Like Water for Chocolate Study Guide

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel

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Introduction

First published in 1989, Laura Esquivel's first novel, *Como agua para chocolate: novela de entregas mensuales conrecetas, amores,* y *remedios caseros,* became a best seller in the author's native Mexico. It has been translated into numerous languages, and the English version, *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies,* enjoyed similar success in the United States. The film version, scripted by the author and directed by her husband, Alfonso Arau, has become one of the most popular foreign films of the past few decades. In a *New York Times* interview, Laura Esquivel told Marialisa Calta that her ideas for the novel came out of her own experiences in the kitchen: "When I cook certain dishes, I smell my grandmother's kitchen, my grandmother's smells. I thought: what a wonderful way to tell a story." The story Esquivel tells is that of Tita De la Garza, a young Mexican woman whose family's kitchen becomes her world after her mother forbids her to marry the man she loves. Esquivel chronicles Tita's life from her teenage to middle-age years, as she submits to and eventually rebels against her mother's domination. Readers have praised the novel's imaginative mix of recipes, home remedies, and love story set in Mexico in the early part of the century. Employing the technique of magic realism, Esquivel has created a bittersweet tale of love and loss and a compelling exploration of a woman's search for identity and fulfillment.

Author Biography

Esquivel was born in 1951 in Mexico, the third of four children of Julio Caesar Esquivel, a telegraph operator, and his wife, Josephina. In an interview with Molly O'Neill in the *New York Times.* Esquivel explained, "I grew up in a modern home, but my grandmother lived across the street in an old house that was built when churches were illegal in Mexico. She had a chapel in the home, right between the kitchen and dining room. The smell of nuts and chilies and garlic got all mixed up with the smells from the chapel, my grandmother's carnations. the liniments and healing herbs." These experiences in her family's kitchen provided the inspiration for Esquivel's first novel.

Esquivel grew up in Mexico City and attended the Escuela Normal de Maestros, the national teachers' college. After teaching school for eight years, Esquivel began writing and directing for children's theater. In the early 1980s she wrote the screenplay for the Mexican film *Chido One,* directed by her husband, Alfonso Arau, and released in 1985. Arau also directed her screenplay for *Like Water for Chocolate,* released in Mexico in 1989 and in the United States in 1993. first published in 1989, the novel version of *Like Water for Chocolate* became a best seller in Mexico and the United States and has been translated into numerous languages. The film version has become one of the most popular foreign films of the past few decades. In her second, less successful novel, *Ley del amor,* published in English in 1996 as *The Law of Love.* Esquivel again creates a magical world where love becomes the dominant force of life. The novel includes illustrations and music on compact disc to accompany it Esquivel continues to write, working on screenplays and fiction from her home in Mexico City.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1-4: Under Mama Elena's Rule

In Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate,* the narrator chronicles the life of her great-aunt, Tita De la Garza, who lives in northern Mexico during the early 1900s. The novel's twelve chapters, written one per month in diary installment form, relate details from over two decades of Tita's life, beginning in 1910, when she is fifteen years old, and ending with her death at thirty-nine. Each chapter also includes a recipe that Tita prepares for her family during this period. After her mother refuses to allow her to marry the man she loves, Tita channels her frustrated desires into the creation of delicious meals that often have strange effects on her family. Through the expression of her culinary art, Tita learns to cope with and ultimately break free from her mother's domination.

Tita is born on her family's kitchen table, amid the fragrant and pungent odors of cooking. Since Tita's mother, Mama Elena, is unable to nurse her, Nacha, the family's cook, takes over the task of feeding her. "From that day on, Tita's domain was the kitchen" and "the joy of living [for her] was wrapped up in the delights of food."

When Tita is a teenager, Pedro Muzquiz comes to the family's ranch and asks for her band in marriage, but Mama Elena refuses his request. Ignoring Tita's protestations, Mama Elena forbids her to marry, insisting that she abide by the family tradition that forces the youngest daughter to stay home and care for her widowed mother until her mother dies. Mama Elena suggests that Pedro marry Tita's sister Rosaura instead and Pedro agrees, deciding that a marriage to her sister is the only way he can stay close to Tita.

Mama Elena orders Tita to cook the wedding feast. As she prepares the cake, her sorrow over the impending marriage causes her tears to fall into the batter and icing. Nacha later tastes the icing and immediately is "overcome with an intense longing" as she thinks about her fiancé, driven away by Mama Elena's mother. The next morning Tita finds the elderly Nacha lying dead, "a picture of her fiancé clutched in her hands."

Tita now becomes the official cook for the ranch Soon after the wedding, Pedro gives Tita a bouquet of roses to ease her depression over Nacha's death. She clasps them to her so tightly that the thorns cut her and she bleeds on them. When her mother forbids her to keep them, Tita mixes the petals in a dish that acts as an aphrodisiac for all who eat it, except Rosaura. Her eldest sister, Gertrudis, becomes so aroused by the meal that she runs to the outside shower, but the heat emanating from her body causes the wooden shower walls to burst into flames. Her body also exudes the scent of roses, which attracts a passing revolutionary. He sweeps her up still naked, on his horse, and rides away with her. When Mama Elena discovers that Gertrudis started to work at a brothel soon after her disappearance from the ranch, she disowns her.

The following year, Tita prepares the celebration feast for the baptism of her nephew Roberto, son of Pedro and Rosaura. Tita had been the only one present at Roberto's birth, which left Rosaura precariously ill. Since Rosaura had no milk after the birth, Tita tried to *feed* Roberto tea, but he refused it. One day, frustrated by his crying, Tita offers him her breast and is surprised to discover that she can nurse him. When Pedro observes Tita nursing his son, their secret moment together further bonds them. Tita's celebration feast generates a sense of euphoria in everyone who shares it-except Mama Elena, who suspects a secret relationship between Tita and Pedro. Her suspicions lead her to send Rosaura, Pedro, and Roberto to her cousin's home in San Antonio, Texas.

Chapters 5-8: Tita's Rebellion

After they leave, Tita loses "all interest in life," missing the nephew that was almost like her own child One day rebels ride up to the ranch and ask for *food.* Mama Elena tells them they can have what they find outdoors, but they are not permitted in the house. Finding little, a sergeant decides to search inside. Mama Elena threatens him with her shotgun, and the captain, respecting her show of strength, stops the sergeant. Tita becomes even more depressed when she realizes that the men took the doves that she had enjoyed caring for Later that day, as Tita prepares the family's meal, a servant appears and announces that Roberto has died because "whatever he ate, it didn't agree with him and he died." When Tita collapses in tears, her mother tells her to go back to work. Tita rebels, saying she is sick of obeying her mother's orders. Mama Elena smacks her across the face with a wooden spoon and breaks her nose. Tita then blames Mama Elena for Roberto's death and escapes to the pigeon house. The next morning, Tita refuses to leave the pigeon house and acts strangely. Mama Elena brings Dr. John Brown to remove her to an insane asylum, but, feeling sorry for her, he takes her to his home instead.

Tita is badly shaken and refuses to speak. As she sits in her room at John's home, she sees an old Native American woman making tea on the patio. They establish a silent communication with each other. Later she discovers that the old woman is the spirit of John's dead grandmother, a Kikapu Indian who had healing powers. John tells Tita stories about how his family had ostracized his grandmother and about her theory that all people need love to nourish their souls. When John asks her why she does not speak, she writes, "because I don't want to," which becomes her first step toward freedom.

One day Chencha, the De la Garza family's servant, brings some soup for Tita, and the *food* and Chencha's visit return Tita to her senses. Chencha then tells Tita that Mama Elena has disowned her. She also gives Tita a letter from Gertrudis, who writes that she is leaving the brothel because "I know that I have to find the right place for myself somewhere." Later, Tita accepts John's marriage proposal. When Chencha returns to the ranch, bandits break in, rape her, and attack Mama Elena, who is left paralyzed. Tita returns to care for her mother, who feels humiliated because of her need for Tita's help Tita carefully prepares meals for her, but they taste bitter to Mama Elena, who refuses

to eat them. She accuses Tita of trying to poison her so that she will be free to marry John.

Within a month Mama Elena dies, probably due to the medicine she was secretly taking to try to counter the effect of the poison she thought she was being given. Sorting through her mother's things, Tita finds letters hidden in her closet that tell of a secret love affair with a man of black ancestry, and of the birth of their child, Gertrudis. At her funeral Tita weeps for her mother's lost love.

Pedro and Rosaura return for the funeral and Pedro is angry that Tita and John are engaged. While at the ranch, Rosaura gives birth to Esperanza who like Roberto, must be cared for by Tita, since Rosaura has no milk. Rosaura determines that her daughter, like Tita, will care for her and never marry, which angers Tita. When John leaves to bring his aunt to meet Tita, she and Pedro consummate their love.

Chapters 9-12: Tita's Fulfillment

Later, when Tita suspects that she is pregnant, Mama Elena's spirit appears, warning her to stay away from Pedro. Gertrudis, now married and a general in the revolutionary army, returns for a visit. After Tita relates her fears for her future, Gertrudis insists she must follow her heart and thus find a way to be with Pedro. One night Pedro gets drunk and sings love songs outside Tita's window. A furious Mama Elena soon appears to Tita and threatens her. When Tita tells her mother she hates her, her mother's spirit shrinks to a tiny light. The apparent reduction of Mama Elena's control relieves Tita, which brings on menstruation and her realization that she is not pregnant. However, the tiny light begins to spin feverishly, causing an oil lamp to explode and engulf Pedro in flames. As Tita tends to his bums, Rosaura and John note the strong bond that still exists between them. Upset, Rosaura locks herself in her bedroom for a week.

John has returned with his aunt, wanting to introduce her to his fiancée. Tita prepares a meal for them, knowing she will have to disappoint them by calling off the wedding. When Pedro argues with her because she is taking such care with John's feelings, Tita is angered that he doubts her love. "Pedro had turned into a monster of selfishness and suspicion," she muses. That same morning Rosaura finally emerges from her room, having lost sixty-five pounds, and warns Tita not to make Rosaura look like a fool by carrying on with her husband in public. That afternoon Tita receives John and his Aunt Mary, and confesses that she has lost her virginity and cannot marry him. She also tells him that she does not know which man she loves best, as it changes depending on which man is nearer. John tells Tita that he still wants to marry her, and that she would live a happy life if she agreed to be his wife.

The narrative then jumps to twenty years in the future as Tita is preparing a wedding feast. However, it is to celebrate the union of Esperanza and Alex, John's son. The death of Rosaura a year ago had freed Esperanza and Tita, making it possible for both to openly express their love. Tita's wedding meal again stirs the passions of all who enjoy it. Pedro's feelings for her, however, have been repressed too long; when he is

finally able to acknowledge his passion freely, it overwhelms him and he dies. Devastated by his death, Tita eats candles so she can light the same kind of fire within her, and soon joins him in death. The sparks the lovers give off bum down the ranch. When Esperanza returns from her wedding trip, she finds Tita's cookbook and passes it down to her daughter, the narrator of the story, who insists that Tita "will go on living as long as there is someone who cooks her recipes."

Chapter 1, January, Christmas Rolls

Chapter 1, January, Christmas Rolls Summary

Once you start chopping onions it is hard to stop your tears. Tita is especially susceptible to tears… just like her great aunt, Tita, who reportedly cried in the womb. That is another story. Tita's great aunt was born in the kitchen and lived most of her life cooking. Tita takes after her in that respect way. Life, for Tita, is the delight of food, and the kitchen is her realm. When Tita was a young girl, she became good friends with the cook, and they often played games, even shaping the sausage they made into the shapes of animals, as though it were balloons.

The only time Tita was not upset at the frying of her little sausage creatures was when the sausages were offered in the making of Christmas rolls. They embodied everything Tita loved about her life at home, the ritual of the sausage making, the rising of the yeast, and the closeness of the women in the kitchen.

The women are in the kitchen when Pedro Muzquiz comes to call one day. Tita's mother, Mama Elena, warns her not to encourage him, because she knows the rules. The youngest daughter cannot marry, so she will always be available to take care of her mother in her old age.

Tita does not dare challenge this custom, but wonders who is supposed to take care of her, since she will not have any daughters of her own. Maybe no one expected a person to live much after their parent's die, if they are the youngest. There are all kinds of arguments in her head, but that is where they stay.

Pedro brings his father with him the next day to ask Mama Elena for Tita, but Mama is fixed. Mama does, however, offer up her oldest daughter, Rosaura, who is only two years older than Tita and completely available. Tita stays in the kitchen while her fate is decided, and only later does Mama Elena tell her that Pedro had agreed to marry Rosaura.

Nacha, the cook and Tita's confidante, approaches Pedro later and asks how he could have agreed to such a thing. Pedro tells her that if he cannot have Tita, he can marry her sister and at least be close to her in that way. Pedro will marry, with his great love for Tita, not Rosaura. Tita finds little consolation in that, though, and sobs herself to sleep over the bedspread she had been crocheting for her married life.

Chapter 1, January, Christmas Rolls Analysis

There is much emotion and drama in this Mexican family. There is much passion, many tears, and cooking huge amounts of traditional foods. Already, there is terrible heartbreak when Tita's boyfriend agrees to marry her sister. However, the family is steeped in tradition, which cannot be broken. It is interesting that the action turns

around the women. There seems to be no men present, other than Pedro, who is told what he will do. These are very strong women, with high passions, and it will be interesting to see how this volatile situation will unfold.

Chapter 2, February, Chabela Wedding Cake

Chapter 2, February, Chabela Wedding Cake Summary

Tita and Nacha are making the wedding cake for Rosaura's marriage to Pedro. They need 180 eggs and much preparation has been made in order to have that amount of fresh eggs today. Tita is beating the mixture while Nacha adds each egg. They are barely past the 100-egg mark, when Tita's hands begin to shake. Tita can no longer hide her outrage at her sister marrying Tita's boyfriend. Tita's mother will not tolerate any outburst and warns her to behave. Tita continues to beat the cake until her mother leaves the kitchen. Nacha is sensitive to Tita's situation and tells her to just cry. Tita's tears flow and flow, and the cake batter will not thicken, because there are too many tears in the bowl.

Finally, her tears stop, and they are able to complete the cake with its apricot filling and meringue frosting. Tita wonders how she will bear the pity and scrutiny of the wedding guests who will have front row seats for her humiliation. Tita is able to bear it after she and Pedro share a private moment at the reception, and he tells her that he is happy, because he will at least have a chance to be near her, the woman he really loves.

Tita is so happy that, at first, she does not see that the guests are reacting quite violently after having eaten their wedding cake. Everyone is crying and wailing over their lost loves. Every person but Tita has fallen under some sort of spell and now, in addition to intense headaches, they all begin to vomit. Tita has left the reception before the worst happened. Tita goes to Nacha's room to tell her about her conversation with Pedro. When she arrives, however, Nacha is dead in her own bed.

Chapter 2, February, Chabela Wedding Cake Analysis

Not only does Tita have to suffer the embarrassment of her boyfriend marrying her sister, she also has to prepare the wedding feast, including this enormous cake, with all its layers and special frosting. Mama Elena will not even tolerate one moment of self pity, either, and she watches Tita like a hawk to make sure she and Pedro do not meet. It is amazing Tita does not revolt, but she carries on the best she can. The only indiscretion is her weeping over the cake batter, into which fall many, many tears. The tears affect everyone at the wedding banquet with longing and remorse for lost loves, so much so that they become physically sick. Tita is the only one exempt from the strange illness. It is as though the spirits also punish those who have laughed at her or derided her in her misery. Something, or someone, is watching out for her and she will prevail over this impossible situation.

Chapter 3, March, Quail in Rose Petal Sauce

Chapter 3, March, Quail in Rose Petal Sauce Summary

With Nacha dead, Tita is now the head cook at the family ranch. To mark the occasion, Pedro brings her a bouquet of pink roses, which turn red in her grasp. His wife, Rosaura, who is pregnant, does not appreciate the gesture and Mama Elena warns Pedro and Tita to keep their heads about them. Tita refuses to throw the roses away and decides that she will prepare quail in a rose petal sauce. It is exquisite and its effects are particularly potent on her other sister, Gertrudis. Gertrudis begins to sweat and imagines one of Pancho Villa's soldiers she had seen in the town square last week.

Gertrudis is stricken with intense feelings that are very new to her. Her whole body produces pink, rose-scented sweat and she runs to prepare a shower. It is a temporary structure into which you must pour the cool water after climbing the ladder to the top many, many times. It is worth it to feel the refreshing water glide over your body all at once. Unfortunately, the heat from her body ignites the wood of the tub and it bursts into flames, and Gertrudis runs away, naked, into the field.

From miles away, a rose scented cloud reaches the soldier she had seen, and he leaves his place in battle to follow it. The soldier sees Gertrudis running naked and swoops her up while he rides his horse, and they make love without the horse breaking its stride. Pedro and Tita watch the whole spectacle from the ranch, and Pedro is riveted by the sight, imagining that Tita must look like her naked sister.

They receive word one day that Gertrudis is working in a brothel in a border town and Mama Elena burns her birth certificate and declares that she never wants to hear her name mentioned again. Tita is envious, because she knows Gertrudis now knows the passions that can consume a person.

Chapter 3, March, Quail in Rose Petal Sauce Analysis

Even though their love is forbidden, the passion is still alive for Tita and Pedro. Tita communicates to him through the dishes she cooks. When she uses the petals of the roses he brings her, she cooks the rose petal sauce so that, as he consumes it, he is also consuming her. Gertrudis is the agent of the passion in the room and it is her body that burns since that consumption is denied to Tita and Pedro directly. Mama Elena disowns her daughter, Gertrudis, and keeps a vigilant eye on Tita and Pedro, even though she has put the two of them in an impossible situation. Passions this strong will not be kept in check for long.

Chapter 4, April, Turkey Mole with Almonds and Sesame Seeds

Chapter 4, April, Turkey Mole with Almonds and Sesame Seeds Summary

Tita is fattening up the turkeys by feeding them walnuts. Everything must be perfect for the banquet she is preparing to celebrate the birth of Roberto, the son of Pedro and Rosaura. Tita feels a strong love for the newborn, something that completely surprises her. Tita is working hard in the kitchen when Pedro catches sight of her bending over the grinding machine while she works the almonds and sesame seeds. Tita's erotic posture and rhythmic movements mesmerize him, and their eyes meet for an eternity.

Fortunately, Chechna, one of the kitchen workers, walks in, or who knows what might have happened.

The next morning, Pedro frantically announces that Rosaura has gone into labor, and he is going into town to get the doctor. Mama Elena and Chechna had left earlier for town to buy things for the new baby. All of them are detained in town by the federales, and Tita must deliver the baby with no other help. From that moment, she is in love with this child and even breastfeeds him when his own mother cannot.

The doctor makes it to the house the next day and is delighted by the sight of Tita, who is no longer the little girl he remembers. The doctor plans to visit the house every day under the guise of seeing about Rosaura, but it is Tita who he has designs on. Mama Elena is not aware of this yet. Mama still focuses on Pedro and thinks of sending him and his new little family away to San Antonio. Tita is frantic with this thought now that she has Pedro and the newborn baby.

Chapter 4, April, Turkey Mole with Almonds and Sesame Seeds Analysis

The rituals of food preparation are very much at the core of Tita's soul. Tita throws herself into it so passionately that it keeps Pedro constantly on alert, and she can even breastfeed on demand, because her nephew needs nutrition. Symbolically, she is one who nurtures, and it seems her mother's attempts to thwart this in her have only exaggerated the instincts. Will Mama Elena succeed in separating the two by sending Pedro, Rosaura, and their baby to San Antonio? It will be interesting to see what develops between Tita and the doctor, because of the restriction of her not being able to fall in love and marry. Maybe he will be able to change Mama Elena's mind.

Chapter 5, May, Northern-Style Chorizo

Chapter 5, May, Northern-Style Chorizo Summary

Tita is in the garden, looking for worms to feed a helpless pigeon. Tita has had no interest in cooking, ever since Pedro, Rosauro, and Roberto left for San Antonio. Tita is supposed to be helping Chechna make sausage, and Mama Elena will be furious if she does not find Tita in the kitchen. They are making sausage, because they had to kill the animals to keep the Mexican rebels from taking them. The sausage is the best way to use up so much meat at one time.

Mama Elena was able to stave the rebels off from the house, but they took everything in the barns, even the doves in the dovecote. After they left, Tita missed their cooing, which had been part of her everyday life since she had been a girl. Tita is mad with the grief about Pedro, her sister, and nephew gone, and now this pillage of her home. Tita screams, because her mother gave her one order too many and escaped to the now empty dovecote.

Mama Elena instructs the ladder be taken away, and she was to spend the night alone in there. The next morning, Doctor John comes, at Mama Elena's request. Mama wants Tita taken away to an insane asylum. The doctor climbs the ladder to the dovecote and finds Tita naked and covered in dirt and droppings. By the time he finishes talking to her, he convinces her to leave with him.

Chapter 5, May, Northern-Style Chorizo Analysis

Tita reaches her breaking point. She has finally reached the end of taking orders from her mother. There has not been a day in her life when her mother has not told her what to do, and now, with the exile of Pedro and the baby, she feels that her life is over. When the rebels come, she is afraid for her mother, but also disappointed to find that she is still alive after they leave. Mama Elena calls Doctor John, because surely Tita must be mad, but actually, she is finally sane and has put an end to the domination in the only way she knows how.

Chapter 6, June, A Recipe for Making Matches

Chapter 6, June, A Recipe for Making Matches Summary

John does not take Tita to an asylum, however. He takes her to his own home to rest and recover. John bathes her and dresses her like a child. Tita is in such deep grief she does not even speak. Some housekeeper from America brings her food, but it is bland and unfit for Tita's palate. Soon, she ventures out of her room and sits for hours with an old Indian woman who wears her hair in a thick braid around her head. The two never speak, but they communicate. Because they both love the kitchen and they can speak silently.

Eventually, John appears, instead of the old Indian woman, and she is surprised to find him there. The kitchen now looks more like a lab with scientific equipment instead of pots, so she spends time with the doctor, just listening while he talks about his life.

The doctor tells her he inherited his curiosity to experiment from his grandmother. She had been a Kikapu Indian, captured by his grandfather and brought to live with him here, very far from her own tribe. The woman has never been accepted by his family, very staunch Yankees, who referred to her as the Kikapu, so she spends most of her life cooking and experimenting in the little room that his grandfather built for her.

One day, John's great-great grandfather fell ill and nothing would help. The medical practitioners even tried bleeding him with leeches. When they removed the creatures, his bleeding would not stop, and it was feared that he would surely bleed to death. The Indian woman heard his cries and went to his bedside, touched his wounds and the bleeding immediately stopped. The Indian woman removed everyone else from his room and spent the afternoon chanting amid incense, and he emerged later that day, completely healed.

After that incident, the woman became their family doctor. John spent much of his childhood with her, and she taught him many lessons, under the guise of scientific experimentation. One of those was the making of matches. To do this, one needs just the right amount of phosphoric acid for the flame end. To prepare the little cardboard strips, they should be coated with potassium nitrate and water. After that, put a little of the phosphoric solution on the ends and bury them in sand to let them dry.

John tries to teach Tita another lesson. When phosphorous is placed in a glass tube and expose it to heat, it combusts and makes a brilliant explosion. John's grandmother had told him that each person has a box of matches inside and all it takes is the right amount of heat for them to spark. The heat can be anything from food, a caress, or a

lover's sigh. The pleasure and warmth grow and finally explode into passion, which nourishes the soul.

He knows instinctively that the matches inside her are damp and he will dry them slowly. He asks her to write something for him on the wall tonight with a piece of the phosphorous and, even though it will be invisible in the morning, he will be able to read what she has written. To prompt her, he asks her to write the reason she does not speak.

After he leaves, she does what he has asked. Tita does not know phosphorous glows in the dark, and he will come back to see that she has written: "because I don't want to." John knows, now, that her independence is coming back and her matches are beginning to dry.

Chapter 6, June, A Recipe for Making Matches Analysis

Doctor John has come back into Tita's life and it seems as though he can heal her in more than one way. His tenderness and his appreciation for chemistry of all sorts appeals to her. For the first time in her life, she is able to focus on things that interest her and to think about why she likes what she does and what she should do next with her life. Mama Elena has made all her decisions for so long that Tita is temporarily struck dumb for lack of what to say. John coaxes her, builds trust with her, and eventually leads her back. Hopefully, she will return, but be changed, now that she is free of her domineering mother and the restrictions on her life.

Tita comes to realize that the old Indian woman she sees moving about the kitchen is actually the spirit of John's dead grandmother, who has come to heal Tita, too, in her own way. The woman makes her feel comfortable and lets her know that she is in a safe place. Eventually, that feeling is transferred to John when the woman's image is replaced by his actual presence. There is much reference to spiritual forces and healing and that it is just as effective, if not more so, than traditional medicine.

Chapter 7, July, Ox-Tail Soup

Chapter 7, July, Ox-Tail Soup Summary

Finally, the day arrives when Tita returns to her old self. Chencha arrives with a pot of ox-tail soup, and it is so comforting and nourishing that Tita cries.
Tita's tears become a stream of water, and John comes into the kitchen to see what is happening. John is grateful to Chechna for healing Tita, because none of his efforts have been able to accomplish this. Tita's tears turn to smiles when she and Chechna talk about life on the ranch and all the memories they share.

Chechna gives Tita a letter from Gertrudis, thanking her for sending the clothes and telling her that she is leaving that place to find where she really belongs. Gertrudis also mentions the man who took her away from home that day and hopes to return home again one day to see her.

Before Chechna leaves, Tita asks her to tell Mama Elena that she does not plan to return to the ranch. Chechna agrees, but frets for hours on how to break the news to the old woman. Finally, she comes up with the idea that she would tell Mama Elena she had found Tita dressed in rags and begging on the streets. Chechna would continue that Tita had escaped from the insane asylum, and her punishment for insulting her mother is to roam the streets as a filthy beggar. Chechna will tell Mama Elena that she had wanted to bring Tita home, but her shame was too great to even consider that. Chechna would finish the story with a flourish—Tita would send her love to her Mama, and she would return as soon as she felt worthy again.

Unfortunately, Chechna never has the opportunity to relate her story. A group of Mexican rebels attack the house that night, rape Chechna, and injure Mama Elena so that she is paralyzed from the waist down. Tita returns to the house to care for them, and Tita and her mother glare at each other until her mother lowers her eyes. The tie of obedience has been broken, and Tita realizes her mother is humiliated, because she is reduced to accepting help from her daughter.

Tita prepares nourishing meals, but Mama Elena refuses them, declaring them all bitter. Mama feels sure Tita is trying to poison her. Tita's mother's rejection of all her efforts reduces her to a little child again, and she wishes, more than anything, she could return to John's house. Tita is honor bound to stay.

When John comes to tend to Mama Elena, she implores him to try the food. John declares it tastes wonderful to him, and there is no trace of poison. Just the same, Mama wants a new cook. They hire many who leave, because of the woman's sour personality. Mama is determined not to eat any more of Tita's food, so convinced that Tita is trying to kill her. Mama's belief is validated when she realizes that Tita and John are in love, and it would suit Tita's purpose to have her mother dead, so that she would be free to marry.

Mama Elena has to give in, finally, when they run out of cooks to hire. Mama Elena eats Tita's food, but always drinks warm milk and syrup of ipecac to counter any possible ill effects. Mama Elena dies within the month from severe stomach pain and spasms, despite all Tita's efforts. When they find the bottle of syrup of ipecac in her drawer, John tells Tita about its strong emetic properties that can cause death.

Tita can feel no sorrow when she looks at her dead mother's face. Tita cannot imagine those lips ever locked in passion with another's. Tita does find some letters that would prove that fact, though. When she unlocks her mother's wardrobe, she finds some letters tucked in between the sheets. Apparently, her mother had an affair with a black man, who had fled to Mexico to escape slavery in America. Their union had resulted in Gertrudis' birth, and it becomes clear to her that Tita and her sister had different fathers. Tita thinks of burning the letters, but something makes her put them away like she had found them.

Tita finally weeps for her mother. All these years, Mama has lived a life of frustration, because her true love had died and she married a man she had not really loved. Pedro and Rosauro return home for the funeral, with Rosauro very pregnant again. At first, Tita is so glad to see Pedro, but she realizes now that he does not deserve her love. Tita is happy to link her arm in John's, so that Pedro can see their love. Pedro is not at all pleased, because he still feels Tita belongs to him, and he intends to get her now that Mama Elena is dead.

Chapter 7, July, Ox-Tail Soup Analysis

Tita's tears flow abundantly, once more; this time in happiness. Of course, it is homemade soup that breaks the dam of her feelings. Food has always represented comfort to Tita and it is Chechna's ox-tail soup that does the trick. The bland meals of John's housekeeper do not reach her at all. Tita's joy is short-lived, though, because she must soon return to care for her mother at the ranch. Even though Mama Elena is paralyzed, she is still demanding and cannot bend one little bit to make the situation easier. Maybe if one is so wounded, like she is, one can prop themselves up with anything they have. The woman soon dies, and Tita's discovery of the letters from her girlhood reveals a side of her mother Tita has never known. For the first time in her life, Tita can feel some compassion for this woman who has lived in sadness for so long.

Chapter 8, August, Champandongo

Chapter 8, August, Champandongo Summary

Tita is crying over onions, as usual. Tita is furiously working in the kitchen, because tonight, John is coming to ask for her hand in marriage. Tita is frantic, because she likes to take much time preparing the meals for special occasions, but she is also caring for Rosauro's baby girl. Rosauro had complications during the delivery and had surgery, so she is unable to properly care for the child. The baby, therefore, spends all day with Tita in the warmth of the kitchen.

Rosaura wants the child with her in her bedroom to sleep, but the baby will not stop crying, so Tita runs a big, hot pot of mole to the room to fool her into sleep. After the baby is asleep, she returns for the pan and falls on the steps going back down. The mole spills everywhere. Pedro sees her sitting on the steps and interprets her sitting there taking a rest and takes the opportunity to tell her that he does not approve of her marrying John. Tita tells him he is in no position to tell her anything of the sort. With a parting comment, she tells him the next time he falls in love, he should also sprout some courage.

Tita's day brightens, however, with the return of Chechna. Chechna has healed from her ordeal and has brought along her new husband, whom she had known from long ago. Tita is happy to turn the meal preparations over to her and head to the shower. Tita's sense of calm is short lived, though, when she learns that Pedro has been watching her take a shower through the slats in the stall. Tita hurriedly dresses, runs to her room, and slams the door.

Later on, Pedro gives his consent for Tita to marry John, but he is in a sour mood all night. When everyone else has left, Tita is cleaning the kitchen and putting away pots in the room with no windows. Since Mama Elena's death, they have turned her room for bathing into a storage space. Pedro pushes her down onto a bed and Tita surrenders. Rosauro and Chechna are searching for them, but seeing the eerie light coming from the crack in the door, they assume it is the ghost of Mama Elena and do not dare enter.

Chapter 8, August, Champandongo Analysis

With Mama Elena out of the picture, Pedro feels he can now make a move on Tita, but she is not sure how she feels about him. Now that she has John and sees how a real man behaves in love, she sees Pedro as a coward for not having whisked her away from the ranch, instead of caving in and marrying her sister. Tita thinks she has her emotions under control, but she weakens when Pedro insistently pursues her in the shower, and then finally in the storeroom. Obviously, there is still some feeling there on her part, but many people will be hurt if she acts on them. Hopefully, John will be able to intervene in some way and rescue all of them

Chapter 9, September, Chocolate and Three Kings' Day Bread

Chapter 9, September, Chocolate and Three Kings' Day Bread Summary

Tita is making Three Kings' Day Bread for guests coming this evening, and she is thinking about the celebrations of this day, held throughout her childhood. Then her biggest worry is what gifts she would receive. Now she has the complications of her love for Pedro, her sister's happiness, and the potential heartbreak she can bring to John.

Rosaura enters the kitchen asking for help with the diet that John has given her. Rosaura is suffering from serious digestive problems and has also gained much weight since the birth of her daughter. Consequently, Pedro is moving farther and farther away from her, even choosing to sleep in a separate room. Rosaura does not blame him;,she cannot bear herself either. Tita promises Rosaura she will help her with the diet and advises her to chew on mint leaves in the meantime.

Tita's guilt is overwhelming when she remembers the night spent in the storage room with Pedro. Tita knows Rosauro will be hurt if she finds out, and her sweet John does not deserve this behavior from her. All she can do, at the moment, is continue making the Kings' Day Bread. Suddenly, a strong, cold gust of air blows into the room, bringing with it the ghost of Mama Elena. Of course, her mother chastises her for her behavior and puts a curse on the child she is carrying.

Chechna's entrance into the kitchen sweeps away Mama Elena's ghost. Tita wishes she could confide in Chechna all the things that worry her, but the older woman is a great gossip, and Tita cannot afford to let her news out just yet.

Finally, the guests have arrived, and Pedro is helping Tita carry the Kings' Bread to the table. Tita whispers to him that she needs to talk to him, alone, after everyone leaves. Pedro confides he has been waiting for her every night in the storeroom, and she tells him that that is exactly what she needs to talk to him about. Tita can see Mama Elena's ghost in the corner of the room, and the dog begins to growl at it, yet no one else can see it.

Suddenly, there is a great commotion outside, and they realize that Gertrudis has come home amid many soldiers, one of which is Juan, who had carried her off on that fateful night. Gertrudis has become a general in the revolution and these men are her soldiers.

When they have some private time, Tita tells her about their mother's death, and Gertrudis is very sad. Gertrudis would have liked her mother to have seen her rise to such an important position in the cause. Gertrudis tells Tita about the things she has

seen and the orders she has given and that she is also very fulfilled with Juan. Gertrudis is a very happy woman, at last. Tita hopes Gertrudis can stay long enough to possibly help her with her own problems.

Chapter 9, September, Chocolate and Three Kings' Day Bread Analysis

Tita wishes she were a child again, when eating the Three Kings' Day Bread was a treat, and whoever found the tiny doll inside was considered to have the best fortune. While she places the doll in the bread she is now making, she contemplates her own luck, or lack of it, lately. Is she to be blamed for her love for Pedro that still continues? Why should she have to give up so much, just because of some outdated family tradition barring her marriage? Now, with her mother dead, should she not be free to make her own choices? There are many people who will be affected by the choice she makes now. Hopefully Gertrudis' surprise visit means Tita's luck is about to change, and hopefully, Gertrudis can give her some common sense perspective about her predicament.

Chapter 10, October, Cream Fritters

Chapter 10, October, Cream Fritters Summary

Tita is preparing Cream Fritters for Gertrudis, who has missed the tastes of her childhood. Gertrudis is working alongside Tita in the kitchen, talking non-stop about her life, now full of so many adventures. Tita is glad for it, because she does not have to do any of the talking, although she would like a moment or two to tell her sister of her dilemma. Finally, the moment comes when the two sisters are sitting at a table on the patio, taking a break from their work.

Gertrudis can see Pedro approaching, and she times the conversation so that he will hear her tell Tita that Tita has to tell Pedro she is pregnant with his child. Pedro stops dead in his tracks at hearing this and approaches Tita with tears in his eyes. Tita is not sure whether to be angry or pleased at what her sister has done. At any rate, Tita and Pedro walk out into the garden to discuss the situation. Pedro tells her he is very pleased, and he wants to leave, right away, and go as far as they can from this place. Then he remembers his commitment to Rosaura and his new baby daughter. They part, because there are too many people at the ranch, with Gertrudis' troops here, and they need to wait until a quieter time presents itself.

Tita retires to her room and is later roused by the sound of Pedro serenading her under her window. Tita can tell he is drunk and she shoos him away, ever mindful that Rosaura might hear him. Suddenly, Mama Elena's ghost is in her room and chastises her, once again, for all the trouble she has caused. Mama Elena tells Tita she should leave the ranch, because she is the one who has caused so much trouble. Tita screams for her mother to leave. Tita hates her and always has. With that rage released, Tita experiences a menstrual flow, which confirms the fact that she is not pregnant.

The ghost departs, but not without creating a swirling ball of energy, which flies out of the room like a firecracker, headed for an oil lamp near Pedro. The lamp explodes and Pedro is quickly engulfed in flames. Gertrudis wraps him in her skirts to extinguish the flames, and within seconds, Tita is also at his side.

Some men pick him up to carry him into the house. The whole time, Tita is holding his hand. When Rosaura hears the commotion, she comes out of her room and sees what is happening. Tita drops Pedro's hand. He begs her not to leave him, and she tells him that she will not. Rosaura returns to her room, leaving Tita to tend to Pedro's burned body.

Gertrudis has received orders to move her troops and must leave immediately, but before she goes, she advises Tita to follow the love in her heart. When the dust from their horses begins to settle, Tita sees John is returning. Part of her is elated and part of her is in despair, because she knows she must break off their engagement.

Chapter 10, October, Cream Fritters Analysis

Thankfully, Gertrudis has arrived and gives Tita some perspective on her situation. Gertrudis does not understand why Tita was faithful to the silly tradition that did not allowing Tita to ever marry. Gertrudis also believes that Tita's present dilemma pales in comparison to the things she has seen in battle. Gertrudis breaks Tita's silence for her by slyly announcing the news of her pregnancy to Pedro. The reader has to admire her no-nonsense approach and wish that the two lovers will wake up and smell the coffee. Pedro is married, with another new baby. Pedro commits to that, and he should not be considering any other life. Tita knows now that she is not pregnant, so to hang on to Pedro is an exercise in futility. Tita is free, now, to marry John and that is exactly what she should do. Apparently, Mama Elena believes that, too, because she sends a fireball to burn Pedro, in the hope that Tita will abandon him if he is disfigured.

Chapter 11, November, Beans with Chile Tezcucana-Style

Chapter 11, November, Beans with Chile Tezcucana-Style Summary

John and his Aunt Mary are coming to dinner tonight. The pantry has been severely depleted by feeding Gertrudis' troops, and Tita is forced to prepare a simple meal of rice, fried plantains, and beans. It is a fine recipe, but she had hoped to prepare something a bit more elegant to greet this old woman who has traveled so far just to see Tita marry her nephew.

Pedro is recovering nicely from his burns, due to Tita's home remedies and fine meals. Today, she does not have time to stay and chat with him, and he senses her impatience to get back down to the kitchen. Pedro is jealous that John is coming for dinner and tells her that she should inform him that she no longer has any interest in him, because she is going to have his baby. Tita is obliged to tell Pedro that this is no longer the case. Pedro then accuses her of having second thoughts about going ahead with her plans to marry John, because Pedro is now a sick man.

Tita doesn't understand his petulance. It is not as though he were going to be bedridden forever. In fact, he would soon be completely healed. Maybe the accident had somehow affected his mind. Pdero continues to yell at her after she has left his room.

Tita returns to the kitchen to eat her own breakfast and is shocked to see Rosaura soon standing in the doorway. In just one week's time, she has lost the 65 pounds she had gained with the last baby. Rosaura is as thin as she has ever been.

Tita can sense something else about her sister, too. Rosaura is determined to confront her on the issue of Pedro. Rosaura tells her that they are due for a talk. Tita agrees that the time is long overdue, ever since Rosaura married her boyfriend. Rosaura tells her that she had no right to have a boyfriend, and Tita tells her that she is determined to break this dreadful tradition for herself, and for Rosaura's own little daughter, who is now doomed to the same fate.

Rosaura contends that Pedro was all too eager to come to her and forsake Tita. Tita tells her that Pedro only married Rosaura to be close to Tita. Rosaura is no longer interested in the past. Rosaura tells Tita she intends to remain Pedro's wife and nothing will change that. Rosaura does not care who he chooses at night, but she will remain his wife in this house, and if Tita does not change her ways, she will be removed from the house which Mama Elena has left to Rosaura.

As a final insult, Rosaura tells Tita that she is not to feed or care for her daughter anymore from this moment forward. The little girl means so much to Tita, and she is grief stricken but will not say another word to Rosaura.

Suddenly, the chickens outside are raising an awful ruckus. They begin to fight and blood spatters on the diapers drying on the clothesline. Tita throws water on the chickens to try to break them up, but that just furthers their fury and soon she is caught in the eye of this swirling chicken fight. Finally, Tita is propelled into the air and lands with a thud at the end of the patio. Tita watches this little hurricane of beaks and feathers while it bores a hole into the ground, taking all the chickens and the diapers with it. Soon there are no chickens left, and there is only dust where the frantic activity had taken place.

Tita has no time to dwell on the chicken incident, because she must finish the dinner for John and his Aunt Mary. Tita is able to freshen up a little before they arrive, and she greets them in the living room. Aunt Mary is a darling little woman, who takes an instant liking to Tita, and compliments her on her dinner and her gentle ways.

John senses that Tita is upset and whispers to her in Spanish. Tita thinks this is rude, but he tells her that Aunt Mary is deaf and can only lip read in English. Their talking in Spanish over her head will not even be noticed. Tita tells him that she cannot marry him. Tita has had intimate relations with another man while he was away and feels much remorse. John is, of course, a little startled, but tells her that it does not matter to him. John then tells her he will abide by whatever decision she makes. Tita is not really surprised by his words. John is a man of great character. The rest of their afternoon passes nicely, and he kisses her before leaving and reassures her that she would be happy with him. Tita knows that this will definitely be taken into account when she makes her decision for her future.

Chapter 11, November, Beans with Chile Tezcucana-Style Analysis

Tita is compelled to prepare a simple meal for John and his aunt. They are so appreciative and complimentary. They are people of such fine character, in contrast to the whining, petulant Pedro. Pedro has never had the courage to make the right decision, and it is irritating to stand by watching Tita even consider choosing him over John. Tita should take Rosaura's advice to leave the ranch and live a new life. It would be a whole new opportunity for her to be free of the restrictions that have held her back in the past. Let us just hope she does the smart thing.

Chapter 12, December, Chiles in Walnut Sauce

Chapter 12, December, Chiles in Walnut Sauce Summary

Tita and Chechna are shelling walnuts in preparation for tomorrow's wedding. There will be 80 guests coming for a 20-course banquet, and Tita wants everything to be perfect. Tita wishes Mama Elena were here, because she loved this tedious job of crushing the hard shells to release the meat of the nuts. The rest of the kitchen help had left fatigued. Even John had stayed until the last minute, but left to go home for a little rest before the wedding.

Pedro is not resting, however. Pedro keeps reliving the moments seeing John tend to Tita's every need in the kitchen today. When the stove needed to be relit, he presented Tita with fresh matches and held her hands a little too long when he handed them to her. He wanted to beat John up but stopped himself, because he knew Tita would not like any news about how her brother-in-law had beat John up the day before the wedding.

Tita is also thinking of Rosaura, who would have loved this wedding. Her poor sister had been dead for a year now. She had succumbed to a complete digestive collapse just a few hours after eating supper one night. Tita and Chechna finish making the chiles and place them in a cool room until tomorrow's celebration.

The next day, Tita watches while the waiters are running back and forth, frantically serving the wedding guests. The party livens even more when Gertrudis, Juan, and their son arrived in a Model T Ford coupe. Gertrudis is the one driving, of course.

Two attendants are taking the beautiful invitations prepared by Alex, John's son, and Esperanza, Pedro and Rosaura's daughter. They spent much time preparing the gold edged cards so that everything would be perfect, right down to the last detail.

Tita and Pedro are dancing like they danced for the very first time. Twenty years have now passed, though, and Tita is now 39 years old. Tita is lovely and trim in her white dress, though and looks as fresh as a bride. Pedro tells her that he still loves her, and wants to have a child as soon as possible. Tita cries once again, this time tears of joy.

For twenty years, they had honored the wishes of everyone else. They had denied their love for the sake of family tradition and the sake of integrity. Now they were free to love like they wanted and start a whole new life together.

Tita is not the bride at this wedding however. The wedding is that of her niece, Esperanza, who today has married Alex, John's son. What a difference this wedding is

from the one that united her parents, Pedro and Rosauro. Instead of getting ill, the wedding guests are filled with passion and intensity from the chiles dish, and two-by-two, are making their early excuses to leave the reception.

Finally, Pedro and Tita are alone in the house and they go to the storage room which has now been converted to a bedroom. It is beautifully lit, with many candles, and the two lovers consume each other. Hearing the passion emanating from the room, all the animals and birds leave the ranch. Tita reaches a point where she sees a brilliant tunnel, and she is reminded of the time John had once told her that if a strong emotion lights up your inner candles, they will show you the way to recover your lost divine origin. The soul always wants to return to its original place, and this is one way it does that.

Tita is not ready to die; she wants to experience this feeling again and again. Suddenly, Pedro's heart stops beating against her chest, and she knows that he has died. Tita cannot bear the thought of living without him and never knowing these feelings again, so she runs to her room and begins to eat candles that John had once given her. With each candle, she recalls a passionate memory of Pedro, and soon she sees Pedro at the tunnel of light, and she goes to him. They embrace, never to be parted again.

Their bodies begin to throw off beautiful sparks that eventually ignite the whole ranch, which then flames and burns into piles of ashes. At first, people think they are seeing fireworks from the wedding, but after a week, they come out to see what has happened. When Esperanza and Alex return from their wedding trip, all that she finds is the family cookbook, buried until feet of ashes. They say that under those ashes is the most fertile land anywhere, where any kind of life can flourish.

Chapter 12, December, Chiles in Walnut Sauce Analysis

When the chapter begins, the reader thinks that only a few days have passed until the time of Tita's wedding. It leads one to believe she has chosen John, because of the tender moments, especially when he presents her with the matches, signifying her own return to life when she had stayed in his home. Pedro is still violently angry over their close relationship.

The story takes a sudden turn, though, when it is revealed that 20 years have passed and the wedding to be celebrated is that of Esperanza and Alex's. Tita has had a huge influence on Esperanza's life after her own mother died, so it is almost as though this wedding is that of her own daughter to her ex-lover's son.

Obviously, Pedro and Tita's love has stood the test of time, and they dance like they did all those years before. When he looks at her, it is as though time has stood still, and she looks as radiant as a young bride. They are finally free to consummate their love, but it ultimately leads to their fiery destruction. Pedro perishes in the throes of lovemaking, and Tita forces her own expiration, because she refuses to live one more day without

him. They are ultimately joined again in the next world, and the physical world they leave behind is one of passion and fertility.

Perhaps there are loves too big to exist in this physical world. Maybe they cannot be trapped by mere mortal boundaries, and will do anything to be able to be expressed freely, or perhaps people just like legends of unrequited love.

Characters

Juan Alejandrez

Juan is a captain in the revolutionary army when he first sees Gertrudis. He is known for his bravery, but when he smells the scent of roses emanating from Gertrudis' s body after she eats one of Tita's magical dishes, he leaves the battlefield for the ranch. Juan sweeps Gertrudis up on his horse and carries her away from her home and her mother's tyranny. The two later marry and return for a visit to the ranch as generals.

Alex Brown

He is the son of Dr. John Brown; his mother died during his birth. He marries Esperanza Muzquiz, daughter of Pedro Muzquiz and Rosaura De la Garza, at the novel's end.

Dr. John Brown

The family doctor who lives in Eagle Pass. When he comes to attend Rosaura after Roberto's birth, he is astounded by Tita's beauty as well as her ability to assist her nephew's difficult birth. He returns to the ranch when Mama Elena De la Garza calls him to take Tita to an insane asylum. He instead takes Tita to his home and nurses her back to health. Tita responds to his kindness and patience and agrees to marry him His understanding of her dilemma after she confesses her infidelity with Pedro leads her to reconsider her decision to call off the wedding: "What a fine man he was. How he had grown in her eyes! And how the doubts had grown in her head!" At the last minute, however, she realizes that her love for Pedro is stronger than her affection for John Gertrudis De fa Garza.

Gertrudis De la Garza is Tita's strong-willed, free-spirited sister. The eldest of the sisters, she is a passionate woman who takes sensual pleasure in life. Tita's cooking arouses such strong emotions in her that she runs off with a soldier in the revolutionary army and thus away from her mother's oppression. When Mama Elena discovers that Gertrudis is working at a brothel soon after her disappearance from the ranch, she disowns her. Only after Mama Elena's death does Tita ironically discover that Gertrudis was the product of their mother's illicit affair with a half-black man. Gertrudis returns to the ranch after Mama Elena's death, now married and a general in the revolutionary army. She advises Tita to follow her heart as she has done.

Mama Elena De fa Garza

Mama Elena De la Garza is the tyrannical, authoritarian, middle-class matron who runs her daughters' lives along with the family ranch. Not only does she enforce the tradition that compels the youngest daughter to care for her widowed mother for the remainder of

her life, but she compounds Tita's suffering by forcing her to prepare the wedding feast for Pedro and her sister. Suspecting a secret relationship between Pedro and Tita, she sends Rosaura, Pedro, and Roberto to her Cousin's in San Antonio. When Roberto subsequently dies, Tita blames her mother because she separated the child from Tita, who fed and nurtured him. Mama Elena doles out severe beatings and/or banishment from the family in response to any acts of rebellion. She beats Tita after the wedding guests eat Tita's meal and become ill, and breaks her nose With a wooden spoon when Tita blames her for Roberto's death. She banishes Tita from the ranch after Tita shows signs of madness and disowns Gertrudis for working in a brothel. Her need for control over her daughters is so strong that it does not end with her death. Her spirit appears to Tita to warn her to stay away from Pedro. When Tita refuses, Mama Elena becomes so angry that she causes Pedro to be severely burned. Her proud and stubborn nature also emerges after the bandits who raid the ranch injure her health. She feels humiliated by her need for Tita's assistance and thus cannot accept her daughter's offer of food and comfort-a rejection that ultimately leads to her death. Mama Elena does appear more human, though, when Tita discovers letters in her closet that reveal a secret passionate love affair from her past. After her lover and her husband died, Mama Elena suppressed her sorrow and never again was able to accept love.

Rosaura De la Garza

The middle of the three sisters, Rosaura De la Garza marries the man Tita loves. She causes Tita further pain when she determines that her only daughter will care for her and never marry, according to family tradition. Maria Elena de Valdes, in her article in *World Literature Today,* notes that Rosaura tries to model herself after Mama Elena in her treatment of Tita and Esperanza. She becomes, however, "an insignificant imitation of her mother. She lacks the strength, skill, and determination of Mama Elena" She also lacks her mother's passion. Tita discovers that Mama Elena has suffered from the loss of her true love and suppressed her emotions. Rosaura, on the other hand, never seems to display any capacity for love. Rosaura does, however, share some similarities with her mother. Like Mama Elena, she is unable to provide nurturance for her children Tita must provide sustenance for both of Rosaura's children, just as Nacha had done for Tita Also, Rosaura dies as her mother did, because of her inability to accept nurturance in the form of food from Tita.

Tita De la Garza

Tita De la Garza is the obedient but strong-willed youngest daughter of Mama Elena. On the surface she accepts her mother's dictates, even when they cause her to suffer the loss of the man she loves. Yet, she subtly rebels by re-channeling her feelings for him into the creation of delicious meals that express her passionate and giving nature. She obeys her mother's order to throwaway the roses Pedro has given her, but not before she creates an exquisite sauce from the petals. Through her cooking, she successfully communicates her love to Pedro. Tita's caring and forgiving nature emerges as she takes over the feeding of Rosaura's two children when their mother is

unable to nurse them and as she tends to her mother after being banished from the ranch. Even after Mama Elena accuses Tita of trying to poison her so she will be free to marry John, Tita patiently prepares her meals. When Rosaura suffers from severe digestive problems, Tita also comes to her aid. Even while Rosaura rails against Tita about her feelings for Pedro and threatens to send Esperanza away to school, Tita serves a special diet to help her sister lose weight and ease her suffering. Tita does, however, have a breaking point Her strength crumbles when Mama Elena sends Pedro, Roberto, and Rosaura away, and later she hears the news of Roberto's death, which pushes her into madness. After she regains her sanity, she seems to redouble her will. She stands up to Mama Elena's spirit and thus refuses to be influenced by her. She also holds her own with Rosaura, and works out an arrangement where she can continue to have a relationship with Pedro and Esperanza. Her passion, however, is her most apparent characteristic. For over two decades, her intense feelings for Pedro never fade, Tita ultimately sacrifices her life for him when she lights herself on fire after his death so that their souls can forever be united.

Paquita Lobo

Tbe De la Garzas' neighbor, who bas unusually sharp senses. She is able to tell something is wrong with Tita when she is overcome by Pedro's presence at their first meeting, She also suggests that Tita appears pregnant at the very time when Tita suspects the same thing.

Chench J Martinez

A servant in the De la Garza household., Chencha becomes Tita's confidante. She takes pity on Tita after Mama Elena banishes her from the ranch and pays her a secret visit at John Brown's home. The soup she brings restores Tita's sanity. When she returns to the ranch, she is brutally raped., but is strong enough to survive the ordeal. Tita allows her to leave the ranch after this trauma, knowing that "if Chencha stayed on the ranch near her mother, she would never be saved." Chencha eventually marries her first love, Jesus Martinez, and returns to the ranch.

Morning Light

John Brown's grandmother, a Kikapu Indian, whom his grandfather had captured and brought back to live with him. Rejected by his grandfather's proud, intensely Yankee family, Morning Light spent most of her time studying the curative properties of plants. After her medicines saved John's great-grandfather's life, the family and the community accepted her as a miracle healer. While at John's home, Tita sees her, or her spirit, making tea on the patio As Tita spends time with her, they establish a silent communication with each other. Her spirit helps calm Tita. Later John tells Tita about his grandmother's theory that we all need love to nourish our souls: "Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us but we can't strike them all by ourselves Each person has to

discover what will set off those explosions in order to live." Tita comes to accept and live by this theory.

Esperanza Muzquiz

Pedro's and Rosaura's daughter. Tita insists that they name her Esperanza instead of Josefita, because she does not want to "influence her destiny." Nevertheless, Rosaura tries to impose on Esperanza the same kind of fate that Mama Elena imposed on Tita, but Rosaura's death frees Esperanza to marry Alex Brown, the man she loves.

Pedro Muzquiz

Pedro Muzquiz marries Tita's sister Rosaura only so he can stay close to Tita He loves Tita, but shows little strength of character. He allows Mama Elena to run ills life and separate him from the woman he loves. He also observes Tita's suffering under Mama Elena's domination and does little to intervene on her behalf. At one point Tita berates him for not having the courage to run off with her instead of marrying Rosaura. Marisa Januzzi, in her article in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* claims that "Pedro sometimes seems so unimaginative that only in fantasy... could such an underdeveloped male character and magical ending satisfy Tita."

Roberto Muzquiz

First child of Pedro and Rosaura. Tita establishes a mother-child bond With him when his mother is too ill to feed him. When Pedro observes Tita nursing his son, their relationship is further strengthened. After Roberto's death, Tita is unable to cope with the sorrow and descends into madness.

Nacha

Nacha cooks for the De La Garza family and their ranch Soon after she is born, Tita establishes a close relationship With Nacha. Since Tita's mother is unable to nurse her, Nacha takes over the task of feeding her and exposes her to the magical world of the kitchen. During her Childhood, Tita often escapes her mother's overbearing presence and finds comfort in Nacha's company. Nacha becomes Tita's surrogate mother and the kitchen her playground and schoolhouse as Nacha passes down traditional Mexican recipes to her. Unfortunately, Tita loses Nacha's support when, after tasting the icing Tita has prepared for Rosaura's wedding cake, Nacha is "overcome with an intense longing" for her lost love, and she dies of a broken heart. Her spirit continues to aid Tita after her death, however, coming to her aid when she is delivering Rosaura's first baby.

Narrator

Esperanza's daughter and Tita's grandniece. The narrator explains that her mother found Tita's cookbook in the ruins of the De la Garza ranch. Esperanza told her daughter the story of Tita's life as she prepared the cookbook's recipes. The narrator has combined those recipes and the stories her mother told her about Tita, explaining that Tita "will go on living as long as there is someone who cooks her recipes."

Jose Trevino

Jose Trevino was the love of Mama Elena's life. Because he was mulatto-half-black-her parents forbid her to see him and forced her to marry Juan De la Garza instead. Mama Elena continued a relationship with him, however, and Gertrudis is his daughter Tita only discovers tills secret relationship after her mother's death.

Themes

Duty and Responsibility

The first chapter begins the novel's exploration of duty, responsibility, and tradition as they present Tita's main conflict. Family tradition requires that she reject Pedro's marriage proposal so she can stay at home and take care of her widowed mother for the rest of her life. If she turns her back on this tradition, she will not fulfill what society considers her responsibility to her mother. Rosaura decides that she also will impose this tradition upon her daughter Esperanza and so prevent her from marrying Alex Brown. Tita recognizes, however, that the tradition is unfair; if she cannot marry and have children, who will support her in her old age? She tells Rosaura that she will go against tradition as long as she has to, "as long as this cursed tradition doesn't take me into account." Nevertheless, she and Pedro respect his duty toward his wife and child, for they remain discreet in their love as long as she lives.

Obedience

In order to fulfill her responsibilities toward her mother, Tita must obey her-a difficult task, given Mama Elena's authoritative nature. Mama Elena makes harsh demands on Tita throughout her life and expects her to obey without question. Mama Elena feels that Tita has never had the "proper deference" towards her mother, and so she is particularly harsh on her youngest daughter. Even when Tita sews "perfect creation" for the wedding, Mama Elena makes her rip out the seam and do it over because she did not baste it first, as Mama instructed. After Mama Elena decides that Pedro will marry Rosaura, she insists that Tita cook the wedding feast, knowing how difficult that task will be for her. When Nacha dies, Mama Elena decides Tita must take full responsibility for the meals on the ranch, which leaves Tita little time for anything else. Tita's struggle to determine what is the proper degree of obedience due to her mother is a major conflict in the novel.

Cruelty and Violence

Mama Elena often resorts to cruelty and violence as she forces Tita to obey her. Many of the responsibilities she imposes on Tita, especially those relating to Pedro and Rosaura's wedding, are blatant acts of cruelty, given Tita's pain over losing Pedro. Mama Elena meets Tita's slightest protest with angry tirades and beatings. If she even suspects that Tita has not fulfilled her duties, as when she thought that Tita intentionally ruined the wedding cake, she beats her. When Tita dares to stand up to her mother and to blame her for Roberto's death, Mama Elena smacks her across the face with a wooden spoon and breaks her nose. This everyday cruelty does not seem so unusual, however, in a land where a widow must protect herself and her family from bandits and revolutionaries.

Victim and Victimization

When Mama Elena coerces Tita into obeying her cruel dictates, she victimizes her. Tita becomes a victim of Mama Elena's obsessive need for power and control. Mama Elena confines Tita to the kitchen, where her life consists of providing for the needs of others. She rejects Tita's individuality and tries to force her to suppress her sense of selfhood. Tita's growth as an individual depends on her ability to free herself from the role of victim.

Sex Roles

The novel closely relates Tita's victimization to the issue of sex roles. When Tita's mother confines her to the kitchen, she relegates her to a limited domestic sphere. There Tita's role becomes a traditionally female one-that of selfless nurturer, placing the needs of others before her own. In this limited role, Tita struggles to find a sense of identity. When Tita is taken to Dr. Brown's house, she marvels at her hands, for she discovers "she could move them however she pleased." At the ranch, "what she had to do with her hands was strictly determined." She learns of Dr. Brown's grandmother, Morning Light, who experimented with herbs and became a respected healer.

Love and Passion

The forces of love and passion conflict with Tita's desire to fulfill her responsibilities toward her mother. In obeying her mother, Tita must suppress her feelings for Pedro. Her sister Gertrudis, on the other hand, allows herself to freely express her passion when she runs off with Juan and soon begins work at a brothel. Tita's and Gertrudis's passionate natures also emerge through their enjoyment of food. Both relish good meals, although Tita is the only one who knows how to prepare one. At one point, Gertrudis brings the revolutionary army to the De la Garza ranch so she can sample her sister's hot chocolate, cream fritters, and other recipes. The food analogy also applies to the love of John Brown for Tita. Although he is captivated by her beauty, he feels no passionate jealousy over her relationship with Pedro. He comes from a North American family where the food, as Tita finds, "is bland and didn't appeal."

Sanity and Insanity

As the need to obey her mother clashes with her own desires, Tita begins to lose her sanity. When Mama Elena sends Rosaura, Pedro, and Roberto away, Tita loses all interest in life. The news of Roberto's death pushes her over the edge and she escapes to the pigeon house, refusing to come out. When John removes her from the oppressive atmosphere her mother has created, and he and Chencha offer her comfort and love, her sanity returns. Mama Elena never questions her own state of mind, although she is obsessive in her need to dominate her daughters. When Tita is found in the pigeon house, Mama Elena ironically states that "there's no place in this house for maniacs !"

Creativity and Imagination

Through Tita's creativity in the kitchen, she finds an outlet for her suppressed emotions. Thus, ironically, while Mama Elena tries to control Tita by confining her to the kitchen and forcing her to prepare all of the family's meals, Tita is also able to strengthen her relationship with others and to gain a clearer sense of herself. She pours all of her passion for Pedro into her meals, which helps to further bond the two Her cooking also creates a bond with Pedro's two children, easing her pain over not being able to have children of her own with him. Tita's imaginative cooking is also a way for her to rebel against her mother; she recalls that whenever she failed to follow a recipe exactly, "she was always sure... that Mama Elena would find out and, instead of congratulating her on her creativity, give her a terrible tongue-lashing for disobeying the rules."

Supernatural

The final important element of the novel is Esquivel's use of the supernatural. Tita's magical dishes, which produce waves of longing and uncontrollable desire, become a metaphor for creativity and self-expression. Like an artist, Tita pours herself into her cooking and produces works of art that evoke strong emotions in others. Her careful preparation of her family's food also reveals her loving nature. Another supernatural aspect, the spirits of the dead that appear to Tita throughout the novel, suggest that one's influence does not disappear after death. Nacha's spirit gives Tita confidence when she needs it, much like Nacha had done while she was alive. Mama Elena's spirit tries to control Tita from the grave, making her feel guilty about her passion for Pedro.

Style

Point of View

In fiction, the point of view is the perspective from which the story is presented The unique point of view in *Like Water for Chocolate* helps convey the significance of the narrative. Esperanza, Tita De la Garza's niece, finds her aunt's cookbook in the ruins of the De la Garza ranch. As she recreates the recipes in her own home, she passes down the family stories to her daughter. Her daughter becomes the novel's narrator as she incorporates her great-aunt's recipes, remedies, and experiences into one book. She justifies her unique narrative when she explains that Tita "will go on living as long as there is someone who cooks her recipes."

Setting

The turbulent age of rebellion in Mexico provides an appropriate setting for the novel's focus on tyranny and resistance. Soldiers, bandits, and rebels are regularly mentioned in the novel, and often make appearances important to the narrative It is a bandit's attack, for instance, that compels Tita's return home after her mother has disowned her. As Pancho Villa's revolutionary forces clash with the oppressive Mexican regime, Tita wages her own battle against her mother's dictates.

Structure

The narrative structure, or form, of the novel intersperses Tita's story with the recipes and remedies that figure so prominently in her life. By placing an actual recipe at the beginning of each chapter, the author is reinforcing the importance of food to the narrative. This structure thus attests to the female bonding and creativity that can emerge within a focus on the domestic arts.

Symbolism

A symbol is an object or image that suggests or stands for another object or image. Food is the dominant symbol in the novel, especially as expressed in the title. "Like water for (hot) chocolate" is a Mexican expression that literally means water at the boiling point and figuratively means intense emotions on the verge of exploding into expression. Throughout the novel, Tita's passion for Pedro is "like water for chocolate" but is constantly repressed by her dictatorial mother. An incident that symbolizes Mama Elena's oppression occurs when Tita is preparing two hundred roosters for the wedding feast. As she castrates live roosters to insure that they will be fat and tender enough for the guests, the violent and gruesome process makes her swoon and shake with anger. She admits "when they had chosen something to be neutered, they'd made a mistake, they should have chosen her. At least then there would be some justification for not

allowing her to marry and giving Rosaura her place beside the man she loved." Food becomes a symbol of Tita's love for Pedro as she uses it to communicate her feelings. Even though Tita remains confined to the kitchen, her creative preparation of the family's meals continues to serve as a vehicle for her love for Pedro and his children, and thus as an expression of her rebellion against her mother's efforts to separate them.

Style

Magic realism is a fictional style, popularized by Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, that appears most often in Latin American literature. Authors who use this technique mingle the fantastic or bizarre with the realistic. Magic realism often involves time shifts, dreams, myths, fairy tales, surrealistic descriptions, the element of surprise and shock, and the inexplicable. Examples of magic realism in *Like Water for Chocolate* occur when Tita's recipes have strange effects on those who eat them, when spirits appear to her, and when she cries actual rivers of tears. The fantastic element in Tita's cooking is that it produces such strong emotions in

her family. The art of cooking, however, does reflect the patience and talent of the cook-qualities that are appreciated by those who enjoy the results. The spirits who appear to Tita symbolize the long-lasting effects of those who impact our lives and our own feelings of responsibility and guilt.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary device used to create an expectation of future events. In *Like Water for Chocolate,* foreshadowing occurs when John tells Tita about his grandmother's theory of love and life. She said that "each of us is born with a box of matches inside us but we can't strike them all by ourselves." We need the breath of the person we love to light them and thus nourish our souls. She warns, however, that lighting the matches all at once would be fatal. This process occurs at the end of the novel when Pedro's suppressed passion for Tita is finally "lit," and the intense flame is too much for him to bear.

Paradox

A paradox is a statement or situation that seems contradictory or absurd, but is actually true. The kitchen becomes a paradoxical symbol in the novel. On the one hand, it is a place where Tita is confined exclusively to domestic tasks, a place that threatens to deny her a sense of identity. Yet it is also a nurturing and creative domain, providing Tita with an outlet for her passions and providing others with sustenance and pleasure.

Historical Context

The Mexican Revolution

Although Mexico had been independent from Spain since the early nineteenth century, their governments were continually beset by internal and external conflicts. In the early part of the twentieth century, revolution tore the country apart. In November 1910, liberal leader Francisco Madero led a successful revolt against Mexican President Porfirio Diaz after having lost a rigged election. Diaz soon resigned and Madero replaced him as president in November 1911. Considered ineffectual by both conservatives and liberals, Madero was soon overthrown and executed by his general, Victoriano Huerta. Soon after the tyrannical Huerta became president, his oppressive regime came under attack. Venustiano Carranza, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, and Emiliano Zapata led revolts against the government. In 1914 Carranza became president as civil war erupted. By the end of 1915, the war ended, but Villa and Zapata continued to oppose the new government and maintained rebel groups for several years.

A Woman's Place

Richard Corliss, in his *Time* review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* writes that "Laura Esquivel brought Gabriel Garda Marquez's brand of magic realism into the kitchen and the bedroom, the Latin woman's traditional castle and dungeon." Traditionally, a Latin woman's place is in the home. In the patriarchal society of the early part of the twentieth century, Mexican women were expected to serve their fathers and brothers and then when married, their husbands, sons, and daughters. These women often turned to the domestic arts---cooking, sewing, and interior decoration-for creative outlets, along with storytelling, gossip, and advice. As a result, they created their own female culture within the social prison of married life.

Maria Elena de Valdes, in her article on *Like Water for Chocolate* in *World Literature Today,* notes that little has changed for the Mexican woman. She defines the model Mexican rural, middle-class woman: "She must be strong and far more clever that the men who supposedly protect her. She must be pious, observing all the religious requirements of a virtuous daughter, wife, and mother. She must exercise great care to keep her sentimental relations as private as possible, and, most important of all, she must be in control of life in her house, which means essentially the kitchen and bedroom or food and sex."

Reading women's magazines became a popular pastime for many married Mexican women. These magazines often contained fiction published in monthly installments, poetry, recipes, home remedies, sewing and decoration tips, advice, and a calendar of religious observances. Valdes finds similarities between the structure of *Like Water for Chocolate* and these magazines. She explains that "since home and church were the private and public sites of all educated young ladies, these publications represented the

written counterpart to women's socialization, and as such, they are documents that conserve and transmit a Mexican female culture in which the social context and cultural space are particularly for women by women."

Critical Overview

When *Como agua para chocolate: novela de entregas mensuales conrecetas, arores, y remedios caseros* by Laura Esquivel was published by Editorial Planeta Mexicana in Mexico in 1989, it quickly became a best seller. The 1991 English version, *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies,* translated by Carol and Thomas Christensen, also gained commercial success. The novel has been translated into several other languages.

Critical reception has been generally positive, especially when noting Esquivel's imaginative narrative structure. Karen Stabiner states in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that the novel is a "wondrous, romantic tale, fueled by mystery and superstition, as well as by the recipes that introduce each chapter." James Polk, in his review in the *Chicago Tribune,* describes the work as an "inventive and mischievous romp-part cookbook, part novel." Marisa Januzzi similarly notes in her assessment in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* that "this short novel's got more heat and light and imaginative spice than the American literary diet usually provides."

Few scholarly articles, however, have been published on the novel. Molly O'Neil!, in her interview with Esquivel in the *New York Times,* notes that American critics often consign the novel to the "'charming but aren't we modems above it' ghetto of magical realism." Scholars also may have avoided the novel because of what some consider its melodramatic tone. In a mixed review for the *Nation,* Han Stavans finds a "convoluted sentimentality" in the novel.

The articles that have been published praise the novel's cultural focus. Han Stavans, in the same *Nation* review, observes that the novel accurately "map[s] the trajectory of feminist history in Mexican society." Maria Elena de Valdes, in her article in *World Literature Today,* argues that the novel contains an intricate structure that serves as an effective parody of Mexican women's fiction. She also praises its main theme: "a woman's creation of space that is hers in a hostile world." Victor Zamudio-Taylor insists the work is one of those that "reactualize tradition, make different women's voices heard, and revitalize identity-both personal and collective-as a social and national cultural construction."

Esquivel's screenplay of *Like Water for Chocolate,* along with her husband Alfonso Arau's direction, helped the film become one of the most successful foreign films of the past few decades. Esquivel has also written the screenplay for the popular Mexican film *Chido One.* Her most recent novel, *The Law of Love,* again focuses on the importance of love and incorporates the technique of magic realism. Reviews of the novel have been mixed. Barbara Hoffert argues in her *Library Journal* review that the novel "is at once wildly inventive and slightly silly, energetic and clichéd." Lillian Pizzichini, however, writes in her review in the *Times Literary Supplement:* "Esquivel dresses her ancient story in a collision of literary styles that confirm her wit and ingenuity. She sets herself a mission to explore the redemptive powers of love and art and displays boundless enthusiasm for parody."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Perkins, Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, explores how Esquivel's use of magic realism in Like Water for Chocolate *reinforces the novel's celebration and condemnation of domesticity.*

In an interview with Laura Esquivel, published in the *New York Times Book Review,* Molly O'Neill notes that *Like Water for Chocolate* has not received a great deal of critical attention because it is "often consigned to the 'charming but aren't we moderns above it' ghetto of magical realism." Some critics, however, recognize the importance of the novel's themes: Ian Stavans, in his review of the novel for *The Nation,* praises its mapping of "the trajectory of feminist history in Mexican society." In an article in *World Literature Today,* Maria Elena de Valdes argues that the novel reveals how a woman's culture can be created and maintained "within the social prison of marriage." Esquivel's unique narrative design is also worthy of critical attention. Her employment of magic realism, with its mingling of the fantastic and the real, provides an apt vehicle for the exploration of the forces of rebellion, submission, and retribution, and of the domestic sphere that can both limit and encourage self-expression.

Tita De la Garza, the novel's central character, makes her entrance into the world in her mother's kitchen, and this female realm becomes both a creative retreat and a prison for her. As a site for the crucial link between food and life, the kitchen becomes the center of Tita's world. Here she gains physical and emotional sustenance as Nacha, the family's servant and Tita's surrogate mother, teaches her the art of cooking. The kitchen also, however, becomes a site of oppression when Tita's mother forbids her to marry the man she loves and forces her into the role of family cook. The novel's public and private realms merge under the symbol of rebellion. As Pancho Villa's revolutionary forces clash with the oppressive Mexican regime, Tita wages her own battle against her mother's dictates. As Tita prepares magical dishes that stir strong emotions in all who enjoy them, the kitchen becomes an outlet for her thwarted passion. Thus the kitchen becomes a site for hunger and fulfillment Yet Tita's cooking does not nourish all who sample it. In some instances her meals exact a certain retribution for her confinement to this domestic arena.

Throughout Tita's childhood, "the joy of living was wrapped up in the delights of food." The kitchen was her domain, the place where Nacha taught her the domestic and communal rituals of food preparation and encouraged her creative input. Here she lovingly prepares meals for her family, including her sister's children, who thrive under her care. The narrative structure of the novel attests to the female bonding and creativity that can emerge within this domestic realm. The narrator, Tita's grandniece, intersperses Tita's story with the recipes that figure so prominently in her life.

The kitchen, however, soon becomes a site of repression for Tita when her mother, Mama Elena, refuses to allow her to marry. Here the mother/daughter relationship enacts a structure of political authority and submission when Mama Elena enforces the family tradition that compels the youngest daughter to care for her widowed mother for

the remainder of her life. Thus the walls of the kitchen restrict Tita's life as she resigns herself to the role of cook for her mother as well as the other members of her family. An incident that symbolizes Mama Elena's oppression occurs when Tita is preparing two hundred roosters for the wedding feast. Mama Elena has compounded Tita's despair over losing Pedro by announcing that her sister, Rosaura, will marry Pedro instead, and that Tita will cook for the wedding party One task Tita must complete is the castration of live roosters to ensure that they will be fat and tender enough for the guests. The violent and gruesome process makes Tita swoon and shake with anger, as she thinks "when they had chosen something to be neutered, they'd made a mistake, they should have chosen her. At least then there would be some justification for not allowing her to marry and giving Rosaura her place beside the man she loved."

Yet ironically, Tita's passion for Pedro, her lost love, and her independent spirit find a creative and rebellious outlet in this same domestic realm. While Mama Elena successfully represses Tita's public voice, she cannot quell the private expression of her emotion. Tita subconsciously redefines her domestic space, transforming it from a site of repression into one of expression when she is forced to prepare her sister's wedding dinner. Tills time her creativity results in an act of retribution. As she completes the wedding cake, her sorrow over Rosaura's impending marriage to Pedro causes her tears to spill into the icing. This alchemic mixture affects the entire wedding party: "The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing.... Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. But the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication-an acute attack of pain and frustration-that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love." Thus Tita effectively, if not purposefully, ruins her sister's wedding.

The kitchen also becomes an outlet for Tita's repressed passion for Pedro. After Pedro gives Tita a bouquet of pink roses, Tita clutches them to her chest so tightly, "that when she got to the kitchen, the roses, which had been mostly pink, had turned quite red from the blood that was flowing from [her] hands and breasts." She then creates a sauce from these stained petals that she serves over quail. The dish elicits a unique response from each member of her family that reflects and intensifies hidden desires or the lack thereof: Pedro "couldn't help closing his eyes in voluptuous delight," while Rosaura, a woman who does not appear to have the capacity for love, becomes nauseous.

The most startling response comes from Tita's other sister, Gertrudis, who responds to the food as an aphrodisiac. Unable to bear the heat emanating from her body, Gertrudis runs from the table, tears off her clothes, and attempts to cool herself in the shower. Her body radiates so much heat, however, that the wooden walls of the shower "split and burst into flame." Her perfumed scent carries across the plain and attracts a revolutionary soldier, who swoops her up, naked, onto his horse and rides off with her, freeing her, if not her sister, from Mama Elena's oppression. Private and public worlds merge as Gertrudis escapes the confinements of her life on the farm and begins a journey of self-discovery that results in her success as a revolutionary general. The meal of rose petals and quail also intensifies the passion between Tita and Pedro and initiates a new system of communication between them that will help sustain their love

while they are physically separated. Even though Tita remains confined to the kitchen, her creative preparation of the family's meals continues to serve as a vehicle for her love for Pedro, and thus as an expression of her rebellion against her mother's efforts to separate the two. Her cooking also continues to exact retribution against those who have contributed to her suffering.

When Rosaura and Pedro move away from the ranch, Tita's confinement to the kitchen drives her mad, and she leaves in an effort to regain her sanity. She later returns to the ranch and to the domestic realm, willingly, to care for Majna Elena, who has become an invalid. This willingness to return to the kitchen, coupled with her mother's need for her, empowers her, yet her mother continues her battle for authority. Even though Tita prepares her mother's meals carefully, Mama Elena cannot stand the taste and refuses to eat. Convinced that Tita intends to poison her slowly in order to be free to marry, she continues to refuse all nourishment and soon conveniently dies-suggesting the cause to be either her refusal to accept Tita' s offer of love and nourishment, or the food itself. Esquivel leaves this question unanswered.

When Rosaura and Pedro return to the ranch after Mama Elena's death, Tita again resumes her role as family cook. Even though $be has decided to stay in the kitchen and not run off with Pedro so as not to hurt her sister, she ultimately. albeit unwittingly, causes her sister's death. Tita confronts her sister over her part in aiding Mama Elena's efforts to separate Tita from the man she loves.

Rosaura, however, refuses to acknowledge her role in her sister's oppression and threatens to leave with Pedro and her daughter, whom Tita has grown to love as her own. As a result, Tita wishes "with all her heart that her sister would be swallowed up by the earth. That was the least she deserved." As Tita continues to cook for the family, Rosaura begins to have severe digestive problems Tita shows concern over her sister's health and tries to alter her diet to ease her suffering. But Rosaura's severe flatulence and bad breath continue unabated, to the point where her husband and child cannot stand to be in the same room with her. Rosaura's suffering increases until one evening Pedro finds "her lips purple, body deflated, eyes wild, with a distant look, sighing out her last flatulent breath." The doctor determines the cause of death as "an acute congestion of the stomach."

Here Esquivel again, as she did after Mama Elena's death, leaves the question of cause open. Rosaura could have died from a diseased system, compounded by her inability to receive and provide love and comfort. Or she could have died as a direct result of Tita's subconscious efforts to poison her. Either way, Rosaura's death releases Tita from the oppressive nature of her domestic realm and allows her to continue to express herself through her cooking.

In *Like Water for Chocolate,* magic realism becomes an appropriate vehicle for the expression of the paradoxical nature of the kitchen as domestic space. This novel reveals how the kitchen can become a nurturing and creative domain, providing sustenance and pleasure for others; a site for repression, where one can be confined

exclusively to domestic tasks and lose or be denied a sense of self; and a site for rebellion against traditional boundaries.

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

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Bilbija examines traditional feminine and masculine roles as they are presented in Like Water for Chocolate.

When Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own* for an appropriate and pertinent place for a woman, she never mentions the kitchen as a possible space in which her intellectual liberation from the patriarchal system could be enacted. At first glance, this area had always been assigned to a wife, servant, daughter, slave, mother, grandmother, sister or an aunt. For feminists, the kitchen has come to symbolize the world that traditionally marginalized and limited a woman. It represents a space associated with repetitive work, lacking any "real" creativity, and having no possibility for the fulfillment of women's existential needs, individualization or self-expression....

A different, quite parodic and critical gender perspective has been presented in several recently published (cook)books by Latin American women writers. Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate: Novela de entregas mensuales can recetas, amores y remedios caseros* (1989) *(Like Water for Chocolate. A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies)* and Silvia Plager's *Como papas para varenikes: Novela contraentregas mensuales, en tarjeta a efectivo. Romances apasionados, recetas judias can poder afrodtsiaco y chimentos (Like Potatoes for Varenike: A Novel in Monthly Installments, Cash or Charge. Passionate Romances, Jewish Recipes With Aphrodisiac Power and Gossips)* (1994) have tried to revise stereotypical power relations and interpretations of male and female identity symbols. After all, alchemy and cooking probably did not always have rooms of their own, but may have shared the same transformative space.

In these novels the mythical, homogenized wholeness of Latin American identity posited by Garcia Marquez, along with the exploration of its origins *vis-à-vis* Europe, becomes fragmented. The power of medieval alchemy, introduced by a vagabond tribe of gypsies who paradoxically bring the spirit of Western modernity, is parodically replaced by different ethnic cuisines: Aztec in the case of the Mexican writer and Jewish in the Argentine example. Both gastro texts can be labeled as postmodern in the sense that they mimic mass-mediated explorations of gender identities. Their surprisingly similar subtitles replicate the format of a monthly magazine whose readers are housewives, or to use a more expressive, literal translation from the Spanish term *amas de casa,* mistresses of the home. *Like Water for Chocolate* is composed of twelve parts clearly identified by months and their corresponding dishes, with the list of ingredients heading the "Preparation" section. By amalgamating the novelistic genre with cookbook recipes, Esquivel and Plager actualize a postmodern blurring of distinctions between high and low cultural values. Both writers insist on the cover that their respective books are actually novels, but they also subvert this code of reference by adding a lengthy subtitle that recalls and imitates the particular realms of popular culture that are associated with women. Although both of the books under consideration here are authored by women, I am not making the claim that recipe-writing is an archetypically female activity. As a

matter of fact, by making a connection with alchemy, I would like to suggest that both activities have a common androgynous origin in the past.

Esquivel's book was originally published in Mexico in 1989, became a national bestseller in 1990, continued its success with a movie version that garnered many international film awards, and in 1992 swept across the English speaking world-primarily the North American market-as a New York Times bestseller for several weeks. Plager's book came out in Argentina in April of 1994 and the public is still digesting it. Critics too. The editors' blurb on the jacket suggests that in *Like potatoes for varenike* the writer... 'shows us her culinary and humorous talents through an entertaining parody of the successful *Like Water for Chocolate.* ' This statement is very significant for several reasons: first of all it represents the female writer *Primarily* as a talented cook; second, it invokes the model, recognizes its success and appeals to the rights of cultural reproduction; and third, it claims that the book that the reader has in hand is actually a parody of that model.

Invoking the culinary expertise of the fiction writer, specially if the Writer is a woman, fits all too well into the current, end of the century, wave of neo-conservativism. It also feeds into the postmodern confusion between reality and its simulation. Fiction is required to have the qualities of reality and reality is defined as what we see on television or read about in the newspaper; that "reality," however, is physically and psychologically fragmented and can only offer an illusion of wholeness. The avant garde insistence on the power of the imagination is giving way to research, "objectivity" and "expertise." Personal confession and "true stories" are valued higher than "imagined" ones and experience-in this case the culinary one-becomes the basis of identity and the source of discursive production. No wonder that the genre of the nineties is testimonial writing!...

The gastro texts that I am discussing deal with gendered identities in a truly postmodern fashion: by situating the female protagonist in the kitchen and by literally allowing her to produce only a "kitchen table talk" spiced with melodrama instead of grandiose philosophical contraptions, their authors "install and destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and . . . to their critical or ironic rereading of the art of the past [according to Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Modernism]."* In that sense the feminist discourse becomes paradoxical: instead of insisting on the liberational dimension of feminism which wants to get woman out of the kitchen, the postmodernist return to the discourses of power leads Esquivel and Plager to reclaim the kitchen as a not necessarily gender exclusive space of "one's own." Both writers rely heavily on traditional cultural practices and subvert the patriarchal values associated with masculinity and femininity....

Esquivel and Plager construct texts that do not fit into the traditional discourse of maternity. *Like Water for Chocolate* is constructed around the mother, who by invoking social rules, requires her youngest daughter Tita to reject any prospects of independent life, and take care of her until death. After Tita's premature birth on the kitchen table,. 'amid the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bayleaves, and cilantro, steamed milk, garlic, and, of course, onion,' Mama Elena does not satisfy the baby's need for food, and Tita has to turn to Nacha, the cook, with whom she establishes the successful

object relation. The proto object-the breast-determines the relationship that the individual will have with other objects in the course of life, is the foundation upon which the construction of individual subjectivity takes place. In this carnavalesque farce, the mother becomes a fairytale-like stepmother, while Tita, who will never feed her own child, becomes the nurturer for all in need. She appropriates the space of the kitchen, transforming it into the center of her power which alters the dominant patriarchal family structure. Hence, her emotions and well being determine the course of other's lives and she literally shares herself with the outside world: when she makes the cake for her sister's wedding to Pedro-with whom she was planning to get married-her tears of desperation mix with sugar, flour, eggs and lime peel. This later provokes melancholy, sadness and finally uncontrollable vomiting among the guests:. . .

The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded With a great wave of longing. Even Pedro, usually so proper, was having trouble holding back his tears Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. But the weeping was Just the first symptom of a strange intoxication-an acute attack of pain and frustration-that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person, fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time-those who didn't joined the collective vomiting that was going on all over the patio.

The somatic reaction provoked by Tita's bodily fluids actually shows how the daughter undermines the mother's authority and prohibition.

Something similar happens with "Quail in Rose Petal Sauce": Tita decides to use the rose that Pedro gave her as a sign of his eternal love, and prepares a meal that will awake Gertrudis' uncontrollable sexual appetite. By introducing the discourse of sexuality without necessarily relating it to marriage and by nurturing without procreating, Esquivel opens for discussion the ever present topics of feminine self-sacrifice and subordination that have traditionally been promoted by patriarchal literature. . . .

By breaking the boundaries between body and soul and by showing that they are actually one, both Esquivel and Plager successfully undermine the duality so embedded in Western culture. The latter day apprentices of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz-go against Plato and his all too well known argument that the soul can best reflect if there are no distractions from the body. They dismantle that same duality that puts masculinity on one side and femininity on the other. *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Like Potatoes for Varenike* unlock the kitchen door and present us its most common inhabitants-women. Then, they leave this door wide open and invite man to share. In Esquivel's version sergeant Trevino is the one who helps Gertrudis decipher the recipe for cream fritters and in Plager's book Saul and Kathy work together from the beginning in meal preparation. By going against the rigid patriarchal binary thinking they, in Derridean fashion, reveal that there is no "transcendental signified." There is no original recipe either, nor original cook. It is all about transcending ego boundaries through dialogic, polyphonic texts, emphasizing the importance of nurturing, both for man and women,

going against sexual oppression and connecting those "honey-tongued" people who are not only making their cake, but are ready to eat it too.

Source: Xenia Bilbija, "Spanish American Women Writers: Simmering Identity Over a Low Fire," in *Studies in 20th Century Literature,* Vol 20, No 1, Winter1996, pg 147-61

Critical Essay #3

In the excerpt below, de Valdes explores "the interplay between the verbal and visual representation of women" in Like Water for Chocolate.

Como agua para chocolate is the first novel by Laura Esquivel (b. 1950). Published in Spanish in 1989 and in English translation in 1992, followed by the release of the feature film that same year, the novel has thrust this Mexican woman writer into the world of international critical acclaim as well as best-seller popularity. Since Esquivel also wrote the screenplay for director Alfonso Arau, the novel and the film together offer us an excellent opportunity to examine the interplay between the verbal and visual representation of women. Esquivel's previous work had all been as a screenwriter. Her script for *Chido Guan, el Tacos de Oro* (1985) was nominated for the Ariel in Mexico, an award she won eight years later for *Como agua para chocolate.*

The study of verbal and visual imagery must begin with the understanding that both the novel and, to a lesser extent, the film work as a parody of a genre. The genre in question is the Mexican version of women's fiction published in monthly installments together with recipes, home remedies, dressmaking patterns, short poems, moral exhortations, ideas on home decoration, and the calendar of church observances. In brief, this genre is the nineteenth-century forerunner of what is known throughout Europe and America as a woman's magazine. Around 1850 these publications in Mexico were called "calendars for young ladies." Since home and church were the private and public sites of all educated young ladies, these publications represented the written counterpart to women's socialization, and as such, they are documents that conserve and transmit a Mexican female culture in which the social context and cultural space are particularly for women by women.

It was in the 1850s that fiction began to take a prominent role. At first the writings were descriptions of places for family excursions, moralizing tales, or detailed narratives on cooking. By 1860 the installment novel grew out of the monthly recipe or recommended excursion. More elaborate love stories by women began to appear regularly by the l880s. The genre was never considered literature by the literary establishment because of its episodic plots, overt sentimentality, and highly stylized characterization. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century every literate woman in Mexico was or had been an avid reader of the genre But what has been completely overlooked by the male dominated literary culture of Mexico is that these novels were highly coded in an authentic women's language of inference and reference to the common places of the kitchen and the home which were completely unknown by any man.

Behind the purportedly simple episodic plots there was an infrahistory of life as it was lived, with all its multiple restrictions for women of this social class. The characterization followed the forms of life of these women rather than their unique individuality; thus the heroines were the survivors, those who were able to live out a full life in spite of the institution of marriage, which in theory, if not in practice, was a form of indentured slavery for life in which a woman served father and brothers then moved on to serve

husband and sons together with her daughters and, of course, the women from the servant class. The women's fiction of this woman's world concentrated on one overwhelming fact of life: how to transcend the conditions of existence and express oneself in love and in creativity.

Cooking, sewing, embroidery, and decoration were the usual creative outlets for these women, and of course conversation, storytelling, gossip, and advice, which engulfed every waking day of the Mexican lady of the home. Writing for other women was quite naturally an extension of this infrahistorical conversation and gossip. Therefore, if one has the social codes of these women, one can read these novels as a way of life in nineteenth century Mexico. Laura Esquivel's recognition of this world and its language comes from her Mexican heritage of fiercely independent women, who created a woman's culture within the social prison of marriage.

Como agua para chocolate is a parody of nineteenth-century women's periodical fiction in the same way that *Don Quijote* is a parody of the novel of chivalry. Both genres were expressions of popular culture that created a unique space for a segment of the population....

Obviously, for the parody to work at its highest level of dual representation, both the parody and the parodic model must be present in the reading experience. Esquivel creates the duality in several ways. First, she begins with the title of the novel, *Like Water for Chocolate,* a locution which translates as "water at the boiling paint" and is used as a simile in Mexico to describe any event or relationship that is so tense, hot, and extraordinary that it can only be compared to scalding water on the verge of boiling, as called for in the preparation of that most Mexican of all beverages, dating from at least the thirteenth century: hot chocolate. Second, the subtitle is taken directly from the model: "A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies." Together the title and subtitle therefore cover both the parody and the model. Third, the reader finds upon opening the book, in place of an epigraph, a traditional Mexican proverb. "A la mesa y a la cama / Una sola vez se llama" (To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid). The woodcut that decorates the page is the typical nineteenth-century cooking stove. The fourth and most explicit dualistic technique is Esquivel's reproduction of the format of her model.

Each chapter is prefaced by the title, the subtitle, the month, and the recipe for that month. The narration that follows is a combination of direct address on how to prepare the recipe of the month and interspersed stories about the loves and times of the narrator's great-aunt Tita. The narration moves effortlessly from the first person to the third person omniscient narrative voice of all storytellers. Each chapter ends with the information that the story will be continued and an announcement of what the next month's-that is, the next chapter's-recipe will be. These elements, taken from the model, are never mere embellishments. The recipes and their preparation, as well as the home remedies and their application, are an intrinsic part of the story. There is therefore an intricate symbiotic relationship between the novel and its model in the reading experience. Each is feeding on the other.

In this study I am concerned with the model of the human subject, specifically the female subject, as it is developed in and through language and visual signification in a situated context of time and place. The verbal imaging of the novel makes use of the elaborate signifying system of language as a dwelling place. The visual imagery that at first expands the narrative in the film soon exacts its own place as a nonlinguistic signifying system drawing upon its own repertoire of referentiality and establishing a different model of the human subject than that elucidated by the verbal imagery alone. I intend to examine the novelistic signifying system and the model thus established and then follow with the cinematic signifying system and its model.

The speaking subject or narrative voice in the novel is characterized, as Emile Benveniste has shown, as a living presence by speaking. That voice begins in the first person, speaking the conversational Mexican Spanish of a woman from Mexico's north, near the U.S. border. Like all Mexican speech, it is clearly marked with register and socio-cultural indicators, in this case of the landowning middle class, mixing colloquial local usage with standard Spanish. The entry point is always the same: the direct address of one woman telling another how to prepare the recipe she is recommending. As one does the cooking, it is quite natural for the cook to liven the session with some storytelling, prompted by the previous preparation of the food. As she effortlessly moves from first person culinary instructor to storyteller, she shifts to the third person and gradually appropriates a time and place and refigures a social world

A verbal image emerges of the model Mexican rural, middle-class woman. She must be strong and far more clever than the men who supposedly protect her. She must be pious, observing all the religious requirements of a virtuous daughter, wife, and mother. She must exercise great care to keep her sentimental relations as private as possible, and, most important of all, she must be in control of life in her house, which means essentially the kitchen and bedroom or food and sex. In Esquivel's novel there are four women who must respond to the model: the mother Elena and the three daughters Rosaura, Gertrudis, and Josefita, known as Tita.

The ways of living within the limits of the model are demonstrated first by the mother, who thinks of herself as its very incarnation. She interprets the model in terms of control and domination of her entire household. She is represented through a filter of awe and fear, for the ostensible source is Tita's diary-cookbook, Written beginning in 1910, when she was fifteen years old, and now transmitted by her grandniece. Therefore the verbal images that characterize Mama Elena must be understood as those of her youngest daughter, who has been made into a personal servant from the time the little girl was able to work.

Mama Elena is depicted as strong, self-reliant, absolutely tyrannical with her daughters and servants, but especially so With Tita, who from birth has been designated as the one who will not marry because she must care for her mother until she dies.

Mama Elena believes in order, *her* order. Although she observes the strictures of church and society, she has secretly had an adulterous love affair With an African American, and her second daughter, Gertrudis, is the offspring of that relationship. This

transgression of the norms of proper behavior remains hidden from public view, although there is gossip, but only after her mother's death does Tita discover that Gertrudis is her half-sister. The tyranny imposed on the three sisters is therefore the rigid, self-designed model of a woman's life pitilessly enforced by Mama Elena, and each of the three responds in her own way to the model.

Rosaura never questions her mother's authority and follows her dictates submissively; after she is married she becomes an insignificant imitation of her mother. She lacks the strength, skill, and determination of Mama Elena and tries to compensate by appealing to the mother's model as absolute. She therefore tries to live the model, invoking her mother's authority because she has none of her own. Gertrudis does not challenge her mother but instead responds to her emotions and passions in a direct manner unbecoming a lady. This physical directness leads her to adopt an androgynous life-style: she leaves home and her mother's authority, escapes from the brothel where she subsequently landed, and becomes a general of the revolutionary army, taking a subordinate as her lover and, later, husband. When she returns to the family hacienda, she dresses like a man, gives orders like a man, and is the dominant sexual partner.

Tita, the youngest of the three daughters, speaks out against her mother's arbitrary rule but cannot escape until she temporarily loses her mind. She is able to survive her mother's harsh rule by transferring her love, joy, sadness, and anger into her cooking. Tita's emotions and passions are the impetus for expression and action, not through the normal means of communication but through the food she prepares. She is therefore able to consummate her love with Pedro through the food she serves.. ..

It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, In the Wine, in every one of the meal's aromas That was the way she entered Pedro's body, hot, voluptuous, perfumed, totally sensuous.

This clearly is much more than communication through food or a mere aphrodisiac; this is a form of sexual transubstantiation whereby the rose petal sauce and the quail have been turned into the body of Tita.

Thus it is that the reader gets to know these women as persons but, above all, becomes involved With the embodied speaking subject from the past, Tita, represented by her grandniece (who transmits her story) and her cooking. The reader receives verbal food for the imaginative refiguration of one woman's response to the model that was imposed on her by accident of birth. The body of these women is the place of living. It is the dwelling place of the human subject. The essential questions of health, illness, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexuality are tied very directly in this novel to the physical and emotional needs of the body. The preparation and eating of food is thus a symbolic representation of living, and Tita's cookbook bequeaths to Esperanza and to Esperanza's daughter, her grandniece, a woman's creation of space that is hers in a hostile world.

Source: Maria Elena de Valdes, "Verbal and Visual Representation of Women: *Como agua para chocolate* / *Like Water for Chocolate,"* in *World Literature Today,* Vol 69, No 1, Winter 1995, pp. 78-82.

Adaptations

Based on Esquivel's own screenplay, *Like Water for Chocolate* was adapted as a film in Spanish by Alfonso Arau, starring Lumi Cavazos, Regina Tome, and Marco Leonardi, Arau Films, 1992; with English subtitles, New Republic, 1993.

Topics for Further Study

Research the rebellion against the Mexican government led by Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Explain how this rebellion provides an effective backdrop for the tensions in the De la Garza family.

Explore Freud's psychological theory on the process of sublimation. Write an essay determining whether or not it can be applied to any situations in the novel. Use examples from the text.

Investigate the term "magic realism." Read another work that employs this technique and compare it to *Like Water for Chocolate.*

Research the position of women in Mexican society in the early part of the twentieth century. How can your findings help define the novel's female characters?

What Do I Read Next?

Esquivel's second novel, 1996's *The Law of Lave,* opens with the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan, the future site of Mexico City. Many centuries later the reincarnated actors of this earlier drama confront each other as an astroanalyst, her missing soulmate, and a planetary presidential candidate.

The House of the Spirits (1982) by Chilean Isabel Allende is a magical story about a Latin American family that survives internal and external pressures.

Whitney Otto's 1991 novel, *How to Make an American Quilt,* focuses on women sharing the stories of their lives as they Sit together and sew a quilt.

One Hundred Years of Solitude, Written by Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez in 1967, is considered the classic example of magic realism. This novel explores several generations of a Latin American family set against the age of revolution.

The recipes in Ntozake Shange's 1982 novel, *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo,* become part of the plot which focuses on the lives of three sisters.

Shirlene Ann Soto's 1990 study, *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910-1940,* provides a good look at the varied roles of Mexican women during the time period of the novel.

Further Study

Mary Batts Estrada, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in the *Washington Post,* September 25, 1993, p. B2.

This review praises the novel for its mixture of culinary knowledge, sensuality, and magic as "the secrets of love and life [are] revealed by the kitchen."

Stanley Kauffmann, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in *New Republic,* Vol. 208, No.9, March 1, 1993, pp. 24-25.

Kauffmann reviews the movie version of the novel and finds it "drawn-out" and "lacking in focus".

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Marisa Januzzi, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Vol 13, No.2, Summer, 1993. pp 245-46.

Molly O'Neill, "At Dinner with Laura Esquivel: Sensing the Spirit in All Things, Seen and Unseen," in the *New York Times,* March 31, 1993, pp. Cl, C8

Lilian Pizzichini, review of *The Law of Lave,* in *Times Literary Supplement,* October 18, 1996, p. 23.

James Polk, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in *Tribune Books* (Chicago), October 8, 1992, p. 8.

Karen Stabiner, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in the *Las Angeles Times Book Review,* November 1, 1992, p. 6.

Ilan Stavans, review of *Like Water for Chocolate,* in *Nation,* Vol. 256, No. 23, June 14, 1993, p. 846.

Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Gulu, "Criss-Crossing Texts Reading Images in 'Like Water for Chocolate,'" in *The Mexican Cinema Project Studies in History, Criticism, and Theory,* edited by Chon Noriega and Steven Ricci, The UCLA Film and TV Archive, 1994, pp. 45-52.

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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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