In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez

Syllabus

WEEK ONE AND TWO

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Students will write a brief essay or short story about a place from their childhood.

Homework: Read “The Dominican Republic and Hispaniola” from the Reader's Guide, Teacher's Guide Handout One, and the first two chapters of the novel (pp. 3–29*). Prepare to read thirty to forty pages each week in order to complete reading this book in eight lessons. Handout One

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Discuss Handout One. Ask students to characterize, and respond to, the world that Alvarez creates. Discuss the novel's structure and chronology.

Homework: Read Chapters Three and Four (pp. 30–59). How does Dedé differ from her three sisters? What qualities do they have in common?

WEEK THREE AND FOUR

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss Alvarez's choice to write the novel from four distinct points of view. Ask the class to write a brief description of an important personal experience in their reader's journals.

Homework: Read Chapters Five and Six (pp. 63–117). Ask students to write one paragraph in their journals about each sister's personality and interests.

WEEK FIVE AND SIX

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Do a character analysis of one of the novel's major figures. Consider how that character reflects the novel's thematic concerns. Read Handout Two and consider how Minerva rebels against some of the traditional roles for women in the Dominican Republic.

Homework: Read Chapter Seven (pp. 118–147). Ask students to find three examples of figurative language. Handout Two
WEEK SEVEN AND EIGHT

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Ask students to find figurative language in the novel and discuss how the use of figurative language helps readers imagine the world of the novel.
Homework: Read Handout Three and read Chapters Eight and Nine (pp. 148–199). Have students page through the book to find examples of objects that can be considered symbolic and note them in their journals.
Handout Three

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Ask your students to write a three-paragraph essay discussing why butterflies are a fitting symbol for the Mirabal sisters. How does Minerva function as a symbol both in this novel and in real life? Encourage students to think of other symbolic objects, characters, or events.
Homework: Read Chapter Ten (pp. 200–226).

WEEK NINE AND TEN

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Develop a timeline of the most important events in each of the sisters lives. Be sure to outline that character's narrative and explain her evolution. Students will write a short essay that considers heroism in everyday life.
Homework: Read Chapter Eleven (pp. 227–256). Have students page through the book and identify three major turning points.

WEEK ELEVEN AND TWELVE

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Construct a comprehensive timeline that shows the book's dramatic build-up. Identify several major turning points. Ask students to write a short journal entry or letter from the point of view of one of the Mirabal sisters or their husbands.
Homework: Read Chapter Twelve (pp. 257–297). Ask students to identify three major themes in the book.

FOCUS: Themes

Activities: Briefly---Discuss three of the novel's themes: rebellion against tyranny, freedom, and courage.
Homework: Students will begin their essays; outlines are due the next class period.

WEEK THIRTEEN THROUGH SIXTEEN

FOCUS: What Makes a Writer Great?

Activities: Evaluate the importance of Alvarez's works and their most significant themes.
Write a letter to a friend, arguing why this book has meaning for all people, even those who have no interest in other times or places.

**Homework:** Finish essays.

ESSAY TOPICS (PICK 2) DUE: DECEMBER,

**MUST BE 1000 WORDS EACH (FOR EACH ESSAY). 12PT FONT TIMES NEW ROMAN AND INCLUDE AT LEAST 5 QUOTES FROM THE BOOK “PROPERLY CITED” USING THE MLA FORMAT.**

1. Analyze the way Minerva treats Señor Mirabal's mistress and her four daughters. Does Minerva's kindness toward her half-sisters add to our understanding of her character? If so, how? Why does Minerva want to make education a possibility for them?

2. Further examine the theme of courage in the novel. While Minerva Mirabal may be considered more outwardly brave, how is each sister courageous in her own way?

3. The portions of the book written from Patria Mirabal's point of view deal with religious themes and include many biblical allusions. How does Patria develop from an idealistic young Catholic girl to a woman who doubts? When does this change occur? Can it be argued that her faith is stronger in the end, even though she has some serious religious doubts?

4. Why might Alvarez have chosen not to write from the point of view of any of the men? For this essay, explore two of the male characters—whether Señor Mirabal or the Mirabal sisters' husbands—and discover how important they are to the underground rebellion.

5. Expanding on the question of historical fiction, choose two scenes from the novel and research their historical veracity. Whether or not they are historically accurate, how effective is Alvarez in her quest to write “the truth according to character”?
Introduction to the Novel

Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) is a work of historical fiction based on the lives of the four Mirabal sisters, who participated in underground efforts to topple Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s three-decade-long dictatorial regime in the Dominican Republic. Three of the sisters—Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa—were slain on Trujillo’s orders on November 25, 1960. Their story haunted Alvarez, whose own family had fled the Dominican Republic just three months earlier in fear that her father's participation in the resistance would make him a target of Trujillo.

The novel is both an homage to the bravery and sacrifice of the Mirabal family and a literary work of high grace. The first chapter begins in 1994 when a young Dominican-American writer, a *gringa dominicana*, visits the surviving sister, Dedé Mirabal, at the sisters' childhood home, which has been turned into a museum. Exhausted by the steady stream of pilgrims who have visited her in the thirty-four years since her sisters' deaths, Dedé reluctantly begins to tell the story of a family entwined with the political turmoil of their country.

In the body of the book, narrated in turn by each of the four sisters, Alvarez brings them to life, skillfully telling the story of four young girls who come of age wanting the same things most young women hope for: love, family, and freedom. Each of the sisters chooses to join the revolution in her own time—even Dedé, the one who lives to tell the tale and admits she only got involved "when it was already too late."

Scattered through the girls' stories are glimpses of a nation under siege, where the simplest liberties have been stripped away. We learn the details of the Butterflies' martyrdom slowly and, as it emerges from its chrysalis, readers find a story that spreads its wings, pauses to breathe the air of freedom, and gently takes flight.

Major Characters in the Novel

**Minerva Mirabal**
Independent, outspoken Minerva is determined to get an education but, even after finishing law school, is prohibited by Trujillo from practicing. She is the first to join the revolution—*la primera mariposa*, the first Butterfly. Her husband Manolo is also a leader in the underground.

"*They marveled at my self-control—and so did I. But by now in my life I should have known. Adversity was like a key in the lock for me.*"

**María Teresa (Mate) Mirabal**
María Teresa, young and naïve, communicates primarily through journal entries. She becomes aware of the underground after she questions Minerva about both the strange, coded language she uses and a crate of guns that is delivered to the house. She marries Leandro and both join the resistance.

"*I’ve lost all interest in my studies. I just go to classes in order to keep my cover as a second-year architecture student. My true identity now is Mariposa (#2), waiting daily, hourly, for communications from up north.*"
Patria Mirabal
The eldest sister, Patria, toys with the idea of becoming a nun before falling in love at sixteen with Pedrito González, a handsome young farmer. She becomes involved with the underground after witnessing a battle in the mountains between government forces and anti-Trujillo rebels on the fourteenth of June, 1959.

"Coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child but that dead boy as well."

Dédé Mirabal
In the novel's opening chapter, Dédé's father foretells her future, saying, "She'll bury us all [. . .] in silk and pearls." Until after her sisters' deaths, Dédé obeys her husband Jaimito's orders not to get involved in the revolution.

"I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mamá and Papá, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize—it's me, Dédé, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story."

The Dominican Republic and Hispaniola

The Dominican Republic is located about 700 miles southeast of Miami, Florida, on the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. The Atlantic Ocean laps the island's northern shore, and the Caribbean Sea washes its southern coast. Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola on his first voyage to the New World in 1492, when he was trying to reach the Indies in Southeast Asia. This new Caribbean region, comprised of many islands, was soon named the West Indies and became a gateway for European conquest of the Americas.

Since the time of Columbus's landing, the island has suffered from tumultuous periods of political instability and corrupt regimes. The indigenous people, the Taíno, were eradicated by brutal treatment from the Spanish settlers and diseases from Europe. As the Taíno perished, the Spanish began bringing enslaved Africans to the islands to serve as laborers.

In the 17th century the French established a colony on Hispaniola and fought with the Spanish over control of the western third of the island. This area became Haiti in 1804 after Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, had previously led a successful rebellion of enslaved Africans, winning freedom from the rule of Napoleon I. Haitians controlled the entire island from 1822 until 1844, when nationalists seized control of the Spanish portion, declared independence, and formally created the Dominican Republic. Political unrest and a series of brutal dictatorships ravaged the nation until democracy was finally established in 1978.

Most Dominicans consider themselves multiracial, a blend of European and African heritage, and were historically Roman Catholic. Though the nation's economy used to be based heavily on agriculture, tourism became a growing industry as the country's political situation stabilized. Today most Dominicans work in service-related jobs such as the hospitality industry, tourism, and banking.

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina (1891-1961)
Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina was born to a lower-middle-class family in San Cristóbal in the southern part of the Dominican Republic west of the capital, Santo Domingo.

In 1916, fearful that the Dominican Republic's faltering economy might destabilize the region, the United States sent Marines to occupy the island and protect shipping approaches to the Panama Canal, completed only two years earlier. During the American occupation, Trujillo was a cadet in the Dominican Army. He was trained by U.S. Marines, and rose quickly through the ranks. By 1925, he was the army's commander-in-chief.

In 1930, President Horacio Vásquez resigned after a revolt against his government. The seizure of power in 1930 confirmed Trujillo as the most powerful man in the Dominican Republic; control of the country was now in his hands. He ran unopposed in a bogus election. For the next three decades, he ruled as an absolute dictator who controlled both the government and the army either directly or through a series of hand-picked puppets.

Trujillo and his family also dominated every aspect of the country's economy, and amassed a great fortune while the masses of the Dominican people suffered from deprivation and political repression. Critics were subjected to torture, loss of property, and harsh prison sentences. In 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacre of thousands of unarmed black Haitians living in the Dominican Republic to racially homogenize the region, avenge old animosities with Haiti, and establish firm control of the country's borders.

By the 1950s, Trujillo's regime faced criticism from home and abroad. On June 14, 1959, with the help of Fidel Castro, Dominicans exiled to Cuba led a failed invasion of the Dominican Republic. Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt had been an outspoken critic of Trujillo, and the Dominican ruler despised him for it. Two assassination attempts orchestrated by Trujillo against Betancourt proved to be serious miscalculations, and fueled international outrage against Trujillo. The Organization of American States (OAS) voted to sever diplomatic ties with his regime and impose economic sanctions on the country.

Meanwhile, the underground revolutionary movement in the Dominican Republic continued to gain strength. As leaders in the group, the Mirabal sisters won admiration throughout the country for their efforts to restore democracy. Ironically, their murder on November 25, 1960, ordered by Trujillo, signaled the end of the dictator's power: six months later, Trujillo was assassinated on the road outside Cuidad Trujillo (now, again, Santo Domingo) by a group of gunmen, some of whom had been members of Trujillo's inner circle.

The Dominican Republic under Trujillo

1930s
Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina becomes president of the Dominican Republic through rigged elections; in the same year a terrible hurricane hits the country, 1930.

Trujillo orders the massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, 1937.

World War II begins, 1939.

1940s
The Dominican Republic declares war on Japan, Germany, and Italy, 1941.
Trujillo arranges to repay all the foreign debt due to the United States, 1942.

World War II ends and the United Nations is established, with the Dominican Republic as one of its founding members, 1945.

1950s
Julia Alvarez is born in New York City, 1950. Trujillo orders every household in the Dominican Republic to display a gold plaque that reads, “In this house, Trujillo is chief,” 1955.

Dominican intelligence and secret police are combined to create the State Security Secretariat for surveillance and control of the population, 1957.

Exiled Dominicans stage a failed invasion that spawns the Fourteenth of June Movement opposing Trujillo's regime, 1959.

1960s
Julia Alvarez's family is forced to leave the Dominican Republic for New York after her father's participation in the underground movement is discovered, 1960.


Trujillo is assassinated, 1961.

Discussion Questions to answer in your Journals.

1. The novel begins with a writer, “a gringa dominicana,” visiting Dedé at the childhood home of the Mirabal sisters. Who or what is the primary focus of the first chapter? How does opening the narrative this way give structure to the book?

2. Discuss the novel as historical fiction. How much license may an author take in recreating past events, especially those so significant to a country’s national identity? What can be gained by presenting the Mirabal sisters as characters in a novel, instead of simply telling the facts of their involvement in the revolution?

3. Most of the novel takes place from the 1930s to the 1960s in the Dominican Republic. What traits are considered appropriate for women living there at that time? Which women defy these social customs, and why?

4. Compare and contrast the personalities of the Mirabal sisters. In what ways are they alike? How do they differ?
5. Despite her anger over her father's infidelity, Minerva insists on meeting her half-sisters and insists after his death that they get the opportunity to have an education. Why do you think she does so?

6. What prompts Patria to become involved in the revolution? How does her commitment differ from Minerva's and María Teresa's?

7. Why does Dedé shy away from involvement with the underground? What does her reluctance tell us about her priorities in life? What does Dedé value most?

8. Each of the sisters has different motivations for her involvement in the underground and tolerates different amounts of risk. Discuss when each sister decides to become politically active. What specific event triggers each woman's decision?

9. The real-life Mirabal sisters are viewed as heroines and martyrs in the Dominican Republic. Discuss what makes a person a martyr. Is it necessary for martyrs to act heroically? How do the actions of the Mirabal sisters compare to other famous people who have died for important causes?