and children involved but also by suggesting a connection between such sexual tyranny and political tyranny. When Salome learns that her husband Pancho (Francisco Henriquez) has created another family while studying medicine in Paris, she is furious and has nothing more to do with him until very near the end of her life when she has sex with him and gives birth to Camila.

Alvarez portrays the many consequences of such arrangements, some harsh and long lasting, both economic and psychological, some apparently benign (the presence of many women in a family to take care of children and other domestic duties). In one section narrated from the point of view of Salome, she recalls a time when a fifteenyear-old girl came to her door. She had been thrown out on the street by her family because she was pregnant by a man who refused to acknowledge his responsibility and who goes on to marry another girl from a "fine family—with no seeming consequences to be paid." Thinking of the girl causes Salome to remember her own father's second family. "Why was it all right for a man to satisfy his passion, but for a woman to do so was as good as signing her death warrant? There was another revolution to be fought to be truly free."

The parallel family theme is clearly a serious criticism of the fact of male dominance in Dominican society, but while the response of women in each of Alvarez's novels varies, that of both Gregoria and later her daughter Salome is swift and sure.

When Gregoria learns from her "sharpeyed, straight-talking older sister, Ana" that Nicolas "has started a whole other family and set up a whole other woman in her own house," she packs up her two girls, Salome and Ramona, and their belongings, moves out, and lives apart from Nicolas for four years. It is only years later when Ramona and Salome bury their father and meet their counterparts at the funeral, his other children, that they learn why their mother had left their father. The complex and tangled nature of such dual families and their sexual relationships is complicated further by their frequently involving interracial alliances and a good deal of cultural racism.

Salome points out that if her mother had not already been pregnant with Ramona, "the Urenas might have had a long talk with their son Nicolas in which they might have pointed out that though Gregoria herself was pale enough, and though she spoke of her grandpapa from the Canary Islands, all you had to do was look over her shoulder at her grandmother and draw your own conclusions." Nicolas was flamboyant, a lawyer and a poet. The poem that Salome and Ramona later compose to their father expresses a guilt common to children of desertion or divorce as they wonder whether his running off was somehow their fault.

Thus the broken hearts lead to a broken family, which leads to a broken nation, and the patriarchy versus the quiet revolution of the women is played out. It is played out not only in the marriage of Salome's parents, Gregoria and Nicolas, but also later in her own marriage to Pancho.

A major theme in Alvarez's work is the rejection of the macho tradition of male domination and the assertion of gender equality and responsibility. She recognizes that the issue is complex because the cultural traditions of gender- and class-based sexual behaviors are deeply engrained in both the women as well as in the men in the traditional and Catholic society of the Dominican Republic. Because sex is, on one level, an important part of marriage and is only to be engaged in within the sanctity of marriage, the pressures to conform to cultural expectations by marrying and enduring are enormous. However, because Dominican men have traditionally maintained extramarital liaisons, many women have been kept in abused and subjected states. Alvarez celebrates the courage of both Gregoria and Salome in their reactions to their husbands' infidelity but connects the facts and the consequences of it to the larger issues of la patria. Furthermore, Alvarez is able to explore the tension between the intense desire of her female characters for love and security, and a feminist opposition to the traditional and hypocritical male view of protecting the virginity of their daughters while engaging in their own illicit affairs.

Key Questions

Alvarez seeks to connect the work of poetry with the work of politics. She explores in this book and in the body of her work the function of poetry and fiction in contemporary society. Historically, poets have played powerful roles in the formation and preservation of homelands both as the instigators of revolutions and as celebrators of the status quo. One thinks, for instance, in the English tradition, of Edmund Spenser; William Shakespeare; John Dryden; and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The intersection of poetry and politics can provide a wonderful and fruitful context for research and discussion. In addition, this novel has much to say about the relation between a poet's personal life and passions and the role she is expected to fulfill as a national spokesperson. Thus the tension between the private and public lives of poets (and other artists) would be a useful area to investigate, using this novel as a core text.

Furthermore, the relationship between one's personal morality and the larger social and political contexts in which individuals operate is always a useful area for discussion.

1. Research the history and nature of political upheavals in Latin America, especially in the Dominican Republic and its sister nation, Haiti. What has been the role of the United States in them?

What has been the role of art and literature in them?

2. Research political leaders who have also been poets or creative writers of some sort. Have any politicians in the United States also been influential poets? Identify several influential poets in the United States who have made their living in business, law, medicine, or some other profession or trade. This research could lead to an interesting discussion of the nature and role of poetry in the culture of the United States.

3. Compare the issue of sexual politics in Salome with that presented, for example, by the seventeenth-century English writer John Dryden in his "Absalom and Achitophel", in which he wrote, "when man on many multiplied his kind." Does polygamy stem from the feudal consequences of male uncertainty about paternity? Is this practice historically popular only in the nineteenth century (for example, Mormon polygamy and Hispanic "second" families) or does it continue on into the twentieth century? Compare and contrast the nature and consequences of the various practices of polygamy with the widespread pattern of divorce and remarriage prevalent in the United States and other countries.

4. What is the relationship between the themes of the novel and the characterization of Salome and Camila?

5. The novel begins and ends with a teacher, Camila, surveying and reflecting on her work as a teacher. Examine the nature and functions of education as presented in the novel.

6. Analyze the issues of race, "mixed blood," and racism in this and other works by Alvarez. Compare and contrast her exploration of these issues with that of such writers as Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Rudolfo Anaya, and Gary Soto.

7. In the acknowledgments section, Alvarez writes that her characters, while based on historic personages, are "re-created in the light of questions that we can only answer, as they did, with our own lives: Who are we as a people? What is a patria? How do we serve? Is love stronger than anything else in the world?" Reflect on these statements.

8. Considering all the evidence (for example, the personal and familial relationships examined in the novel), argue whether In the Name of Salome presents a pessimistic or an optimistic view of life.

9. Reflect on the issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and Cuba as presented in the novel— and the daily news media—and argue whether United States foreign policy should or should not change.

10. Compare and contrast Alvarez's portrayal of female characters in her other novels with the portrayal and characterization of Salome and Camila.

11. Referring to the acknowledgments section of the book, analyze Alvarez's use of historical documents, such as letters, published poems, and diaries. What other writers can you think of who make use of historical figures, events, and documents to create a work of fiction? Compare Alvarez's use of historical documents in Salome with William Harrison's in The Blood Latitudes and Andrew Dubus III's in House of Sand and Fog, both are novels that also use historical events and materials.

Literary Precedents

Two of Alvarez's earlier works are especially useful in understanding her techniques and themes in the present work. In the Time of the Butterflies and YO!, in particular, emphasize the importance of family stories, whether directly from the oral tradition or as recovered from journals, diaries, and letters, in telling family members, as well as others, of the journey of the family and how it got where it is as part of its homeland, as a family, and as individual members of that family. Both YO! and In the Name of Salome are in many ways "metafiction," that is, works that examine every aspect of the creative writing life, including the emotional challenges of creating stories and poems, the writer's need for love and acceptance, the writer's use of both her own experience and that of others, the connections between life (especially political life) and art, and the crucial role of genius in transforming it all into art. In all of Alvarez's work, stories create the fabric and the truth of lives. They also serve to create a lasting monument to those lives, a poetic conceit as old as poetry itself. Just as In the Time of the Butterflies, where the story of the Mirabal sisters, created out of the fragments of oral legend and history, memorializes their courage and warns about the dangers of dictatorships, so In the Name of Salome memorializes the courage and lives of two great Dominican poets and teachers and the inestimable contributions they made to la patria.

In Something to Declare (1998), Alvarez writes that she sees her writing as a "palimpsest, and behind the more prominent, literary faces whose influence shows through the print (Scheherazade, George Eliot, Toni Morrison, Emily Dickinson, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros), I see other faces: real-life ladies who traipsed into my imagination with broom and dusting rag, cookbook and garden scissors, Gladys and the Has, the cook at Yaddo and her sidekick, the lady with the vacuum cleaner." But her fundamental indebtedness is to her large and verbal Dominican extended family, that swirl of aunts (Has) and uncles (tios), of grandparents, cousins, and sisters, of maids and neighbors. All of these people told and corrected stories about each other. The maids, especially Gladys, the pantry maid, taught her songs, folk remedies, and the secrets of life of which Gladys and her colleagues were the keepers.

The seed for her writing was planted in this Dominican soil and then nourished by teachers in her English classes in New York City, by the example of William Carlos Williams, another Caribbean immigrant, and by the work of Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya and Gary Soto, among other bilingual, bicultural writers.

New York City English, the sounds and rhythms of that second language, was an additional influence.

Related Titles

During the 1980s, Alvarez became increasingly prolific in the genres of poetry, nonfiction prose, and the novel and continued to be productive throughout the 1990s.

The Housekeeping Book (1984) was a handmade book of her housekeeping poems, parts of which she wrote while at Yaddo (a writer's retreat) where she began to discover her voice as a woman and as a Latina.

Her first novel, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991), was followed by In The Time of the Butterflies (1994); The Other Side/ El Otro Lado, a book of poems (1995); Homecoming: New and Collected Poems (1996); Seven Trees, another book of poems (1999); Something to Declare, a book of essays (1998); and her third novel YO! (1997). In the three novels especially, Alvarez has explored many of the same themes that make In the Name of Salome (2000) such a compelling novel: race and racism, the homeland, the role of the poet and of poetry in life and politics, and the challenges and rewards of being multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural.

Copyright Information

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Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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