

Study guide

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



October 2, Study Guide “ I Want to be Miss America” by Julia Alvarez: Julia Alvarez, in her essay, “ IWant to be Miss America,” writes about her family, which has immigrated to the United States from Dominican Republic. The story’s main focus is the struggle an immigrant does to conform to a new society in which he or she settles. It is natural that a person will feel estranged in a new place and it becomes difficult for that person to get absorbed into a alien culture. Alvarez deftly illustrates the problems that she confronts in the American society. Every culture prescribes certain norms for the people who live in a certain community. However, when people from a different country relocate to that society, they find it extremely difficult to adapt to the new culture and such individuals confront many issues that may entail personality conflicts. The author, through her essay, has been able to demonstrate the problems she has encountered in becoming American and it clearly depicts how immigrants feel in an alien land.

The society prescribes a high standard on outward appearances, especially in the context of females. Thus, they are forced to harbor certain notions on how a woman should look. The concept of beauty also changes as a person moves from one society to the other. In her essay, Alvarez illustrates this eloquently when she shows the sisters watching the Beauty Pageant. They actively discuss about different contestant, opining who should win and who should not. During all these, they feel themselves intimidated by the notion that they may not ever be able to win the Miss America Pageant because they are not “ American.” Through the description of the inner feelings of the sisters, Alvarez provides her audience a subtle hint that the sisters do not feel “ belonging” to the American culture. Their alienation becomes evident

when they think that they will have to change their appearance to “ English, iron and tweeze them out, straighten them, mold them into Made-in-the-USA beauty” (Alvarez Page).

Return to La Plata, Missouri:

Jim Barnes’ poem, “ Return to La Plata, Missouri,” evokes a sense of nostalgia, where the poet recalls the memories of his town, saying goodbye to it. Like many of his other poems this is also focused on the description of a place. The city, like many others around the world, has all the evils, hidden beneath its red sheath that slowly turns brown. At the first reading, a reader may not clearly understand many of the imagery and how the writer connects these to the evils that hide within the dark recesses of cities.

However, a close reading makes it clear that the author is alluding to the evils that happen in cities, the suffering it brings and yet, it offers the people who cherish memories, something to come back to, to feel the nostalgia and yearn for a return.

James Baldwin’s Sonny’s Blues:

Baldwin’s story, “ Sonny’s Blues,” tells the saga of two brothers who are different. It can be perceived as a comment on the social and familial bonds. The lack of proper bonding within a family can lead to alienation of members within a family. It transpires that Baldwin intends to raise his voice against the social menace through this story. The ceiling metaphor seems to connote to the idea that the society does exercise unwarranted control over people and they have to fight hard against it to achieve their freedom.

The brothers are in two extremes; one a middle class person, with a job who leads average life and the other represents the jobless, drug using lower

class. By using characters that contradict each other, Baldwin illustrates life and alienation. Most of the time, people tend to take it for granted that people who are from the lower strata are of no use and refuse to believe that they can have talents. However, this stereotypical notion is challenged at the end of the story when the elder brother discovers Sonny's real talent.