

Background for the Teacher

Student Name _____ Date _____

The Dominican Republic

The island of Hispaniola lies between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean; the Dominican Republic lies to the east of its island neighbor, French-speaking Haiti. The Dominican capital, Santo Domingo, is on the Caribbean coast. The overall climate is tropical, although weather varies because of three mountain ranges that divide the country. Since colonial times, the Dominican Republic has been a Spanish-speaking, Roman Catholic country. The primary crops produced for export are sugar, coffee, cacao, and tobacco. Manufacturing and mining are important as well as the tourist industry and contributes to the economy.

The history of the Dominican people has been marked by many turbulent eras and changes of government. None was more brutal than that of Rafael Trujillo.



Who was Rafael Trujillo?

Although born in 1891 to middle-class parents, Trujillo had 10 siblings and only a rudimentary education. At 16, he joined a gang and engaged in a series of petty crimes, resulting in the loss of his day job as a telegraph operator. When he married his first wife and settled down, he quickly became restless. Offered a job as a policeman in the Constabulary Guard by the U.S. Marines then occupying the country, he jumped at the chance and rose quickly through the ranks; by 1927 he was commander-in-chief of the army.

In 1930, during a period of unrest, Trujillo announced his candidacy for president. He built a secret police force and had his opponents' supporters murdered and tortured. He won the election and then, in his first term, a hurricane devastating the island gave him a chance to declare martial law. He assumed control of all major institutions in the country, granted himself and his family monopolies of profitable industries, seized bank accounts, and built statues in honor of himself. Santo Domingo was re-named Ciudad Trujillo (Trujillo City).

For thirty years, Trujillo ruled the country in a brutal dictatorship. There were some improvements in the life of the Dominican people, but the spoils of his rule went primarily to his family and supporters. In 1937, he ordered the expulsion of Haitian workers from the Dominican Republic; his army murdered tens of thousands of unarmed Haitians, men, women, and children, allegedly identifying them by their inability to trill the “r” in the word *perejil* (parsley)—hence the name *Perejil* Massacre. Pressured by Franklin D. Roosevelt to pay reparations, Trujillo paid a modest amount, most of which ended up in the coffers of the corrupt Haitian president.

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America, however, tolerated Trujillo for many years, in large part because he seemed one bulwark against Communism in Latin America. However, eventually U.S. support waned and the CIA, it is said, provided the weapons used by those who finally succeeded in assassinating him.

Why did Trujillo order the deaths of the Mirabal sisters?

The Mirabal sisters—Patria, Dedé, Minerva, and Maria Teresa—were born in Salcedo in the northern part of the Dominican Republic. They came from a well-off family, which tried to ignore the corruption and brutality of the Trujillo regime as much as possible. Unlike most women of that time and place, they were well-educated. One by one, each of the girls except Dedé, the lone survivor, was drawn into the movement to overthrow Trujillo. Minerva and the much younger Maria Teresa were married to men that were part of the movement, and Patria’s son was also involved; all were eventually arrested. The women were eventually released.

Known by their code name *mariposas* (Spanish: butterflies), they became a threat to Trujillo because of the popular affection for them. He decided that he could eliminate the problem by having them killed, as he had done to so many other political opponents. One day (November 25, 1960) when they were returning from visiting their husbands in prison, they were ambushed. They and their driver were beaten to death, their bodies placed back in their Jeep, and the car thrown over a steep hillside. Although the assassination was supposed to look like an accident because of bad weather, the Dominican people knew that Trujillo was behind their deaths and his popularity declined further. Six months later he was dead, himself the victim of an assassination.

Only the second sister, the timid Dedé who had declined to become part of the revolutionary movement, survived. She has dedicated her long life to preserving the memories of her sisters. She lives in their family home in Salcedo and maintains it as a museum, preserving their photos and memorabilia. In the novel, Dedé is visited by an anonymous woman writer; in fact, Julia Alvarez traveled to the Dominican Republic to research the novel and spent time speaking with Dedé herself.

Today the Mirabal sisters are symbols of resistance, particularly resistance to violence against women. In 1999, the United Nations, following the lead of many Latin American nations, chose November 25, the date of the Mirabal sisters’ assassination, as its annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Why did Julia Alvarez write the Mirabal sisters’ story?

Julia Alvarez (pronounced “HOO-li-ah AL-va-rez”) was well aware of the nature of Trujillo’s dictatorship because her family, like that of the Mirabals, became part of the opposition to him. Her parents had immigrated to New York City, where she was born in 1950. When she was three months old, they returned to the Dominican Republic and her father eventually became involved in the resistance movement against Trujillo. Thus, she spent the first ten years of her life in the Dominican Republic surrounded by a network of extended family members. The Dominican Republic was a police state, and she recalled in an interview having a picture of Trujillo hung with a picture of Jesus.¹

In 1960, the family fled back to the U.S. after a failed coup against Trujillo in which her father had been involved, just four months before the Mirabal sisters were assassinated. Alvarez had to learn English and she was frequently taunted at school as a “spic.” She turned to reading as an escape and became enraptured with storytelling. At the age of fifteen, she became a writer: first a poet; then a nonfiction writer; then a teacher of creative writing; and, at the age of 41, a novelist when *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, based on her own experience as an immigrant, was published.

¹ <http://www.nea.gov/av/avCMS/Alvarez-podcast-transcript.html>

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Alvarez was particularly struck when she learned that there were four Mirabal sisters—the same as in her own family—and she realized that but for circumstances, her family’s fate might have been similar. In fact, her uncle was arrested and her aunt and cousins were put under house arrest by Trujillo after her own immediate family left. After Alvarez’s first novel finally broke into print, she determined to tell their story.

She chose to write it as fiction rather than a strict nonfiction biography, explaining that she had heard many different versions and interpretations of the stories in doing her research. She “started to realize that history itself is the story we tell ourselves about what really happened.... The way we live history is through personality through ourselves and our lens.”² Her choice brought the story of the Mirabal sisters to a much wider audience.

² <http://www.nea.gov/av/avCMS/Alvarez-podcast-transcript.html>