

Curriculum: The Arpillerista

Overview: Poem Analysis

The following activity guides students through an analysis of Marjorie Agosín's Poem "The Arpillerista," which is reprinted here from "Stitching Truth: Women's Protest Art in Pinochet's Chile."

Agosín's poem offers an excellent way to bridge literacy with content area studies. Through analyzing the poem, students gain both knowledge of this period of Chilean history, but also experience in practicing literary analysis of poetry. Since students would need at least some understanding of the historical period in order to complete the analysis, this is an activity best done after the unit has already been introduced. It could even be used as an assessment activity at the end of the unit to gauge student knowledge.

1. What is an arpillerista? Agosín defines the arpillerista as "artisan of remains." What does this mean within the Chilean context?
2. How does an arpillerista "burn" with cold? What does the cold represent? (s. 1 v. 3)
3. What is a shroud? (s. 1 v. 6)
4. Why do you think Agosín uses all of the allusions to fabric? (remnants, trousers, ragged scraps)
5. Who is Philomena? (s. 1 v. 13) Why is she relevant to the poem?
6. Who are the "victorious armies"? (s. 2 v. 7)
7. What does it mean to "bring the dead back to life" in the context of the arpilleras? (s. 2 v. 9)

The Arpillerista

The arpillerista,
artisan of remains
burns with rage and cold
as she tenderly
picks through the remnants of her dead,
salvages the shroud of her husband
the trousers left after the absences
submerges herself in cloth of foaming, silent blood
and though she is fragile she grows large,
sovereign over her adobe hut,
her ragged scraps
and determined to tell her story
truer than the tale woven by her sister Philomena.
Disruptive and beautiful she
puts together her flayed remnants
like a greenish forgotten skin
and with her disguised thimble
hidden in the pocket of her modest apron
and her harmless needle
she conjures up victorious armies
embroiders humble people smiling, become triumphant
brings the dead back to life
fabricates water, bell towers, schools, dining rooms
giant suns
and the Cordillera of the Andes
peaks opening like portals
of this splendid city.

—

Marjorie Agosín
Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras