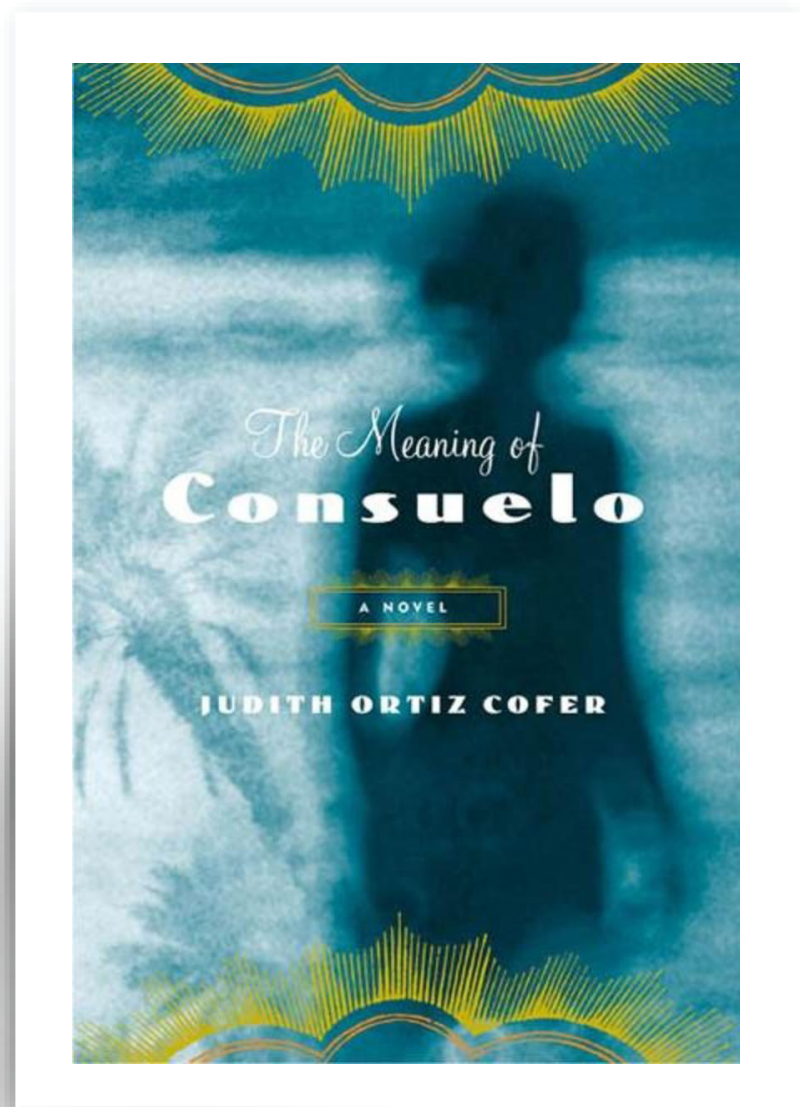


# VAMOS A LEER

*teaching latin america through literacy*



# VAMOS A LEER

## Educator's Guide

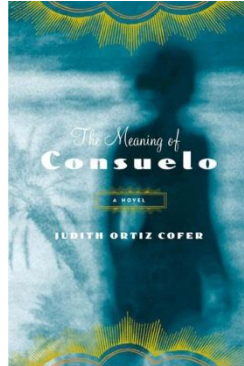
### **The Meaning of Consuelo**

Written by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2003

ISBN: 9780807083871

Age Level: N/A



### **BOOK SUMMARY**

The Signe family is blessed with two daughters. Consuelo, the elder, is thought of as pensive and book-loving, the serious child-*la niña seria*-while Mili, her younger sister, is seen as vivacious, a ray of tropical sunshine. Two daughters: one dark, one light; one to offer comfort and consolation, the other to charm and delight. But, for all the joy both girls should bring, something is not right in this Puerto Rican family; a *tragedia* is developing, like a tumor, at its core.

In this fierce, funny, and sometimes startling novel, we follow a young woman's quest to negotiate her own terms of survival within the confines of her culture and her family.

### **AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS:**

- American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults
- 2003 Américas Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature
- New York Public Library's "Books for the Teen Age 2004 List"

## AUTHOR'S CORNER

### About Judith Ortiz Cofer:

Ortiz Cofer was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, where she spent her formative years until her father's job in the Navy had them move to Paterson, New Jersey. Ortiz Cofer, though, returned repeatedly to the island, often staying for months at a time with her grandmother. Her passion for story telling was inspired by the many stories she heard from her grandmother during these visits.



In her writing, she deals with issues that have been themes in her own life, such as having experienced the opposing world views of her parents who disagreed about living on the island. While her mother wanted to maintain strong ties to her tradition and heritage, her father wished to disassociate himself and his children from the stigmas and lack of opportunity of being from the island. In an [interview](#) done by the Annenberg Foundation, she states, *"I now know that it was my heritage; this is my material, this is what I can write about because I have intimate knowledge of it. So in a lot of my books, beginning with my early poetry and then on to my novels...my theme is: When you are always between cultures and between languages, how do you negotiate the world? And I think that is a very contemporary theme because America is constantly being populated and repopulated by new immigrants, and that is what makes this country unique."* This theme is evident throughout our featured novel, *The Meaning of Consuelo*, in particular.

Her books are relevant to multiple audiences, from those in high school all the way through adulthood. With writing that is at once personal and political, Ortiz Cofer deals with issues that pertain to Latin@s throughout the United States, including family networks, language maintenance, and identity formation.

Ortiz Cofer holds a B.A. in English from Augusta College and an M.A. in English Literature from Florida Atlantic University. After 26 years as an English professor, she retired from the University of Georgia in December 2013. We can imagine that her students must have been inspired to have her as teacher, for Ortiz Cofer's writing is as flexible as it is creative. She shifts with apparent ease between writing poetry, essays, novels, short stories and creative non-fiction – all of which have garnered her critical acclaim. As evidence of her success, in 2010 Ortiz Cofer was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. She has received grants from the Witter Bynner Foundation and the George Council for the Arts, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Florida Fine Arts Council.

Check out [Judith Ortiz Cofer's](#) website for more information about the author.

**USING *The  
Meaning of  
Consuelo*  
IN THE  
CLASSROOM**

In reflecting on *The Meaning of Consuelo*, Julia Alvarez expresses what one finds at the heart of the book that makes it both beautiful and sad at the same time: “A bittersweet tale of the price one pays to re-invent the story handed down by one’s *antepasados* and *familia*. Consuelo is both herself and every *mujer*, and her story her own and that of her island, torn between self-discovery and safety.”

It’s not a light read. How could it be? From the very first chapter, we realize that what follows is the unfolding of *la tragedia* that would forever change Consuelo and her family. The novel tackles a number of difficult themes such as mental illness, sexuality, gender, rejection, poverty, independence, tradition, and progress. Like many other books we’ve featured, this is a coming-of-age story. Our protagonist, Consuelo, struggles for the right to define herself at the same time that she grapples with the mental illness of her sister, society’s rejection of her gay cousin, and the growing tensions between the traditional Puerto Rican culture of *gente decente* and the increasing influence of progressive America.

I think it’s fairly safe to say that Consuelo’s family is a dysfunctional one. Her family fails to successfully handle the homosexuality of her cousin Patricio, or the mental illness of her sister Mili. The family appears unable to accept either situation, as these are not issues of *gente decente*. In different ways, the family loses both Patricio and Mili as a result of the decisions they make. This isn’t to say that the family is ‘all bad.’ We all know that families are complex, and they come with both the good and the bad. Tempered by the expectations of what it means to be a *mujer decente*, Mami’s family is one with a history of strong women. Surprisingly, it is Mami’s mother, Abuela, who is the most explicit in her support of progress toward gender equality. While she may cling to the traditions of past generations of women, she does embrace the technological progress that made life easier for women: “She then vowed to invest in every product that allowed her the luxury she had never had as a wife and mother—time for herself” (p. 26). To a certain degree, it’s painful to watch Consuelo’s relationship with her parents unfold as she ages. To her parents, Consuelo is the strong, dependable, serious child who needs little parenting or attention, and as a result, little love. She is certainly strong, but it is troubling to watch as she struggles through her teenage years not only alone, but also responsible for her mentally ill younger sister. As many of our students may also have to deal with equally complex family dynamics or feelings of isolation, the novel creates the space to connect those experiences to classroom learning and discussion.

There’s something difficult about watching Consuelo come-of-age on her own, with little support from her parents, but there’s also something empowering in seeing Consuelo decide for herself how she will be defined. The idea of being the outsider, *el fulano* or *la fulana*, is an important one in the story. At the beginning of the novel it’s used as a means to separate the *gente decente* from others; it’s a way to enforce the economic and social stratification of society. Both Consuelo and the reader are introduced to the complicated notion of the outsider through the neighborhood

transvestite. He's good enough to come through the backdoors to do manicures, but must be completely ignored if seen out in public. But by the end of the novel, something changes, at least for Consuelo. She's realized that there is a certain power in embracing the idea of *la fulana*. Shunned for the choices she makes with her boyfriend, Consuelo accepts the role of *la fulana*, and is empowered in doing so. By refusing to play the role of the shamed *fulana*, Consuelo's peers find they have little power over her. Other reviews have called Consuelo "gritty and brave." I agree. Here is a protagonist that suffers through experiences that many of our students may be all too familiar with. She survives, and on her own terms. She chooses how she will define herself, not limiting herself to the traditions of her family or her society. This is the takeaway, the real lesson we want all of our students to master.

If you'd like to read what others have thought about the book, check out the links to other reviews below:

- [Books are for Lovers Review](#)
- [Wandering through LA Lit Book Review](#)

If you're interested in hearing what the author herself has to say about her work, check out the following online interviews:

- [Bookmark: Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer](#)
- [Teaching Multicultural Literature interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer](#)

## **LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES**

The following lesson plans are comprised of two sections:

- A short section of suggested activities that can be used before, during or after the reading of the novel which are organized thematically by different subject areas
- Guided reading questions organized by parts of the book and extended response writing prompts. These questions have been written to support the types of reading and critical thinking skills required in standardized reading comprehension tests. The following key words and skills are highlighted: analyze, infer, evaluate, describe, support, explain, summarize, compare, contrast and predict.

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, check out other curricula:

- 'Judith Ortiz Cofer in the Classroom' [teacher's guide](#) from National Council of Teachers of English
- Beacon Press' [Teacher's Guide](#) for *The Meaning of Consuelo*

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make

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logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

#### Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### Writing

#### Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

#### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

#### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support

## Social Studies and History

analysis, reflection, and research.

### [PBS: Latino Americans Documentary and Lesson Plans](#)

This film is the first major documentary series for television to chronicle the rich and varied history and experiences of Latinos, who have helped shape North America over the last 500-plus years and have become, with more than 50 million people, the largest minority group in the U.S. The changing and yet repeating context of American history provides a backdrop for the drama of individual lives. It is a story of immigration and redemption, of anguish and celebration, of the gradual construction of a new American identity that connects and empowers millions of people today. All of the [episodes](#) are available to watch for free online. PBS has also created a series of free lesson plans “[Puerto Rican Perspectives](#)” based on the documentary.

### [Puerto Rico: Uncovering La Isla](#)

In this curriculum guide students are given an overview of Puerto Rico through topics such as art, music and sports, and asked to compare what they learn about Puerto Rico to the United States. Created for elementary school students it could easily be adapted for older students.

### [The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano](#)

This young adult novel by Sonia Manzano tells the story of a teenage girl living in New York who comes to learn the significance of her Puerto Rican heritage and why her family moved to the U.S. Taking place decades after *The Meaning of Consuelo*, it is a good way to further students understanding of Puerto Rico, the factors that influence U.S. immigration, and the Puerto Rican experience in the United States.

[The Puerto Rican experience in the United States](#): As the influence of the U.S. and the hope for moving there play a significant role in *The Meaning of Consuelo* the following resources may be useful:

- [Palante! A Brief History of the Young Lords](#)
- [Young Lords Party 12-Point Program and Platform](#) (a digitized version of the Young Lords Party manifesto)
- [Center for Puerto Rican Studies](#) (dedicated to the study of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States, this New York-based research center holds the world’s only repository of archival and library materials dedicated exclusively to the Puerto Rican diaspora and has a special section dedicated to “[Teaching U.S. Puerto Rican History](#)”).
- [Puerto Rico and the American Dream](#) (includes oral histories, timelines, and a photo gallery)
- [Puerto Rico History Timeline](#)



## Guided Reading Questions

- [PBS' Puerto Rico – A Timeline](#)

### FULANO, NA, n.m.f.: So-and-so, what's his/her-name; tart, whore; Mr./Miss/Mrs. Nobody | Pages 1-11

1. What does *el fulano* or *la fulana* mean? Think about the description of María Sereno. Based on that description, why do you think he might be referred to as *el fulano*? (p. 3-4)
2. What does María Sereno do for work? Why is this the only job he can get? (p. 4)
3. Why does Consuelo feel like an outsider in her neighborhood? (p. 5)
4. How does Mami respond when she realizes that María Sereno has come into the yard and talked to Mili? Why does this seem contradictory to Consuelo? (p. 6-10)
5. What talent does Mili have? How does Cofer foreshadow that something tragic is going to happen? (p. 10)
6. What does María Sereno communicate with Consuelo through the look he gives her? Make a prediction: Do you think that Consuelo will become *la fulana*? (p. 11)

### MUJER/HOMBRE: Some early words | Pages 12-19

1. Describe the personalities of Consuelo's mother and father. How are the two different? Who is Consuelo more like? Who is Mili more like? (p. 12)
2. Why does Consuelo's family move to San Juan? (p. 13)
3. How are Patricio and Consuelo alike? (p. 13-14)
4. What do you think Patricio's play with the Papá puppet reveals about his feelings toward his father? Explain. (p. 14-15)
5. Why doesn't Consuelo get focused attention from anyone but Patricio? (p. 19)

### SERPIENTES AND AZÚCAR | Pages 20-37

1. What happens on Sundays when Papi has the day off? (p. 20-21)
2. How does Mami's demeanor change when she knows they're on their way to her mother's house? (p. 22)
3. Why does Mami want the girls to be silent as she checks the sugarcane? How would Papi respond if he knew the girls were going to eat something non-processed? (p. 23)
4. What kind of agreement do Mami and Consuelo have? (p. 22-23)
5. What is Operation Bootstrap? How is it changing the island? (p. 24)
6. How did Abuelo become an 'Angel to Widows and Orphans' during World War II? (p. 25)
7. What creates a rift between Abuelo and Abuela? Why does Abuela have the deciding vote in family affairs? (p. 25-26)
8. Why is Abuela in favor of technological progress that allows her to have a washing machine and television? What luxury is she able to



- experience for the first time? (p. 26)
9. Why does Papi want to leave before Abuelo returns? (p. 27)
  10. Where is Consuelo's favorite room in her grandparent's home? (p. 27)
  11. What version of the Spanish conquest do the grandchildren learn from Abuelo? Does this version describe the Spaniards as brave and heroic men? How are the Taíno described in Abuelo's story? (p. 28-30)
  12. What ritual do the grandchildren have to enact in order to enjoy the fiestas? (p. 31-32)
  13. What happens while Consuelo is on the Ferris wheel? What does she see when she spots Mili? (p. 34-35)
  14. Do you think that what happened to Mili was Consuelo's fault? Do you think it should always be her responsibility to look after Mili? (p. 35)

### **¡AY BENDITO!: Betrayals of the Tongue | Pages 38-48**

1. How is Puerto Rico changing with the increased influence of the United States? (p. 38-40)
2. What has happened to Patricio's white hibiscus while Consuelo was away at her grandparents? What does this teach Consuelo about nature? (p. 41)
3. Why does Patricio defend María Sereno? (p. 41-42)
4. Why is Patricio so upset? (p. 41-42)
5. What does Mami interrogate Consuelo about? Is Consuelo honest with Mami? (p. 43-45)
6. What happens to the hibiscus bush? What else changes for Patricio? (p. 45-47)
7. What is Patricio teaching Consuelo? (p. 46)
8. What does Patricio teach Consuelo about hiding something? Do you think he's correct? (p. 48)
9. What do you think Patricio's life is like inside his house with his father? What do you think it is that Consuelo senses he needs protection from? (p. 48)

### **ESCÁNDALOS and Other Commotions | Pages 49-57**

1. What is the real reason for Tío deciding it is time to move? What does this say about the community where they live? (p. 49)
2. What is Patricio's experience at school like? Does it appear that any adults step in to help him? (p. 49-50)
3. What do you think Consuelo means by "It was then that I began to see language as a weapon of destruction, as well as of self-defense"? Explain your answer. (p. 50)
4. What changes for Consuelo once she starts her period and becomes a *señorita*? (p. 50-51)
5. What does the family say about Patricio? What does this demonstrate about their willingness to accept and love Patricio? Between his school experience and the way his family talks about him, how do you think Patricio feels? (p. 52-54)
6. What are the early signs that something is wrong with Mili? (p. 1-

**The meaning of the word TRAGEDIA | Pages 58-78**

1. How does Mami feel about the unbreakable dishes? How are her feelings representative of the differences between Mami and Papi in terms of their beliefs about the American way and the Puerto Rican way? (p. 59)
2. What is the story surrounding Papi's stolen song? (p. 61-62)
3. What is Patricio's plan for when he arrives in the United States? Why does this upset Consuelo? (p. 62-64)
4. How has Patricio's influence changed Consuelo? (p. 65-66)
5. How does Patricio ensure that he will never be returning to Puerto Rico? (p. 69-70)
6. Why do you think Consuelo begins praying for Mili? (p. 71)
7. What does Consuelo realize about Patricio on their day in San Juan? (p. 73-74)

**SILENCIO: The Lessons of the Forest | Pages 79-92**

1. Why does poetry frighten Consuelo? What does she prefer? Which do you prefer? (p. 80)
2. What is the *situación muy seria* at home? (p. 80-81)
3. What becomes Mili's new obsession? How do her parents deal with her increasingly odd behavior? (p. 81-82)
4. What information about Papi does Consuelo learn through Patricio? What does this make her question? (p. 83)
5. What does Mami mean when she says "Not enough noise" while they're visiting the rain forest? How does the exchange between Mami and Papi continue to demonstrate their differing opinions on the American way and the Puerto Rican way? (p. 86)
6. In what way does Mamá Isadora continue to guide the female generations of her family? Is there anyone in your family like this? (p. 87)
7. What happens with Mili and the hen? What about this is so disturbing to everyone? What does Abuelo reveal about the history of his own family? (p. 90-92)

**CONSOLAR: To Console, to Comfort | Pages 93-99**

1. What "intense involvement" outside the family does Consuelo begin to develop as her home life becomes more difficult? (p. 94)
2. What did Patricio do that has angered his father? In his letters, Consuelo can tell that he's changing. How is he different? (p. 95-96)
3. What does Consuelo realize as she walks home with Wilhelm? (p. 97-99)

**LA FAMILA: A Crown of Thorns and Roses | Pages 100-115**

1. How is life on the island changing? (p. 100-102)
2. What does Mami's family believe is wrong with Mili? What advice do they offer? (p. 102-104)
3. What is Papi's solution for Mili's issues? (p. 105)
4. What does Mami ask Consuelo to do? (p. 105-106)

5. How does Consuelo's fifteenth birthday begin? Do you the morning foreshadows what the rest of the day will bring? Do you think there will be a celebration for Consuelo? (p. 108-109)
6. How does Consuelo decide to celebrate her birthday, even if her family doesn't acknowledge it? (p. 110-111)
7. What does Consuelo decide to do with Wilhelm? How does she feel afterward? Was it what she expected? (p. 112-113)
8. What does Consuelo find upon returning home? (p. 113-115)

**AGUACERO: Heavy rain; a Downpour | Pages 116-124**

1. What was decided as a result of the school nurse's and the psychiatrist's visit with Mili? (p. 120)
2. What advice does Doña Sereno give? (p. 121-122)
3. What have Mami and Papi decided will be best for Mili? How does Consuelo respond to this news? (p. 121-122)
4. How does Wilhelm treat Consuelo when she sees him after school the next day? (p.122-123)
5. What do you think Miss Vélez was trying to communicate to Consuelo? (p. 124)

**SEÑORITA | Pages 125-132**

1. Why does Patricio's letter upset Consuelo so much? (p. 125-126)
2. How is the family preparing for the upcoming move? (p. 128)
3. What transpires between Miguel and Consuelo? How does Consuelo decide she will not be like her mother? (p. 130-132)

**Sticks, Stones and BOMBAS | Pages 133-150**

1. What do the neighbors do each time María Sereno walks down the street to get a snow-cone? (133-135)
2. Does anyone offer to take Doña Sereno to the hospital to visit her son? What does this say about the neighbors? (p. 135-136)
3. What sort of hierarchy separates the students at Consuelo's school? What is the role of the teachers in this? (p. 136-138)
4. How does Consuelo's hate begin to change her? How does she decide to deal with her situation at school? Do you think this was the best approach? Why or why not? (p. 138-139)
5. How does Mami deal with the upcoming move? What is her new approach for finding a cure for Mili? (p. 139-143)
6. Where does Mami take Consuelo when she says they're going to the beauty shop? Why was this a good experience for Consuelo? Why do you think that María Sereno gives her a medal for courage in the field of action? (p. 147-149)

**The AVE MARÍA and Other Flightless Birds | Pages 151-168**

1. How have Patricio's letters continued to change? Make a prediction: Do you think he will include Consuelo in his life once she arrives in the U.S.? (p. 151-152)
2. What message about life does Consuelo get from both her mother and the poetry she's reading? (p. 154-155)
3. What does Consuelo do to reach closure with Wilhelm? What does she learn? Does gossip have a reverse gear? (p. 156-159)

**Reflective  
Writing  
Questions**

4. How does Lucila treat Consuelo when she finds her at her home in La Perla? (p. 165-167)
5. What does Consuelo learn from her visit to La Perla? (p. 168)

**And Some Songs of EL AMOR | Pages 169-181**

1. How does Consuelo's family treat her, Mami, and Papi as they prepare to leave for the U.S.? (p. 169-172)
2. What does Mili manage to communicate in her drawings that is disturbing to Mami? (p. 169-170)
3. What do you think Patricio means when he writes, "You may leave the island, niña, but it will never leave you"? (p. 174)
4. What happens on the beach? (p. 178-180)
5. What conclusions does Consuelo come to about life, *el destino*, and who she is based on losing Mili? (p. 180-181)

**Epilogue: ADIÓS, BORINQUÉN | Pages 182-185**

1. Why must Consuelo continue to act as if she is an adult even after Mili's death? In what ways does she fulfill this role? (p. 182-183)
2. What is Mami's family's approach to helping her heal? (p. 183-184)
3. How does Consuelo decide to survive *la tragedia*? (p. 184-185)

1. Compare and Contrast Papi and Mami in terms of the ways in which they are 'pro-America' or 'pro-Island.'
2. What does it mean to be a *gente decente*? How does this become a way in which children are pressured into acting or behaving in a certain way?
3. Would you refer to Consuelo as a feminist? Why or why not?
4. In what ways does Consuelo's extended family's inability to really see, accept, and embrace difference cost them?
5. How would you characterize the way in which the family interacted with Patricio? Was it loving and healthy? How else could they have approached the situation with Patricio and his struggles to fit in to Puerto Rican society?
6. How does the term *el fulanolla fulana* change for Consuelo over the course of the novel? Initially, Consuelo thinks of it in terms of what she overhears in family conversations: an outsider whose name must not be said. It's an insult, something negative. How does this change by the end of the novel?
7. How does Consuelo neither embrace the 'pro-American' beliefs of her father or the 'pro-Island' beliefs of her mother? What beliefs does she embrace? In what ways is it a hybrid of both her parents' beliefs and at the same time different?
8. The U.S. plays a significant role in Consuelo's life long before she moves there. In what ways does 'America' influence Consuelo?

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## **ABOUT US & THIS GUIDE**

The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teaching across grade levels and subject areas so educators can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

Written by staff at the LAI, **Vamos a Leer Educator's Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the Vamos a Leer book group. For more on Vamos a Leer, visit our blog at [bit.ly/vamosaleer](http://bit.ly/vamosaleer). This guide was prepared by Katrina Dillon, LAI Project Assistant and Lorraine Archibald, LAI Graduate Assistant.

To complement this guide, the LAI oversees the **Vamos a Leer blog**, which provides a space for exploring how to use literature to teach about Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. In addition to promoting discussion, the blog shares relevant resources and curriculum materials. Visit the blog at the following address: <http://bit.ly/vamosaleer>.