

Nopalitos

by **Conrad Romo**

Illustrated by **Christopher Perez**

Curriculum developed by **Leslie Hall** and **Tiffany Owens**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Léna Garcia**



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"> * Narrative nonfiction * Personal essay
Length	1,609 words
Content Advisories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Occasional cursing in English and Spanish * Allusions to Catholicism * Modest references to sex
One Sentence Summary	A traditional dinner between an adult son and his aging father is an opportunity for reflection and redemptive acceptance.

Lesson Planning	
Topic/s	Yearning for connection Fear of loss Role of food in culture and family Cultural assimilation
Key Theme/s Overview	Family relationships Passage of time; change Acceptance of others' limitations Aging Grief Renewal and redemption Traditional father-son relationships; machismo pressures and cultural expectations
Historic Events / Time Period for Study	Contemporary Los Angeles Catholic traditions (history of Ash Wednesday tradition)
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	* <i>Letter to My Father</i> by Franz Kafka

Lesson Planning	
Author and Artists Information	<p>Conrad Romo is a writer living in Los Angeles.</p> <p>Christopher Perez is an artist living in Los Angeles and the cousin of the author.</p>

Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, 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.RH.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2</p>
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Author Biography

Conrad Romo grew up in N.E.L.A. (Northeast L.A.) short, stocky, and swarthy. He is the producer and host of the literary series Tongue & Groove at the Hotel Café, now into year eleven. He is also a co-founder of Lit Crawl L.A.: NoHo. He earns his daily bread as a salesman. His writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, *Huizache*, *Latinos in Lotusland*, *Tu Ciudad*, *Silver Birch Press*, *Palehouse*, *Splice Today*, and most recently in the *Men’s Heartbreak Anthology*.

Artist Biography

Christopher Perez is a Los Angeles, California-based artist. His work includes drawings, linoleum blocks, and paintings. He also works for the film industry. He and “Nopalitos” author Conrad Romo are cousins.

SYNOPSIS

A grown son and his father eat dinner: a traditional meal of nopalitos. Throughout dinner, the speaker reflects on issues of personal and family identity, aging, grief, loss, and the roles food and religious tradition play in our lives. As an adult, the speaker has come to terms with the challenges of communi-

cating and achieving closeness with his father. No longer struggling, the speaker accepts their meal and casual conversation with grace and gratitude for another year of nopalitos with his father.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

Write in your journal about a situation in which you wanted to talk to another person about an important issue, but you found communication difficult or impossible. Describe what happened and explain how you responded.

Main Ideas

We often say that a relationship is “complicated.” Think of a non-romantic relationship in your life that used to be complicated but is now easier. What experiences brought you and the other person to a place where you accepted each other more? Could your relationship have improved without those experiences? Why or why not?

Begin this prompt as a brief journal exercise. Then, in small groups, compare your answers. Is there anything in common about how your relationships improved?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following last lines from “Nopalitos”:

When the check comes I give three dollars for the tip.

“That much?” he says.

“Yeah, maybe they’ll give us a bigger portion next time.”

Discuss in class the significance of the anticipation of “next time” in the context of “Nopalitos.” What does this explain about the speaker’s feelings about his relationship with his father?

Universal Themes

In “Nopalitos,” the speaker experiences tension between the reality of his relationship with his father and the ideal relationship he yearns for. Think of a time when you experienced tension between the real and the ideal. In a journal entry, respond to the following questions: How were the two different? How did you try to achieve the ideal? Were you successful? Describe what happened.

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
apprehension	partake	abstinence
avoidance	ritual	dialysis
significance	invariably	sacrament
acknowledgments	pious	hernia
hospitalization	arteries	etymology
equivalent	mass	gurney
virtual	bedridden	patron saint
strip mall	nopalitos	widescreen plasma TV
		chalice
		Ash Wednesday
		Alzheimer’s

Vocabulary Activities

1. Throughout “Nopalitos,” Romo uses religious and Catholic terms, including “sacrament,” “patron saint,” “chalice,” “ritual,” and “Ash Wednesday.” What effects do these terms have on both the essay’s tone and the reader’s understanding of the speaker and his father? Write a paragraph in which you analyze Romo’s use of religious language. Use specific examples to support your analysis.
2. Romo writes with specific medical terminology, including words like “dialysis,” “hospitalization,” “arteries,” and “hernia.” If this terminology is unfamiliar to you, look up the meaning of each

word. In three to four sentences, explain why Romo chose specific terms rather than general language. How does his frequent use of medical terms affect the story's tone?

3. The following nouns may be changed into verbs or adjectives:
 - abstinence
 - apprehension
 - avoidance
 - significance
4. Write the meaning of each noun. Then write the adjective and verb form of each word.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. What barriers to intimacy and communication exist between generations? Are these barriers inevitable, or is there a way to overcome them?
2. Discuss the cultural, religious, and symbolic roles that food takes in our lives. Is there a food that is special to your family or that brings your family closer? How and why does it bring you closer?
3. How do you manage communication difficulties with people you would like to be close to? What do you do when communication becomes difficult or awkward? Do you, like the speaker, find topics that are easier or safer? Do you persist in trying to address challenging topics?
4. Romo does not describe himself as particularly religious, yet Catholicism has clearly influenced his upbringing. What traditions, religious or other, are important to your own upbringing?

Text-Dependent Questions

1. What does the speaker fear when he answers his father's call? Citing textual evidence, discuss what this fear reveals about he and his father. Consider their personalities and life circumstances.
2. What topics does the speaker avoid discussing with his father and why?
3. In what parts of life do the speaker and his father find common ground? How does Romo feel about restricting conversations with his father to limited topics? Cite textual evidence.
4. The narrator eventually shifts his perspective about his father. He subtly explains how previous judgment has given way to acceptance. How has this acceptance changed the narrator?
5. An allusion to Genesis 3:19 (“... for you are dust, and to dust you shall return”) — as depicted by smudging one's forehead with ash on Ash Wednesday — opens “Nopalitos.” What is an epigraph, and what epigraph does Romo include in his essay? Citing textual evidence, discuss what message he intends to convey with the epigraph.
6. View the illustration by Christopher Perez, the author's cousin. Describe the body language of each character. Discussing what you learned about the characters, analyze what their body lan-

guage might say about each of them and their relationship. Do you think it makes a difference that another member of the family created the illustration? Why or why not?

Additional Questions:

7. How does the speaker's relationship with his father change over time?
8. How does the speaker feel at the end of the essay?

Writing Exercises

Narrative

Throughout the essay, we learn far more about the son than we do about the father. Use your imagination to fill in the gaps about the father. What would he like to say to his son? Write an imagined dialogue between the father and son, in which you show the father's side of the relationship, addressing many of the same incidents and memories as the son.

OR

Think of a time when you experienced alienation or a lack of connection with someone to whom you wanted to feel close. Write a story about this experience so the reader understands what happened and how you felt.

Descriptive

Romo describes the food at La Morenita in delicious detail. Write two to three paragraphs describing a memorable meal. Be sure to use sensory details to describe the setting, the food, and any significant events or conversations you remember.

OR

As a class, try nopalitos. This can either be a simple activity, with canned nopalitos, or a more complex activity, in which students learn to cook the dish from scratch. Ask students to keep a notebook nearby and describe the details of their experience using strong imagery, including taste, texture, smell, sound, the class' reaction, and the sight of the dish — from preparation to cooking to completion.

Analysis

Read the following paragraph from "Nopalitos":

“There was some stuff that I knew already about our name, but not this. I didn’t tell him that I had looked up some information about a couple of saints named Conrad. One was a German bishop who drank from a chalice during a mass knowing full well that a spider had fallen into the wine — at the time it was believed that they were all poisonous. So pious and respectful of the sacrament was the bishop that he drank anyway, and now the guy is a saint. I didn’t tell him about another St. Conrad who is the patron saint of hernia sufferers, or that the etymology of our name means *bold counsel*.”

In a short essay response, analyze how this anecdote contributes to the reader’s understanding of the speaker. What does this passage reveal about the speaker? Use details from the essay to support your analysis.

Complementary Reading Text

Read an excerpt from *Letter to My Father*. What does Kafka want from his father? How is this similar to or different from what the speaker in “Nopalitos” wants?

In a short essay, compare and contrast Kafka’s relationship with his father to the relationship between the speaker and his father. Use details from both *Letter to My Father* and “Nopalitos.”

Dearest Father,

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you and because the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning, to you the matter always seemed very simple, at least in so far as you talked about it in front of me, and indiscriminately in front of many other people. It looked to you more or less as follows: you have worked hard all your life, have sacrificed everything for your children, above all for me, consequently I have lived high and handsome, have been completely at liberty to learn whatever I wanted, and have had no cause for material worries, which means worries of any kind at all. You have not expected any gratitude for this, knowing what “children’s gratitude” is like, but have expected at least some sort of obligingness, some sign of sympathy. Instead I have always hidden from you, in my room, among my books, with crazy friends, or with crackpot ideas. I have never talked to you frankly; I have never come to you when you were in the synagogue, never visited you at Franzensbad, nor indeed ever shown any family feeling; I have never taken any interest in the business or your other concerns; I saddled you with the factory and walked off; I encouraged Ottilia in her obstinacy, and never lifted a finger for you (never even got you a theater ticket), while I do everything for my friends. If you sum up your judgment of me, the result you get is that, although you don’t charge me with anything downright improper or wicked (with

the exception perhaps of my latest marriage plan), you do charge me with coldness, estrangements and ingratitude. And, what is more, you charge me with it in such a way as to make it seem my fault, as though I might have been able, with something like a touch on the steering wheel, to make everything quite different, while you aren't in the slightest to blame, unless it be for having been too good to me. This, your usual way of representing it, I regard as accurate only in so far as I too believe you are entirely blameless in the matter of our estrangement. But I am equally entirely blameless. If I could get you to acknowledge this, then what would be possible is— not, I think, a new life, we are both much too old for that — but still, a kind of peace; no cessation, but still, a diminution of your unceasing reproaches. Oddly enough you have some sort of notion of what I mean. For instance, a short time ago you said to me: "I have always been fond of you, even though outwardly I didn't act toward you as other fathers generally do, and this precisely because I can't pretend as other people can." Now, Father, on the whole I have never doubted your goodness toward me, but this remark I consider wrong. You can't pretend, that is true, but merely for that reason to maintain that other fathers pretend is either mere opinionated nests, and as such beyond discussion, or on the other hand — and this in my view is what it really is — a veiled expression of the fact that something is wrong in our relationship and that you have played your part in causing it to be so, but without its being your fault. If you really mean that, then we are in agreement.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Share a dish! Ask each student to learn about a traditional family dish and to bring to class a short journal entry describing the dish and its cultural/familiar significance. Be sure to address where, when, and why this dish is eaten, who prepares the food, and how it is made.

In the classroom, ask students to give brief oral presentations, sharing their traditional foods with the class and explaining the food's significance. Students may choose to bring in the actual food to share (at the teacher's discretion) and/or pictures of occasions when it is being enjoyed.

Classroom Activity Two

Break the class into small groups and ask students to conduct online research** about one aspect of sociolinguistics* from "Nopalitos": the value of "small talk" communication across cultures generational differences in communication assimilation and second-language acquisition communication accommodation theory — how and why people alter how they communicate with certain people

Ask each group to assign a recorder, facilitator, and reporter and ask the groups to present their findings to the class. If there is time, allow other students to ask the groups questions about their findings.

*Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to social factors, including differences of region, class, occupational dialect, gender differences, and bilingualism.

**If students do not have Internet access or if the teacher doesn't wish to use the Internet, explain sociolinguistics and assign one of the topics to discuss, speculate, and brainstorm about.

After your research and presentations, write about or discuss as a class how important language is to our sense of identity.

Home Activity

Ask a relative to teach you how to prepare a food that is special to them. Together, you will both read the recipe, shop for ingredients, and prepare and share the food. As you shop or work in the kitchen, ask your relative about the food and its significance.

Write two to three paragraphs describing this experience. (This activity could be combined with Classroom Activity One.)

Guest Speaker

Option One:

Invite a local chef who specializes in a regional cuisine to discuss the cultural significance of food traditions.

Alternate or additional speaker: Invite a panel of guest speakers comprised of a father-son pair and a mother-daughter pair to discuss family relationships and communication. What difficulties have the pairs confronted? What solutions have they found effective? Are there common experiences between the pairs? Are there gender-related differences?

Option Two:

The author, Conrad Romo, and the artist, Christopher Perez, both live in Los Angeles. Invite one or both as guest speakers to discuss their relationship with each other and with Romo's father.

Field Trip

Identify a local grocer that sells fresh cactus for making nopalitos, as well as canned nopalitos. With your class, review recipes for nopalitos dishes and vote on two dishes to make — one that requires fresh cactus and one that requires canned cactus. Organize a class trip to the store to buy the cactus. To make the trip even more fun, partner up with your school's Spanish teacher and practice the Spanish and English names for various produce items as your class walks through the store.

After buying the nopalitos, make the dishes at your school and decide which recipe you like better.

Writing Exercise: Ask students to keep a notebook nearby and describe the details of their experience using strong imagery, including taste, texture, smell, sound, the class' reaction, and the sight of the dish — from preparation to cooking to completion.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Activity:

In Conrad Romo's "Nopalitos," communication creates a barrier between the speaker and his father. Closely read the story, listing instances of vagueness (when something is unclear) and miscommunication in speech. For each example you write down, predict what impact it may have on the speaker and the father's relationship.

Writing Prompt:

Observe a conversation at school or in your neighborhood. What makes a conversation work? Select a scene from "Nopalitos," and improve the character's unclear dialogue, clarifying what you imagine they are trying to say to each other. Finally, write a one-paragraph reflection in which you justify the changes you made.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

This story and its exercises are appropriate for 9-12th grade. Ninth-grade standards are cited

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.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.

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 standards 1-3 above.)

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

Vocabulary Activity Options

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.9-10.4.A Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

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

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.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.

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.

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.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.

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.

Writing Exercise 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.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: 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.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.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.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

Activity Options

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.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.

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.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.

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 standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when

appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

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.