



Meet Julia Alvarez

(b. 1950)

Author of

My English

When her family fled the Dominican Republic and returned to New York, Julia Alvarez was ten years old, and Spanish was her primary language. Painfully aware of not fitting in, Julia took refuge in reading and making up stories. She says, "I landed, not in the United States, but in the English language. That became my new home."

"I write to find out who I am." Alvarez attended Middlebury College, where she won several poetry awards. She later earned a master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University. Alvarez says that writing is "a way to understand yourself." Her writing has been praised for its humor, sensitivity, and insight.

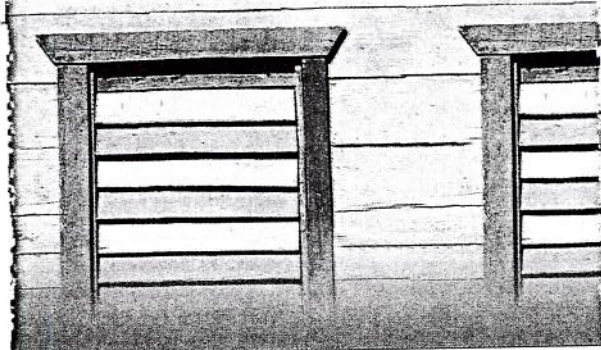
Did You Know?

One of Julia Alvarez's books, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, was made into a film starring Salma Hayek.

BACKGROUND FOR THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Alvarez's Two Nationalities

Julia Alvarez, the author of "My English," was born in New York but grew up in the Dominican Republic, a small Caribbean nation. An independent state since 1844, the Dominican Republic has often struggled with foreign conquest, political unrest, and dictatorship. Alvarez's family was forced to return to New York in 1960 because her father had participated in a movement against the brutal Dominican dictator Raphael Trujillo.





Literary Analysis Voice

Which words and phrases here convey the writer's uncertainty about English and her unwillingness to learn it?



Spiral Review

Central Idea What central idea does Alvarez convey here?

Vocabulary countenance

(koun' tə nəns) *n.* face

Soon, I began to learn more English, at the Carol Morgan School. That is, when I had stopped gawking. The teacher and some of the American children had the strangest coloration: light hair, light eyes, light skin, as if Ursulina had soaked them in bleach too long, to' deteñio.⁸ I did have some blond cousins, but they had deeply tanned skin, and as they grew older, their hair darkened, so their earlier paleness seemed a phase of their acquiring normal color. Just as strange was the little girl in my reader who had a *cat* and a *dog*, that looked just like un gatito y un perrito. Her mami was *Mother* and her papi *Father*. Why have a whole new language for school and for books with a teacher who could speak it teaching you double the amount of words you really needed?

Butter, butter, butter, butter. All day, one English word that had particularly struck me would go round and round in my mouth and weave through all the Spanish in my head until by the end of the day, the word did sound like just another Spanish word. And so I would say, "Mami, please pass la mantequilla." She would scowl and say in English, "I'm sorry, I don't understand. But would you be needing some butter on your bread?"

Why my parents didn't first educate us in our native language by enrolling us in a Dominican school, I don't know. Part of it was that Mami's family had a tradition of sending the boys to the States to boarding school and college, and she had been one of the first girls to be allowed to join her brothers. At Abbot Academy,⁹ whose school song was our lullaby as babies ("Although Columbus and Cabot¹⁰ never heard of Abbot, it's quite the place for you and me"), she had become quite Americanized. It was very important, she kept saying, that we learn our English. She always used the possessive pronoun: *your* English, an inheritance we had come into and must wisely use. Unfortunately, my English became all mixed up with our Spanish.

Mix-up, or what's now called Spanglish, was the language we spoke for several years. There wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word. At school, a Spanish word would suddenly slide into my English like someone butting into line. Teacher, whose face I was learning to read as minutely as my mother's, would scowl but no smile played on her lips. Her pale skin made her strange countenance hard to read, so that I often misjudged how much I could get away with. Whenever I made a

8. to' deteñio (tō dā tñ yē' ò) all washed out; completely colorless (Spanish).

9. **Abbot Academy** boarding school for girls in Andover, Massachusetts; merged in 1973 with the neighboring boys' school, Phillips Academy.

10. **Cabot** (kab' ət) John Cabot (1450–1499), Italian explorer who sailed in the service of England and was the first European to discover the coast of North America in 1497.

mistake, Teacher would shake her head slowly, "In English, YU-LEE-AH, there's no such word as *columpio*. Do you mean a *swing*?"

I would bow my head, humiliated by the smiles and snickers of the American children around me. I grew insecure about Spanish. My native tongue was not quite as good as English, as if words like *columpio* were illegal immigrants trying to cross a border into another language. But Teacher's discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back.

Soon, I was talking up an English storm. "Did you eat English parrot?" my grandfather asked one Sunday. I had just enlisted yet one more patient servant to listen to my rendition of "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" at breakneck pace. "Huh?" I asked impolitely in English, putting him in his place. *Cat got your tongue? No big deal! So there! Take that! Holy Toledo!* (Our teacher's favorite "curse word.") *Go jump in the lake! Really dumb. Golly. Gosh.* Slang, clichés, sayings, hotshot language that our teacher called, *ponderously*, idiomatic expressions. Riddles, jokes, puns, conundrums. *What is yellow and goes click-click? Why did the chicken cross the road? See you later, alligator.* How wonderful to call someone an alligator and not be scolded for being disrespectful. In fact, they were supposed to say back, *In a while, crocodile.*

There was also a neat little trick I wanted to try on an English-speaking adult at home. I had learned it from Elizabeth, my smart-alecky friend in fourth grade, whom I alternately worshiped and resented. I'd ask her a question that required an explanation, and she'd answer, "Because . . ." "Elizabeth, how come you didn't go to Isabel's birthday party?" "Because . . ." "Why didn't you put your name in your reader?" "Because . . ." I thought that such a cool way to get around having to come up with answers. So, I practiced saying it under my breath, planning for the day I could use it on an unsuspecting English-speaking adult.

One Sunday at our extended family dinner, my grandfather sat down at the children's table to chat with us. He was famous, in fact, for the way he could carry on adult conversations with his grandchildren. He often spoke to us in English so that we could practice speaking it outside the classroom. He was a Cornell¹¹ man, a United Nations representative from our country. He gave speeches in English. Perfect English, my mother's phrase. That

Literary Analysis Voice

How would you describe the author's voice, based on her examples of idiomatic expressions?

Vocabulary
ponderously
(pän' dər əs lē) adv.
in a labored, boring, and serious way

Cat got your tongue?

*See you later,
alligator.*

*In a while,
crocodile.*

☐ Reading Check

Which language did Alvarez learn to speak first—English or Spanish?

11. **Cornell** Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

**Vocabulary
enumerated**

(ē nōō' mēr āt id) *v.*
named one by one;
specified, as in a list

**Reading Skill
Author's Purpose**

Why do you think the
writer includes these
details about Mami's
comments?

*"Taking what
someone says
with a grain
of salt
is an idiomatic
expression in
English," she
explained.*

Sunday, he asked me a question. I can't even remember what it was because I wasn't really listening but lying in wait for my chance. "Because . . .," I answered him. Papito waited a second for the rest of my sentence and then gave me a thumbnail grammar lesson, "Because has to be followed by a clause."

"Why's that?" I asked, nonplussed.¹²

"Because," he winked. "Just because."

A beginning wordsmith, I had so much left to learn; sometimes it was disheartening. Once Tío¹³ Gus, the family intellectual, put a speck of salt on my grandparents' big dining table during Sunday dinner. He said, "Imagine this whole table is the human brain. Then this teensy grain is all we ever use of our intelligence!" He enumerated geniuses who had perhaps used two grains, maybe three: Einstein, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Beethoven. We children believed him. It was the kind of impossible fact we thrived on, proving as it did that the world out there was not drastically different from the one we were making up in our heads.

Later, at home, Mami said that you had to take what her younger brother said "with a grain of salt." I thought she was still referring to Tío Gus's demonstration, and I tried to puzzle out what she was saying. Finally, I asked what she meant. "Taking what someone says with a grain of salt is an idiomatic expression in English," she explained. It was pure voodoo is what it was—what later I learned poetry could also do: a grain of salt could symbolize both the human brain and a condiment for human nonsense. And it could be itself, too: a grain of salt to flavor a bland plate of American food.

When we arrived in New York, I was shocked. A country where everyone spoke English! These people must be smarter, I thought. Maids, waiters, taxi drivers, doormen, bums on the street, all spoke this difficult language. It took some time before I understood that Americans were not necessarily a smarter, superior race. It was as natural for them to learn their mother tongue as it was for a little Dominican baby to learn Spanish. It came with "mother's milk," my mother explained, and for a while I thought a mother tongue was a mother tongue because you got it from your mother's milk along with proteins and vitamins.

Soon it wasn't so strange that everyone was speaking in English instead of Spanish. I learned not to hear it as English, but as sense. I no longer strained to understand, I understood. I relaxed in this second language. Only when someone with a heavy southern or

12. **nonplussed** (nān plūst') *v.* confused; baffled.

13. **Tío** (tē' ō) "Uncle" (Spanish).

British accent spoke in a movie, or at church when the priest droned his sermon—only then did I experience that little catch of anxiety. I worried that I would not be able to understand, that I wouldn't be able to “keep up” with the voice speaking in this acquired language. I would be like those people from the Bible we had studied in religion class, whom I imagined standing at the foot of an enormous tower¹⁴ that looked just like the skyscrapers around me. They had been punished for their pride by being made to speak different languages so that they didn't understand what anyone was saying.

But at the foot of those towering New York skyscrapers, I began to understand more and more—not less and less—English. In sixth grade, I had one of the first in a lucky line of great English teachers who began to nurture in me a love of language, a love that had been there since my childhood of listening closely to words. Sister Maria Generosa did not make our class interminably diagram sentences from a workbook or learn a catechism¹⁵ of grammar rules. Instead, she asked us to write little stories imagining we were snowflakes, birds, pianos, a stone in the pavement, a star in the sky. What would it feel like to be a flower with roots in the ground? If the clouds could talk, what would they say? She had an expressive, dreamy look that was accentuated by the wimple¹⁶ that framed her face.

Supposing, just supposing . . . My mind would take off, soaring into possibilities, a flower with roots, a star in the sky, a cloud full of sad, sad tears, a piano crying out each time its back was tapped, music only to our ears.

14. **enormous tower** a reference to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9.

According to Genesis, early Babylonians tried to build a tower to heaven, but they were thwarted when God caused them to speak many languages rather than one.

15. **catechism** (kat' ə kiz' əm) *n.* short book written in question-and-answer format.

16. **wimple** (wim' pəl) *n.* cloth worn around the head, neck, and chin by some nuns.

▼ Critical Viewing

Based on these photographs, why do you think Alvarez might have found New York to be both intimidating and exciting? **[Analyze]**

Vocabulary

interminably

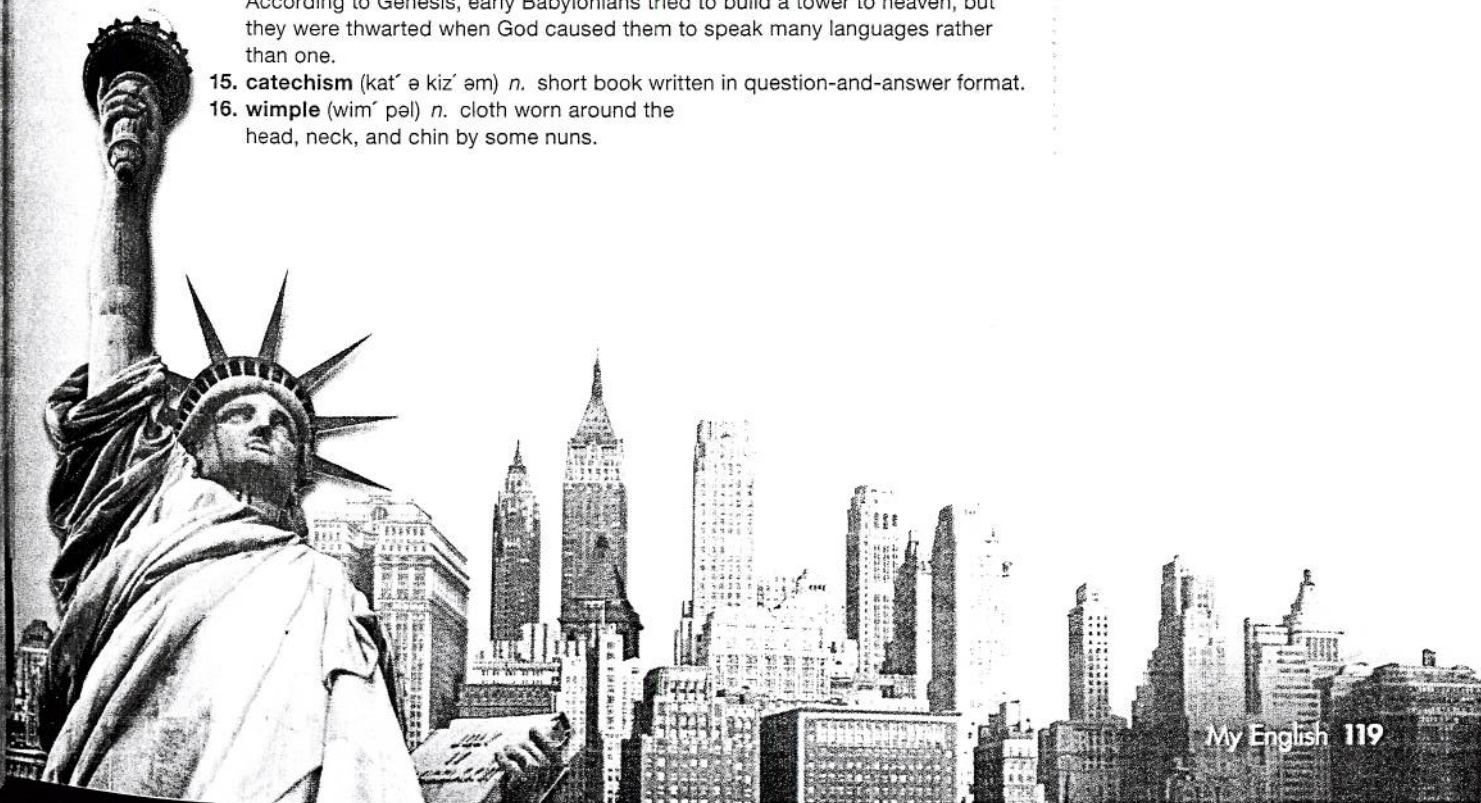
(in tə' mi nə blē) *adv.*
endlessly

accentuated

(ək sen' chōō āt id)
v. emphasized;
heightened the effect of

☐ Reading Check

To what city does Alvarez's family relocate?



Literary Analysis Voice

Which words and phrases in these paragraphs give the author's voice a poetic quality?



*I was no longer
a foreigner with
no ground to
stand on.
I had landed
in the English
language.*

Cite textual
evidence to
support your
responses.

Sister Maria stood at the chalkboard. Her chalk was always snapping in two because she wrote with such energy, her whole habit¹⁷ shaking with the swing of her arm, her hand tap-tap-tapping on the board. "Here's a simple sentence: 'The snow fell.'" Sister pointed with her chalk, her eyebrows lifted, her wimple poked up. Sometimes I could see wisps of gray hair that strayed from under her headdress. "But watch what happens if we put an adverb at the beginning and a prepositional phrase at the end: 'Gently, the snow fell on the bare hills.'"

I thought about the snow. I saw how it might fall on the hills, tapping lightly on the bare branches of trees. Softly, it would fall on the cold, bare fields. On toys children had left out in the yard, and on cars and on little birds and on people out late walking on the streets. Sister Marie filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping and moving the language, scribbling all over the board until English, those verbal gadgets, those tricks and turns of phrases, those little fixed units and counters, became a charged, fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language.

17. habit (hab' it) *n.* robe or dress worn by some nuns.

Critical Thinking



- © 1. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** When Julia Alvarez was young, at what times did her parents speak English at home? **(b) Infer:** Why do you think Alvarez says that English was the "sound of being left out"?
- © 2. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** What method does Sister Maria Generosa use to teach Alvarez English? **(b) Compare and Contrast:** How does this method differ from the way she was taught at the Carol Morgan School? **(c) Assess:** Which method does Alvarez prefer? Why?
- © 3. **Craft and Structure Evaluate:** How well do you think Alvarez succeeds in portraying the growth of her relationship with the English language? Use details from the text to support your answer.
- © 4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** How do Alvarez's ideas about English change as she learns the language? *[Connect to the Big Question: Can truth change?]*