
A Pedagogical Approach to Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

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The beauty of world literature is that it can lead to open-mindedness as the student comes to the realization that his or her own life is not so different from the lives of teenagers of other cultures. Cultural texts placed in a world literature unit focused on adolescents coming of age in a war-torn country will enhance your students' world view. The texts I have compiled will grab the students and place them into the lives of others, enabling them to experience heartbreaks, tragedies, and triumphs right along with the characters. These stories are about childhood passing, the loss of innocence, accepting responsibility, and surviving under the harshest of conditions. I highly recommend teaching *Like Water for Chocolate* to upper level high school students as one text in a series of world literature that focuses on children of war, and the lesson plan I have created for this novel is the focus of this article.

Like Water for Chocolate is set during the Mexican Revolution, and a critical reading will enable your students to explore the family dynamics, love, traditions, rights of children, humor, and politics that are abundant in the novel. This lesson plan focuses on Esquivel's use of historical events, magical realism, metaphoric language, and adolescent coming-of-age in the midst of war. *Like Water for Chocolate* is valuable because studying it gives insight into the early 20th century female Mexican

woman that is not widely known. Although Esquivel's female characters are encased in the traditional Mexican roles of wife, mother, daughter, sister, and maid, these roles are developed to their fullest extent; this is a story about strong Mexican women filled with determination.

Como Agua para Chocolate, Esquivel's first novel, was published in Spanish in 1989. The English translation was published in 1992 and became an instant best-seller.¹ The film adaptation was a success as well, becoming one of the most popular foreign-language films in American history, grossing \$8.5 million at the box office (Altan). Point out to the students that the film will be viewed after the reading of the novel is complete.

You can introduce your students to the characters in the novel by setting up the story in some variation of the following: This is the story of Tita, an adolescent girl who is struggling for independence and looking to claim her own identity. Her knowledge of life is based on her experiences in the kitchen, and the reader must analyze the novel through the role and power of food, guided by the recipes that begin each chapter. In this book, food is the direct cause of a person's physical and emotional state, and food also serves as a channel through which one person's emotions can be transmitted to another. Tita is trapped in a family tradition that will not allow her to marry her true love Pedro, who plans to ask Mama Elena for Tita's hand. Mama Elena says to Tita: "If he intends to ask for your hand, tell him not to bother . . . You know perfectly well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die" (*LWFC* 10).

Before reading *Like Water for Chocolate*, it is imperative that the students gain background knowledge on the history of Mexico, the Mexican Revolution, and the culture of the Mexican people at the time of the revolution. This knowledge will prove to enhance their understanding of the novel. In this lesson plan, Mexico's history as well as the highlights of the Mexican Revolution are researched by the students; each student is assigned one specific time-frame of Mexican history to research, and each student should deliver a brief five minute presentation

to the class on their findings.² Their research will help them to better understand instances in the novel: how political instability made it impossible for Tita's family to travel safely, so they rely on their connections with a Chinaman who deals in smuggled goods to get certain items, such as wedding dress material; why bandits raid the family ranch and rape Chenchu; how Tita's sister Gertrudis runs away from home and why she chooses to join a band of revolutionary soldiers.

The students' research should include the influential people of the revolution, such as Porfirio Diaz, Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, and Lazaro Cardenas, as these historical figures are mentioned in the novel. For example, there is a reference to folklore about Villa that he was known to "remove his enemies' bloody hearts so he can devour them" (*LWFC* 68). Another example of how Tita's family is affected by the revolution is how Tita's nephew's wet nurse is killed when "she was struck by a stray bullet from a battle between the rebels and the federales" (*LWFC* 75). Upon conclusion of the historical presentations, the students should be able to answer the following questions:

How did these influential men contribute to the Mexican Revolution?

What was the cause of the Mexican Revolution?

What was the outcome of the Mexican Revolution?

As a class, glance at the chapters so the students get a feel for the layout of the book, which is organized in monthly installments. Explain that one chapter/month will be assigned per day (this should not be a problem because the chapters are fairly short and easy to read). The lesson plan is divided into twelve parts, each part representing a chapter from the novel. Some of the chapters refer to aspects of Mexico that were not covered in the background information sessions. These aspects should be addressed as they appear in the novel.

Before the first chapter is assigned, take another day to define the following: aspects of the Mexican culture in the era of

1910-1930, magical realism, and metaphoric language, because the students will be expected to look for those elements in each chapter. Some “fast facts” about the Mexican culture of that time are as follows: close contact is at the center of family life in Mexico in the early 1900’s; households can include several generations; grandparents share in the educating of the children just as much as the parents, and they are responsible for taking care of the house any time that both of the parents are away; older girls almost always remain at home until they marry; Mexican families form the core of the country’s social structure; the strength of the family forms the foundation of Mexico’s political stability; extended families are extremely self-sufficient and closed to outsiders, with the exception of very close friends who are considered family.³

Magical realism is a literary style that generally describes work that combines fantasy with reality to create a mythical occurrence. Magical realism is often described as a unique product of Latin America, but German Franz Roh is actually credited for its inception. “Roh introduced it into artistic discourse in the mid-1920s through the German phrase *Magischer Realismus*” (Simpkins 141). Latin American authors were drawn to Roh’s literary concept because it proved to be “a suitable means to express the ‘marvelous reality’ unique to their own culture” (141). Laura Esquivel employs this technique throughout her novel in such a way that the mythical occurrences do not seem odd to the characters at all. The characters accept the supernatural incidents as a part of everyday life.

I suggest that you point out an example of Esquivel’s use of magical realism so the students know what to look for when reading the first chapter. An excellent example occurs almost immediately in the novel when Nacha, the family’s Indian cook and Tita’s primary caretaker, is present at Tita’s unusual birth; Tita is born on a tide of tears that floods the kitchen. This event is not at all shocking to Nacha, a woman who firmly believes in and abides by the mythical occurrences that occur in her domestic sphere: “Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack

– it was used for cooking and lasted a long time” (6).

I also suggest that you encourage your students to reflect on an event in their own lives that may have had magical elements in it; in other words, an event that had an unexplainable, almost miraculous outcome. They may be more willing and able to do this if you provide an example of your own first. An example that students may be able to relate to is how, for people of the Catholic faith, the body and blood of Christ become ‘mythically’ tangible during communion. A suggestion such as this may open up their imaginations, thus allowing them to come up with personal life experiences.

When you address the definition and uses of metaphoric language, I suggest that you refer to examples that are in the novel. An example of a simile occurs on page 36: “She heard, as she passed, the whispers in the church, and she felt each comment like a stab in her back.” An example of metaphoric language is on page 136: “You know how men are. They all say they won’t eat off a plate that isn’t clean.”

Each day that a chapter is to have been read, the students should expect a quiz. These quizzes will be peer-graded (which will save the instructor time), with a class discussion following. The purpose of the quizzes is to ensure that the students are doing the reading, and to improve their critical thinking skills. The quiz that I have created to accompany the first chapter is as follows:

1. Who is the narrator?
2. What is Tita’s world like in comparison to that of her sisters?
3. Why can’t Tita marry Pedro?
4. Tita detests the family tradition – what questions does she ask?

The class discussion that accompanies the first chapter includes the following questions:

1. Where did you find magical realism?
2. Where did you find similes and/or metaphoric language?

3. Where did you find references to culture/family traditions?
4. Lastly, consider your findings. What was the author's purpose in utilizing them? Did these findings contribute to your understanding of this chapter?

Also, with each chapter a writing prompt will be assigned (to be done in class). These prompts will allow the students to bring the story into their own personal lives so they can make connections with the content in the novel. I like these writing prompts because I firmly believe that students become better writers with *practice*. The writing prompts are structured in such a way that every student, regardless of gender or ethnicity, can make their own personal connections to the story. The following writing prompt accompanies the first chapter: On page 7 we learn that the kitchen is Tita's 'realm.' I believe that everyone has a place where they feel most confident, as well as proud of who they are and what they can do. Where is *your* realm?

After the book has been completed, I suggest watching the film adaptation. It would be fun to make one of the recipes out of the book to enjoy while watching the film. Hand out the guidelines for the final paper, which is a written response to an essay question that focuses on the issue of the instability in the family and the instability in the political environment, due after the film has been watched.

If you are interested in putting together a series of cultural texts that focus on adolescents who are struggling for independence and who encounter obstacles while searching for their own identity in a time of political instability, you could move from this story into *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy—a book about an adolescent male dealing with unstable times along the Mexican border. A third selection for this unit could be Scott Simon's *Pretty Birds*—a novel about a teen named Irena Zaric living in Sarajevo whose family is brutalized by Serb soldiers during a period of "ethnic cleansing" against the Muslims. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* takes place in Afghanistan during the Taliban invasion; it describes Afghan customs and traditions, male friendship, the influence of fathers

over sons, and betrayal. If you feel that *The Kite Runner* is too long a read, a shorter, less dense story about adolescent life in Afghanistan is Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner*; it is a story about a girl who must disguise herself as a boy in order to survive during the Taliban invasion.

I believe it is comforting for students to realize that the difficulties and delights they are experiencing in their teen years are similar to those experienced by adolescents from other parts of the world. Reading about other teens going through common life experiences while also struggling to survive under the harshest of conditions will heighten the students' awareness of global problems and may also create a feeling of compassion for the young people who suffer daily in a war-torn country.

Notes

1. All subsequent references to Esquivel's novel will occur parenthetically, as *LWFC* and page number.

2. For a copy of the research assignments or for the lesson plan in its entirety, feel free to e-mail me at nickie.kranz@mnsu.edu.

3. Two texts that I used to verify this information, that efficiently explain the most basic elements of Mexican culture, are: Jermyn, Leslie and Mary Jo Reilly's *Cultures of the World: Mexico* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2004) and Jack Rummel's *Mexico* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999). See my Works Consulted page for other useful resources.

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