

Miss Johnson Comes to Dinner

by **Pat Alderete**

Illustration by **Rosalind Helfand**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ages 14+ * Grades 9+
Genre/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Creative nonfiction * Comedy * Drama * Coming of age
Length	5,859 words
Content Advisories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * References to drugs, alcohol, and smoking * Cultural misunderstanding * Neglectful parenting
One Sentence Summary	Through a school program, a white, midwestern gym teacher comes over to a young Latina girl's house and defends the girl's interest in sports to her family, but after the teacher subsequently takes the girl to a baseball game, the teacher reveals a hurtful cultural bias of her own.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Different definitions of family * Cultural shaming / intolerance of other cultures * Cultural pride / acceptance of other cultures * Underage smoking and drinking * Feminism and concepts of femininity * Girls in sports * Latino food and culture in America * Acceptance of a multilingual society (English and Spanish in this piece) * Drinking in moderation * Parent child relationships * Peer pressure * Acceptance of different family cultures * Girls seeking strong female role models

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Wanting to be different to impress somebody * Navigating cultural differences in a healthy (or unhealthy) way * Believing that smoking and drinking will allow one to “fit in” * Discovering and taking pride in cultural and personal identity * Power/privilege dynamics in Modern American Society * Standing up for oneself and believing in one’s self worth * Recognizing white privilege dynamics in American society and empowering minority voices and culture
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Contemporary East Los Angeles * Los Angeles Angels * Zoot Suit Riots * Contemporary racial and socio-economic issues in America
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner</i> (1967) * Poems of Gloria E. Anzaldúa
Author and Artists Information	<p>Pat Alderete is a writer of stories and plays and a performer living in Los Angeles, CA.</p> <p>Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Author Biography

Pat Alderete’s short stories are published in *Joteria* and *PEN Center Journal* and anthologized in the following publications: *Hers 2* and *Hers 3*; *Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Latino Arts Anthology, 1988-2000*; *Geography of Rage: Remembering the Los Angeles Riots of 1992*; *The Afro-Hispanic Review*; and *Love, West Hollywood: Reflections of Los Angeles*. She has written two one-act plays: *Ghost and the Spirit*, produced as a staged reading in 1997, and *Love and Fire*, produced as a staged reading by the MACHA Theatre in 2003; her one-woman performance, *Tina Gets Married*, was produced in 1999.

Artist Biography

Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.

SYNOPSIS

Patsy, a young girl who attends school at Griffith Junior High School in East LA, is invited to be a part of a program that sends schoolteachers out to students houses, and her gym teacher Miss Johnson is assigned to her. She discovers that Miss Johnson is surprisingly cool with her family's culture and unique oddities, even considering the fact that her deadbeat dad joins them and shares his "broadminded" opinions with her. At the dinner, Miss Johnson invites Patsy to an Angel's game, which excites her greatly, but the family is mistrustful of the gesture, warning Patsy not to trust outsiders. When Miss Johnson eventually takes Patsy to the baseball game, the outing is almost idyllic. Patsy rides home with Miss Johnson feeling proud of her own culture as well as accepted in Miss Johnson's. That is, until Miss Johnson brings up that Patsy really shouldn't be speaking Spanish, as "it will not help her in life". Patsy is rightfully offended by this and comes home losing her faith in the positive attitude she had had moments before, now agreeing with her parents that the two cultures should stay separate and different. She decides to handle the emotional pain of this disappointment by going to smoke and drink with a new group of friends.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

Think about a specific detail of your background or family that is either unique or makes you proud. It could be the food you eat, the things you say, your holiday rituals, the way you all feel about a certain topic, or even what you like to watch on TV together. Write a journal entry about it, and share with the class if you are truly proud.

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from the story:

My mother added in a worried voice, “I don’t think it’s such a good idea for Patsy to be so involved with sports. I’m afraid it might make her . . . rough.” Miss Johnson glanced at me, and I had the feeling she wanted me to say something, but I didn’t know what. She tried again, “Sports are a good thing for girls, helps give them confidence, makes them feel better about their bodies.”

I saw the hair on my mom’s neck stand up and the frown on my dad’s face. “I want my girl sweet,” he said.

Miss Johnson laughed, not realizing he was serious. “Sports won’t change that, Nico.”

My parents would have considered it rude to contradict her, so they didn’t say anything.

Look up the term “gender role.” What behaviors, expectations, career choices, etc. does society often associate with femininity? With masculinity? Do you agree with or fit into these roles? Why or why not?

After journaling about these questions for 5-10 minutes, discuss Patsy’s family’s expectations for her gender as a class. Questions can include:

- Why do you think Patsy’s family thinks that certain things are more appropriate for girls than others?
- Why might Miss Johnson disagree with the family?
- Why is it dangerous to assume that everyone conforms to culturally prescribed gender roles?

Allow the class to form a discussion around these questions.

Universal Themes

Have the students pair up and research then discuss the difference between “broad-minded” or “open-minded” and “closed- minded.”

Once they have had some time to discuss, ask each pair to brainstorm and choose a debatable topic (and run them by you to see if they are appropriate to be discussed in class) to discuss in front of the class as an improvised role play. Assign one member of each pair to be “open-minded” and the other to be “closed-minded.” If students are uncomfortable improvising, allow them to write a script.

After the role plays are complete, conduct a class discussion about the interactions they observed and whether it’s more ideal to be “open-minded” or “closed-minded.”

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
brainstorm	exotic	chile
dazed	rickets	limpiador
figurine	broad-minded	abre la puerta
deer in the headlights	anxious	CCCs
sweet	psycho	hot boxed
home-cooked	wrong pipe	frajos
goofy	bewildered	chola
spoil sport	halo	loca
forbid		clica
		carnala
		humble harve
		jefita
		gourami
		gringa
		pug nose
		bogart
		Ku Klux Klan

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. If you don't know Spanish, use context clues to guess the definitions of words. After you have written down your guesses, use a Spanish-English Dictionary to check your work. Mark where you missed the definition, and write down how your definition was different from the dictionary definition.
2. Reread this passage:

“Pues, of course you can take your lunch. Te cuesta! Those places charge you a foot and a leg for any little thing.”

“Mama, it’s an arm and a leg,” I corrected her.

“Ah, arm, leg, foot, hand, it’s all the same. Any who, at least I know you’ll eat good.”

The story uses a lot of sayings and idioms. Research what idioms are. Afterwards, write a brief essay discussing the definition of idioms, and how American idioms are very distinct, and could potentially be isolating to second generation speakers.

3. Identify all of the American slang in the story. Once you have done so, attempt to identify all of the Spanish slang in the story. If you don’t know the meanings, look up on wordreference.com

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. In the story, Patsy is surprised by the fact that Miss Johnson only drinks one beer at the baseball game. Why is this? What is drinking responsibly? Do concepts of drinking responsibly differ between cultures? Are these concepts equally valid?
2. Review what Miss Johnson says at the end of the story. Does it undermine the good things that she did for Patsy? Is Patsy right to sever her connection with Miss Johnson because of this statement or should she handle the situation differently?
3. Patsy spends a lot of time in the story worrying about fitting in. She even does things that she knows she shouldn’t and doesn’t want to do. Sometimes she’s embarrassed about her family’s culture, too. Why does she worry about fitting in? Why do we all?
4. How has Patsy’s outlook about her identity, her family, and her culture changed and not changed by the end of the story?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. What is Patsy’s idea of “ordinary” food? Why is she afraid that Miss Johnson won’t like it? Cite the text in your response.
2. What story does Patsy’s father tell her after Miss Johnson invites them to the baseball game? What is the purpose of this story?
3. Why does Patsy stuff cheese in her mouth when she comes home from hanging out with her new friends?
4. What is sarcasm? Identify some moments in the text where Patsy uses it. Then talk about why she uses it in those scenarios.
5. How does Patsy feel about femininity? How do her parents feel about it? And Miss Johnson? Compare and contrast all of their views citing the text in your response.

6. The photo attached to the story is not of any traditional hot dogs. What is combined in this specific type of hot dog, and what does it represent?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Write a creative nonfiction story about a time when someone else came to eat with those who you normally eat meals with. This can be an aunt, uncle, or family friend. It doesn't matter who they are, as long as they usually don't eat meals with the people you usually eat with. Illustrate how the typical meal dynamic changed with them present.

Descriptive

Channel your inner food critic, and write a nonfiction, magazine-style article about sitting down to your favorite meal, wherever that might be.

Analysis

How does the visiting teacher program that the school put on succeed in accomplishing its goals? How does it fail? Write an analytical essay with textual points that illustrate the program's strides forward and steps back.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Read the *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* screenplay.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061735/> (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061735/>)

Writing Exercise

Have the students read the screenplay of the classic film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, to which the title "Miss Johnson Comes to Dinner" alludes. After reading, have the students write an essay on the similarities and differences between the film and story.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Have the students write down a tradition from their background. Collect them, and throw a little celebration integrating the students' traditions. Afterwards, ask everybody if they tried something new, and what they liked about it.

Option Two: Have each student bring in a food item from their kitchen, cooked or packaged. Make sure and bring something from your own kitchen, as well. Collect them, and throw a little celebration integrating the students' foods. Afterwards, ask everybody if they tried something new, and what they liked about it.

Classroom Activity Two

Have each student write about how something new (from school, someone else's culture, popular culture, or technology) that is part of their life might not be understood by their parents. Why do they think their parents won't understand? Have they ever tried to help them understand?

Home Activity

Reread this passage from the story, and note the song they are listening to:

"Well, go ahead and put it on whatever you'd like." I wiped my hands on my pants and turned the knobs. Sly and the Family Stone were singing "Everyday People," and I was surprised to see Miss Johnson nodding her head in time.

Listen to this song, and read the lyrics along with it. Then, write a quick reaction as to why it is particularly relevant to the story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrBOfP8lTSM> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrBOfP8lTSM>)

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author Pat Alderete to come to the class. Have the students prepare questions for her, and ask them to write a brief reaction to the visit afterwards.

Option Two: Invite a speaker from the Museum of Latin American Art to come and give a presentation to the class on the history and influence of Latin American art, and how it is relevant today. Before the

speaker comes in, have the students do a bit of research on Latin American art so that they can have a proper discussion with the speaker.

Field Trip

Take the class on a behind the scenes tour of a Mexican restaurant or grocery store to sample some of the cuisine mentioned in the story. Have the students write a brief reaction describing one new thing they learned, ate, or saw during this experience.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

In Alderete’s story, Miss Johnson says, “If you come to this country you should speak English.” Why do you think Miss Johnson feels this way? Why might someone keep speaking their first language after moving to the United States? If you and your loved ones moved to a non-English-speaking country, would you continue to speak English? Why or why not?

Explore these questions in a two-page essay in which you consider what it would be like to immigrate to another country, as well as to navigate between two languages.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.