



parents, he had told me, had come up from Georgia, the same place where the novel was set. His father worked for a company that had transferred him to Paterson. His mother was very unhappy, Eugene said, in his beautiful voice that rose and fell over words in a strange, lilting way. The kids at school called him “the hick” and made fun of the way he talked. I knew I was his only friend so far, and I liked that, though I felt sad for him sometimes. “Skinny Bones” and the “Hick” was what they called us at school when we were seen together.

- 13 The day Mr. DePalma came out into the cold and asked us to line up in front of him was the day that President Kennedy was shot. Mr. DePalma, a short, muscular man with slicked-down black hair, was the science teacher, P.E. coach, and disciplinarian at P.S. 13. He was the teacher to whose homeroom you got assigned if you were a troublemaker, and the man called out to break up playground fights, and to escort violently angry teenagers to the office. And Mr. DePalma was the man who called your parents in for “a conference.”
- 14 That day, he stood in front of two rows of mostly black and Puerto Rican kids, brittle from their efforts to “keep moving” on a November day that was turning bitter cold. Mr. DePalma, to our complete shock, was crying. Not just silent adult tears, but really sobbing. There were a few titters from the back of the line where I stood shivering.
- 15 “Listen,” Mr. DePalma raised his arms over his head as if he were about to conduct an orchestra. His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands. His barrel chest was heaving. Someone giggled behind me.
- 16 “Listen,” he repeated, “something awful has happened.” A strange gurgling came from his throat, and he turned around and spat on the cement behind him.
- 17 “Gross,” someone said, and there was a lot of laughter.

“You are going out today?” The way she said “today” sounded as if a storm warning had been issued.

elation (ee LAY shuhn) *n.* great happiness and excitement

- 18 “The President is dead, you idiots. I should have known that wouldn’t mean anything to a bunch of losers like you kids. Go home.” He was shrieking now. No one moved for a minute or two, but then a big girl let out a “Yeah!” and ran to get her books piled up with the others against the brick wall of the school building. The others followed in a mad scramble to get to their things before somebody caught on. It was still an hour to the dismissal bell.
- 19 A little scared, I headed for El Building. There was an eerie feeling on the streets. I looked into Mario’s drugstore, a favorite hangout for the high school crowd, but there were only a couple of old Jewish men

at the soda-bar talking with the short order cook in tones that sounded almost angry, but they were keeping their voices low. Even the traffic on one of the busiest intersections in Paterson—Straight Street and Park Avenue—seemed to be moving slower. There were no horns blasting that day. At El Building, the usual little group of unemployed men were not hanging out on the front stoop making it difficult for women to enter the front door. No music spilled out from open doors in the hallway. When I walked into our apartment, I found my mother sitting in front of the

grainy picture of the television set.

- 20 She looked up at me with a tear-streaked face and just said: “*Dios mio*,”⁵ turning back to the set as if it were pulling at her eyes. I went into my room.
- 21 Though I wanted to feel the right thing about President Kennedy’s death, I could not fight the feeling of **elation** that stirred in my chest. Today was the day I was to visit Eugene in his house. He had asked me to come over after school to study for an American history test with him. We had also planned to walk to the public library together. I looked down into his yard. The oak tree was bare of leaves and the ground looked gray with ice. The light through the large kitchen window of his house told me that El Building blocked the sun to such an extent that they had to turn lights on in the middle of the day. I felt ashamed about it. But the white kitchen table with the lamp hanging just above it looked cozy and inviting. I would soon sit there, across from Eugene, and I would tell him about my perch just above his house. Maybe I should.
- 22 In the next thirty minutes I changed clothes, put on a little pink lipstick, and got my books together. Then I went in to tell my mother that I was going to a friend’s house to study. I did not expect her reaction.
- 23 “You are going out *today*?” The way she said “today” sounded as if a storm warning had been issued. It was said in utter disbelief.

5. **Dios mio** (DEE ohs MEE oh) Spanish for “My God!”

Before I could answer, she came toward me and held my elbows as I clutched my books.

- 24 “*Hija*,⁶ the President has been killed. We must show respect. He was a great man. Come to church with me tonight.”
- 25 She tried to embrace me, but my books were in the way. My first **impulse** was to comfort her, she seemed so distraught, but I had to meet Eugene in fifteen minutes.
- 26 “I have a test to study for, Mama. I will be home by eight.”
- 27 “You are forgetting who you are, *Niña*⁷. I have seen you staring down at that boy’s house. You are heading for humiliation and pain.” My mother said this in Spanish and in a resigned tone that surprised me, as if she had no intention of stopping me from “heading for humiliation and pain.” I started for the door. She sat in front of the TV holding a white handkerchief to her face.
- 28 I walked out to the street and around the chainlink fence that separated El Building from Eugene’s house. The yard was neatly edged around the little walk that led to the door. It always amazed me how Paterson, the inner core of the city, had no apparent logic to its architecture. Small, neat, single residences like this one could be found right next to huge, dilapidated apartment buildings like El Building. My guess was that the little houses had been there first, then the immigrants had come in droves, and the monstrosities had been raised for them—the Italians, the Irish, the Jews, and now us, the Puerto Ricans and the blacks. The door was painted a deep green: *verde*, the color of hope, I had heard my mother say it: *Verde-Esperanza*.⁸
- 29 I knocked softly. A few suspenseful moments later the door opened just a crack. The red, swollen face of a woman appeared. She had a halo of red hair floating over a delicate ivory face—the face of a doll—with freckles on the nose. Her smudged eye make-up made her look unreal to me, like a mannequin seen through a warped store window.
- 30 “What do you want?” Her voice was tiny and sweet-sounding, like a little girl’s, but her tone was not friendly.
- 31 “I’m Eugene’s friend. He asked me over. To study.” I thrust out my books, a silly gesture that embarrassed me almost immediately.
- 32 “You live there?” She pointed up to El Building, which looked particularly ugly, like a gray prison with its many dirty windows and rusty fire escapes. The woman had stepped halfway out and I could see that she wore a white nurse’s uniform with St. Joseph’s Hospital on the name tag.
- 33 “Yes. I do.”
- 34 She looked intently at me for a couple of heartbeats, then said as if to herself, “I don’t know how you people do it.” Then directly to me: “Listen. Honey. Eugene doesn’t want to study with you. He is a smart

6. **Hija** (EE hah) Spanish for “daughter.”

7. **Niña** (NEE nyah) Spanish for “child,” used here as an endearment.

8. **Verde-Esperanza** (vehr day ehs pay RAHN sah) Spanish for “green-hope.”

NOTES

impulse (IHM puls) *n.* sudden urge to act or do something

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraphs 29 and 30, mark details that describe Eugene’s mother’s appearance and behavior.

QUESTION: Which details suggest softness or sweetness, and which suggest hardness or harshness?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these contrasting details?

boy. Doesn't need help. You understand me. I am truly sorry if he told you you could come over. He cannot study with you. It's nothing personal. You understand? We won't be in this place much longer, no need for him to get close to people—it'll just make it harder for him later. Run back home now."

35 I couldn't move. I just stood there in shock at hearing these things said to me in such a honey-drenched voice. I had never heard an accent like hers, except for Eugene's softer version. It was as if she were singing me a little song.

36 "What's wrong? Didn't you hear what I said?" She seemed very angry, and I finally snapped out of my trance. I turned away from the green door, and heard her close it gently.


37 Our apartment was empty when I got home. My mother was in someone else's kitchen, seeking the solace she needed. Father would come in from his late shift at midnight. I would hear them talking softly in the kitchen for hours that night. They would not discuss their dreams for the future, or life in Puerto Rico, as they often did; that night they would talk sadly about the young widow and her two children, as if they were family. For the next few days, we would observe *luto*⁹ in our apartment; that is, we would practice restraint and silence—no loud music or laughter. Some of the women of El Building would wear black for weeks.

38 That night, I lay in my bed trying to feel the right thing for our dead President. But the tears that came up from a deep source inside me were strictly for me. When my mother came to the door, I pretended to be sleeping. Sometime during the night, I saw from my bed the streetlight come on. It had a pink halo around it. I went to my window and pressed my face to the cool glass. Looking up at the light I could see the white snow falling like a lace veil over its face. I did not look down to see it turning gray as it touched the ground below. ❧

9. *luto* (LOO toh) Spanish for "mourning."

Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. On what memorable day in history does this story take place?
2. How does the narrator first become aware of Eugene?
3. Why does the narrator like Eugene even before she meets him?
4. According to her mother, how does Elena seem to feel about Eugene?
5. How does Eugene's mother react to Elena's visit?
6.  **Notebook** Write a summary of "American History."

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the story?

Research to Explore Choose something from the text that interested you, and formulate a research question.



AMERICAN HISTORY

Close Read the Text

1. The model, from paragraph 1 of the story, shows two sample annotations, along with questions and conclusions. Close read the passage and find another detail to annotate. Then, write a question and your conclusion.

ANNOTATE: This clause includes strong, emotionally charged language.

QUESTION: What do these words suggest about the nature of life in El Building?

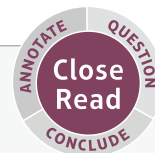
CONCLUDE: *Whatever* and *currently* suggest that the people had many different problems, while the word *enduring* suggests that they faced long-term struggles with no easy solutions.

At almost any hour of the day, El Building was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out *salsas* from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown out whatever they were currently enduring with loud music.

ANNOTATE: These two words are especially colorful.

QUESTION: What picture of El Building is the narrator painting with these word choices?

CONCLUDE: *Monstrous* suggests El Building is large, strange, and dangerous. *Blasting* suggests loudness and aggression. It is a big, fierce place.



Tool Kit

Close-Read Guide and Model Annotation

2. For more practice, go back into the selection, and complete the close-read notes.
3. Revisit a section of the text you found important during your first read. Read this section closely, and **annotate** what you notice. Ask yourself **questions** such as “Why did the author make this choice?” What can you **conclude**?

Analyze the Text

CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE to support your answers.

Notebook Respond to these questions.

1. **Compare and Contrast** Explain the contrast in Elena’s feelings toward her own home and Eugene’s house. Cite descriptive details that reflect these feelings.
2. **Analyze** In what ways does this story reflect social issues facing America in the 1960s? Consider descriptions of Elena’s school and neighborhood, as well as Eugene’s mother’s reaction to Elena.
3. (a) What subject is Elena planning to study with Eugene?
(b) **Interpret** What other reasons might Ortiz Cofer have for calling this story “American History”?
4. **Essential Question:** *What does it mean to be “American”?* What have you learned about American identity from reading this selection?

STANDARDS

Reading Literature

Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Analyze Craft and Structure

Narrative Structure Every story is driven by a **conflict**, or struggle between opposing forces. Characters in stories may face two different types of conflict—internal and external.

- In an **internal conflict**, a character grapples with his or her own beliefs, values, needs, or desires. For example, a character may know something is wrong but still be pulled to do it.
- In an **external conflict**, a character struggles against an outside force. This force may be another character, nature, or society. For example, a character trying to survive a hurricane at sea is experiencing an external conflict.

A character's efforts to resolve, or fix, a conflict form the basis for the plot of a story. In "American History," the main character, Elena, experiences both internal and external conflicts.

Practice

CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE
to support your answers.

 **Notebook** Respond to these questions.

1. (a) What is the main conflict in this story? (b) Is that main conflict primarily external or internal? Explain.
2. Use the chart to identify conflicts Elena faces in addition to the main conflict. For each conflict you note, identify at least one story detail that supports your answer.

ELENA VS. AN OUTSIDE FORCE	ELENA VS. HERSELF

3. (a) In the last scene of the story, why does Elena say that her tears are just for herself? (b) In what ways does the assassination of the president both add to and minimize the importance of Elena's suffering? Explain.



AMERICAN HISTORY

Concept Vocabulary

anticipated

enthralled

elation

infatuated

devoted

impulse

Why These Words? The six concept vocabulary words from the text all involve having a fascination with or an attraction to something. For example, Elena is *enthralled* by the book *Gone With the Wind*. She is captivated by the story, which is set in a romantic and tragic place.

1. How do the vocabulary words help the writer describe characters' emotions?
2. Find two other words in the selection that describe a strong emotion.

Practice



Notebook The concept vocabulary words appear in "American History."

1. Use each concept vocabulary word in a sentence that demonstrates its meaning.
2. Rewrite each sentence using a synonym for the concept vocabulary word. How does the replacement change the meaning of the sentence?

Word Study

Cognates When two words in different languages share a common origin, they are called **cognates**. Often, they are spelled and pronounced similarly in the two languages and still share a common meaning. Recognizing when two words are cognates can help you determine an unfamiliar word's meaning. If you know Spanish, for example, you can quickly guess the meanings of the English words *bicycle* and *paradise* from knowing their Spanish cognates: *bicicleta* and *paraíso*.

1. For each Spanish word in the chart, write its English cognate. Then, write the meaning the pair of cognates shares.

SPANISH WORD	ENGLISH COGNATE	MEANING
<i>anticipación</i>		
<i>pasión</i>		

2. Look back at paragraph 11 of "American History." What English word is a cognate of the Spanish word *enamorada*? Write the word and its definition. Consult a bilingual dictionary if necessary.

WORD NETWORK

Add interesting words related to American identity from the text to your Word Network.

STANDARDS

Language

- Use various types of phrases and clauses to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations.
- Consult general and specialized reference materials, both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology.
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Conventions

Types of Phrases A **preposition** is a word such as *of*, *in*, *to*, *for* or *with* that relates a noun or a pronoun to another word in the sentence.

A **prepositional phrase** is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun, called the **object of the preposition**.

When a prepositional phrase modifies a noun or a pronoun, by telling *what kind* or *which one*, it is an **adjective phrase**. When it modifies a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, by pointing out *where*, *why*, *when*, *in what way*, or *to what extent*, it is an **adverb phrase**. In the chart, the prepositional phrases are italicized, and the words they modify are underlined.

TIP

CLARIFICATION


Refer to the Grammar Handbook to learn more about these terms.

SENTENCE	TYPE OF PHRASE	HOW PHRASE FUNCTIONS
Let's take a picture <u>of the Eiffel Tower</u> .	adjective phrase	tells <i>what kind</i>
The snowball <u>on the table</u> melted.	adjective phrase	tells <i>which one</i>
I left my wallet <u>in the car</u> .	adverb phrase	tells <i>where</i>
The other team played <u>with more skill</u> .	adverb phrase	tells <i>in what way</i>

Read It

1. Mark every prepositional phrase in each of these sentences. Then, indicate whether each phrase is an adjective phrase or an adverb phrase.
 - a. Elena's mother was unhappy in Paterson.
 - b. When Elena sat on the fire escape, she was above Eugene's backyard.
 - c. The boys tossed basketballs through a hoop in the yard.
2. Reread paragraph 29 of “American History.” Mark one adjective phrase and one adverb phrase. Then, note which word each phrase modifies.

Write It

 **Notebook** Add either an adjective phrase or an adverb phrase to each sentence. Label each phrase you add.

Example

We drove.

We drove *to the suburbs*. (adverb phrase)

We drove to the suburbs *of Paterson and Clifton*. (adjective phrase)

1. Elena observed Eugene.
2. I could see the snow falling like a lace veil.



AMERICAN HISTORY

Writing to Sources

A story can be a way of exploring and even of explaining a topic. The conflicts a writer chooses to address in a work of fiction often reflect issues people encounter in real life. The resolutions to those conflicts may suggest authentic solutions.

Assignment

Consider the conflicts Elena faces in “American History” and the choices she makes as she faces them. Ask yourself whether she could have made different choices and whether those other options might have had a better or, perhaps, a worse result. Then, write an **alternative ending** to the story. Start your ending after Elena knocks on Eugene’s door. Consider how you will either resolve or leave open the main conflicts Elena faces in the story.

- Your new ending should flow logically from the story’s earlier events.
- Your new ending should be consistent with your understanding of the characters.
- Your new ending should either provide a resolution to the conflict or demonstrate a realization Elena experiences.

Vocabulary and Conventions Connection Consider including several concept vocabulary words in your alternative ending. Also, consider using prepositional phrases to make your writing more precise.

anticipated	enthralled	elation
infatuated	devoted	impulse

Reflect on Your Writing

After you have written your alternative ending, answer these questions.

1. How did you make your portrayal of the characters consistent with the earlier part of the story? Explain.
2. Did you include any prepositional phrases in your writing? If so, how did they help you be more descriptive or precise?
3. **Why These Words?** Which words in your writing do you feel are especially effective in portraying characters’ thoughts or feelings? List a few of these words.
4. **Essential Question:** *What does it mean to be “American”?* What have you learned about American identity from reading this selection?

STANDARDS

Writing

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

Speaking and Listening

Assignment

Write and present a **monologue** from the point of view of a character in “American History” other than Elena. A monologue is an uninterrupted speech often used in drama. It is delivered by one character to an audience of silent listeners and allows the character to present his or her version of events. For example, your monologue may present Eugene’s thoughts and feelings after his mother sends Elena away.

1. **Choose a Character** Other than Elena, which character in the story would have something interesting and important to say? When choosing your character, consider the following elements:
 - the character’s knowledge, attitude, and feelings about the story’s events
 - the character’s relationship to Elena and connection to the main events of the story
2. **Plan and Write** Brainstorm for ideas, perceptions, experiences, and thoughts your chosen character would have and might want to explain to others. Then, write your monologue.
 - Adopt the character’s point of view and write using first-person pronouns—I, me, us, and we.
 - Create an authentic voice by working to “hear” the character’s voice in your head as you write. Include details that show how he or she sees the setting, events, and other characters.
 - Remember that your character’s knowledge is limited. Include only what he or she actually knows about the events of the story.
3. **Prepare and Deliver** Practice your delivery before you present to the class.
 - Speak clearly without rushing.
 - Employ body language and gestures to add drama or create emphasis. Try to be true to the type of movements or speech patterns your character would use.
 - Vary your speech cadence and emphasis to express your character’s ideas.
4. **Evaluate** Use the evaluation guide to evaluate your classmates’ monologues.

MONOLOGUE EVALUATION GUIDE

Rate each item on a scale of 1 (not demonstrated) to 5 (demonstrated) for each speaker.

- ☐ The speaker spoke clearly and effectively.
- ☐ The monologue sounded authentic and accurately reflected the story’s setting and events.
- ☐ The speaker varied tone and cadence to enhance meaning.
- ☐ The speaker’s body language helped express ideas.

EVIDENCE LOG

Before moving on to a new selection, go to your Evidence Log and record what you learned from “American History.”