

Uncle Sonny

by **Andrew Ramirez**

Illustration by **Rosalind Helfand**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 15+ * Grade 10+
Genre/s	* Fiction * Vignette
Length	1,756 words
Content Advisories	* References to drunkenness * Brief cursing
One Sentence Summary	An uncle visits his nephews, leaving behind an air of mystery in which the boys piece together a portrait of an eccentric father figure.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * Family * Being unconventional * Finding a father figure * Ownership of an animal * Alcoholism/addiction
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes * Mystery * Boyhood * Adulthood * Masculinity * Poverty * Trust * Separation * Responsibility
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	* Current sociopolitical climate between Mexico and the U.S. * Contemporary border crossings between Mexico and the U.S.

Lesson Planning	
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	* Poem: “Washing Palms” by Douglas Manuel: http://bit.ly/2hLYhkd (http://bit.ly/2hLYhkd) * Article: “Homeless people face L.A. crackdown on living in cars” by Gale Holland: http://lat.ms/2jtNLKH (http://lat.ms/2jtNLKH)
Author and Artists Information	<p>Andrew Ramirez is a writer from El Paso, Texas, who lives in Los Angeles.</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.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Author Biography

Andrew Ramirez, a writer from El Paso, Texas, is an LA transplant. His fiction and poems have appeared in many publications, including *Slake* and *if&when*.

Artist Biography

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

SYNOPSIS

An uncle visits his nephews, leaving behind a dog and an air of mystery in which the boys piece together a portrait of a hardened father figure. Fleeting moments with Uncle Sonny—recounted like a legend—test the brothers’ conception of adulthood, masculinity, and responsibility in these vignettes drenched in the memory of an unconventional family member.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

Background: We've come a long way from prehistoric times, when many people viewed animals primarily as sources of food and clothing rather than as companions. Now, an estimated 44 percent of American households have a dog and 35 percent have a cat, says the American Pet Products Association (APPA).

Option One: In a mini-research project, explore how the concept of pet ownership has evolved over time.

Option Two: Think about what it means to own an animal, another living being. What responsibilities does the owner have towards the animal?

In small groups, create a poster representing at least eight aspects of responsible pet ownership.

Journaling: In a 10-minute journal entry, respond to the following questions: In dominant western culture, why are some animals viewed as members of the family while others are still viewed as food sources? Is this just? Why or why not?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following excerpt from the story:

He disappeared in the dust toward our house. The screen door slammed like a rat trap. I didn't know what stone drunk meant, but that's what Sandy and Pat called him.

Journaling: What do you think is happening here? Using the passage's context and your imagination, write what happens next. Try to capture the feeling of the moment using dialogue and descriptions of the setting and characters.

Universal Themes

Individually research a contemporary coming-of-age ceremony (i.e., quinceañera, bar/bat mitzvah, Sateré-Mawé Initiation, Sunrise Ceremony, Ji Li/Guan Li, Dipo, etc.) What exactly happens during the ceremony? What is its historical and cultural history?

Discussion Activity: In small groups, share your findings, and discuss the following questions:

- Why do so many cultures have traditions marking the transition from childhood to adulthood
- Why are so many of these traditions gender based?
- What does it mean to be an adult, and does performing a ceremony really make you a grownup?
- What other rites of passage can you think of which signal adolescence or adulthood? As a group, brainstorm a list to share with your class.

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
camper (RV)	wringing	stone drunk
whooshing	perked up	Moses
slopping	plaid	show dog (noun)
shrubs	index (finger)	blood rituals
strays (noun)	rays of light	gouged
headlock	sunstruck	Saint
rabies	streaking	Jesus
	tilted	
	trotted	

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. How, exactly, does the rabies virus affect the central nervous system? Referencing reputable sources, write a thorough paragraph on the topic.
2. Read the following *Los Angeles Times* article about a law which legalizes sleeping in parked cars on half of L.A.'s streets: <http://lat.ms/2jtNLKH> (<http://lat.ms/2jtNLKH>)

Why do you think the City of Los Angeles chose to create this law? What problem does it address? What are some possible solutions you can think of to help people who are houseless?

3. Author Andrew Ramirez alludes to Catholicism at several moments in his story. Look up the dictionary definitions and etymology (origin) of the word Saint. Next, select a Saint and read their story.

Fold a sheet of paper in half. On one side, write a brief summary of your Saint's story; on the other side, illustrate the story you read.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Read the story of the biblical figure of Moses. Why do you think Uncle Sonny calls the dog Moses, and why are the boys reluctant to do the same?
2. Do you think Uncle Sonny will ever come back for the dog? Do you think he should?
3. What's a rumor? Are the nephews' stories about their uncle just rumors, or are they something more? Why?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Do you think Uncle Sonny's nephews view him as a father figure? Why or why not? Cite the text.
2. Why does the boys' mother decide to keep Moses even though she "has enough to deal with"? What might be her history with her brother?
3. Why do you think Joe, the boys' father, isn't coming to dinner? Cite the text.
4. What does it mean to be naive? Is ours a naive--and therefore, unreliable--narrator? In other words, do you trust the narrator? Point to moments in the story to support your answer.
5. Research the literary term anthropomorphize. How does Ramirez anthropomorphize Moses?
6. How do you imagine the dog Moses to look? Study the story's illustration, a photograph by Rosalind Helfand. How is this depiction of Moses similar and/or different from the one you imagined?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Imagine the dialogue between the border control officer and Uncle Sonny as he crosses from Mexico into the United States. It's up to you to decide whether you believe Sonny's story about sneaking Moses across the border by hiding him beneath a blanket and telling him to "play dead." How do you think his decision to hide the dog might have shaped his interaction with the border control officer?

Descriptive

Imagine you are casting actors in a one-act play of Ramirez’s story. To give the actors a sense of the role, write a one-page character sketch of Uncle Sonny, in which you explore how his character looks, talks, and carries himself. What experiences have shaped him into the person he is today?

Analysis

Research the etymology (origin) of the name Sonny. In a one- to two-page essay, respond to the following question: Is Uncle Sonny’s name ironic (the opposite of what we expect)? Include in your argument what we already know about his person.

Complementary Reading Text Option

In his poem “Washing Palms,” Douglas Manuel writes about a difficult relationship with his father. In “Uncle Sonny,” Ramirez writes about fleeting moments with a feckless father figure.

“Washing Palms” by Douglas Manuel

When the junkies my father sold crack to got
Too close to me, he told them to back up

six dicks’ length. This is the man who when I
was seven caught me under the bed crying and said:

Save those tears. You’ll need them later.
The man who told me he smoked crack

because he liked it, the man sitting on his couch
now watching the History Channel, scratching

the nub beneath his knee where his leg used to be,
gumming plums, his false teeth

soaking in vinegar on the table. I’m sitting
across the room trying to conjure each version

he's shown of himself, trying to lie
in water warm enough

to soak away the switch he hit me with.
To help me summon love for the man

who just asked if he can borrow 200 dollars,
the man who once told me: *Wish*

*in one hand, then shit in the other
and see which one fills up the quickest.*

Writing Exercise

In Ramirez's story, how does the family "summon love" for Uncle Sonny, and do they owe it to him? Do you think the speaker of "Washing Palms" will do the same for his father, and does he owe it to him? Is familial love a given or something to be earned?

Journal for 15 minutes on the above questions, and share your thoughts with a classmate.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

In small groups, have students adapt a scene from the story into a script, which they will perform for the class. In addition to actors, each group will have a playwright, director, and scenery manager. At the teacher's discretion, scenes may be performed in chronological order so that the whole story is presented.

Classroom Activity Two

Print off from the internet or ask students to bring to class the kind of yellowing, old family photographs the narrator remembers seeing of Uncle Sonny. Give each student a photograph and 15 minutes to write a poem about its subject. Switch photographs and allow another 15 minutes of writing. Ask poets to share their favorite of the two poems, and post the photographs and the poems around the class.

Home Activity

Ask students to pay close attention to the conversations they overhear on a daily basis when they are riding the bus, getting coffee, or eating lunch at school. Tell them to carry around a small notebook or make notes in their phone to record, as accurately as possible, the conversations they hear.

Have students turn in a transcript of at least one conversation and a half-page writing assignment in which they explain the context of the conversation (setting, time of day, and speakers, as well as their relationship).

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author and/or the illustrator to come and speak to your class about this project, their creative processes, and their current endeavors.

Option Two: Invite a member of Los Angeles Animal Services to speak about the city's stray dog statistics and prevention, what happens when a stray dog is found, and what it means to be a responsible pet owner.

Field Trip

Visit the Pet Resource Center on Skid Row, a project of the nonprofit Downtown Dog Rescue, which is housed at the Inner City Law Center (1309 E. 7th St., Los Angeles, 90021). Learn about the challenges facing low-income and houseless pet owners in Los Angeles and the Inner City Law Center's perspective on L.A.'s crackdown on people living in cars. Be sure students read up on the issue beforehand.

Note: The Pet Resource Center is open on Wednesdays.

Writing Exercise: What specific difficulties do houseless pet owners encounter, and how are they similar or different from those faced by Uncle Sonny? How might community services like the Pet Resource Center have helped Sonny keep Moses?

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

Rewrite the scene from the story in which Uncle Sonny and his sister, Irene, have a conversation at the kitchen table. Write this one- to two-page scene either from the perspective of Uncle Sonny or Irene.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity 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.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in Text Type and Purposes standards 1-3.)

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6: Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

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.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

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.

Text-Dependent Question Options

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.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.L.9-10. (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/):5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 (http://www.corestandards.org/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.A (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/a/): Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D (<http://www.corestandards.org/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.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

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.

Activity 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.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.