

Macarena Hernández

“One Family, Two Homelands”

OBJECTIVES

- to contrast Mexican and American culture through how each views death
- to help with reading comprehension of literary text/nonfiction (memoir)
- to learn new vocabulary words and help with reading development
- to understand symbolization
- to write an essay about family funeral traditions

BACKGROUND AND TEACHER DISCUSSION IDEAS (10-15 minutes)

Macarena Hernández studied English and journalism at Baylor University, and went to earn a degree in journalism from the University of California at Berkeley. Former Rio Grande bureau chief for the San Antonio Express-News, she has written for The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News and “Frontline World.”

CUES: This selection discusses if the death of a grandparent is also the death of a culture.

STUDENT-TEXT INVOLVEMENT (15-20 minutes)

1. Have students list the funeral traditions Hernandez talks about in her essay. Ask students how different/same they are from the funeral traditions their family practices.
2. Have students give three examples of how the author proves that Mexicans are obsessed with death. Can they give examples from their life of how American’s are obsessed with death?
3. Ask students if Hernandez views herself as Mexican or American. List examples from the essay supporting both views.
4. Ask students how many different directions the author is pulled in this essay. Ask them to find examples of how the author shows she is pulled.
5. Divide class into small groups of four. Have each group work on these two questions. 1) How does the author show her family loved Mexico? 2) How does the author show her family loved America? Have each group find examples and list them. Have students share the examples with the class.
6. Have students find these words in the selection. First have students write a definition of the words based on context clues in the paragraph. Second have students look up the words in a dictionary. Discuss how much their definitions differ from the ones in the dictionary.
 - a. el rancho
 - b. Dia de los Muertos
 - c. por favor
 - d. huecitos
 - e. huapango

- f. rancheras
- g. pan de semita
- h. ropero
- i. recuerdos
- j. rebozo

7. Ask students: Why do you think the author chose to end her essay with the image of the butterfly?
8. Ask students: What is a butterfly? What does it symbolize?
9. Ask students: Why does the author write about death? What does death symbolize in this selection?
10. Ask students when the first time they discussed death with their family or understood death.

DISCUSSION OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY ISSUES (10-15 MINUTES)

1. Do Mexican Americans see themselves as Mexican or American?
2. If a person leaves their country behind and settles in another, does that mean they are no longer part of that culture? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the Day of the Dead. What does it mean? What are the traditions associated with the celebration? Discuss your family traditions having to deal with funerals and death? (Do children go to funerals? Is death talked about openly or not at all?) How do your family's views differ from the author's family? How are they the same?
4. Why do you think the author's family stayed in the United States, despite not receiving medical care for her their seventh child?
5. Why do you suppose the author wrote about death in relation to Mexico and her family?

TAKE HOME ASSIGNMENT

- Interview a parent or grandparent about funeral and family traditions. Ask them why and how they celebrate or mourn their dead.

Macarena Hernández (La Joya)
from "One Family, Two Homelands"

Death and More Death

Mexicans are obsessed with death. "If you don't bury me en el rancho I will come back after I die and pull your feet in the middle of the night," my mother told us. She would remind us to take her back to Mexico, especially around the first two days of November, when we celebrate Dia de los Muertos. On the Day of the Dead, the cemetery in the rancho fills with people, most of whom haven't visited all year.

The first time I discussed death with my mother I was 5 and my pet chicken had just

died. My mother was raising a dozen of them in our La Joya backyard, which was infested with fire ants. I found my black hen lying flat and stiff underneath my mother's washing machine outside our house, not long after she had sprinkled ant poison that resembled chicken feed. I cried for days. My mother reassured me that my nameless chicken was in heaven. But I kept crying.

"Por favor, Macarena!" she told me. "Please leave those tears for the day I die. When I die there will be no tears left for me."

Every year around Day of the Dead, my parents also visited my brother Ramiro's gravesite at La Piedad cemetery in McAllen. They would tie a small bouquet of plastic flowers to the green metal nameplate marking his grave. They never bought him a marble headstone because they didn't intend for him to stay there.

Ramiro, my mother's seventh child, arrived in early November 1971 while my father was working back in Mexico and my mother was at a relative's house in McAllen. My tio Baldo and tia Queta rushed her to a Mission clinic when her contractions came. When the clinic staff turned her away, her relatives drove her to Starr County, 35 miles west of Mission. They went in search of a midwife, who wasn't home. They drove back to Mission and found another midwife who sent my mother to the hospital after she began bleeding. My mother used Ramiro's first baby outfit—the yellow one she planned to take him home from the hospital in—to stop the blood from spilling onto the seats of the car. He drowned in her blood just before he was delivered. My mother was in the hospital when my father and his brother Rafael buried my brother at La Piedad cemetery, a narrow strip of graves now squeezed between the city airport and a row of warehouses.

"When I die," my mother would tell us, "I want you to take his huecitos (little bones) and bury them with me in Mexico. I don't want his gravesite to be forgotten."

In Mexico, my mother has always said, they respect the dead. Aqui, no. Here, they don't. For La Ceja, Altamira, Serafin and La Reforma, the cemetery is the meeting point, the one place where at least once a year, on Dia de los Muertos, those who left come home to reunite with those still here. We forget our ranchos are dying. There, as a family, we reconnect with our dead. The marble gets polished and the photographs encased in glass are dusted. That is the only time the grass is trimmed and the weeds are yanked. The handful of people who still live here collect donaciones, paid mostly in dollars. One year, they paid for an outhouse.

When my mother was a teenager, the biggest dances of the year were held at the school during Day of the Dead. Young couples danced as Los Hermanos Flores from Altamira played their huapangos and rancheras, while the mothers sold carne guisada plates. By the 1980s, those lively dances had faded into memory, as old and unfamiliar as the painted portraits of long-dead relatives that hung in my grandmother's house. No one gets married there anymore and there are hardly any children.

It was the drought that followed Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 that finally killed the ranchos, my grandfather says. The drought lasted more than a decade, forcing many to abandon their fields. It wiped out the agricultural industry, dominated by a few families that every year shipped out tons of watermelon, canteloupe, sorghum and corn to

nearby Monterrey and as far south as Guadalajara and Mexico City. Some had no choice but to sell their cattle and land. In Comales, fishermen's wives made pilgrimages to the reservoir, where they begged God to open the skies. By then, only my grandfather and grandmother were left on our family rancho. The rancho's cemetery is the only gathering place left.

We know my father wanted to be buried there, close to his mother and grandmother, but unlike my mother, he didn't plan his funeral, only prayed for a quick death. "The day I die, these kids are going to do whatever they want," he would say. "I won't know the difference. I'll be dead."

One Tuesday night in August 1998, as he drove home from my brother's house where he had just dropped off a grandson's carseat, an 18-wheeler smashed into my father's car on the corner of Esperanza Street. He died instantly. My father and I were just starting to understand each other. Just three months earlier, he had watched me accept my master's degree from the University of California at Berkeley, just north of where my family once picked grapes.

My siblings were torn between burying him in Mexico or in the United States, where all of us live. In the end, we buried him in Mexico, a few feet from his parents' graves and his beloved grandmother Manuela, and next to his younger brother Enrique, who also died in a car accident nine years earlier. The Hernandezes, like their rancho, El Puente, have had short and sad lives, I tell my mother.

The small ranching community where my father's family first settled died decades before anyone in La Ceja could ever imagine their rancho suffering the same fate. All that is left of my father's childhood home, where his parents raised eight children, are the hollow walls of crumbling cinderblock. Not long after my father died, my mother abandoned her dream of a rancho life by the arroyo. These days, she just asks that we bury her next to him, by the main gate of the Sara Flores Cemetery, the ranchos' constant reminder of the cycle of life.

No Slow Death

Jose Maria Reyna has never been afraid of death, only of dying slowly. He told my mother if he ever grew too old or sick to take care of himself, he would end his life rather than face the unfortunate fate of the old: living long enough to become a burden. He knows sooner or later even your own children begin to resent you.

"I've already given myself to God," my grandfather tells his sister Juanita one day as we sit in her front yard watching the cars drive by Sugar Road in Edinburg. "But I hope he sends death when I'm at the rancho, my rancho."

"Porque en el rancho?" I ask, thinking he will tell me what I have heard him say often: I was born on the rancho, I will die on the rancho.

But what he says is, "I don't want to give my children any more work."

His sister Juanita tells him she has no plans to go back to Mexico. She has nothing left there.

"If I, who am from Mexico, don't go back to see my father and mother's gravesites,

much less my children," she tells my grandfather, who is sipping coffee and eating pan de semita, a sweet bread. "They'll never go visit me, or bring me flowers." She's already paid Palm Valley Memorial Gardens for her burial plot, just two miles from where we now sit. "It is close by so I won't burden my children," she says before walking inside her house. She walks to the corner room, to the ropero, where she keeps her handmade dresses, recuerdos from her dancing days at the senior citizen centers. They are under lock and key until she sells them. She has no plans to wear them again. She returns with a neatly folded shawl made of delicate black and gold thread. It smells of her—musty perfume sprayed many Saturday nights ago. "So you can remember me when I am no longer here," she says, handing it to me.

"I want you to wear it when you bury me," my grandfather tells me. I wrap the rebozo around me. Stretched across my back, it reveals a glittering butterfly.