

Teachers' Guide for *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*

Juan

My mind is a brush made of feathers
painting pictures of words
I remember
all that I see
every syllable
each word a twin of itself
telling two stories
at the same time
one of sorrow
the other hope

(excerpt from *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*, p. 3)

About the Book

Margarita Engle's stirring, free verse biography of nineteenth-century Cuban slave, Juan Francisco Manzano, reveals the strength of the human spirit and the will to survive despite incredible challenges and sufferings. Manzano possessed the ability to memorize and recite poetic verses which made him the pet of his mother's owner Doña Beatriz who had him entertain and perform for her guests. Manzano secretly learned to read and write and later crafted his own poetry about courage and the beauty around him. At the age of six, Manzano's mother was granted her freedom with the promise that Juan would gain his as well upon the death of Doña Beatriz. But when she died, his ownership is transferred to La Marquesa de Prado Ameno, a cruel, mentally unstable woman who subjected him to brutal beatings and periodic confinement.

Engle presents a multi-voice format that draws readers into the story while adding dimension that could not have been achieved through a first-person narrative. Sean Qualls' breathtaking black-and-white illustrations are stark and compelling in their depiction of Manzano's suffering and strength.

Margarita Engle on the Writing of *The Poet Slave of Cuba*

I wrote *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* with hope that Manzano's courage and perservance would serve as an inspiration for young people. As a slave during the 1800s, Manzano craved the chance to learn to read and write. His life demonstrates

the profound, universal longing for self-expression. He became a renowned poet, even while he was still a slave. His poems and autobiographical notes were smuggled to England by British abolitionists. They were translated and published, and had a powerful effect on public opinion regarding slavery, partly because they were the only known slave narrative written by a Cuban slave while he was still held in bondage, and partly because they were so powerful and so moving.

After reading Manzano's notes about his childhood, I felt haunted by an image he described, of a time when he used his fingernail to slice words into the leaves of a plant in the garden, because he was not supposed to be writing and he had to practice in secret. For ten years, I struggled to write about Manzano in prose but it never worked. Until I switched to free verse, the story of this brave poet's childhood simply did not spring to life. Once the story was told in verse, I was able to focus on Manzano's spirit of wonder, and his hopeful emotions. In his autobiographical notes, he mentioned that he hoped to write a novel about his life, but he never had the chance, so I felt like I was doing it for him, with his spirit watching, cheering me on.

I believe the story worked in verse rather than prose primarily because poetry is a suitable vessel for expressing the inner life, a secret life, a life of hidden hopes. I feel that Manzano's paired longings for freedom from bondage, and freedom of expression, are just as relevant today as during Cuba's tragic centuries of colonialism and slavery. All people, regardless of time or place, know what it feels like to yearn for a way to communicate the inexpressible. Words are as close as we can come.

(Presentation by Margarita Engle, November 2008, Madison, WI)

<http://wioc.wisc.edu>.

Further information about Margarita Engle is located at:

<http://us.macmillan.com/author/margaritaengle>.

Introducing *The Poet Slave of Cuba* through Reading Performance

Engle's poetic verse begs to be read aloud in a skillful and dramatic manner. The voices of the various characters in this compelling biography are distinct and striking. Recruit students to rehearse the first few verses of Juan, his mother María del Pilar, and mistress Doña Beatriz as a way to introduce the book to others. Listeners will gain initial interpretations of the characters based on a reading that is performed with deliberate expression.

Podcasting this reading performance is another way to introduce *The Poet Slave of Cuba* to students. Podcasts by students can also be created for other portions of the book.

Identifying Character Traits

Through sparse, yet concise poetry, Margarita Engle captures the personalities of each character in the story. These distinctive individuals that readers meet in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* are those that were instrumental in Juan Francisco Manzano’s life—in both positive and challenging ways. Brainstorm traits exhibited by people such as demanding, calm, talented, fearless, skillful, arrogant, or hopeful. Then have students select a character and complete a character traits worksheet that involves:

CHARACTER NAME	TRAIT(S) THEY REVEAL	EVIDENCE OF TRAIT THROUGH BEHAVIOR or ACTIONS

Writing Poetry

Bio-Poem

Writing a bio-poem about a character, either real or imagined, allows the reader to delve deeper into the important elements of that individual’s identity. Bio-poems extend beyond aspects of identity that are obvious (such as ethnicity, gender, or age) by illuminating other factors that shape identity such as relationships, abilities, experiences, interests, and aspirations. Bio-poems can demonstrate students’ understanding of literary or historical figures and provide them with a structure for thinking critically about traits, behavior, and motives.

There are various formats for a bio-poem that can be adapted to include items such as memorable quotes, important events, accomplishments, or attitudes and beliefs. For response to *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, the following format is suggested:

BIO-POEM FORMAT

- Line 1: First name: _____
- Line 2: Four traits that describe character: _____, _____, _____, _____
- Line 3: Relative (brother, sister, daughter, etc.) of _____
- Line 4: Lover of _____, _____, _____ (list three things or people)
- Line 5: Who feels _____, _____, _____ (three items)
- Line 6: Who needs _____, _____, _____ (three items)
- Line 7: Who fears _____, _____, _____ (three items)
- Line 8: Who gives _____, _____, _____ (three items)
- Line 9: Who would like to see _____, _____, _____ (three items)
- Line 10: Resident of _____
- Line 11: Last name: _____

Before beginning to write a bio-poem, have students select a character that is intriguing, vibrant, or possibly disturbing. Have students brainstorm ideas and words that they might want to incorporate into their poem. Share with students an example of a bio-poem to assist them in understanding the format.

Facilitating Poetry Discussion Circles

Many teachers are familiar with literature circles and their ability to capitalize on the social nature of learning. Anyone who has participated in a literature discussion understands how their own understanding and connections grow as they share impressions, interpretations, opinions, and questions with others who respond in kind. Literature discussions honor the richness of talk as a way to create meaning and deepen understanding. This literary conversation works equally well in discussing poetry through poetry circles.

Poetry and poetic prose offer layers of interpretation and meaning-making. To assist students in preparing to discuss *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, assign them roles that will facilitate the discussion. These roles may include:

Image creator: Offers visual representation of how the poem affected their senses. This person provides at least two concrete images for the portion of the book they are discussing.

Poet researcher: Conducts biographical research about Juan Francisco Manzano, or José Martí, who played an important role in Cuba's abolition movement, and shares this information with the group.

Critical dialogue leader: Encourages critical conversations and poses questions to initiate group discussion. This role requires the reader to prepare at least five to seven questions to bring to the small group.

Poetic Verse Reader: Practices reading the poem or passages aloud several times before reading them to the group.

Idea generator: Facilitates the process of dramatizing the poem for the small group or rest of the class and encourages everyone to participate.

Music Provider: Locates, records, and shares music that illustrates the mood or tone of the verse, of the character's perspective, or of the book overall.

While it is possible to read and discuss *The Poet Slave of Cuba* and explore it in one poetry circle, it is advisable to prolong the discussion over two or three book groups to enhance and enrich students' responses.

Conducting Historical Research

In order to understand the historical context of the time in which Juan Francisco Manzano lived, have students engage in research on various components of this biography. Research areas could include:

- The emergence of slavery in Cuba. Have students create a timeline of significant events of the beginnings and of the progression of slavery.
- The persecution and execution of poets during the 1840s.
- The lives and poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega, Fray Luis de León, Pedro Soto de Rojas, Andrés Fernández de Andrade, and San Juan de la Cruz, whose work inspired and influenced Manzano.
- Student generated inquiry questions leading to research on a topic or issue they have responded to in the biography.

As students conduct research, encourage them to record events of significance that they uncover and to include citation information.

Creating an Artistic Response to *The Poet Slave of Cuba*

Sean Qualls, the illustrator of *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, uses a variety of media to create his illustrations. As art is an expression of human emotions, responding to Engle's biography through art is a way to blend and complement words and images.

One method Qualls utilizes is to paint over newsprint with tempera or acrylic paints. Have students mimic this style. They can then use the painted newsprint to create a collage of images that symbolize important ideas, events, or themes in the book. Details can be drawn on the painted newsprint if desired. Additional information about Sean Qualls and his artistic method may be located at <http://seanqualls.blogspot.com>.

A collage may also be created in response to one of Manzano's original poems. These translated poems were included in Manzano's *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba Recently Liberated* translated by R. R. Madden and located at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/manzano/manzano.html>.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the slave experience of Juan Francisco Manzano in Cuba differ from that of slaves in the United States?
2. How did sugarcane contribute to the growth of slavery in Cuba?
3. What was the cultural hierarchy of Cuba during the 19th century? How was this revealed in *The Poet Slave of Cuba*?
4. What was the relationship between the individuals in *The Poet Slave of Cuba*? Create a diagram to assist in determining how each was connected to the other person.
5. What were the various skills and trades learned by Manzano? How were they acquired and how did he use these skills throughout his life?

6. Why was La Marquesa de Prado Ameno so sadistic in her relationship with Manzano? What do her actions tell us about her?
7. What type of interactions occurred between Manzano and Don Nicolás? Could Nicolás have assisted Juan in some way?
8. How do Sean Qualls' white, black, and gray illustrations enhance and extend the biography?
9. What do you feel is the most compelling moment or event of this story? Explain.
10. Would you film this biography in black and white or in color and why?