

TEACHING THROUGH CULTURE

Strategies for reading and responding to young adult literature

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Chapter 7

...y no se lo tragó la tierra/ And the Earth Did Not Devour Him: The Voices of the People

Story Summary

The diverse narrative structure of Rivera's classic work gives the reader a unique glimpse into the art and craft of the oral storyteller who carries the different voices of the people in memory and relates their histories in order to preserve their culture. Using the stylistic element of different points of view, the author tells his stories as an omniscient third-person narrator, in the child's voice of a first-person narrator, through dialogue between the many voices of the Chicano collective, and through dramatic monologues that reflect innermost thoughts. Using personal experiences, observations of others' experiences, and fragments of conversations about daily life in the fields, in the home, and at school, the boy narrator attempts to reconstruct his own memory of a figurative year that was lost to him (p. 7/83).

In the previous chapter on *Spirits of the High Mesa*, we discussed a number of ways that authors develop characters in a story. In *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him*, characterization is taken to its highest level. The stories are presented to the reader through short vignettes and longer episodes that incorporate descriptive narrative, dialogue, and dramatic monologue. Through these three forms, Rivera presents a holistic picture of the culture of the migrant farm worker. The book

opens with descriptive narrative, related by the third-person narrator. In this introduction, the reader learns of the narrator's desire to reconstruct a year of his life—perhaps his whole history and identity—that was lost in his memory. This opening narrative serves to frame the sketches that follow and seem to be a metaphor for the art and craft of the storyteller whose calling is to reconstruct and keep the memory of a collective cultural consciousness. The same structure of descriptive narrative is found throughout the book. For example, in the episode in which the character is denied service at the barbershop and access to the movie theatre, we discover, along with the subject of the sketch, the racism and discrimination against the young boy who represents the collective farm worker identity. There are also family-related memories, such as the short sketch of a grandfather and his youthful and impatient grandson, as well as the story of a beautiful wedding day. There are memories of school, such as the one about the child's sacrifice of a button for a school poster. Through the voice of this third-person narrator, the reader also experiences the dramatic irony and skepticism that underscores the various stories. We hear stories lived in the familiarity of family and those shared collectively with the community of farm workers. We also hear those about a life lived in the often alien and harsh environments of school and society.

Descriptive narrative is also used to introduce the dramatic structure of dialogue that is played out in social situations using the language associated with the actors in a specific social context. In this blending of structures, narrative is woven in and out of the dialogue, mixing the voice of the third-person narrator with the voices of the unidentified people who speak to one another. For example, in "Los niños no se aguantaron"/"The children couldn't wait," the stage is set for the tragic event of the shooting of a child who stops working to get a drink of water. We learn from this introductory narrative that when the heat had set in early, the bucket of drinking water the boss had brought into the fields was not enough to relieve everyone's thirst, especially the children.

When the children begin to go to the water tank at the edge of the field, the boss gets angry because the loss of time picking means he must pay more since it is an hourly wage. We then hear the voices of the field worker and his child and whether they should risk going for a drink at the tank. This dialogue is followed by a narrative passage describing the shooting incident. The episode ends with a dialogue between the farm workers discussing the demise of the boss, who reaps the harvest of his own injustice, ending up in poverty and a state of drunken, guilt-ridden madness, driven to suicide. However, the underlying question of justice not being satisfied according to the law (isn't murder punishable by death?) seems to come through the stated question, "But he didn't kill himself, did he?" In other words, in the end, the crime of murder was neither acknowledged nor punished by the recognized laws of society.

There are other similar episodes related through dialogue with an intermingling of third-person narrative. One of the longer episodes in particular, "La noche que se apagaron las luces"/"The night of the blackout," tells of a love triangle that reaches a violent climax at a dance, a well-known and often repeated theme in oral as well as written Mexican-American and Chicano literature (Kanellos, 1986). In this written version of this traditional tragic tale, the story of Ramon and Juanita is related through the narrator as well as through dialogue between the ill-fated lovers and those who know them.

Dialogue is also used in the shorter sketches and is similar both in content and language to the *actos* in Chicano theatre. In these short, dramatic acts, archetypal characters present typical scenes from Chicano life filled with tragedy, humor, and social satire (Kanellos, 1986). The plight of the itinerant worker who is at the mercy of often unscrupulous bosses is humorously and yet satirically portrayed in the scene in which two *compadres* are discussing the location and even existence of a place called Utah.

Sometimes the narrative form shifts to first person, as in "La mano en la bolsa"/"Hand in his pocket." In this episode, the first-

person narrator describes his experience living with Don Laito and Doña Bone. Inserted in the narrative are bits of dialogue spoken by these two characters. First-person narrative is also used with longer dialogic sections as in "El retrato"/"The Portrait" that tells the story of a fraudulent portrait salesman.

Finally, some of the stories also incorporate the use of dramatic monologue or an inner dialogue of thought. For example, in "Es que duele"/"It's that it hurts," the narrator is speaking through a monologue that exposes his inner thoughts about the humiliation he must go through at school and the shame he feels when he fears he has been expelled from school. The irony of the story unfolds as the child expresses his confusion about whether he has actually been expelled: "But, maybe they didn't expel me, *sure they did*, maybe not, *sure they did*" (p. 95). This confusion is just one very real example of the difficulties that children must face when the language of school is not their first language. Other characters also reveal their innermost thoughts through these dramatic monologues. For example, in "Un rezo"/"The prayer," a mother pours out her heart and soul for her son's safe return from the Korean War. The use of monologue is also mixed with the other forms of dialogue and descriptive narrative. For example, in "La noche buena"/"The night before Christmas," Doña María determines to venture out into the city to buy her children toys for Christmas. Her dramatic monologue expresses her anxiety about the journey into a hostile environment where store clerks view her suspiciously. The use of dialogue at the end of the piece reveals the underlying reason for her anxiety—a prejudice reflecting a predetermined stereotypical notion of migrant worker as thief.

Thus, it is in *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, that author-storyteller Rivera reconstructs the memory of the collective migrant worker experience. His characterizations shift from a third-person to a first-person narrator who tells the stories about the events and archetypal characters with a keen observer's eye, to the dialogues (of overheard conversations) between family members and

between farm workers, to the monologues that reveal the character's innermost thoughts. Rivera accomplishes this reconstruction of a collective memory through his use of these written structural forms that are based on oral language, which is historically the medium of storyteller.

Building Background Before You Read

When was the last time you visited the supermarket or corner store to buy some fruit and vegetables? When you were choosing a head of lettuce or squeezing the peaches or thumping the melon, did you ever think about how all of this produce ended up at the market, ready for you to buy when you wanted it? The complex cycle of agricultural production is essentially invisible to the average consumer, yet, at the heart of this cycle, is the little known, but indispensable, migrant farm worker. While the migrant population is somewhat diverse, it is estimated that the majority of workers are mostly Hispanics/Latinos—Mexican Americans, Mexican Nationals, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and citizens of Central and South America. Many of these workers live apart from their families, in work camps for single men. However, many of these workers, particularly those who follow the Midwestern picking routes, travel with their families to these sites. This labor force has been working in the fields for many years and generations. In the novel, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him*, Tomás Rivera tells the story of the people who are part of this community.

The Migrant Farm Worker

The story of the Mexican-American migrant farm worker is part of a complex set of economic and ecological forces that began in the mid-nineteenth century, soon after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the U.S. Civil War. The end of legalized slavery in the United States brought about a shortage in farm labor because many former slaves were no longer working the fields. This created a demand for low-cost farm workers. In the Southwest, many Mexican Americans, who had become citizens of

the United States after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico, filled these low-wage jobs, which also meant extremely poor working and living conditions. Beginning in the early twentieth century, many Mexican nationals were recruited to meet the demand for farm labor in the rapidly growing Southwest. The Immigration Act of 1924 put a moratorium on immigrant groups other than Mexican workers. Border stations were set up to admit these immigrants, and a head tax was assessed for each person who legally entered the United States from Mexico on a permanent visa. There were no quotas for this wave of Mexican immigration. In addition to the legal immigrants, many Mexican nationals entered the United States illegally to avoid the border immigration fees, which were costly. Shortly after World War I, an economic recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops. This brought about farmers' attempts to increase their productivity in order to gain back the money lost. This push to produce more crops also meant cultivation of more land using more mechanized farm equipment, all of which required more money, causing many farmers to overextend their budgets. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the already overextended farmers lost their land, and the tenant farmers working for the larger landowners found themselves unable to find work.

In addition to this economic disaster, there were also disastrous environmental consequences that came with the increased cultivation of land, which had replaced the natural grasslands of the southern Great Plains of the United States. As a result, the rich soil lost its ability to retain water that the grasslands had conserved, the nutrients slowly washed away, and the land began to erode. When a seventeen-year drought began in 1931, followed by the beginning of the severe dust storms, resulting from the eroding land, many of the farms literally dried up and blew away. The area became known as the Dust Bowl. The onslaught of the Great Depression, coupled with drought and the accompanying dust storms, forced thousands of farmers and their families to join the stream of migrant farm work.

The Bracero Program

The World War II era was a time of labor shortage in the United States. In August of 1942, the United States and Mexico entered into an agreement, creating the Bracero Program. This program contributed significantly to the growth of the agricultural economy for the United States. More than three million Mexican farm laborers came to work the fields as part of this program. The braceros cultivated the agricultural fields of our country into the most productive in the world. Experienced farm workers, the braceros came from the principal agricultural regions of Mexico. Convinced they would earn a great deal of money, the braceros left their homes and families to work the fields on the other side of the border. However, the reality for the bracero meant low wages and a poverty-level existence. The braceros also suffered from prejudicial treatment, harassment, and oppression from racist extremist groups and even government authorities. By the 1960s, however, an excess of agricultural workers, both legal and illegal, and new farming technology supplanted the practicality and need for the Bracero Program. Thus, the Bracero Program, which has been described as a system of legalized slavery, officially ended in 1964. However, braceros continue to cross the borders into the Southwestern United States to work in the fields and on ranches. They also continue to be one of the most exploited and oppressed labor groups in the United States.

César Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union

The most influential person in the history of the Mexican-American farm worker movement was César Chávez. During the 1960s and 1970s, Chávez became a household name as he actively promoted and worked for *La Causa*, the cause of the migrant worker. Born near Yuma, Arizona, in 1927, Chávez learned early about injustice. Losing their land through a broken agreement and foreclosure as a result of dishonest dealings, the Chávez family moved to California. César Chávez's experience with school

was not a pleasant one. The teachers were mostly Anglo and the students could only speak English at school, a rule that was enforced by corporal punishment in the form of a rap on the knuckles with a ruler. In school, Chávez had to endure racist remarks and experience the signs of institutional racism that read *For Whites Only*. Despite this oppressive environment, similar to that described in Rivera's novel, Chávez graduated from eighth grade in 1942 and then went to work in the fields. In 1944 he joined the navy and served for two years. After he returned to San Jose, he met Fred Ross, a community organizer. Working for Ross's organization, the Community Service Organization (CSO), Chávez's job was to get people registered to vote. From then on, he became a committed grass-roots activist.

While working with the CSO, Chávez met Dolores Huerta, who also worked for the CSO. During this time, they came to the conclusion that farm workers needed to be organized into unions. In 1962, Chávez and Dolores Huerta founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFW), which later became the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). Through the NFW and later the UFW, Chávez and Huerta lobbied the government for economic aid to unemployed and underemployed farm workers, and organized nonviolent marches, boycotts, pickets, and strikes to improve conditions and pay for them. One of the most famous of such marches was the 340-mile trek from Delano to Sacramento, California, in 1966. This march brought attention to the Delano grape strike so that people would become aware of the need for better pay and safer working conditions for those who worked in the fields.

Chávez, who was willing to sacrifice his own life to forward *La Causa*, fasted in nonviolent protest on a number of occasions. In 1968, he fasted for 25 days, drinking only water. He fasted again in 1972 for 24 days. In 1988, his fast lasted for 36 days. Through fasting, Chávez wanted to demonstrate his belief that only through nonviolent sacrifice and hard work could the union survive and enact positive change. Fasting for Chávez was a personal act of purification and cleansing as well as for those who worked

with him in the farm worker movement; it was also an act to place moral pressure on those who were in positions of authority to enact social and labor-relations changes. Chávez died in 1993, near Yuma, Arizona; his greatly weakened heart finally gave out from all of the fasting. On August 8, 1994, Helen Chávez, César's widow, accepted the Medal of Freedom for her late husband, and it was presented by President Bill Clinton.

There are numerous books about the life and work of César Chávez. The UFW website also is a good resource for his speeches. Two notable recent titles about Chávez are *The Fight in the Fields: César Chávez and the Farm Workers Movement* and *The Rhetorical Career of César Chávez*.

Tomás Rivera

Tomás Rivera was born in Crystal City, Texas, in 1935. A child of migrant farm workers, Rivera and his family followed the migrant stream from Texas to various other states where they worked in the fields, often under oppressive and harsh working and living conditions. Rivera was an avid reader and began writing at an early age. Through his determination and overcoming great obstacles, he graduated from high school and earned a bachelor's degree from college, the first of his family to do so. A teacher, he taught for many years in Texas public schools in San Antonio, Crystal City, and League City. After receiving his doctorate in Romance Languages and Literature from the University of Oklahoma in 1971, Rivera became a professor of Spanish at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and in 1973, he was appointed an associate dean and vice-president of the university in 1976. In 1978, Rivera left San Antonio to become executive vice-president of the University of Texas at El Paso. Then in 1979, Tomás Rivera became the first Mexican-American chancellor in the United States, at the University of California, Riverside. In addition to his own career in teaching and writing, Rivera was dedicated to helping Mexican Americans gain access to higher education as well as opening doors to the writing and publishing world.

Rivera wrote various literary works, including poetry, but probably his most famous work is the novel, ...*y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him*, which was published in 1970. For this work, Rivera received the Quinto Sol Literary Award in 1971. The novel was originally written in Spanish and later translated into English. The original Spanish text is written in the colloquial speech of the working-class migrant worker and, as such, is highly expressive of an orality that is at the root of the storytelling tradition. For the reader of Spanish, this oral rhythm is evident. For the English-only reader, the oral rhythm is an approximation. For this reason, if possible, it would be good to read the Spanish text aloud (followed by the English translation), so that English-only speakers and readers can hear and appreciate the oral rhythm of the work.

...*y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him* is a landmark in Mexican-American literature, both a documentary and a literary work of art. As an author, Rivera said he was influenced by his readings of James Joyce, William Faulkner, and the great Latin American novelists. Rivera also credited Mexican American anthropologist and folklorist Americo Paredes as being a great influence. Many scholars and friends believe this work to be autobiographical, documenting his experiences and the overheard conversations from the community of migrant workers of which he was a part. Through the different voices making up the social and historical context of the farm worker in the late 1940s and 1950s in Texas, Rivera presents a holistic portrait of the lifestyle, culture, and worldview of the Mexican-American migrant worker. For a more in-depth study of Rivera and his work, Julián Olivares, *International Studies in Honor of Tomás Rivera*, is an excellent resource. The various chapters offer recollections and essays about the novel as well as different aspects of his work in relation to other Chicano literature.

Reading and Responding to the Story

In the novel *y no se lo tragó la tierra/...And the earth did not devour him*, Rivera uses the written forms of dialogue and monologue as well as descriptive narrative. Through these forms, the

reader is given concrete examples of the stylistic element of *point of view*. The dialogues that are spoken in the voices of the people of the fields, the monologues that represent the interior language of a person's thought, and the narrative of an omniscient third-person or first-person observer share a sense of orality that is at the root of the Hispanic storytelling tradition. Through these voices, the reader learns about the migrant worker experience and culture. Within these stories we hear a collective voice that often speaks with irony that, through its understated subtlety, illuminates the message of discrimination and social injustice. Because of the richness of style and content, the activities described in this chapter focus on helping students develop their understanding of the literary elements used in the novel, as well as responding to the content of the text.

Examining the Forms

The opening episode of the novel is a descriptive narrative related through a third-person narrator. The narrator seems to know about the person being described in terms of observable events as well as interior motives and thoughts. The following episode is also told in third person. As you progress through the novel, the reader encounters other forms—first-person descriptive narrative, dialogue, and monologue—in various combinations. As students read the novel, they can identify the different forms and shifts of point of view within a given episode. The example below illustrates one kind of graphic organizer that can be used to identify the different narrative forms and points of view found in the novel. See Figure 7-1.

Isn't It Ironic?

A few years ago, a teacher and I were having a conversation about how hard it is for students to identify the use of irony in literary works, not to mention asking them to interpret it. At that time, there was a popular tune by Alanis Morissette that consisted of a set of vignettes followed by the question "Isn't it ironic?"

Episode Title or First Line	1 st person Narrative	3 rd person Narrative	Dialogue	Monologue
"Lo que nunca supo"/"What his mother never knew" (9/85)		X		
"Los niños no se aguantaron"/"The children couldn't wait" (10/86)		X	X	
"Un rezo"/"A prayer" (14/90)				X
"Es que duele"/"It's that it hurts" (16/92)			X	X
"El retrato"/"The portrait" (60/136)	X		X	

Figure 7-1. Forms and Points of View

Thinking of using a piece of popular culture to teach irony to her English class, she designed a lesson using the song as an example. The teacher said that while her students really liked and related to the tune, they still didn't get the concept of irony or the meaning intended by the songwriter.

So, why is irony such a difficult concept to grasp for many students? One reason may be related to a similar difficulty in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension that occurs when trying to move from a surface level of understanding to a deeper meaning or interpretation. Since *irony* is based on an incongruity or a discrepancy between what is stated and what is really meant, the connection between surface and deep meaning seems to fit. If we can manage to help students understand irony, we may be able to connect this concept to their understanding of surface and deep meaning of words and text.

The word *irony* comes from the Greek *eiron*, a comic character in Greek drama who typically spoke in seemingly simple words that hid deep and complex meanings. There are three kinds of irony used in literary works:

- *Dramatic irony* occurs when an audience/reader perceives something that a character does not know, giving the audi-

ence a sense of being in on something that the character is unaware of. It may also occur between characters, when one or more individual characters know something another character does not know.

- *Verbal irony* occurs when a character says one thing, but really means something else.
- *Situational irony* occurs when there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and the actual results of the situation.

In this chapter, we will focus on verbal and situational irony. A good example of the use of irony in the novel can be found in *Los quemaditos/Little burnt victims*. In this tragic story of children's death in a house fire in which the only things left on the victims are the boxing gloves that their father had given them, the dialogue at the end of the story points to this ironic paradox. When the question is raised, "But I wonder why the gloves didn't burn," the answer is that, ". . . these people know how to make things so well that not even fire will touch them" (pp. 121–122). The verbal irony, is that "these people" exercise great care in making indestructible the materialistic things they consider valuable, but have little invested in protecting a "commodity" such as a migrant worker child (Kanellos, 1986). The situational irony is that the gloves would be untouched by the fire.

To develop students' understanding of irony, you might begin with situational irony because evidence of it can be identified in more concrete terms. In other words, we can better see the relationship between our expectations about how something might turn out, and the sometimes very different results. Ask students to brainstorm some situations taken from their personal experiences in which they were expecting one thing to happen, but something totally unexpected happened instead. I like to use large pieces of craft paper tacked up all around the room—a kind of graffiti wall. Make two columns on each sheet and label them *Expectations* (How they thought it would turn out) and *Happening* (How it actually turned out). After the students have spent time

at the graffiti wall, discuss students' written responses and if and how they are examples of situational irony. Then, as students read the novel, ask them to try to find examples of situational irony in the text.

The move to verbal irony can be made through its relationship to sarcasm. Students are well familiar with sarcasm. How many times have you heard sarcastic statements like "Really nice hairdo," or "Good-looking shoes," when the real meaning was just the opposite. Ask students to think about statements in which they knew that the meaning was very different from what was said. Then, as you read the story of *Los quemaditos/Little burnt victims*, discuss the dialogue in which irony is used. Ask students to write a journal entry that gives their interpretation of the statement about the boxing gloves being the only things that survived the fire and why that might be considered irony.

Teatro Chicano

The use of dialogue in the novel is highly dramatic in recreating events in an authentic way, such that the reader is actually experiencing the situations along with the characters engaged in conversation. Many of the episodes in the novel are almost entirely presented in dialogue. These dialogues are very similar to Chicano theatre skits, which have a long-standing tradition in Mexican folkdrama (Kanellos, 1986). According to Kanellos (1986), the most recent manifestation of this tradition is *teatro chicano* (Chicano theatre). In this traveling theatre, improvisational skits or *actos* present scenes from the barrio or the fields through authentic dialogue in Spanish, English, and combinations of both, depending on the situation being presented. In Chapter 5 (*Trino's Choice*), we also talked about El Teatro Campesino, a dramatic improvisational troupe founded as part of the United Farm Workers Union by Luis Valdez, and the important role that it played in the development of contemporary Mexican-American and Chicano literature. Some of the episodes in *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* are very similar in content, language, and format to the

actos of *teatro chicano*.

An authentic way for students to respond to the text is through performance of these dialogues like the *actos* of *teatro chicano*. If there are Spanish speakers in the class, the *actos* can first be performed in Spanish, and then a translation performance can be done using the English text. In actual *teatro chicano* performances, the skit is introduced by one of the troupe members. Since some of the dialogues in the novel have a preceding narrative, this can be read, or students may want to write and present their own introductions. Another production technique that is part of *teatro chicano* is the use of signs that explain the relationship of the characters to one another. For example, characters may wear signs such as *La Mamá/Mother*, *El Patroncito/Boss*, *El Hijo/Son*, and so on. Presentation in this authentic way can reinforce comprehension of the novel and provide an opportunity for responding to the text through creative expression. Using dramatic interpretation as a response to the novel moves the words off the page and into the realm of orality that is at the core of both the theatre and storytelling traditions.

Responding through Interior Monologue

As stated earlier, another narrative form that is used effectively in the novel is *the interior monologue*. In an interior monologue, the actor or character presents a personal reflection, an introspective view, of his or her innermost thoughts. When reading or listening to an interior monologue, the audience gains insight into what the character is really thinking or feeling about the situations of life he or she is experiencing. It is like a little window into the soul of the person who is speaking. Some definitions of interior monologue link the technique to *stream of consciousness* in which the character's flow of thought is revealed in sensory images and free associations. However, many literary theorists consider the technique of interior monologue as more structured in its presentation of rational thoughts, closely related to *soliloquy* and *dramatic monologue*.

To get inside a person's or character's head is a difficult thing, because we cannot, after all, really know everything a person may be thinking, even if he tells us. More importantly, our individual cultural and experiential backgrounds frame our assumptions and interpretations to the extent that it is probably impossible to actually think like someone else. However, considering what others may be thinking or feeling is important in building empathy and twofold understanding: first, that cultural perspectives other than one's own exist; and, second, that while they may be different from one's own perspective, these must be respected and treated with dignity.

After students read the novel, ask them to pick one of the characters in one of the episodes and write an interior monologue for that character. It is important to remember to use language that is in the expressive mode of speaking rather than narrating or telling; it must also convey an introspective and reflective examination of the character's innermost thoughts and motivations. A good brainstorming activity to use for a prewrite is to ask students to create a list of questions that they would like to ask the character. For example, the character of Ramon in *La noche que se apagaron las luces/The night the lights went out*, provokes many questions:

- How did you feel when you saw Juanita dancing with someone else?
- Why did you love someone who did not love you in the same way?
- What were you thinking when you stormed out of the dance hall?
- What made you walk over to the power plant?
- If you had it to do all over again, would you change anything?

Then, by answering these questions as if they were the character, students have ideas to begin a draft of their interior monologues. Once revised and completed, the monologues should be

performed orally. If students are literate in Spanish, they can write and perform their monologues in Spanish with an English translation.

Working with Words

When we think about the term narrative, essentially we think of telling stories about people involved in events that take place in a particular place and time. Descriptive narrative is, therefore, a story, an episode, a vignette that is developed using sensory details designed to bring the reader into the scene as an active participant. These narratives can be written in the point of view of either first or third person. Descriptive narratives can stand alone, be used as an opening paragraph to grab the reader's attention, and can be interwoven with sections of dialogue, all of which we have encountered in Rivera's novel.

The use of sensory details is important to descriptive narrative. The use of carefully chosen descriptors can create an image so real that often we find ourselves in the space and time of the story, hearing the characters speak, feeling the heat or the cold, and experiencing the sights, sounds, smells of the moment. So, how do writers know which words to choose? How do we help our students go about selecting descriptive words that best convey the image without sounding like they swallowed a thesaurus? First, they must really understand the meaning of a word, make it their own. Only then can they have the freedom to knead it and shape it into its expressive form. Therefore, learning new words and acquiring vocabulary requires an understanding of both a word's *denotative* and *connotative* meanings.

Denotation and Connotation

Words have two kinds of meaning that are termed denotation and connotation. When we refer to a word's denotation, we are talking about the literal meaning or its definition. When we look up a word in a dictionary, we are accessing its denotation. There can be several such denotations and each can involve explana-

tions of different parts of speech that may denote different meanings. For example, the word *book* can be a noun, in which case it denotes a printed text, and it can also be a verb—we can *book* a ticket, or police *book* a prisoner. When we teach dictionary skills, then, we are helping students to access a word's denotation. But, there is another meaning that is a suggested meaning beyond the literal meaning. A word's connotation carries with it values and judgments, as well as historical and cultural associations that have been handed down or evolved from one generation to the next. It could also be argued that certain words have more status than others, and attaining a certain vocabulary can be considered a thing of worth (Bourdieu, 1986).

Some words may have the same denotation but have very different connotations. For example, think of the following pairs of words: house/home, unmarried woman/spinster, angry/enraged, cheap/inexpensive, quiz/test. Now think about how you reacted to each of the words in the pair. Did one evoke a more positive image? Many times our reactions to different connotations reflect our personal experiences with the concept that the word represents. For example, the word *wake*, in which the denotative meaning is a gathering of mourners for one who has died, may connote a very sad and disturbing event for many people. However, in my family, a wake was a joyous time in which the family—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, great-aunts, great-uncles, and so on, got together to visit with each other and tell stories and relive old memories. So, for me, the connotation of the word *wake* evokes a positive response.

So what does this mean for descriptive narrative? If a writer or storyteller is trying to create an image in the mind of the audience, he or she needs to know both the denotative and connotative meanings and anticipate how the audience might respond—positively, negatively, or even neutrally. Rivera creates images that are built on the interplay between denotative and connotative meanings of the words he uses to describe the events and characters in the novel's episodes. For example, in *Los niños no se aguantaron/The*

children couldn't wait, the boss wanted to teach the field worker and his child a lesson—not to take time out of work to get a drink from the water tank. The notion of teaching someone a lesson can have a variety of denotative and connotative meanings. When I think of the concept of teaching, the principal denotation for me involves developing students' knowledge through instruction or example. This meaning connotes a reciprocal relationship in which both teacher and student are involved in a collaborative construction of meaning. However, for others, teaching someone a lesson may have another connotation, such as a punishment or one associated with disciplinary measures. For me, the first connotation evokes a positive response. On the other hand, the example associated with punishment stimulates a negative response. In the text example, the idea that using a gun to teach someone a lesson, regardless of whether the intention was to harm or not, is a connotation that evokes a negative response for me as reader of the story. Can you find other examples in the text in which Rivera portrays an image through the interplay of denotative and connotative meanings? To build understanding of denotation and connotation and connect these meanings to students' experiences, have them compile a word bank of meanings associated with the text. Students should begin by selecting a scene or character from the story that has stimulated a significant personal response or connection. Next, record the primary meaning that the particular words or images denote. Then record what that meaning connotes in the text. Finally, compare the textual connotation with the connotation you usually associate with the words or images. For both connotative meanings, use a plus (+) sign, minus (-) sign, or a 0 (zero) to show whether they evoke positive, negative, or neutral feelings. Using the previous example of "teaching a lesson," a graphic representation might look like this. See Figure 7-2.

Developing an understanding of the concepts of denotation and connotation through the use of textual examples and links to one's own personal experience can help students better grasp the connections and interplay between explicit and implicit mean-

Image	Denotation	Textual Connotation	Personal Connotation
Teaching someone a lesson	Instructing or modeling a skill or strategy	Inflicting fear or harm to change someone's behavior (-)	Reciprocal relationship based in collaborative construction of meaning (+)

Figure 7-2. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

ings of words and descriptive phrases, which promotes greater comprehension of text.

Across the Curriculum

Although it is primarily a story of an Anglo family's experience during the Great Depression, the publication of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 first brought the conditions and plight of migrant workers to the forefront for mainstream Americans. However, other sources, such as documentary photography, also provide a different perspective on the stories of the migrant workers, including Mexican and Mexican-American farm workers during the Great Depression.

Documentary Photography

One of the programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program created during the Great Depression was the Farm Security Administration (FSA). You may remember that the Rural Electrification Association (REA) discussed in Chapter 6 (*Spirits of the High Mesa*) was also part of this multifaceted program. The FSA, which grew out of the Resettlement Administration and moved to the Department of Agriculture in 1937, was created to provide assistance to the rural poor and agricultural migrant workers. The FSA included a plan for documentation of the program through photography. A group of about twenty men and women worked under Roy E. Stryker to create a pictorial record of the effects of the Depression on rural farm workers. After more

than sixty years and three generations of their creation, these photographs still remain as striking documents from which Americans can gain a visual understanding of the Great Depression. Perhaps one of the most famous of the photographs is Dorothea Lange's 1936 portrait entitled *Migrant Mother*. Other photographers who participated in this project were Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Wolcott, and Arthur Rothstein.

To begin the study of this era of documentary photography, ask students to gather reproductions of the photographs produced as part of the FSA. These can be found in traditional texts about the Great Depression, and, there are also reproductions on many Internet sites. After viewing these images, ask students to record their initial responses to the individual images. How did the photograph make you feel? Did the photograph remind you of something else?

Now consider the photograph through a more critical "lens." A photograph has often been referred to as a reflection of reality. We have all heard the saying "Cameras don't lie." However, like any other text, a photographic image is an interpretation of reality, a version of what is really there. When photographers take photographs, they focus in on the image they wish to portray, including certain aspects of their subjects, leaving out others. Even after the negative is developed, cropping of the image can further manipulate the "reality." Ask students to respond critically to the photographs as documentary texts. These questions might help start the discussion.

- Why did the photographer choose the particular subject?
- What is the composition of the photograph—the specific subjects, the landscape, and the objects?
- What are some things that could have been added to the image? What could have been left out?
- How does the arrangement of the composition contribute to the overall effect?

Documentary photography is still used to record the social,

economic, and political circumstances that continue to affect migrant farm workers. Students can collect documentary photographic images from over the past decades to the present and compare them for their content and their effect. A chronological presentation of all the photographs should include a discussion of whether there are similarities in the images and what, if any, changes have occurred over the years of documentation. In order to make further connections to the text, ask students to reread the episode *El retrato/The Portrait*. Then, using what they have learned from these photographic images, ask students to write a response to the story.

You Do the Math

What if you had a family of four and had to feed, house, and clothe them on an income of between \$5,000 and \$7,500 per year? It seems an impossible task. Yet, many migrant farm worker families are faced with such a dilemma. In addition, most do not have health insurance to cover the many illnesses that are related to the hazards of the job and living in poverty: parasitic infections, tuberculosis, heat stress, toxic chemical injuries, malnutrition, and dental disease, to name a few. Constructing a budget that includes allocations for housing, food, and clothing can provide students with a concrete example of the reality that many migrant families face. Students can break into inquiry teams to study the average costs of groceries, rent, utilities, transportation, and clothing. A trip to the supermarket as well as to other department stores as comparative shoppers can provide students with good examples of prices for food and clothing. Classified ads can be resources for determining rental costs. Utilities companies and public transportation systems can be contacted for rates. After these are collected, students can then construct a budget for the year, choosing what to purchase and for how much. A good way to calculate spending is to break out the costs per month, beginning with a maximum amount available for each month and then listing the expenses. For example, if a family makes \$7,500 in a

year, the monthly spending cap is \$625. The budget can be represented on a spreadsheet, a chart, or other graphic organizer.

Health Risks and Hazardous Pesticides

Farm workers suffer the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries in the United States, according to the Farm Worker Health Alliance. Cesar Chávez addressed this issue in many of his speeches. The use of pesticides in the fields poses threats of birth defects and cancer in children and adults. Campaigns have been conducted to ban such pesticides. Some have been successful, such as the one that eventually led to the banning of DDT. However, many toxic pesticides remain in use. Students can conduct an inquiry into the types of pesticides used on various crops and the risks attached to each. Using the writing components of a position paper, which were discussed in Chapter 6 (*Spirits of the High Mesa*), students can write a position paper about the use of toxic pesticides in the fields. Students can also become involved with advocacy groups that provide education and seek legislation banning such carcinogens. In addition to the UFW, other private agencies provide ways for citizens to advocate for the protection of farm workers and their families against these harmful pesticides.

Summary

Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him* is a landmark piece of Chicano literature that presents a sensitive, true-to-life portrayal of the Chicano farm worker experience. The book, which is a collection of vignettes and episodes taken from the fields and barrios, can be read on many different levels and from a variety of perspectives. As a documentary work, Rivera presents an insider's view of a community that shares a common history and culture, which is similar to the participant observer conducting and writing about an ethnographic study. On another level, Rivera's word portraits, drawn in descriptive narrative, dialogue, and monologue, are as vivid and alive as the photographs of the documentary photojournalist. And, many of

the short vignettes and longer episodes reflect the format of Chicano theatre, which is a dramatic presentation of social reality (Kanellos, 1986). The text also naturally lends itself to reading and visualizing these moments in Chicano history and culture through a criticalist lens (Kincheloe, McLaren, 1994; Carspecken, 1996), from which social inequalities and injustices are revealed, and action is taken to change the status quo. Finally, this classic work is often approached and read as a high form of literature. Through the forms of descriptive narrative, dialogue, and monologue, the narrative point of view shifts back and forth, moving the reader to different vantage points that allow glimpses into the lives of the Chicano people whose voices are heard through the text. Like poetry, the *voices* should be read aloud. If possible, it should be read in the Spanish version, which reflects the rich orality and vocabulary of Chicano speech. In doing so, the reader/listener can experience the history, culture, and collective identity, which are held in memory and told in the voices of the Chicano farm workers who worked the fields of Midwest United States and lived in the barrios of Texas.