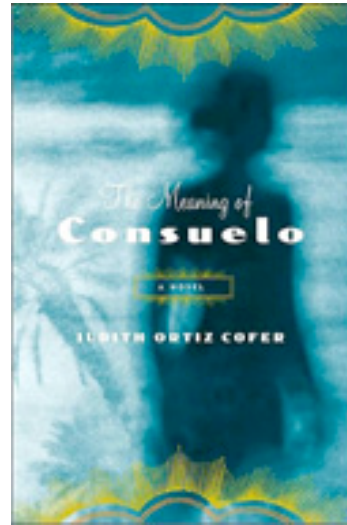


"The world is a colorful mix of people from all backgrounds. Yet many people try to erase the traits that set them apart from others."  
Judith Ortiz Cofer



### **The Meaning of Consuelo**

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2003

#### **Grade Levels**

9-12

#### **Curriculum Areas**

Language Arts • Social Studies

#### **National Language Arts Standards**

##### **NL-ENG.K-12.8**

##### **DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS**

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

#### **National Social Studies Standards**

##### **NSS-G.K-12.2 PLACES AND REGIONS**

Students should understand how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.

#### **Objectives**

To provide a range of culturally diverse literature meeting students' needs to understand themselves, understand worldviews and other cultures.

To provide meaningful, authentic opportunities to read vocabulary in a variety of contexts; language in a cultural context.

To gain knowledge of literature, art and history of the Puerto Rican culture.

#### **Overview**

Judith Ortiz Cofer tells a bittersweet coming-of-age story set in 1950s Puerto Rico, the era of Operation Bootstrap. Consuelo, the young narrator of the novel, is a keen observer of human nature. She struggles to hold together a family that is drifting apart, even as she herself yearns for new experiences. Reflecting the social discord of Puerto Rican society at the time, Consuelo's family views with mixed emotions the increasing US influence on their island. Eventually, Consuelo must decide on the direction of her own life and find her place within her family, her community, and the world. Throughout, the narrator's wry sense of humor and determination gives her the strength to contend with loss and reach for a better future.

#### **Activity**

##### **Author's Background**

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in 1952 in Hoingueros, Puerto Rico, and immigrated with her family to the United States in 1956. She received a B.A. from Augusta College in 1974 and an M.A. from Florida Atlantic University in 1977. She also attended Oxford University. She has been a public school bilingual teacher, an instructor in English at the University of Georgia and Macon College, and a member of the literature panel of the Fine Arts Council of Florida. She received a grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry in 1988 for *Letters from a Caribbean Island* and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in

poetry in 1989. In addition to poetry, her published works include essays and novels. *The Meaning of Consuelo* was selected as one of two winners of the 2003 Americas Award, sponsored by the National Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, for U.S. published titles that authentically and engagingly portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States. Her webpage is a great way for students to become familiar with her works: <http://www.english.uga.edu/~jcofer/>

### Activity

Ask students to make predictions about *The Meaning of Consuelo* using just the titles of the chapters as clues. The author describes childhood experiences in her novel. Have the class think about childhood experiences of their own that still cause them pain some years later. Ask them to write a journal entry, along with a description of how they felt. Students might be surprised to discover later as they read the novel that the characters in this story also experience feelings that they jotted down.

### Activity

Assist the reader in comprehending the action of the story by helping him or her create a mental picture. Identify simple symbols or pictures that act as a visual reminder of an important literary element in a text, thereby providing a support for students as they read. One of the more challenging aspects of reading a novel is vocabulary acquisition; using context in order to clarify the meaning of a word or phrase. Quite often when confronted with an unfamiliar word within its context, students will skip over it and continue to read, or they will cease reading altogether. However, teachers can assist students' by showing them how to obtain the meanings of unknown words through recognizing and applying context clues. Types of context clues are:

#### Definition/Explanation Clues

Sometimes a word or phrase's meaning is explained immediately following its use.

Example:

"It was all what you were told to do, what you had to do to be *gente decente*, decent people, which is what we all thought we were or wanted to be—except for Maria Sereno."

#### Restatement/Synonym Clues

Sometimes a challenging word or phrase is clarified in simpler language.

Example:

"Maria rolled the cup around his palms like I did when playing with dough, then glancing to

both sides of the street as the *piragüero* had done, he reached his hand under his T-shirt and stuffed the paper ball inside it. The result was that he looked like he had grown a lumpy little breast, just one. He then began to walk in the slow regal pace that had been interrupted by our game, and headed toward his mother's house at the end of the street."

### Contrast/Antonym Clues

Sometimes a word or phrase is clarified by the presentation of the opposite meaning somewhere close to its use. Look for signal words when applying context clues. Example:

"Mili starts acting strangely, singing to herself and speaking in tongues. Consuelo thought that her sister's recovery was *futile*, but she remained faithful to the course of her sister's restored health." The signal word *but* tells the reader that an opposite, contrasting thought is occurring. Consequently, *futile* must mean the opposite of remaining faithful to the course; therefore, it must mean giving up.

An effective method is through a vocabulary journal. In this activity, students will clarify unfamiliar words or phrases by listing them on a chart in their journals. They write what they perceive is the definition by reading and recognizing clues within the sentence or surrounding sentences. They note the type of context clue they used in order to derive the meaning of the word or phrase. Have students use context clues as they read to figure out the meanings of difficult or vocabulary that are in a cultural context. As they encounter new vocabulary in Spanish create a word list and create response notes to document language in a cultural context.

Text	Word List and Response Notes to Language in a Cultural Context
There were kiosks that sold <i>bacalaitos</i> , the salty codfish fritters Mami liked so much but didn't make often because Papi said they filled the house with a smell he hated, one of salty, greasy fried fish. Mami claimed that <i>bacalao</i> was island food, implying that to reject it was to reject his heritage. No one ever won the argument over <i>bacalao</i> .	<p><i>bacalaitos</i> – codfish fritters</p> <p><i>bacalao</i>– codfish</p> <p>Definition</p> <p>Explanation:</p> <p>Clue</p>

The after-reading phase occurs when the reader finishes reading the novel. The reader takes time to think about what he knew before the reading and what he learned or what connections he made during the reading, and then he links this information together to build new knowledge. At the end of reading a novel, take time for students to explain what "The Meaning of Consuelo" meant to them personally. This can be in a discussion or writing prompt. It is important to stop and think about what a reading (novel) taught you or made you think about.

Ask the students to find a passage in the text that illustrates an example of something, such as a literary element or a technique, then discuss and defend their choices. Retell specific events from the novel or retell the plot in its entirety, in writing or orally. Create a positive profile of a particular character by gathering information about the character, evaluating and synthesizing the information, and creating a positive written impression of him/her.

### Resources

#### **Books, Essays, Poems Written by Judith Ortiz Cofer**

*An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. New York, New York: Puffin Books. 1996.

*Call Me Maria.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. New York, New York: Orchard Books. 2004.

*The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. New York, New York: Norton Company 1995.

*The Line of the Sun.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. Atlanta, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 1991.

*Reading and Writing Sourcebook.* "The Story of My Body". Robert Pavlik and Richard G. Ramsey. Wilmington, Massachusetts: Great Source-Houghton Mifflin Company. 2001. Pages 183-195.

*Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. Houston, Texas: Arte Publico Press. 1998.

*Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer.* Judith Ortiz Cofer. Atlanta, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 2000.

### Internet Websites

#### **Learn About Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican Arts, Archaeology, Literature, Music, and History**

PBS Masterpiece Theatre - Puerto Rico: A Timeline

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/woman/timeline.html>

Puerto Rico y el Sueño Americano

<http://www.prdream.com/>

Puerto Rico and the American Dream is the award-winning website on the history, culture and politics of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Founded four years ago by Judith Escalona and Stephanie Owens, this multimedia site continues to bring unique, original content online in Spanish and English. A film section, an online gallery, discussion boards, historical timelines and oral histories are featured along with announcements and current events postings.



Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña  
<http://www.icp.gobierno.pr/aaa/index.htm>

### For Spanish Speaking Students:

Learn about Puerto Rican arts, literature, archaeology, museums, music, cultural events and history.

<http://www.icp.gobierno.pr/aaa/index.htm>