Hunger of Memory

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Born the third of four children to Mexican immigrant parents, Richard Rodriguez grew up in Sacramento, California. He was raised in a Spanish-speaking household until he entered Catholic school at age six, at which point his parents began speaking English at home in the hopes of improving Rodriguez's confidence in his English-only classroom. In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez marks this as a turning point in his life. After doing well in secondary school, Rodriguez went on to receive his bachelor's degree from Stanford University and his master's degree from Columbia. He also spent a year in England working on his dissertation as a Fulbright Scholar. As he advanced in the world of academia, Rodriguez became more and more uncomfortable with the various successes he was achieving, attributing them to his status as a "minority" scholar. In the mid-1970s, just as he was beginning to receive national attention for his essays criticizing affirmative action, Rodriguez made the decision to leave academia for good, turning down teaching offers at several prestigious universities. Funded in part by a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, Rodriguez spent the next six years after his departure from academia at work on what would become *Hunger of Memory*, which was ultimately published in 1982 to great acclaim. Since then, Rodriguez has continued writing and giving interviews, though none of his work has become as popular or well-known as *Hunger of Memory*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez references several important cultural movements of the 1960s and 70s, including the struggle for civil rights by black Americans and the women's liberation movement. These movements inform the way that Rodriguez thinks about privilege and belonging in the context of a university setting. Another important phenomenon that Rodriguez addresses in his memoir is that of affirmative action. Upheld by the Supreme Court in 1978, affirmative action is a policy that asserts that identity markers such as race and gender can and should be considered by institutions of higher learning when considering applicants. Though affirmative action continues to generate controversy today, Rodriguez tackled this subject in its heyday and became infamous for being one of the first minority writers to denounce the policy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hunger of Memory is the first in Rodriguez's trilogy of autobiographical works, followed by *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. These books deal with similar themes to *Hunger of Memory*, particularly public identity in America. *Hunger of Memory* is related to other books dealing with bicultural identity, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and to books dealing with education, such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. As an intellectual coming-of-age story, *Hunger of Memory* is similar to Annie Dillard's memoir *An American Childhood* and Sherman Alexie's novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Though Rodriguez actively hoped it would not be the case, *Hunger of Memory* has become part of the Chicano canon, a tradition that includes the work of Mexican American authors like Sandra Cisneros (author of *The House on Mango Street*), Oscar Zeta Acosta (*Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*), and Rudolfo Anaya (*Bless Me, Ultima*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography*
- **When Written:** 1976-1982
- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** American modernism
- **Genre:** Memoir; Intellectual Autobiography
- **Setting:** For the most part, the California of Rodriguez's childhood
- **Climax:** When Rodriguez decides to leave academia as an act of protest, despite feeling called to teaching as a profession
- **Antagonist:** The book does not have a single antagonist; rather, it shows Rodriguez wrestling with questions of identity, belonging, and guilt
- **Point of View:** First person from Rodriguez's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Not exactly a sophomore slump. Though it was not published until a decade after *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez's second book, *Days of Obligation* (in which he came out as gay), was a finalist for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction.

Lightning rod. While some critics derided *Hunger of Memory* because of Rodriguez's stance on affirmative action and bilingual education, others praised it due to Rodriguez's artistic style. Paul Zweig, writing for the *New York Times*, even compared Rodriguez to both Wordsworth and Proust!

PLOT SUMMARY

Hunger of Memory is introduced by a prologue titled "Middle-Class Pastoral," in which Rodriguez firmly asserts his identity as a middle-class American. Though Rodriguez is comfortable identifying with the middle class, he passionately rejects the possibility that he might give readers access to Mexican or Mexican-American culture through his memoir. Rodriguez explicitly states that language will be an important topic in the book, and he characterizes his memoir as a parable for the life of a middle-class man.

The memoir formally begins with "Aria," in which Rodriguez lays out his concept of private versus public language. He explains that he began his education in a school of predominantly white students, knowing only fifty words of English. At home, he spoke Spanish with his parents and siblings. He found English intimidating and relished the sounds of Spanish, a private language that he shared only with his family, which gave him a cherished since of intimacy with them. Gradually Rodriguez became more confident with English, especially after a trio of nuns arrived at his house and asked his parents to start speaking English at home. However this transition to English as the language of his household was a brutal one for Rodriguez, as it made him feel far less connected to his mother and father. He spends much of the essay evoking the profound **silence** that came to dominate his childhood after this transition. Though he ultimately comes to the conclusion that he was foolish to feel this change of language as a loss of intimacy (for intimacy is created not by language but by intimates, he writes), he continues to express sadness and even guilt over having learned English and having adopted a public identity that eclipsed the intimacy of his home. Rodriguez ends the essay by denouncing bilingual education, arguing that it encourages a sense of public separateness when the true goal of education should be to affirm for children that they have the right to speak a public language and express a public identity.

"The Achievement of Desire" is structured around concepts drawn from a life-changing book Rodriguez encountered while working on his dissertation: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. In this essay, Rodriguez uses Hoggart's formulation of "the scholarship boy" to describe his own experience of schooling. He describes his complicated love of reading (he enjoyed learning, but **books** often made him feel quite alone) and his evolving relationship with literature. He worries that, as a "scholarship boy," he has always been an anxious student, a mimicker of other ideas rather than a generator of his own. Rodriguez also devotes much of this essay to describing his mother's and father's personal backgrounds, and to describing the increasing distance he began to feel from them as he gained more and more education. He writes, rather regretfully, that he has become a "cultural anthropologist," studying his own parents.

In the memoir's third essay, "Credo," Rodriguez reflects on his Catholic upbringing. He writes that, as a scholarship boy, he inhabited two different worlds—yet the Catholic Church provided "an essential link" between them. In this essay Rodriguez compares his experience as a Mexican Catholic to the varying practices of white American Catholics. (One striking moment occurs when Rodriguez describes how, in Mexican paintings, the Virgin Mary was "dark just like me.") He spends the final third of the essay considering how he has lost touch with his Catholic roots as he has grown into adulthood, instead embracing the values of secular city-life. He attributes much of his separation from Catholicism to liturgical changes within the Church, of which he disapproves.

The bulk of "Complexion" is composed of Rodriguez's reflections on the different ways in which his brown skin has been interpreted (by himself and others). In his adulthood as a successful writer, many people see his skin as a mark of leisure, asking if he's recently been on vacation. In contrast, when he was a child his mother constantly warned Rodriguez not to spend too much time in the sun because she worried that a darkened complexion would cause her son to resemble one of *los pobres* (poor workers). For his part, Rodriguez claims that his main worry was that his complexion made him ugly. (In one poignant passage he recalls shaving his arms as a boy, in an attempt to rid himself of his dark skin.) Rodriguez also dedicates a significant portion of this essay to describing his desire to prove to his father that he is capable of doing "real work," rather than just the "unmanly" job of writing. The essay concludes with Rodriguez telling the story of a summer construction job he took during his undergraduate years at Stanford. Initially, he feels excited by the job, finding pleasure in the physical labor. However, when his fellow workers warn him that he is laboring too hard and is in danger of hurting his back, he realizes that he has been fooling himself: three weeks at a summer job will never teach him what his father meant by "real work." His sense of his own naïveté is reinforced when a team of Mexican temp workers (some of *los pobres*) arrives at the site and he reaches the conclusion that he is separated from them by "an attitude of the mind," a direct result of his education. The essay ends with Rodriguez remembering the profound silence of those Mexican workers, which he interprets as a symbol of their lack of public identity, their permanent status as "persons apart."

Rodriguez's infamous critique of affirmative action constitutes the majority of "Profession." He describes how, upon his entrance into the world of academia, he was designated a "minority student," and he writes that he was wrong to have accepted this designation. He argues that affirmative action causes students like him, who are already advantaged due to their middle-class status, to be advanced solely "because many others of their race were more disadvantaged" than they. Rodriguez goes on to discuss many identity-based social

movements and demonstrates how these movements (in his opinion) failed because of their commitment to race issues at the expense of class issues. Rather than focusing on college education, Rodriguez argues, education reform should target primary and secondary schools and should consider class as a key factor. He also spends much of this essay reflecting on the growing distance he feels from his parents and on his increasing discomfort within the world of academia. The essay concludes with Rodriguez recounting the story of how he decided to leave college teaching as an act of protest against a system that had unfairly given him more breaks than he feels he deserved.

"Mr. Secrets" is the melancholy and meandering final essay of the memoir. Rodriguez meditates on the value his family has always placed on privacy, attempting to reconcile his profession as a writer with his mother's urgent plea for him to "write about something else." He wrestles with the impulse he feels to publicly share personal details of his life and family, ultimately concluding that his writing is a kind of graffiti and that writing for a reader he will never meet helps him to better understand himself. The essay—and the book—concludes with a description of a Rodriguez family Christmas, the only time of the year that Rodriguez is together with his parents and his three siblings. Rodriguez describes a lack of connection to his siblings and parents, even as they show interest in his life and writing, and the memoir ends on a sorrowful note with Rodriguez reflecting on his father's silence.

CHARACTERS

Richard Rodriguez –Rodriguez grew up in Sacramento, California, the third child of Mexican immigrant parents. From a young age, he loved **books** and he achieved great academic success, earning degrees from Stanford and Columbia, as well as receiving a Fulbright Scholarship. Ultimately, however, Rodriguez's discomfort with affirmative action and his alienation from his colleagues led him to leave his job as a university professor to focus on his writing. Though Rodriguez is the author of this book, he is also a character within the text. Rodriguez's narrative voice is distinct from the character of his childhood self, and this distance allows Rodriguez (as the author) to reflect on Rodriguez the boy and describe the profound changes he has experienced as a result of his education. Rodriguez's narrative voice encompasses an impressive range—lyrical, didactic, elegiac—demonstrating that, although his opinions may generate controversy, he is without doubt a master of his craft.

Rodriguez's Mother – Rodriguez's mother is depicted as the biggest advocate of his education, which she sees (at least according to Rodriguez) as an opportunity for job advancement. As a new immigrant to America, Rodriguez's mother received her high school diploma (despite having poor English skills) and became a typist recognized for her excellent spelling. Eventually she moved up to a job in a government agency, but her limited English resulted in her making an embarrassing mistake (writing "gorillas" instead of "guerrillas") and being demoted. Rodriguez writes that after reaching a dead end in her own career, his mother "willed her ambition to her children." Rodriguez's mother is supportive of his academic successes and she is upset and mystified when he chooses to leave his career as a professor and turn to writing about topics that she considers to be private family matters. She is also dismayed that Rodriguez sees the family as lacking closeness.

Rodriguez's Father – Rodriguez's father grew up as an orphan in Mexico and immigrated to America with the hopes of becoming an engineer. A series of disappointments led to Rodriguez's father living a life of "dark factory jobs," though he eventually gets a "clean job" making false teeth. Though he is often seen teasing his son for his soft hands, Rodriguez's father is also silently and deeply proud of his son's academic success, which he believes will save him from a life of labor. Rodriguez credits both his parents with forging a sense of their own "middle-classness" and instilling it in their children. Both of Rodriguez's parents also encourage their children to assert their identity as Mexicans.

Rodriguez's Siblings – Rodriguez has an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister. The reader learns few identifying details about the Rodriguez siblings, and Rodriguez never divulges their names. The siblings have all grown up to be successful (both sisters are business executives and Rodriguez's brother is a lawyer), even though, according to Rodriguez, none of them was ever the anxious student that he was. Of his three siblings, Rodriguez's older sister appears most substantially in the book. Rodriguez feels a special connection to her because she, like Rodriguez, has a dark complexion that makes her stand out from the rest of the family. Though the reader does not learn many details of the Rodriguez siblings, it is evident from passages of the book (such as the dedication) that Rodriguez's brother and sisters have steady, conventional jobs that sometimes make Rodriguez—and, more profoundly, his mother and father—feel anxious and inadequate in comparison.

Rodriguez's Grandmother – Though her life and death are wholly encompassed in the first chapter of the book, Rodriguez makes it clear that his grandmother played an important role in his life. She grew up in Mexico and was the only one of Rodriguez's relatives who spoke no English. Rodriguez writes that his grandmother had "no interest in *gringo* society," and was wholly protected from living a public life by her daughters and by Rodriguez himself, who acted as her translator when they went to the grocery store together. It is largely from his grandmother's example that Rodriguez comes to draw the conclusion that intimacy is an experience that goes beyond language. Thus, though she only appears in one chapter of the

book, Rodriguez's grandmother is an important figure due to her influence on many of the important questions in his writing.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC IDENTITY

Hunger of Memory traces Rodriguez's development from a "disadvantaged" youth—the son of Mexican immigrant parents, growing up in northern California—into a sought-after academic, lecturer, and author. At the core of Rodriguez's development as an intellectual is the tension between his private self (who he is when he is with his family or when he is alone) and his public self (who he is when he is amongst strangers, particularly in school). While Rodriguez does not argue for the complete abolishment of private identity, he continually highlights the fact that the development of a public identity *necessarily* implies the shrinking of one's private identity. Though he laments the loss of intimacy such a shrinking entails, Rodriguez argues that cultivating a public identity is synonymous with maturing into adulthood: he says, "I became a man by becoming a public man."

Rodriguez depicts childhood as a journey toward realizing "the necessity of public life." For him, the "great lesson" of growing up is learning how to assimilate into public society. This is something all children—not just the children of immigrants—must learn, and it is necessary if one wants access to the privileges that come with public life (such as the civic privilege of voting). However, Rodriguez also frames this journey as a process of claiming one's rightful place in public society. Everyone, Rodriguez argues, deserves to speak in a public voice and feel a sense of belonging in public society—but in order to achieve this, one must make accommodations to the expectations of society. This requires losses to one's private identity, for as a person spends more time speaking and acting in public, he or she necessarily begins to live a life of reduced intimacy. Superficially, Rodriguez seems to accept this fact—yet much of his memoir is devoted to mourning the family closeness he once felt as a child.

Despite the nostalgia he feels for the more private life of his childhood, Rodriguez views as vulgar those who would cling to a private identity rather than assimilate into public society. He uses the example of black teenagers speaking black English on a public bus, characterizing their use of black English as a defiant act of "brazen intimacy." He sees these teenagers as deliberately living private lives publicly as an act of defiance against a public mainstream that will not accept them. While he admires and even envies the teenagers' sense of intimacy with one another, he ultimately rejects their worldview as dangerous. For Rodriguez, trying to force public life to look and feel more like private life is an act of deliberate separateness which only further disadvantages already marginalized groups. Therefore, he refuses to "romanticize public separateness."

However, despite his avowal that people have not only a right but also an obligation to live public lives, much of Rodriguez's memoir is spent reflecting on ways to mitigate his own discomfort with his public life. Rodriguez is constantly seeking out experiences that allow him to feel "alone with others," whether that experience is participating in a Catholic Mass (where people make private prayers in a communal setting), writing a book (expressing personal experiences to a public, unknown readership), or—in the simplified example he gives his mother—relating one's problems to a psychiatrist. The reader thus begins to question why Rodriguez so strongly rebukes people who live their personal lives out loud, when he also clearly longs for the comfort that derives from such an act.

RACE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez discusses his upbringing and identity in the context of both his race and his class, arguing that class is a much more useful frame through which to understand a person's identity than race. Though Rodriguez's understanding of the centrality of class to a person's experience and identity informs the way he writes about topics such as academia and cultural heritage, he also—despite his opposition to centering race as a determinant of identity—writes at length about his Mexican heritage, his bicultural upbringing, and his brown skin. The tension between Rodriguez's preference for class-based analysis and his devotion of a significant portion of the book to writing about his race suggests that race and class might have a more complex relationship than Rodriguez overtly acknowledges.

Part of Rodriguez's resistance to viewing race as a central part of a person's identity is that, to him, race is a category so broad and nondescript that it flattens a person's individuality. Since Rodriguez does not identify strongly as Mexican American, he feels that people who focus on his race cannot truly see who he is. For example, when Rodriguez is a professor, a group of minority students asks him to teach an ethnic literature class. Rodriguez knows that he has been asked only because of his race; his specialty is English Renaissance literature. Furthermore, Rodriguez believes that focusing on race overshadows the importance of class differences, which often have a more direct effect on people's lived experiences. Policies such as affirmative action conflate the experiences of middle-class Mexican Americans with those of working-class Mexican Americans (*los pobres*). Because such policies disregard class in

favor of race, middle-class members of minority racial groups are uplifted by social programs while their lower-class counterparts remain entrapped in poverty. Rodriguez thus opposes a focus on race over class for both personal and structural reasons.

While class, like race, is a vast category, Rodriguez identifies much more strongly as middle class than as Mexican American. His middle-class background allows him to attend prestigious schools and become a cosmopolitan intellectual; to him, that says much more about who he is than does his race. For example, Rodriguez spends one summer working a construction job where he encounters Mexican seasonal laborers. Rodriguez realizes that, despite their shared race, they have almost nothing in common. To Rodriguez, this shows that class is a greater determinant of identity than race: the other men's lives are working-class, while Rodriguez's life is middle-class. However, this becomes complicated when Rodriguez—who sought out the job after feeling alienated from his academic peers—speaks Spanish to the workers and feels a strong yearning for evidence of their "familiarity" with him. This desire for a connection with his Mexican upbringing suggests that Rodriguez's cultural heritage *does*, in some way, make him stand apart from his middle-class peers in academia.

Though Rodriguez despairingly imagines a future bookseller who will blindly shelve *Hunger of Memory* "alongside specimens of that exotic new genre, 'ethnic literature,'" Rodriguez's considerable attention to issues of race (such as his insecurity about his dark skin) has ironically made *Hunger of Memory* part of the canon of Chicano literature. Rodriguez's exploration of race could be simply a concession to the expectations of his readers (who are, according to Rodriguez, likely to assume that race is the most important aspect of his identity), but it does seem that Rodriguez is unable to tell the story of his middle-class upbringing (and of his development as an enthusiastic English speaker and social conservative) without considering his race. This seems to undercut his argument for the unimportance of race in identity formation.

Rodriguez claims that his writing is political only "in a broad sense," largely for the way it describes his coming-of-age into a public person. However, his deliberate decision to highlight class over race—even as his own writing seems to pull him into a discussion of race—represents the most political aspect of this memoir. Rodriguez is deliberately refusing to center the issue that readers expect to be most important. Yet, the irrepressible presence of race in Rodriguez's memoir clearly suggests that race and class in America are interlocked in ways that make it difficult to isolate the effects each one has on a person's identity and development.

LANGUAGE, INTIMACY, AND AUTHORITY

Rodriguez writes, "Language has been the great subject of my life." This is true on several levels: Rodriguez is a scholar of English literature, a writer who understands and communicates his experiences through the written word, and a philosopher of the role of language in public and private life. One of Rodriguez's most important assertions in *Hunger of Memory* is that the best use of language is not to create intimacy or community (which Rodriguez believes exist outside of language), but rather to authoritatively participate in public life and assert a public identity. Despite arguing this point, Rodriguez still seems to think of language as the medium most apt for communicating his most personal thoughts and experiences (writing his memoir), bonding with his community (language is important to his relationship with his English-speaking peers), and even forging spirituality (he discusses his Catholic faith in the context of the language of the Church). Therefore, in a complex way, Rodriguez seems to simultaneously overvalue and undervalue the power of language to shape a person's sense of self.

Rodriguez values public education—and monolingual, Anglophone public education, in particular—because he believes it gives children the ability to confidently participate in public life. Indeed, learning English opens possibilities for Rodriguez that he otherwise would not have had: it gives him access to further academic opportunity, for example, and it leads him to great literary works of the Western canon (a subject upon which he builds a successful career). Learning English, however, means that Rodriguez stops speaking Spanish. Initially he interprets this shift as a loss of intimacy and closeness with his family members; after his parents switch to speaking English at home in order to make Rodriguez learn faster, he notices a new **silence** among them. As he grows up, however, Rodriguez adopts the opinion that intimacy is something that cannot be contained in language itself: it stems from interpersonal relationships between people. To explain this, he describes realizing that he is unable to translate a phrase that his grandmother shouts to him from an open window, since a literal translation would fail to convey the intimacy contained not in her words themselves, but in the fact that she has addressed him and only him. Thus, Rodriguez ultimately comes to the conclusion that, while language can powerfully shape personal identity, it cannot dictate interpersonal relationships.

While Rodriguez downplays the power of language to affect one's relationships, he emphasizes the effect of language on thought and consciousness. For example, he explores the effects of the language of Catholic Mass on the meaning of his faith. Rodriguez recalls that as a boy, his priest always began prayer with the word "credo," which is Latin for "I believe." Today, Rodriguez's priest starts Mass with the English phrase,

"we believe." He laments the use of the first-person plural, claiming that it highlights only the communal aspect of religion, rather than reminding listeners through the first-person singular that they are alone before God. Rodriguez's analysis underscores that small differences in language can have a large impact on something as fundamental as a person's relationship to God. Similarly, Rodriguez asserts that learning English not only created a cultural gap between him and his parents, but it also gave him, through education, the ability to understand and articulate the separation he feels. In other words, while his academic work separated him from his family, it also gave him the gift of being able to think and write critically about his upbringing. This is a complicated statement; while Rodriguez's academic training does give him the clarity to interpret his childhood in sophisticated and illuminating ways, he also suggests quite clearly that educated, middle-class people are better able to understand class than lower-class people. Here, it seems that Rodriguez is overestimating the power of language to shape consciousness and identity; certainly, lower-class people are not incapable of class-consciousness merely because they do not speak about it in the same language an academic might use.

Rodriguez thus has a complicated relationship to language. He loves the way it allows him and others to express themselves, but he nevertheless consistently emphasizes the sadness and discomfort he feels at no longer speaking "good" Spanish—he even refers to having learned English as his "original sin" against his family. Thus, language occupies a fraught position in his life, and trying to reconcile opposed realities—that language has given him his passion and livelihood, and taken aspects of his family life—sometimes leads him to contradictory or condescending ideas. Nonetheless, the beauty and clarity of his prose, as well as his keen philosophical interest in language, reveal that language *is* the great subject of Rodriguez's life, even if he can't always fully account for it.

EDUCATION, AMBITION, AND BELONGING

Rodriguez sees his entrance into the education system as the defining moment of his life—so important, in fact, that the subtitle of his memoir is *The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. To Rodriguez, education is a process that radically changes people, whether they recognize this fact or not. As a self-proclaimed "scholarship boy," Rodriguez feels intensely aware of the personal changes demanded by his education—and he seems willing to make these changes in order to become "an educated man." Yet Rodriguez ultimately leaves the world of higher education disappointed; his depressing portrait of academia casts a shadow over his generally positive depiction of education.

Early in his life Rodriguez demonstrates a love of reading. He is attracted to the "possibility of fellowship between a reader and a writer," and comes to enjoy "the lonely good company of books." However, he admits that his motivation for reading was not always pure or even beneficial. As a youth, Rodriguez faced his family's suspicion of his reading. Though he finds "a mysterious comfort" in the ritual of reading, his mother's constant question, "What do you see in your books?," makes him feel like he must find a more legitimate reason for reading than mere pleasure. As a result, he recalls asking his teachers for "the names of important books," since he saw **books** not as vessels for ideas, but as the utilitarian keys that would unlock his academic success and make him truly "educated." Rodriguez read books like *The Republic* merely so he could say that he had read them—he didn't understand these books, nor did he realize that understanding them was important.

As an adult, after encountering a book by Richard Hoggart called *The Uses of Literacy*, Rodriguez begins to identify his youthful behavior with that of a "scholarship boy." He realizes that instead of approaching books with a point of view, he has been reading books in order to gain a point of view. Like the archetypical scholarship boy, Rodriguez writes, he has become "a great mimic; a collector of thoughts, not a thinker." Though he has achieved great success—graduating from Stanford, becoming a Fulbright scholar, receiving offers of teaching positions from prestigious universities—Rodriguez insists that he is fundamentally a bad student because his thoughts aren't original. He begins to experience anxiety about his place in the world of academia, and his guilt is exacerbated by his worry that he has only received these opportunities due to affirmative action.

Rodriguez identifies himself as an ambitious person, but his negative descriptions of the life of a scholar-professor raise the question of whether his ambition of achieving academic success has been misplaced. Describing his year as a Fulbright scholar in the U.K., Rodriguez talks often of the loneliness of scholars. He begins to wonder if anyone besides his supervisor will ever read his dissertation and even to question whether being an academic counts as an act of social withdrawal of the kind he so abhors (an act he also describes as prioritizing private identity over public identity). Little by little, it becomes clear that the world of academia is not satisfying to Rodriguez. This is perhaps surprising, given that his description of his fellow scholars toiling away in the British Museum—silent strangers, united by an unspoken respect for the written word—almost perfectly parallels his earlier, laudatory description of the Catholic Church. Like the Church, the university is an institution that mediates between public and private life—yet Rodriguez seems deeply dissatisfied in this setting. Ultimately he rejects academic life altogether, abandoning the teaching jobs he has been offered to focus exclusively on his writing.

Rodriguez's portrait of education is thus a confusing one. He asserts that his primary education was the greatest turning

point of his life, and he is deeply grateful for the opportunities it afforded him. However, as his choice to leave academia demonstrates, he could never feel quite at home in the world of higher education. To make sense of this, it is important to note that affirmative action was the last straw for Rodriguez in academia, perhaps because it made him feel that he didn't belong. Rodriguez's beloved Catholic school education insisted that he develop a public identity that was similar to his white, Anglophone peers, which thereby inserted him into a community. In academia, however, he was deeply uncomfortable that he was seen, first and foremost, as a representative of a race to which he does not feel connected. Ultimately, then, it seems that Rodriguez values education insofar as it inserts him into a community of shared ideas and values. Academia, with its focus on his racial identity, could never make him feel at home.

MEMORY

Though memory features prominently in the title of this book, its role within the text is complex. From the outset Rodriguez claims that his book tells the story of "one life only." This is an emphatic statement: that his memories are not representative of the Mexican American experience. Yet he simultaneously presents his memoir as a "parable" for the life of a middle class man, implying that he can speak for others of his class, if not his race. The ways in which Rodriguez uses his own memories to speak (or not) for the broad experiences of others calls into question the ability of memory to be neatly used and understood.

Rodriguez opens his memoir with a refusal to enact for a white audience a "drama of ancestral reconciliation" with his Mexican roots. He suggests that continuity with such a deep past is impossible because memory is personal, rather than cultural. However, though he doesn't believe his personal memories can make him an ambassador for his Mexican cultural heritage, Rodriguez confidently asserts that his personal narrative can act as a "parable" for the life of a middle-class man. While this could be due to Rodriguez's openly-asserted belief that social mobility affects everyone regardless of race, it seems strange that Rodriguez would be comfortable with his memories standing in for those of other middle-class Americans, given his long-standing interest in "the connection between dark skin and poverty." The book thus presents a murky picture of how and when personal memories can be legitimately mobilized to generalize about group experiences.

Though Rodriguez is skeptical of the notion of cultural or group memory, his memoir inherently places value on the role of personal memory. Rodriguez writes, "I turn to consider the boy I once was in order, finally, to describe the man I am now." This speaks to the fact that Rodriguez's adult sense of selfhood is built on his memories of who he was as a child. Yet, he allows that his memories likely differ from those of others. He wonders of his parents, for example, "What would be their version of the past we once shared?" Rodriguez thus acknowledges that, while his memories have fundamentally shaped him, these memories should not be considered objectively true. For Rodriguez, then, memory is less useful for reconstructing the past than it is for understanding the present. In a way, this sheds light on his title: Rodriguez is not hungering for memories of the past—his memories, as they exist in the present, have a hunger all their own. Thus, the act of writing and remembering memories is a way to subjectively reconcile the past with the present, a process that people have a profound need to undertake.

Memory's role in this book, while central, is thus difficult to grasp. Rodriguez comes down clearly on some aspects of how memory works—he is precise about which group experiences his memories can be counted on to represent—yet his reasoning for these beliefs remains obscure. At the same time, he also does not claim that his personal memories are perfect, acknowledging that his family members likely have different memories of the same events, some of which they could never bring themselves to express to others. Ultimately, it seems that Rodriguez wants to suggest that the most valuable use for memory is not representation of another's experience, but rather the exploration and construction of a person's sense of self.

FAMILY

Rodriguez dedicates this memoir to his parents—"to honor them," he writes. Aside from Rodriguez's own narrative voice, his mother and his father are the central figures of the novel. However, the reader learns relatively little about Rodriguez's parents and hears only a few snippets of their dialogue, while Rodriguez's brother and two sisters are even less present. Though Rodriguez laments the fact that his education has isolated him from his family members, his family continues to demonstrate their love for him every time they appear in the text. This seems at odds with Rodriguez's characterization of their relationship as distant and unconnected, raising the question of whether the isolation Rodriguez claims to feel is—at least partially—self-imposed.

Rodriguez maintains that his education has so drastically altered him that he can no longer relate to his family, particularly his parents. This began when his school demanded that the family speak English at home, continued with his first visit home from college (in which he found himself relating to his parents as an interviewer or anthropologist), and solidified once he realized that his academic training has led him to think only abstractly about his relationship to his family (a thought process that he presumes they cannot follow, since, he writes, "My father and mother did not pass their time thinking about the cultural meanings of their experience"). While Rodriguez convincingly argues that his education has inevitably created a

cultural gulf between him and his parents, some of his claims about his parents open up the question of whether the distance Rodriguez feels from them is partially a result of his condescension. It is ironic, in light of his statement that his parents don't think abstractly about their experience, that he later praises the Catholic Church for being the only institution to treat his parents as "thinkers—persons aware of the experience of their lives." Rodriguez seems unaware that he does not always extend this dignity to them.

The fact that Rodriguez feels comfortable making assumptions about the way in which his parents have experienced their lives is further complicated by the fact that he acknowledges that there are parts of his parents' experiences to which he will never have access, since they are not comfortable speaking about certain thoughts and experiences. Of his mother he wonders, "What would be her version of this book?" Rodriguez thus seems curious about his parents' inaccessible interior lives, yet he simultaneously makes reductive assumptions about their thoughts. This brings into question Rodriguez's certainty that his closeness to his family has been compromised solely because of his education—perhaps their distance is not due to the richer analytical abilities that Rodriguez enjoys as a result of his education, but rather due to his inability to suspend judgment about his parents' thoughts and capabilities.

It could also be that the distance Rodriguez feels from his family is a result of him being, at the core of his identity, a writer. He admits that he has not always maintained a "conventional social life," turning instead "to the silence [he] both need[s] and fear[s]." Perhaps the reason Rodriguez does not feel connected to his family—despite the nearly constant care and concern they demonstrate for him—is not because his family is less apt or able to think complexly about their lives, but rather because Rodriguez reflects on his life in a fundamentally different way from his family: through writing. Though he spends much of the book lamenting the various silences in his life and examining their origins, it seems probable that **silence** is ultimately a self-inflicted experience, one that is necessary to the way Rodriguez exists in the world. Though Rodriguez's lament of his lack of closeness with his family seems genuine, the way he discusses his distance from his family thus opens up possibilities other than his education for why this distance exists.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SILENCE

From its very first essay, *Hunger of Memory* is a text obsessed with silence. Silence appears in three iterations in this memoir: the silence of not having a public identity, the silence of reading and writing, and silence as a result of cut-off intimacy. Rodriguez often talks about silent or reserved people as having a less developed public identity than characters who are more vocal. This can be seen in the way that Rodriguez's father talks loudly and confidently in Spanish but is painfully quiet in English, or in the haunting silence of the Mexican workers Rodriguez encounters during his summer construction job. In this way, silence represents disempowerment and an inability to participate in public life. The second way that silence is manifested in the book is as the silence of reading and writing. Rodriguez recalls that he used to dislike reading on his own as a child, even speaking the words out loud to make himself feel less lonely. This uncomfortable silence recurs in Rodriguez's adulthood as something he both fears and requires in order to write. In this sense, silence takes on a kind of power because it becomes a means of getting in touch with a deeper sense of self. The final form that silence takes is much more philosophical. Rodriguez is fascinated by the distinction between sound and sense—that is, the boundary between when words hit the ear as mere sound and when they begin to take on meaning. Rodriguez suggests that somewhere beyond this transition from sound to sense lies a profound silence. It is this form of silence that he suffers through after learning English and feeling cut off from the previously comforting Spanish sounds of home, but this silence also enables Rodriguez to access the abstract meanings that have defined his interests and career. In this way, silence becomes both reward and a consequence of education.

BOOKS

Hunger of Memory is a book full of other books. Rodriguez frequently references books and authors he admires, such as Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, or Shakespeare, Milton, and Austen. In this regard, books symbolize Rodriguez seizing and asserting his identity as an educated, middle-class man with extensive knowledge of the Western canon. However, as much as books symbolize Rodriguez's belonging in academic spaces, books also symbolize his alienation from his family and peers. Rodriguez is more often seen in the company of books than people, and, in this way, books come to embody the educational and literary ambitions that have set him apart (literally and metaphorically) from his parents and siblings. Books, then, occupy a complicated place in the memoir. They are at once Rodriguez's passion and avenue towards professional success, and a barrier to his continued connection with his non-literary family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dial

Press edition of *Hunger of Memory* published in 2004.

Prologue Quotes

> Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnamable ancestors. I assume I retain certain features of gesture and mood derived from buried lives. I also speak Spanish today. And read García Lorca and García Márquez at my leisure. But what consolation can that fact bring against the knowledge that my mother and father have never heard of García Lorca or García Márquez?

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

Part of Rodriguez's goal in the prologue is to spell out the themes and aims of his memoir. This quote shows Rodriguez actively challenging the expectations of readers who have come to the book expecting Rodriguez's writing to act as a roadmap to Mexican or Mexican American culture. The phrase "buried lives" indicates how little interest Rodriguez has—or, at least, is willing to admit he has—in connecting with his Mexican roots. This quote also makes it clear that, while Rodriguez thinks language can do many things (as he will go on to explain over the course of the memoir), he does *not* believe that language can serve as a vehicle for cultural memory. His dismissive tone in the short sentence "I also speak Spanish today" makes this point clear. Finally, Rodriguez gestures at the deep rift his education has created between him and his parents. Rodriguez reads different English works than his parents, and he is also able to read Spanish classics, which his parents, both native Spanish speakers, cannot do. This quote thus reinforces Rodriguez's identity as an academic. Rodriguez will build his argument for the link between his identity as an academic and as a middle-class man over the course of the book.

> Language has been the great subject of my life. In college and graduate school, I was registered as an "English major." But well before then, from my first day of school, I was a student of language. Obsessed by the way it determined my public identity. The way it permits me here to describe myself, writing…

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote captures Rodriguez's fascination with language—a subject that is central to his identity not only as an academic, but also as a writer. It also subtly indicates the complexity of Rodriguez's alienation from his family. Though Rodriguez argues forcefully that this distance was created by his education, this quote complicates such a straightforward interpretation. The fact that Rodriguez specifies that he was a student of language before he even began formal schooling suggests that perhaps the reason Rodriguez feels so different from his family members is not because he has had more extensive formal education than they, but rather because he has an inherent love of language (both written and spoken), which is not shared by his parents or his siblings.

Chapter 1 Quotes

> The odd truth is that my first-grade classmates could have become bilingual, in the conventional sense of that word, more easily than I. Had they been taught (as upper-middle-class children are often taught early) a second language like Spanish or French, they could have regarded it simply as that: another public language. In my case such bilingualism could not have been so quickly achieved. What I did not believe was that I could speak a single public language.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

One aspect of the brilliance of Rodriguez's writing is the way in which he redefines words that society has come to accept. The common understanding of "bilingual education" is schooling that is conducted in two languages. Rodriguez suggests in this quote that there are different kinds of bilingualism. His wealthy, white schoolmates have grown up speaking English, so bilingualism for them follows the conventional definition. However, for Rodriguez, who has grown up speaking Spanish—a private language (at least in the United States)—"bilingual education" is a much more

fraught term. This is because, were Rodriguez to have been educated in a bilingual classroom, he would have been mediating between a private language (Spanish) and a public one (English). This gets to the crux of Rodriguez's disagreement with bilingual education: Rodriguez thinks school must serve to teach children a public language, helping them to cultivate a public identity. A bilingual classroom would have defeated this goal for a lower-class, Hispanic student like Rodriguez. In this way, this quote demonstrates that a term like "bilingualism" is much more complicated than it appears on first glance.

One Saturday morning I entered the kitchen where my parents were talking in Spanish. I did not realize that they were talking in Spanish however until, at the moment they saw me, I heard their voices change to speak English. Those *gringo* sounds they uttered startled me. Pushed me away. In that moment of trivial misunderstanding and profound insight, I felt my throat twisted by unsounded grief. I turned quickly and left the room. But I had no place to escape to with Spanish. (The spell was broken.) My brother and sisters were speaking English in another part of the house.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Siblings , Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20-21

Explanation and Analysis

The moment Rodriguez describes in this quote took place shortly after Rodriguez's Catholic schoolteachers persuaded his parents to speak only English at home. This quote captures the confusion and bewilderment Rodriguez felt at this drastic change taking place in his home. What makes this quote notable is the sense of betrayal Rodriguez evokes. Most of the time, when he speaks of learning English, he casts himself in the role of betrayer (by betraying the language of his parents); however, in this quote, he clearly feels betrayed—not only by his parents but also by his siblings. Thus, this quote reveals that, on some level, Rodriguez feels his parents were complicit in creating an environment of reduced family intimacy. This might explain why Rodriguez doesn't seem to make concerted efforts as an adult to repair his relationship with his family. This quote also engages with the question of silence; one could consider *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez's attempt to articulate the grief that remained "unsounded" in the years of his childhood.

My mother met the wrath of her brother, her only brother, when he came up from Mexico one summer with his family. He saw his nieces and nephews for the very first time. After listening to me, he looked away and said what a disgrace it was that I couldn't speak Spanish, "*su propio idioma*." He made that remark to my mother; I noticed, however, that he stared at my father.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote addresses the question of what it means to "correctly" enact Mexican American identity. To Rodriguez's uncle, clearly a Mexican American should speak Spanish; for Rodriguez's parents, raising children who speak good English is of higher priority. Though he explicitly did not want to write a book that would speak for Mexican Americans, the fact that Rodriguez's writing deals with such complicated questions around what it means to have a bicultural identity has helped make Rodriguez a key figure in Chicano literature. This quote is also interesting on a formal level because Rodriguez renders his uncle's dialogue in Spanish, without an accompanying English translation. Rodriguez's choices about when to use Spanish (or Spanglish) in this book are difficult to analyze because they do not follow a pattern. In this instance, Rodriguez's decision to render the phrase "his own language" in untranslated Spanish may underscore the internalized shame Rodriguez felt about his poor Spanish skills as a child.

He wanted to know what she had said. I started to tell him, to say—to translate her Spanish words into English. The problem was, however, that though I knew how to translate exactly *what* she had told me, I realized that any translation would distort the deepest meaning of her message: It had been directed only to me. This message of intimacy could never be translated because it was not *in* the words she had used but passed *through* them. So any translation would have seemed wrong; her words would have been stripped of an essential meaning.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

This quote documents a pivotal moment in Rodriguez's life. When a neighbor asked if Rodriguez could translate something his grandmother had shouted to him from a window, Rodriguez had the realization he narrates here. This quote is significant because it explains an important change of mind Rodriguez had: instead of thinking that Spanish itself created intimacy, he realized that the speaker—not the language—was the source of intimacy. This quote has important implications for how Rodriguez later depicts written language (as a form that *mimics* a feeling of intimacy, though it can never achieve it). According to Rodriguez's philosophy, written language cannot capture speech just as a spoken translation of something said in another language cannot capture the essence of the original. However, as a writer, Rodriguez clearly places value on the written word. As a student of language, Rodriguez's conclusions are thus occasionally messy—and sometimes verge on tautological, such as his argument that intimacy is created by intimates (rather than by language).

Behind this screen there gleams an astonishing promise: One can become a public person while still remaining a private person. At the very same time one can be both! There need be no tension between the self in the crowd and the self apart from the crowd! Who would not want to believe such an idea? Who can be surprised that the scheme has won the support of many middle-class Americans?

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the context of Rodriguez's discussion of bilingual education. He argues that this system of education is built on the false premise that the tension between one's private and public identities can be eased, and even erased. The implications of this argument are rather depressing, as Rodriguez suggests that discomfort is (or at least should be) inherent to life, since it comes from a necessary separation of public and private. In this passage and throughout the book, Rodriguez adheres to the idea that the "astonishing promise" of bilingual education is a delusion; it seems possible that he over-argues the point in this quotation, in part to justify (and even redeem) the discomfort he has felt his whole life. This quote is notable on a formal level because it shows Rodriguez breaking slightly from his standard academic tone, using exclamation points (as well as question marks) to dramatize how ridiculous he finds the concept of bilingual education.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Those times I remembered the loss of my past with regret, I quickly reminded myself of all the things my teachers could give me. (They could make me an educated man.) I tightened my grip on pencil and books. I evaded nostalgia. Tried hard to forget. But one does not forget by trying to forget. One only remembers. I remembered too well that education had changed my family's life. I would not have become a scholarship boy had I not so often remembered.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote evokes the important role that teachers came to play in Rodriguez's life as he furthered his primary and secondary education, seeming to suggest that teachers, in part, displaced his parents. It also suggests the powerful link between books and memory: as a child, Rodriguez used books to combat memory, as education was meant to erase

his family's past. This quote resonates on a meta level for, as an adult, Rodriguez uses books (including the one he is writing) to give voice to memory. This shows a development in Rodriguez's thinking, for he has come to realize, as he describes in this passage, that attempting to suppress memory does not work. It is interesting to note that, though Rodriguez speaks in this passage and in others of the impact that teachers had on him, he does not mention individual teachers by name. This seems to undercut Rodriguez's argument that teachers became more important in than his parents—as his parents continue to play a prominent role in every remaining chapter of the book.

Months later, two weeks of Christmas vacation: The first hours home were the hardest. ("What's new?") My parents and I sat in the kitchen for a conversation. (But, lacking the same words to develop our sentences and to shape our interests, what was there to say? What could I tell them of the term paper I had just finished on the "universality of Shakespeare's appeal"?)

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Rodriguez's first visit home from Stanford. His mother, particularly, was resistant to the idea of Rodriguez going to university so far away from home, but Rodriguez writes that he felt his departure for college would only make the emotional distance he already felt from his family more concrete. Though other passages in the book suggest that this distance is, at least to some extent, a self-fulfilling prophecy, this quote succinctly demonstrates how vastly different are the forms of English that Rodriguez and his parents speak. It is interesting to note that Rodriguez's description of language as a force that can shape a person's interests engages with a school of thought known as linguistic relativity. In its strong form, this principle suggests that the language a person speaks determines her thoughts. Though Rodriguez might not agree with this principle to its fullest extent, this quote does seem to suggest that Rodriguez assigns language the power to influence the direction of thoughts, as well as to shape the way they're articulated.

Playfully she ran through complex sentences, calling the words alive with her voice, making it seem that the author somehow was speaking directly to me. I smiled just to listen to her. I sat there and sensed for the very first time some possibility of fellowship between a reader and a writer, a communication, never *intimate* like that I heard spoken words at home convey, but one nonetheless *personal*.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Rodriguez recalls his one-on-one tutoring sessions with a nun when he was first learning to read in English. He felt intensely lonely when he read, which caused him to form the habit of reading aloud to himself. His teachers noticed this and assigned him to remedial reading classes. Hearing his tutor read aloud in these sessions caused Rodriguez to experience a profound shift, in which he realized that reading could be a pleasurable experience rather than a chore.

This quote indicates how important interpersonal connection was to Rodriguez as a child. Hearing his own voice read aloud didn't convince him of the joys of reading, but hearing another person read aloud did. Though this quote is about Rodriguez realizing the feeling of fellowship that books made possible, it also implies that loneliness is somehow an intrinsic characteristic of a life of reading. Even after Rodriguez learned to enjoy reading, it could not replace the sounds of "spoken words at home." Thus, this quote reflects the painful cost of Rodriguez choosing the life of a scholar: exchanging sound for silence.

Here is no fabulous hero, no idealized scholar-worker. The scholarship boy does not straddle, cannot reconcile, the two great opposing cultures of his life. His success is unromantic and plain. He sits in the classroom and offers those sitting beside him no calming reassurance about their own lives.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the context of Rodriguez's discussion of what it means to be a scholarship boy. He argues that the figure of the scholarship boy makes other students uncomfortable because the scholarship boy reminds them that education changes everyone fundamentally, not just those from poorer backgrounds. This quote is powerful because it pushes back on a "romantic" view of what a lower-class student looks like (that they are inspiring, or uniquely hardworking, or even lucky), and instead evokes the cognitive dissonance that such students feel in straddling their different lives. Rodriguez's insistence on painting a true picture of a scholarship boy has resonances today, as educational dialogue can sometimes tend to romanticize low-income students for the "grit" they demonstrate instead of treating them as "normal" or students.

Negatively (for that is how this idea first occurred to me): My need to think so much and so abstractly about my parents and our relationship was in itself an indication of my long education. … And yet, *positively*: The ability to consider experience so abstractly allowed me to shape into desire what would otherwise have remained indefinite, meaningless longing in the British Museum.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

This moment occurs upon Rodriguez's return from a year abroad in Britain working on his dissertation. He returned home eager to reconnect with his family and his roots, only to find that he still approached experiences and interpersonal relationships through the lens of an academic. As this quote indicates, this realization was, at first, frustrating for Rodriguez; he saw this tendency as yet another reminder of how his education had changed his relationships with his family. However, Rodriguez also reflects that the analytical abilities his education has given him have allowed him to think critically about the effects his education has had on him. This is a sentiment that Rodriguez expresses elsewhere in the book, and it represents the paradox of education, as he sees it: education has changed him (which distances him from people and experiences he values), but has also allowed him to think critically about the changes he has experienced (a process he treasures). Rodriguez celebrates the fact that language, learned in his student days, has allowed him to articulate his emotional experiences. He thus shores up his argument that the benefits of education outweigh the costs. Yet, this quote serves as a rare indication that Rodriguez's immediate reaction to his education was one of loss, and that his argument in favor of education's benefits could be seen, in some lights, as little more than a rationalization of the losses he has endured.

Chapter 3 Quotes

When all else was different for me (as a scholarship boy) between the two worlds of my life, the Church provided an essential link. During my first months in school, I remember being struck by the fact that—although they worshipped in English—the nuns and my classmates shared my family's religion. The *gringos* were, in some way, like me, *católicos*.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

This quote succinctly explains why Catholicism was so important to Rodriguez as he was growing up: it provided him with a sense of continuity even as he experienced dramatic life changes. However, this quote also suggests that Rodriguez felt so positively about Catholicism because it gave him a sense of connection even with people very different than him. This is, however, a complicated sense of community, as Rodriguez insists on marking white Catholics as *gringos*, and he and his family as *católicos*. It is thus unclear how profoundly Catholicism made him feel that he "shared" a fundamental characteristic with people who worshipped in English. Indeed, this passage seems curiously to emphasize the differences in language, rather than emphasizing that both groups worship the same God. Though Rodriguez is a proud speaker of English, his decision to use Spanish words in this passage further underscores the fact that he continued to feel different from his white Catholic peers.

A child whose parents could not introduce him to books like *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, I was introduced to the spheres of enchantment by the nighttime Catholicism of demons and angels. The superstitious Catholicism of home provided a kind of proletarian fairy world.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is significant because it suggests that a desire for stories is an essential experience of childhood, regardless of the child's background. Because his parents didn't speak enough English to be able to tell him Grimm's fairy tales, Rodriguez sought out other stories that would satisfy his desire for fantasy stories, finding them in his Catholic faith. Thus, this quote helps provide another explanation of why Catholicism was so important to Rodriguez as a child; not only did it provide continuity between home and school, but it also inspired his imagination. What is interesting about this quote is that Rodriguez makes no mention of Mexican fairy stories his parents might have told him. As he has done before, Rodriguez places nearly exclusive emphasis on English-language literature. This quote thus engages with the question of the role books have played in Rodriguez's life.

In ceremonies of public worship, [my parents] have been moved, assured that their lives—all aspects of their lives, from waking to eating, from birth until death, all moments—possess great significance. Only the liturgy has encouraged them to dwell on the meaning of their lives. To think.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is significant because it demonstrates the tendency Rodriguez has to make assumptions about his parents' intellectual lives. He claims, without direct evidence, that the Church is the only institution that has encouraged his parents to think. Presumably, the other institution that could have had this effect on his parents would have been the university—but neither of his parents attended college. It is important to take account of quotes like this. While Rodriguez's account of the distance he feels from his parents is certainly full of urgency and pain, Rodriguez also makes occasional claims about his parents, such as this one, that betray a sense of condescension. He often assumes that, because his parents are not college-educated, they do not naturally tend to "dwell on the meaning of their lives," as Rodriguez clearly does. This rather crude assumption serves as a reminder to the reader to question Rodriguez's narrative voice.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The normal, extraordinary, animal excitement of feeling my body alive—riding shirtless on a bicycle in the warm wind created by furious self-propelled motion—the sensations that first had excited in me a sense of my maleness, I denied. I was too ashamed of my body. I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This quote reflects the deeply embedded shame that Rodriguez felt about being brown. He does not go so far as to claim that this shame came from internalized racism (this would, in Rodriguez's mind, likely place too great an emphasis on race), but it seems possible that this was the case. Though this passage does not mention Rodriguez's sexuality, it is still a remarkably sensuous passage, which makes it stand out in the context of Rodriguez's academic-sounding writing. Part of the reason this passage is so powerful is because Rodriguez never seems to truly recapture that "extraordinary, animal excitement" about his body. Though he discusses, later in this essay, feeling that his summer job broke the curse of shame, the adult Rodriguez writing this book seems to have resolved to ignore his skin color, rather than feeling either ashamed *or* proud of it.

> At such times I suspected that education was making me effeminate. The odd thing, however, was that I did not judge my classmates so harshly. Nor did I consider my male teachers in high school effeminate. It was only myself I judged against some shadowy, mythical Mexican laborer—dark like me, yet very different.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Quotes like this one, which implicitly engage with questions of Mexican masculinity, are part of why Rodriguez is considered a seminal Chicano writer. This quote captures the conflicting ideals that dominated Rodriguez's childhood imagination. On the one hand, he hoped (despite his mother's fears) to be more like a Mexican laborer, who he felt had both physical power and some kind of metaphorical power. On the other hand, he emulated his literate white teachers. This quote thus captures the intense dissonance Rodriguez experienced as a Mexican student in American schools.

It also raises the question of whether Rodriguez is guilty of romanticizing the figure of the Mexican laborer. He admits that this character was a mythical one, yet he also seems to assume that this "ideal" Mexican man—the antithesis of a white American high school teacher—is illiterate. It seems that, in some ways, Rodriguez unfairly distills *los pobres* into a homogenous group, making assumptions about this large group of people based solely on their class status.

> In my bedroom were books by poets and novelists—books that I loved—in which male writers published feelings the men in my family never revealed or acknowledged in words. And it seemed to me that there was something unmanly about my attachment to literature. Even today, when so much about the myth of the *macho* no longer concerns me, I cannot altogether evade such notions.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

This quote powerfully articulates the link between Mexican manhood and stoicism. Mexican men are expected to be macho, a characteristic that encompasses both physical and emotional strength. In Rodriguez's family, this is often expressed as silence; many of Rodriguez's descriptions of his father emphasize his father's silence, especially in English-speaking settings. The cultural value of machismo was at direct odds with Rodriguez's education, which encouraged him to be able to articulate his feelings, even as a man. Rodriguez's admission that the pressure to be macho still lingers in his adult mind demonstrates the intense effect that cultural values like machismo can have. Not only does this passage make Rodriguez's writing relevant to Chicanos, but it also makes *Hunger of Memory* pertinent to white readers today, as questions of toxic masculinity and broader ideals of American manhood continue to surface in national discussions.

> I would not learn in three months what my father had meant by "real work." I was not bound to this job; I could imagine its rapid conclusion. For me the sensation of exertion and fatigue could be savored. For my father or uncle, working at comparable jobs when they were my age, such sensations were to be feared.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reflects another aspect of Rodriguez's distance from his parents. Not only has Rodriguez lived a more "intellectual" life than his father, but he also lived it almost to the complete exclusion of leading a physical life. For him, physical labor is thus intriguing and exciting, rather than tedious and potentially dangerous. Though Rodriguez will later expand the conclusions of this passage, reasoning that he will never be able to feel connected to *los pobres* in general, the power of this particular quotation comes from the fact that Rodriguez's experience of manual labor makes him feel an unbridgeable distance from his own father and uncle. In some ways, this could be considered a generational gap. The life Rodriguez has led in America has allowed him

to imagine things beyond physical labor; his father does not have the luxury (or perhaps, in Rodriguez's view, even the capability) of imagining a different life. Part of what makes this quotation so melancholy is that, rather than allowing the distance he feels to inspire him with a sense of gratitude or compassion, Rodriguez emphasizes the alienation he feels from the men in his family.

> I stood there. I wanted to say something more. But what could I say in Spanish, even if I could have pronounced the words right? Perhaps I just wanted to engage them in small talk, to be assured of their confidence, our familiarity. I thought for a moment to ask them where in Mexico they were from. Something like that. And maybe I wanted to tell them (a lie, if need be) that my parents were from the same part of Mexico.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

This passage refers to the Mexican seasonal workers (*los pobres*) that Rodriguez encountered when working a summer construction job during college. His boss assumed that Rodriguez spoke Spanish and used him as a translator to explain directions to the seasonal workers. Rodriguez was nervous about speaking Spanish to the Mexicans, but he was able to make himself understood. However, he also experienced the intense longing for connection that this passage describes. This desire seems to extend beyond wanting to "prove" to these men that he was Mexican, too. In this moment, Rodriguez genuinely seems to crave a sense of community with these workers. Ultimately Rodriguez left without saying anything more to these men and, later in the chapter, he explains his conclusion that his education and class status have made him fundamentally different from them. Yet the urgent need for connection that this passage articulates—a connection Rodriguez is so desperate to feel that he considers lying—serves as an important reminder that, for all Rodriguez's disclaimers that he is not interested in his Mexican ancestry or culture, he cannot shake his deep longing to belong to a community.

> That is only to say that my complexion assumes its significance from the context of my life. My skin, in itself, means nothing. I stress the point because I know there are people who would label me "disadvantaged" because of my color. They make the same mistake I made as a boy, when I thought a disadvantaged life was circumscribed by particular occupations. … But I was not one of *los pobres*. What made me different from them was an attitude of *mind*, my imagination of myself.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

This passage encapsulates Rodriguez's argument that class more powerfully shapes a person's experiences and identity than does race. Here, Rodriguez claims that his skin color "means nothing": it does not say anything about who he is or to what communities he belongs. As an adult he finally realizes that he never has been, nor can he ever be, in true solidarity with *los pobres* because he is fundamentally different from them. Not only does this conclusion betray a sense of arrogance (Rodriguez assumes that his imagination of himself, because it developed through a rich education, is superior to that of the Mexicans), but it also does not account for the deep desire Rodriguez once felt to be part of the Mexican community. Rodriguez's overall depiction of academia makes it clear that the university community is not satisfying to him. While he ultimately dismisses his longing for community (at least, race-based community) as childish and misinformed, Rodriguez never seems to address *why* this sense of longing has seemed to continue to crop up throughout his life. This omission suggests that perhaps Rodriguez's almost complete dismissal of race as a factor in identity formation is not entirely an honest portrayal, serving instead to help Rodriguez make a political point.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Academics would have violated their generation's ideal of openness if they had said that their schools couldn't accommodate disadvantaged Americans. To have acknowledged the truth about their schools, moreover, academics would have had to acknowledge their own position of privilege. And that would have been difficult. The middle-class academy does not deeply impress on students or teachers a sense of social advantage. The campus has become a place for "making it" rather than a place for those who, relatively speaking, "have it made."

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the context of Rodriguez's discussion of changes to universities in the aftermath of World War Two. According to Rodriguez's view, universities and the people working in them deluded themselves into thinking that academia could be a place for disadvantaged people to gain privilege by becoming educated. In fact, Rodriguez argues, a person's mere presence at a university is indicative of the fact that she is already, to some degree, privileged. Such a person would need to have already experienced a sufficient level of secondary education to allow her to succeed in a university; thus, Rodriguez claims, her entrance to middle-class society—her journey to "making it"—really began long before she entered university.

This brief quote thus has deep implications for Rodriguez's view of class, because it suggests that universities *aren't*, in reality, open to disadvantaged (i.e. lower-class) Americans. Rodriguez doesn't explicitly address whether this should or shouldn't be the case—however, his reverence for academia elsewhere in the book would seem to indicate that Rodriguez sees the university as an inherently middle-class institution. In this way, this quote exposes a troubling side to Rodriguez's insistence that he is a middle-class man: he has a tendency to condescend to lower-class people (as a group) even as he nominally expresses concern for and interest in them.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Adulthood seemed consumed by memory. I would tell myself otherwise. I would tell myself that the act of remembering is an act of the present. (In writing this autobiography, I am actually describing the man I have become—the man in the present.)

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Rodriguez is reflecting on the process of writing *Hunger of Memory*. It presents a complicated view of the role of memory. Rodriguez's tone here suggests that, perhaps, he is only "telling himself" that memory is an act of the present, when, in fact, writing this book really *has* caused him to become mired in the past. Yet, Rodriguez's argument that the boy he was has made him the man he is seems genuine. Regardless of how one decides to interpret it—reading it as straightforward or tinged with irony—this passage remains significant because it is one of the few instances in which Rodriguez overtly meditates on the role that memory has played in his life, not only as a private person but as a writer.

This quote also engages with the motif of silence. Elsewhere in this chapter, Rodriguez demonstrates that the life of a writer is dominated by silence. As an inherently silent act, the act of remembering thus deepens Rodriguez's experience of silence. One way to interpret this quote, then, is to conclude that part of Rodriguez's impulse to write an autobiography is not only to describe his identity but to give voice to the uncomfortable silence of his memories.

❝ My mother must use a high-pitched tone of voice when she addresses people who are not relatives. It is a tone of voice I have all my life heard her use away from the house. Coming home from grammar school with new friends, I would hear it, its reminder: My new intimates were strangers to her. Like my sisters and brother, over the years, I've grown used to hearing that voice. Expected to hear it. Though I suspect that voice has played deep in my soul, sounding a lyre, to recall my "betrayal," my movement away from our family's intimate past.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Siblings , Rodriguez's Father , Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191-192

Explanation and Analysis

Rodriguez explains in this quote that, even now that he is an adult, his mother still uses her "public voice," one he recognizes from childhood. Though he offers this example, ostensibly, to show that his mother has never developed a public identity in the way that he has, this quote also reveals a sense of bitterness. Rodriguez hints that his sense of having betrayed his family by pursuing his education is a feeling that his family members have themselves reinforced. Moments like this one suggest that, although Rodriguez celebrates his education and the new identity it gave him, he has perhaps not fully confronted his deep-held worry that his family was complicit in creating—perhaps even accepting of—the lack of intimacy that resulted. This quote is crucial in that it encapsulates the conflicting feelings Rodriguez has toward his parents: though they are proud of him and continue to make efforts at connecting with him, he cannot help but feel that the push they gave him out of the nest of his happy childhood was excessively forceful.

> I have come to think of myself as engaged in writing graffiti. Encouraged by physical isolation to reveal what is most personal; determined at the same time to have my words seen by strangers. I have come to understand better why works of literature—while never intimate, never individually addressed to the reader—are so often among the most personal statements we hear in our lives.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is significant because it represents the most complete articulation of Rodriguez's project to appear in the book. As religion once was for him, writing is a way for Rodriguez to fuse the private with the public. Rodriguez makes a vague rhetorical attempt to deny that this is what he is doing—he specifies that while writing can be personal, it can never be intimate—this quote nevertheless remains troublesome because it contradicts some of the earliest arguments Rodriguez made in this book. Even earlier on in this essay, Rodriguez explained how gestures of private life made in public (such as a movie star discussing his divorce on a TV talk show) were dishonest and vulgar. It is difficult to say how Rodriguez writing a book about his personal life is any different, except that, unlike the movie star, Rodriguez is at least aware of the distinction between private and public speech/identity. The one part of this quote that offers a clue to this paradox is the fact that Rodriguez defines his writing as an act of graffiti-making. Perhaps he sees his writing as an exception to his (and his family's) rule of vulgarity because what he is creating is art. Regardless, this quote is crucial because it reveals that Rodriguez's argumentation is not airtight; though he nearly always writes as an essayist, sometimes his conclusions are not as logical as scholarly writing should be.

> All those faraway childhood mornings in Sacramento, walking together to school, [my siblings and I] talked but never mentioned a thing about what concerned us so much: the great event of our schooling, the change it forced on our lives. Years passed. Silence grew thicker, less penetrable. We grew older without ever speaking to each other about any of it. Intimacy grooved our voices in familiar notes; familiarity defined the limits of what could be said. Until we became adults. And now we see each other most years at noisy family gatherings where there is no place to stop the conversation, no right moment to turn the heads of listeners, no way to essay this, my voice.

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Siblings

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

This quote represents one of the few instances that Rodriguez specifically addresses his relationship with his siblings. He argues that certain things—often the most important events of one's life—cannot be discussed with people one knows well, because having a close relationship

with someone circumscribes the topics that can be discussed with that person. This is an unconventional stance on what it means to be intimate with someone; many people would argue the opposite—that being intimate with someone means you discuss ultra-personal things with that person. Though Rodriguez is most well-known for his controversial views on bilingual education and affirmative action, his atypical view of intimacy merits equal, if not more, critical attention.

This quote is also significant because it suggests that Rodriguez would like to feel more connected to his siblings. However, this quote also shows that Rodriguez assumes education was a "great event" for his siblings in the same way it was for him; in fact, this is part of the reason he can't bring himself to broach the topic with his siblings—it seems too monumental. In some ways, Rodriguez's view of intimacy is self-defeating. He laments the inability to commiserate with his siblings, but perhaps if he talked to them, he would find that they hadn't had the same experience of schooling as he did.

> My mother stands waving toward no one in particular. She seems sad to me. How sad? Why? (Sad that we all are going home? Sad that it was not quite, can never be, the Christmas one remembers having had once?) I am tempted to ask her quietly if there is anything wrong. (But these are questions of paradise, Mama.)

Related Characters: Richard Rodriguez (speaker), Rodriguez's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 211-212

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears just before the end of the book, poignantly capturing the unbridgeable distance Rodriguez feels from his mother. It is notable on a formal level due to Rodriguez's poetic use of parenthetical statements. The final of these parenthetical statements is most significant, as it implies that only in a perfect world would Rodriguez be able to ask his mother the simple question, "What's wrong?" This claim is significant because, on the one hand, it seems hyperbolic—surely, despite their many differences (both cultural and linguistic), Rodriguez must be able to ask his mother such a straightforward question. It seems that Rodriguez might be dramatizing his lack of closeness to his mother for artistic effect. Still, the fact that Rodriguez cannot bring himself to inquire after his mother—for whatever his many reasons—indicates how lonely a life Rodriguez leads, suggesting that his mother's nickname for him, "Mr. Secrets," might be more appropriate than she even knows. For this passage would indicate that, not only does Rodriguez keep some secrets of his own, but that he is also emotionally incapable of, perhaps even uninterested in, enquiring about the secrets of others.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: MIDDLE-CLASS PASTORAL

Rodriguez sketches the arc of his life in broad strokes. "Once upon a time," he writes, he was a socially disadvantaged child whose life was a balance of intense family closeness and extreme public alienation. Now, he is an assimilated middle-class American man. However he doesn't quite blend into his surroundings: he is still "exotic in a tuxedo" at a Beverly Hills party, and wonders if he is more monster than man.

This introduction establishes one of the key tensions within the book: private versus public identity. As will become clear, Rodriguez endorses the latter more forcefully than the former. But his persistent feelings of "exoticness" hint at his continuous battle with feeling out of place in many settings throughout his adulthood.

Rodriguez also lays out the various ways in which he has been viewed by different groups. Some people on what he calls the Ethnic Left see him as a brown Uncle Tom—someone who has been duped by white, mainstream society. He imagines a "dainty white lady" approaching him at a luncheon and sighing piteously over the fact that Rodriguez wasn't able to "use" his Spanish in school. Other people, members of White America, want him to perform "a drama of ancestral reconciliation," in which he returns to his Mexican roots. Rodriguez rails against these people, claiming no interest in "buried lives." His focus, he claims, lies in the immediate: that is, the separation he has endured from his family as a result of his education. This will be the focus of his book and it is, he asserts, an American story.

Rodriguez is positioning his ideas in context. Many advocates of minority and Chicano rights movements felt that Rodriguez had "sold out" by denouncing policies such as affirmative action and bilingual education. Here, Rodriguez makes it clear that these people themselves are the fools—the derision with which he speaks of the white woman commenting on his life experience indicates that he believes the people who pity him don't fully understand the dangerous implications of the policies they advocate. Rodriguez also takes a political stance by refusing to speak on behalf of Mexican Americans as a whole. Rather, he defines his project in his own terms, focusing on the Americanness of his story.

Rodriguez elaborates by describing his memoir as a pastoral, a hymn to middle-class life. He claims that writing about his lower-class childhood reminds him of the separation he has achieved from that life, thereby helping him define the man he has become. While his New York editor, calling him on the phone, thinks his memoir needs "more Grandma"—that is, more personal anecdotes—Rodriguez is determined to focus on abstract concepts that he finds important. These concepts include the way in which gaining a public identity permanently changed his life. Rodriguez maintains that language is the main force that has allowed him to shape this identity, and he admits that he is obsessed with the power of language. He closes the prologue with the bold claim that his memoir will be a parable for the life of his middle-class reader.

Rodriguez is at work defining his own goals for this book: he is determined to write the book he wants to write, rather than the one people expect. The language he uses here is important in itself because he is deliberately using terms (such as "pastoral") that mark him as an educated individual with middle-class sensibilities. Thus, even on a sentence level, Rodriguez is beginning to build evidence for his claim that this memoir will serve as an analogy for middle class life writ large. It's also worth noting that Rodriguez assumes that his reader is middle-class. It's unclear if he sees this as an inevitable result of writing a literary memoir, or if he is actively defining the audience he wants.

CHAPTER 1: ARIA

Rodriguez started school knowing only fifty words of English. He lived in a middle-class neighborhood, and his classmates were mostly white. School was the first setting in which Rodriguez heard himself named in English rather than Spanish. Rodriguez started school before the push for bilingual education in American schools, and he is glad of this fact. He claims that supporting bilingual education both misunderstands the purpose of public education and trivializes the nature of "intimate life." No child, he says, is capable of using his family's language in school.

Rodriguez is beginning to draw a distinction that will be hugely important to his memoir. His disapproval of bilingual education is based on the fact that he believes school should be a place to build a child's public identity, not to cultivate the private identity she has already formed at home. Here, he is giving a special status to a family's private language; the rest of his essay will begin to trouble this idea of the sanctity of private language.

Rodriguez describes his childhood growing up in a Spanish-speaking home. The sounds of Spanish were soft and comforting to him as a child, making him feel "specially recognized." These sounds stood in contrast to the harsh English sounds uttered by *los gringos*. Rodriguez argues that being so aware of the difference between private and public sounds was not healthy because it made him shy in public, too dependent on the private voices of his family. Though his childhood home was joyous and full of laughter, looking back Rodriguez scornfully realizes what his family was doing: "Like others who know the pain of public alienation, we transformed the knowledge of our public separateness and made it consoling—the reminder of intimacy."

The happy portrait of Rodriguez's childhood conflicts with the harsh tone he uses to condemn his family's embrace of Spanish as a private language. This tension between Rodriguez's nostalgia for his boyhood and his firm conviction that many of the ideas he held then were misguided will persist throughout the memoir. Here the reader is also introduced to Rodriguez's complicated relationship with his parents: though he has dedicated his memoir to them as a gesture of honor, he also seems to blame them for creating the conditions that he felt made his transition to public life more difficult.

Rodriguez elaborates on his disapproval of bilingual education. He points out that supporters of this policy believe "children like him" miss out by not being taught in their family's language. He then counters this argument by claiming that the purpose of education is to convince children that they can and should speak a public language (in his case, English). This is a crucial step in children developing a public identity. Allowing children to speak a private language at school would defeat this purpose—it would disempower them from participating in public life.

Many supporters of bilingual education were themselves Hispanic. Rodriguez is marking himself as unique by adopting what many readers might consider a "nontraditional" opinion for a person of his racial background. The publication of passages like this one contributed to some people's perception of Rodriguez as a "brown Uncle Tom"—someone who had bought into the political agenda of assimilation upheld by white America.

Rodriguez recalls a defining moment in his life: a trio of nuns from his Catholic school visited his home and asked his parents to begin speaking English at home, because they had noticed that Rodriguez was very shy when speaking English at school. Initially, Rodriguez was annoyed by his parents' insistence that he speak English but eventually a shift occurred and he became determined to master the language. From then on he stopped being attentive to the pleasures of sound, focusing instead on the meaning of what people were saying. He spoke confident English at school but was struck by the awkward **silence** that came to dominate his home, as he and his parents began to share fewer and fewer words. However, Rodriguez writes that the more profound silence was the one that came from his new "inattention to sounds."

Rodriguez is making important distinctions about the way language works. He longs for the days when he was able to savor the sounds of language, rather than being focused solely on the meaning or "sense" of words. Though he depicts his mastery of English as a sort of triumph, his writing is filled with anguish not only at the distance that bloomed between his parents and him, but also at the profound change in his relationship with spoken language. This change represents one of the great losses that came with Rodriguez's education, for in his loss of attentiveness to sound is contained both the roots of his new, confident public identity and the lost richness and warmth of his childhood.

Rodriguez returns to the question of bilingual education. "Bilingualists," he writes, are convinced that schools should remind children of how their heritage makes them different from mass society. Rodriguez claims that scorning assimilation in this manner dangerously romanticizes public separateness. People who hold these views, he says, are infatuated with self-pity. Rodriguez, on the other hand, "celebrate[s]" the day he received his new, English name.

This passage demonstrates the vast range of Rodriguez's writing. At times, he may focus on specific moments from his life, but he is also capable of making intricate arguments about broader topics. Making a scholarly argument against bilingual education gives Rodriguez's message more power than if he were merely sharing his personal experiences.

Because he was caught between Spanish and English, Rodriguez's childhood was one of "disabling confusion." He recalls family members who would tease him about being a *pocho*, a Mexican American who has forgotten his Mexican roots. He writes that his mother and father felt pressure to explain why their children did not speak fluent, easy Spanish. All of these memories carry with them Rodriguez's boyhood sense of guilt; he felt he had betrayed his family by learning English. Now, however, Rodriguez claims to have realized an important truth he did not recognize as a child: intimacy is not created by speaking a particular language, but rather by personal connections. If his home life felt less intimate after he learned English, it was because, Rodriguez says, he had finally become a public citizen. This was a social rather than a linguistic change, he writes.

This is a classic example of Rodriguez's prose: he is confronting several high-level topics in a confident but sometimes contradictory way. The fact is that Rodriguez clearly felt less close with his family after he learned English, and this diminished closeness holds deep sadness for him. His broader argument (that intimacy comes not from language but from intimates) attempts to dismiss the profound sense of loss that came with his transformation into a public, English-speaking person. However, despite Rodriguez's academic conclusions about the relationship between language and intimacy, a nagging sense of pain persists in his writing.


Again, Rodriguez returns to the question of bilingual education. He argues that languages like Spanish or black English are dangerous for use in schools, not because of any inherent quality they possess, but because they reinforce a feeling of public separateness amongst lower-class people. He claims that, fundamentally, supporters of bilingual education are trying to convince themselves that a person can live a public life with no cost to his private life. While Rodriguez admits this is a consoling thought, he maintains that "schemes" like the goal of public bilingualism are "foolish and certainly doomed."

Though Rodriguez's critics claim that he has "sold out" by adopting conservative views (such as opposing bilingual education), passages like this one suggest Rodriguez's genuine concern for the lower-class. Ultimately, he opposes bilingual education because he feels it puts lower-class students at a greater disadvantage.




Rodriguez fondly recalls his childhood as a "magical realm of sound." He confesses that he still enjoys listening to music and reading lyrical poetry because both of these artistic forms blur the line between sense and sound. However, he maintains that growing up necessarily means losing the pleasurable feeling of intimacy. He writes: "Intimacy is not trapped within words. It passes through words. It passes."

This passage pushes Rodriguez's claims about intimacy even further by revealing Rodriguez's conviction that intimacy is fleeting, a feature of life that diminishes as one ages. He treats the subject lyrically, but the fact that he doesn't articulate such a strong statement until the very end of this essay—leaving him little time to build a case for it—might make the reader wonder whether Rodriguez truly holds such a depressing view of life.

"Aria" closes with Rodriguez's poetic remembrance of the last time he saw his grandmother before she died. He can remember what she said to him, but he doesn't communicate these words to the reader, since he wouldn't be able to capture their intimacy on the page.

Rodriguez is using a personal memory to make a broader point, blurring the distinction between memoir and didactic essay.

CHAPTER 2: THE ACHIEVEMENT OF DESIRE

Rodriguez achieved great academic success, beginning his schooling barely speaking English and ending up as a Fulbright Scholar studying in the British Museum. He acknowledges that he went to excellent secondary schools and that he had significant support from his parents. However, he argues that his success ultimately came from his habits as a "scholarship boy" (a term he waits to define). He admits that his academic achievement was due ultimately to the fact that he never forgot how drastically his education was changing him.

Rodriguez is implying that his background as a lower-class, Mexican American student gave him a kind of advantage in the classroom, since it made him so aware of the changes his educating was bringing to his life. This very awareness caused him to push harder in his academic endeavors. (He will go on to trouble this later in the essay.)

When he was working on his dissertation in Britain, Rodriguez encountered Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, which was unique in that it specifically addressed students like him. He immediately identified with Hoggart's use of the term "scholarship boy," an anxious, ambitious student, haunted by the knowledge that he has *chosen* to become a student and that this choice will forever change him, separating him from the life he used to love. Reflecting on his school days as a child, Rodriguez describes himself as both enthusiastic and sad. He describes how he began to fall in love with **books** and spent more and more time alone, apart from his family.

Once again Rodriguez is demonstrating his academic training by citing and analyzing quotations from Hoggart's book. He begins to complicate the idea that his background made him ambitious in an advantageous way by showing that this ambition was also riddled with anxiety about what education was doing to him. Rodriguez is also making broader commentary on the state of educational studies by pointing out how students like him are underrepresented in the existing literature.

Throughout his childhood, people commented on how proud Rodriguez's parents must have been of him. Rodriguez says that these comments felt ironic to him, because he was painfully aware of how different his parents' backgrounds were from his own. He briefly describes their life stories, but focuses more closely on what other feelings must have been mixed in with their pride in him. He imagines the humiliation and frustration his parents must have felt when their educated children corrected them in an argument or when he himself became the first of their children to move away for college. Finally, he remembers his first visit home from college and how talking to his parents felt more like an interview than a conversation.

Here Rodriguez begins to explicitly engage with the question of how his parents' memories differ from his own. He turns his self-examination outward, considering how his education may have affected his parents differently from him. This gesture is inherently a compassionate one and, combined with the intense investment his parents clearly showed in his education, it seems to contradict Rodriguez's conviction that he and his family are not close. However, his painful description of his visit home from college shows that his experiences as a first generation American are wildly different than those of his immigrant parents, and that these differences have only been exacerbated by his education.

Rodriguez begins to explore his relationship with **books**. Hoggart writes that the scholarship boy sees books as "strange tools," and Rodriguez affirms this opinion by reflecting on the almost shameful faith he used to have that books would make him educated. He writes that he first came to love reading because of the feeling of fellowship and connection it gave him. However, he distrusted the idea that reading could be just for pleasure and he instead tried to read as many "important books" as he could. He entered high school having read hundreds of books—including many Western classics—but not truly understanding them.

Rodriguez expands on the idea that the scholarship boy, though successful, is actually a bad student. He expresses a disdain of unoriginality, claiming that he was fundamentally an unoriginal student. This is a complicated statement for Rodriguez to make, as he has made a career for himself of writing original pieces. In passages like these, it seems possible that Rodriguez's infamously harsh tone has been turned inward, making him hard on himself.

Continuing with the question of the scholarship boy, Rodriguez writes that other students and academics loathe the scholarship boy because the contrast between his shabby clothes and the way he expresses himself remind them that education has remade him. People do not want to be reminded that education is "a long, unglamorous, even demeaning process"—and the scholarship boy cannot help but remind them of this, by his very presence in the classroom.

Though he analyzes what the scholarship boy represents symbolically, Rodriguez does not explicitly delve into how it feels to sit in a classroom and be viewed this way—though, presumably, he has had this experience. As such, this passage seems to recall the admonition of Rodriguez's editor: "Let's have more Grandma." In moments like this one, it seems clear that Rodriguez is working in an essayistic rather than a narrative mode.

Rodriguez recalls the moment of intense disillusionment he felt while working on his graduate dissertation. He began to question if anyone other than his adviser would ever read it; he grew afraid of the library's **silence** and dissatisfied with his own sense of loneliness. In this moment, he writes, he finally allowed himself to feel the nostalgia for childhood that he had held back for years. Returning home after his year in England, Rodriguez yearned to feel closeness with his parents, to finally lead "a life less thoughtful." Instead, he continued to feel an academic's desire to describe his relationship to his parents in abstract terms. This led to a realization: "If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about that fact." Rodriguez writes that it took many more years of schooling for him to trust this habit of abstraction.

The most significant work this passage does is to define a deeper dimension of why Rodriguez is grateful for his education. Not only did it teach him the public language of English, but it also taught him the language and terminology of the university, which has helped him to better understand his relationship with others and, one might guess, with himself. This passage also suggests that only past Rodriguez is "allowed" to feel nostalgia; the Rodriguez penning these pages seems to want to repress the feeling entirely.

CHAPTER 3: CREDO

This essay opens with a handful of memories from the childhoods of Rodriguez's mother and father. Rodriguez emphasizes that his parents recall growing up in Mexican towns "where everyone was a Catholic." Rodriguez, on the other hand, knew of non-Catholics growing up—yet, both at home and at school, he was surrounded by Catholics. (He emphasizes, however, that his Catholic schoolteachers gave him an excellent public education and that he was not "a ghetto Catholic.") Rodriguez says his experience of religion as a boy was unlike anything he experienced afterwards. Since college, he has identified as "a Catholic defined by a non-Catholic world." In contrast, when he was a child, he experienced Catholicism "continuously in public and private."

This passage provides a rare glimpse of Rodriguez working as a biographer rather than an autobiographer. However, his parents' memories are not very detailed and seem to be included mostly to provide a point of contrast for Rodriguez's own. Furthermore, a sense of Rodriguez's condescension emerges in his use of the phrase "ghetto Catholic." In his determination to assert his identity as a middle-class person, Rodriguez can be seen slipping into harsh and sometimes unfair language about the lower classes of American society. He sometimes takes a similar tone toward his parents.

Rodriguez writes, "I was *un católico* before I was a Catholic." As a child he didn't notice the many differences between "home Catholicism" and "school Catholicism." Instead, he embraced the fact that "when all else was different for [him] (as a scholarship boy) between the two worlds of [his] life, the Church provided an essential link." As an adult, however, Rodriguez is aware of the many differences between the *gringo* Church and his parents' Mexican Catholicism—and he goes on to detail some of them. One striking example is the different depictions of the Virgin Mary. In the *gringo* Church, she was depicted as a "serene white lady"; at home, she was "dark like [Rodriguez]" and Rodriguez's mother proudly reminded him that the Virgin "could have appeared to anyone in the world, but she appeared to a Mexican." After reflecting on some of these differences, Rodriguez notes that his Catholic schooling is also different from today's Catholic schools—his education (which emphasized memorization and submission to the authority of the Church) "belonged to another time."

Though Rodriguez insists that his Mexican background does not define him, this passage clearly indicates that his experience growing up in the tradition of Mexican Catholicism has made him a different person than he would have been had he been raised in a different Catholic tradition. It is also important to note that Rodriguez praises the Catholic Church for serving as a bridge between his private and public life—in effect, as a force that helped blur the distinction between the two. This seems to contradict some of Rodriguez's earlier statements about how private and public life should not be conflated.

Rodriguez outlines some key lessons from various stages of his education. He goes on to recall differences in the religious calendar, which governed his school year, and the secular calendar, which governed the city of Sacramento at large. He continues to compile assorted memories of his childhood in the Church (most notably, the enjoyable experience of serving as an altar boy), reflecting particularly on his love for the liturgical elements of the Church. He focuses specifically on the ritual of Mass, which he loved because it exemplified his feeling toward other Catholics: "We were close—somehow related—while also distanced by careful reserve."

Though he does not describe many specific memories, the fact that Rodriguez collects so many details from his childhood in the Catholic Church demonstrates his dedication to painting a holistic picture of this experience. The abundance of detail in this passage thus underscores how formative Rodriguez's time in the Catholic Church was.

Rodriguez shifts to detailing some of the changes he has noticed in the Church over time (he particularly dislikes the shift from Latin to English Mass). However, Rodriguez recognizes that, just as the Church has changed, so has he. He marks this change has having begun when he entered high school and began to receive a more Protestant-based education. The change was solidified during his time at Stanford, where he became "a Catholic who lived most of his week without a sense of communal Catholicism"; as a result, he writes, he began to rely more heavily on conscience. Though he lambastes changes to the Catholic liturgy, Rodriguez recognizes that these changes are aimed at his demographic: Catholics living in a secular world. He even admits that he has come to embrace cosmopolitan values. Despite the reforms that have occurred within the Church, Rodriguez writes that he clings to his religion. If he were to abandon it, he writes, he doubts there is anywhere else he could he go to have the experience of feeling himself alone with others. "If I should lose my faith in God," he writes, "I would have no place to go where I could feel myself a man."

Though Rodriguez generally condemns the impulse to blend private with public life as vulgar, he seems to grant the Catholic Church special status, celebrating its ability to bridge the personal and the public. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Rodriguez seems to more openly express pain at the loss of his Catholic community than at his perceived loss of family intimacy. This is connected to the vital role Rodriguez ascribes to the Church in making him feel like a man (by which he seems to mean "human" rather than, specifically, a male human). The deep need Rodriguez expresses in this passage for an institution like the Catholic Church complicates his dismissal of other people's desire to merge their private and public experiences.

Rodriguez admits that, when he was younger, he would never have discussed his spirituality openly. He recalls reading the diaries of seventeenth-century Puritans some time after graduating from college, and he remembers his realization that "Protestants were so public because they were otherwise alone in their faith." Writing about his spirituality, Rodriguez argues, thus makes him like a Protestant, because he is addressing his religious concerns to readers he assumes are non-religious themselves. He concludes that this is the only "appropriate" setting (surrounded by people who do not share his religious beliefs) in which he can attempt to resolve his "spiritual dilemma."

The value Rodriguez places on being amongst those who do not share his religious beliefs contradicts the intense nostalgia he has expressed elsewhere in this essay for a sense of Catholic community. It seems possible that this final segment of the essay is less Rodriguez expressing a genuine argument and more an apology for having written about what he cannot help feeling is an intensely personal topic.

CHAPTER 4: COMPLEXION

Rodriguez first describes how, in his current life as a respected author, he meets many people who react to his dark complexion by asking whether he's recently been on vacation in the Caribbean. (Rodriguez writes that he always answers with a soft but firm negative.) In direct contrast stand Rodriguez's memories from childhood summers, when his mother would react angrily to his sun-darkened skin. She scolded him for being careless, warning, "You know how important looks are in this country. With *los gringos* looks are all that they judge on." She insisted that if Rodriguez stayed in the sun he would look like one of *los pobres* or *los braceros*. Rodriguez remembers how these men used to strike him as both powerless and powerful, "their fascinating darkness—like [his]—to be feared."

Rodriguez's mother uses los pobres *and* los braceros *to refer to working class Mexican Americans, and her concern that Rodriguez's dark skin will make him look like a* bracero *shows her commitment to upward mobility and to leaving the hardships of her own childhood in Mexico behind. However, her efforts to distance herself and her family from poor manual laborers by trying to appear lighter skinned seem to equate poverty with being Latino, and her comments mirror Rodriguez's occasional condescension towards the poor. Though a young Rodriguez felt a sense of fear about his complexion, he was also able to view it as a source of potential power.*

Rodriguez reflects on the fact that he and his older sister are the only members of their nuclear family with dark complexions. Despite the fact that, according to Rodriguez, the siblings look like they could all be from different continents, Rodriguez's mother and father insist that their children never deny their Mexican ancestry. As a child, Rodriguez mechanically obeyed this lesson, but he never spoke openly to his sister about their shared dark complexions until she had children of her own and "quietly admitted relief [to Rodriguez] that they were all light."

Even though Rodriguez has, up until this point in the memoir, overtly been inclined to minimize (if not dismiss) the importance of race in identity formation, the high degree of detail with which he describes the differing complexions in his own family suggests that he cannot fully articulate his sense of selfhood without, to some degree, addressing the question of race.

Rodriguez elaborates that his extended family members shared his mother's (and sister's) preference for light skin. He claims that, even though he was the target of racial slurs as a child, no statements about race were as formative to his self-image as were his family's statements about their preference for light skin. He does note, however, that the handful of "name-calling" incidents he experienced caused him to be sensitive to the "connection between dark skin and poverty" from a very early age.

Though it probably causes Rodriguez dismay, Hunger of Memory *has become part of the canon of Chicano literature. Part of the reason for this is that, as this passage shows, Rodriguez is able to piercingly examine issues that are integral to the Mexican-American experience, such as how colorism and internalized racism affect self-image. It is important to note that in this discussion he is careful to return to two points he considers crucial: the power of language itself to affect self-identity, and the intersectional nature of race and class.*

Expanding his discussion further, Rodriguez explains how important symbols and appearances were to his parents. He recalls that when his older sister wanted to take a job cleaning houses in high school, his mother allowed it only on the condition that she not wear a uniform—she was not a maid. Rodriguez shifts to describing photographs of his parents from when they were young, dressed in the fine clothes they used to wear when Rodriguez's father took his new wife to opera performances and polo matches. He struggles to recognize the people depicted in these photos, whose poses contain "an aristocratic formality, an elegant Latin hauteur." By the time they had children, Rodriguez writes, his parents no longer dressed in this way: "Those symbols of great wealth and the reality of their lives too noisily clashed." However, they continued to respect the symbols of upper-class life and imparted this sensibility to their children. Rodriguez remembers himself as a watchful child; on visits to wealthy friends' houses, he would correctly observe the formalities—but also notice his "dark self, lit by chandelier light, in a tall hallway mirror."

For the first time, Rodriguez explicitly addresses the topic of memory, attempting to reconcile his memories of the people who raised him with the young people they used to be. In this passage, he is mainly focused on examining old photographs—photographs whose context he clearly has some knowledge of, despite that he doesn't claim to have learned this information directly from his parents. This raises the question of how memory gets transmitted within a family. Another important aspect of this passage is Rodriguez's observation that he was able to "pass" as upper-class as a child—but he was still deeply aware of how his race marked him as out-of-place. In this regard, this passage represents another moment of contradiction in terms of how Rodriguez depicts the role of race in his life.

Rodriguez writes that his first memory of "sexual excitement" is linked to his sense of his complexion. The moment occurred at a pool in the summer; Rodriguez noticed his mother watching his father dive into the water. His awareness of the sensuality of this moment was immediately followed by his mother turning and telling him to cover his shoulders with a towel. Rodriguez claims that this memory encapsulates the "shame and sexual inferiority" he came to feel because of his complexion. He considered himself ugly, and he even recalls trying to remove the darkness of his skin by shaving his arms with a razor. Because he was so ashamed of his body, he began to deny himself "a sensational life"—not participating in physical education class or riding his bike in the sun. He writes of the envy he felt of los braceros and the desire for a physical life that they inspired in him. His sense of longing was compounded by his fear that his education had made him effeminate. Even as an adult, Rodriguez writes, aspects of "the myth of the *macho*" still haunt him.

Rodriguez is engaging with questions of gender and sexuality in important ways. He notes how Mexican masculinity is linked to silence, rather than to language, and how his love of literature makes him feel disconnected not only from his cultural heritage but from his gender. Rodriguez's discussion of sexuality is also of note (as is his discussion of the braceros*) because, though he discusses his experience of desire, he makes no mention of the fact that he is gay. (Rodriguez came out ten years after writing* Hunger of Memory *in his 1992 book* Days of Obligation.*) Rather than specifying his sexual orientation, Rodriguez emphasizes how his first inkling of sexuality was revealed to him through watching his parents, suggesting that family ties have played a more integral role in his life than his discussion has previously allowed. Finally, though he does not go into great depth in his discussion of machismo, his sensitive rendering of some of the key values of Mexican masculinity is another reason that Rodriguez has come to be seen as a canonical Chicano writer.*

In one of the most extended vignettes of the memoir, Rodriguez describes the summer construction job he worked while an undergraduate at Stanford. The job was offered to him by a friend and, though Rodriguez surprised himself by accepting it, he ended up finding the physical labor pleasurable. However, when his fellow workers pointed out that he was overexerting himself and in danger of hurting his back, he had the profound realization that he had been fooling himself. "I would not learn in three months," writes Rodriguez, "what my father meant by 'real work.'" His sense of his own naïveté was underscored when he met a group of Mexican seasonal workers later in the summer. Though he felt a strange yearning to be "assured of their familiarity," he writes that he was ultimately "depressed" by the Mexicans, saddened by (what he perceived as) their vulnerability. "I would not shorten the distance I felt from *los pobres* with a few weeks of physical labor," Rodriguez writes. "I would not become like them. They were different from me." This realization—and the fact that "the curse of physical shame was broken by the sun"—are the most important takeaways from Rodriguez's construction job.

Rodriguez marks the profound differences between himself and the Mexican workers, implicitly arguing that these differences are rooted in class (since they are the same race). He thus shakes the foundation of his mother's worry that a darkened complexion would make him like these men by pointing out that his vastly different upbringing means he could never be like them. Significantly, Rodriguez ignores the fact that some of the difference he felt from these men may have arisen from the fact that they were Mexican and he is Mexican American.

Rodriguez draws the essay to a close by arguing that interpretations of his complexion are based on context. Though people in his current life assume his dark brown skin means he has been on vacation, Rodriguez points out that no one would guess this if he entered hotels through the service entrance rather than the front door. He returns, finally, to *los pobres* from his summer job, concluding that, even more so than class differences, he is separated from them by his education, which has given him a life of the mind that these men do not share. He writes that the men's **silence** is what continues to haunt him, because it represents not only their vulnerability but also their lack of a public identity.

In some regards, it seems unfair that Rodriguez pities these men for their lack of public identity, because this pity is based on his assumption that the men should speak English. However, the men are Mexican—not Mexican American—so perhaps Rodriguez's lament of their lack of public identity is misplaced, as America is neither their country of origin nor their adopted country. Here, then, is one of the potential flaws in Rodriguez's interpretation of this memory; he holds these men to the same standards he holds himself as a Mexican American man, without considering that these standards might not apply to Mexican men.

CHAPTER 5: PROFESSION

Rodriguez opens this essay by explaining that he has been the beneficiary of affirmative action. This policy arose in the late 1960s, as a result of agitation by nonwhite Americans to gain more equal access to higher education. He declares that he was wrong to have accepted the label of "minority student." He writes, "For me there is no way to say ['minority student'] with grace. I say it rather with irony sharpened by self-pity. I say it with anger." He recalls the first time he saw the phrase "minority student": in a college literature class, his professor returned a paper Rodriguez had written with the comment, "Maybe the reason you feel Dickens's sense of alienation so acutely is because you are a minority student." Rodriguez remembers the confusion he felt reading this comment: "Never before," he writes, "had a teacher suggested that my academic performance was linked to my racial identity." He considers questioning the professor about the comment, but instead he leaves the class silently—thus, he writes, "implicating" himself in the "strange reform movement" of the late 1960s.

Rodriguez became notorious in the 1970s for his anti-affirmative action stance. In this passage, he introduces the notion that part of his opposition to affirmative action, which targets "minority students," is the way that such a policy manipulates language. Rodriguez experienced intense cognitive dissonance when he was first labeled as a minority student, because this is never how Rodriguez had seen himself. Furthermore, he found the comment condescending, because he considered his identification with Dickens to be unrelated to his race (and perhaps more related to his academic abilities). As he will continue to explain in this essay, Rodriguez takes issue with a policy that thrusts labels onto people without their consent.

Rodriguez provides a brief history of affirmative action. He argues that this policy has its roots in the black civil rights struggle of the late 1960s. The leaders of this movement realized that institutional racism was blocking black students from acceptance to universities, and they advocated for improved access for black students. Rodriguez agrees with the assessment that limited access was a problem, but he argues that these activists "tragically limited the impact of their movement" by defining and addressing the problem "solely in racial terms." Affirmative action is flawed, Rodriguez argues, because it stands to benefit "those blacks least victimized by racism or any other social oppression—those culturally, if not always economically, of the middle class." Rodriguez goes on to describe how he initially accepted the label of minority student, even though it made him uneasy, but then he began to realize that his excellent early schooling meant that he wasn't disadvantaged in the way that other nonwhite students entering university were. By the early 1970s he had realized that he was "not—in a *cultural* sense—a minority, an alien from public life." Rodriguez writes: "The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student."

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this passage. Rodriguez is redefining the concept of what it means to be a minority; rather than regarding the label as an issue of race, he defines being a minority as existing outside of public, middle-class life. Rodriguez attacks the question of affirmative action in an almost legalistic manner, challenging the way that others have defined their terms. Furthermore, Rodriguez takes a fundamentally intersectional approach to the question of affirmative action: he believes that it is a flawed policy because it does not account for the intersection of race and class. Despite the rhetorical power of this passage, however, it is difficult to determine whether to take Rodriguez's statement that when he became a student he ceased being a minority at face value. Even if the professor mentioned earlier was misrepresenting Rodriguez's response to Dickens, it seems unlikely that Rodriguez's race could have had absolutely no impact on his experience within the university.

Rodriguez elaborates on the reasons he thinks affirmative action has been a failed policy. He argues that affirmative action had its roots in the American South, "where racism had been legally enforced, [and therefore] all blacks suffered discrimination uniformly." He acknowledges that affirmative action has had the positive effect of teaching Americans that "there are forms oppression that touch all levels of society." However, the downside, he writes, is that this focus on racism has made it "easy to underestimate, even to ignore altogether, the importance of *class*." He further explains that he does not doubt, for example, that a black lawyer or businessman experiences racism—but, he writes, "I do not think that all blacks are equally 'black.' Surely those uneducated and poor will remain most vulnerable to racism." Because affirmative action is blind to class distinctions, "those least disadvantaged were helped first, advanced because many others of their race were more disadvantaged." Rodriguez argues that the more revolutionary (and effective) course of action would have been to focus on reforming primary and secondary schools.

Rodriguez is writing as a kind of historian/sociologist, demonstrating yet another narrative form he is comfortable using. He is expanding his argument for an intersectional approach to the problem of institutional barriers to higher education. Though Rodriguez is known as a conservative writer, his argument against affirmative action reveals that one of his fundamental concerns is that this policy is not comprehensive enough, since it does not help the poor. The danger of this argument, however, was well-articulated by Le Anne Schreiber in her New York Times' *review of* Hunger of Memory: *"The pity is that Mr. Rodriguez's very personal reservations about bilingual education and affirmative action will be conveniently taken up by some conservatives who do not also share his very personal concern for the people those programs are intended to help."*

Rodriguez admits that he is guilty of having accepted the benefits of affirmative action, even after speaking out against it. ("I permitted myself to be prized," he writes.) He writes that he seeks forgiveness—the forgiveness "of those many persons whose absence from higher education permitted me to be classed a minority student." He doubts, however, that such people will ever read his writing.

Yet again Rodriguez's writing evokes a deep longing for connection with lower-class people. In some ways, this tone matches the form of pastoral literature (Rodriguez's specialty), which celebrates agricultural life. Yet, instead of celebrating laborers, Rodriguez feels guilty for having accepted benefits he believes should have been conferred on lower-class people.

Rodriguez further details his argument that affirmative action is only a superficial solution. He writes that, "the academy was prepared to do little more for such [minority] students" beyond admitting them. Universities began accepting students who did not have the tools to succeed in college and, thus, "the conspiracy of kindness became a conspiracy of uncaring."

The concerns Rodriguez articulates are incredibly prescient. Even today, many minority and first-generation college students protest that they do not feel supported by institutions of higher learning.

Thus far, Rodriguez has been addressing the status of affirmative action in the 1960s. He now shifts to discussing the occurrences of the 1970s—the most significant of which, he writes, was a tendency of nonwhite students to believe that it was possible for them to "[belong] at once to academia and to the society of the disadvantaged." This is a false premise, Rodriguez argues: "Activists encouraged students to believe that they were in league with the poor when, in actuality, any academic who works with the socially disadvantaged is able to be of benefit to them only because he is culturally different from them." He uses the example of the word *Chicano*, which was adopted by Mexican American activists in the 1970s. Among communities of lower-class Mexican Americans, this word was used in an "affectionately vulgar" manner, and was considered offensive when used by strangers. Activists reanimated the word with "pride and political purpose," turning it into a public word (much to the shock of non-activist Mexican Americans). Thus, Rodriguez writes, the student-activist "taught his listeners to imagine their union with many others like themselves. But the student easily coined the new word because of his very distance from *Chicano* culture."

Clearly, Rodriguez's opposition to affirmative action and the reform movements that ushered it in is extremely nuanced. His argument against such policies is deeply rooted in his conception of public versus private life and his understanding of how language operates within this paradigm. Unfortunately, both conservatives and liberals who have marshaled Rodriguez's writing in favor of their respective causes have exhibited a tendency to flatten the nuance of Rodriguez's arguments. For example, the fact that Hunger of Memory *is considered part of the Chicano canon is incredibly ironic given the subtle argument against the public use of this word that Rodriguez articulates in this passage.*

At this point Rodriguez issues a disclaimer: he writes that he is "not the best person to evaluate the Third World Student Movement" he has been describing because his relationship to these "self-proclaimed Chicano students" was a deeply uneasy one. He was envious of their fluent Spanish, for example, yet he "distrusted the implied assertion that their tongue proved their bond to the past, to the poor." These students, Rodriguez implies, were deluding themselves by thinking that their education had not fundamentally changed them.

Despite Rodriguez's envy of the connection these Chicano activists have with their Mexican heritage, Rodriguez distrusts that such a connection has any deeper meaning, since he believes that a connection that tries to cross temporal, geographic, or class boundaries will become unrecognizably distorted. He believes that these activists have good intentions, but are somewhat deluded about their own position in the world.

Rodriguez was glad to get away from these student-activists, he writes. He went to Britain for a year to study as a Fulbright Scholar and then "rushed to 'come home'"—only to realize that, even with his parents, he "remained an academic—a kind of anthropologist in the family kitchen." At this point, Rodriguez accepted a teaching position at Berkeley, where he once again had to "face" minority students. He recalls how a group of Hispanic students once visited his office, requesting that he begin teaching a minority literature class. He tried to convince the students that minority literature doesn't really exist—"Any novel or play about the lower class will necessarily be alien to the culture it portrays, I rambled." He recalls that the students looked at him with scorn, and that, from that point onward, he was seen as a comic figure, "a 'coconut'—someone brown on the outside, white on the inside." However, many of his fellow faculty members remained convinced that Rodriguez would be able to serve as a counselor to minority students. The reality was, Rodriguez writes, that the students he connected best with were middle-class (presumably white) students. Yet he still received invitations to speak about the problems facing socially disadvantaged people: "I heard myself introduced at conferences as a 'Chicano intellectual,'" he writes. "(And I stood up.)"

In recounting the story of the would-be minority literature class, Rodriguez is again redefining what has come to be a commonly understood term. While many people understand minority literature as literature written by and about people of color, Rodriguez makes an argument that all literature is high literature—that is, all literature fundamentally belongs to the higher classes of society and thus cannot accurately represent the experiences of the poor. This is a troubling argument in that Rodriguez seems not only to conflate class with race (minority literature is not necessarily about poor people), but also to inherently dismiss the ability of nonwhite, non-educated, lower-class people to create literature. Another important aspect of this passage is the discomfort Rodriguez expresses at allowing others to label his identity. As a writer, it is important to Rodriguez to be in control of language, so the fact that he has allowed people to define him as, for example, a Chicano intellectual is disturbing to him (a fact that is emphasized by Rodriguez's evocative use of parentheticals).

Rodriguez shifts focus to discuss the white student protests that occurred during his years in graduate school. Most of these protests were about American intervention in Southeast Asia (namely the Vietnam War), but white students were also reacting to the decline in value of a college diploma on the job market. Regardless, Rodriguez writes, it was ludicrous for white, middle-class students to play the victim. Though he himself protested the war in Vietnam, he argues that, for too many people, their protest was based on self-pity and that, fundamentally, students had lost sight of the fact that "higher education implie[s] privilege."

Rodriguez's argues that university students are in a place of inherent privilege, which "disqualifies" them from certain protests. The question of what kinds of protests are acceptable for college students to make persists today in questions about the value of safe spaces, free speech, and the university's role in student life.

Closing the essay, Rodriguez reflects on the deep uneasiness he began to feel in the mid-1970s as he began to apply to permanent teaching positions post-graduate school. He received countless prestigious offers, but couldn't shake the feeling that he was only being offered these positions because he was a "minority." He recalls a pivotal conversation with a fellow graduate student, who was depressed because the only job offer he'd received would require him to move away from his young daughter. When Rodriguez admitted to his colleague that he had, in fact, gotten an offer from Yale but hadn't made up his mind about it, the colleague replied, "You're the one who gets all the breaks." Rodriguez was angered by this comment and found himself defending affirmative action, to his own disgust. The colleague, who was Jewish, dismissed him saying, "There isn't any way for me to compete with you. Once there were quotas to keep my parents out of schools like Yale. Now there are quotas to get you in. And the effect on me is the same as it was for them." In this moment, Rodriguez realized that, though he wanted the life of an academic, he had to protest the unfair place the university had become. He declined all the offers he'd received. When he called his parents to inform them, his father, upset, said, "I don't know why you feel this way. We never had any of the chances before." Rodriguez writes: "*We*, he said. But he was wrong. It was *he* who had never had any chance before."

This vignette is one of the few moments in the book when Rodriguez recounts an extended, specific memory. As such, it stands out even more dramatically as a critical moment in Rodriguez's life. This passage is also noteworthy because, in his conversation with his father, Rodriguez complicates the idea of the American dream: that a child's life in America should be better than his immigrant father's. Rodriguez, however, rejects the idea that he should receive advantages his father never had solely because his father never had them. Though the conversation between Rodriguez and his father is brief, it nevertheless engages with a classic question of immigrant literature: the familial pressure placed on first-generation Americans to make something of themselves.

CHAPTER 6: MR. SECRETS

Rodriguez recalls how, following the publication of his first autobiographical essay, he received a letter from his mother saying: "Write about something else in the future. Our family life is private." Specifically, Rodriguez's mother did not want *gringos* to know about her family life. Rodriguez reveals that he considered this question while writing *Hunger of Memory*. He also reflected on the isolation and **silence** required to live a writer's life, as well as his fear that his "absorption with events in [his] past amounted to an immature refusal to live in the present." He concludes that he will never be able to explain his motives for writing to his mother; instead, he will only be able to reveal them "to public readers [he] expect[s] never to meet."

This passage seems to support the argument that what differentiates Rodriguez from his family is not his education but his identity as a writer. Though Rodriguez has, throughout the memoir, expressed ambivalent feelings toward silence, it is evident that silence is what is required for him to be a writer. This necessarily cuts him off from a family life, and could also explain the lack of other defined characters (such as friends or colleagues) in the book.

Rodriguez continues, arguing that his mother's use of the phrase *los gringos* indicates that his mother and father "have not followed their children all the way down the path to full Americanization." His parents "never forget when they are in public." He provides further details of his mother's letter, where she pleaded: "Writing is one thing, the family is another. I don't want *tus hermanos* hurt by your writings." Rodriguez writes that his mother never had to give him these kinds of warnings as a child. As a boy, he was very protective of what he considered his family's secrets. Though he recalls being sometimes embarrassed at how his mother would use "her 'visitor's voice'" when one of his school friends came to dinner, he also remembers how he refused to write about personal topics in school. (When a high school teacher suggested he write about "something closer to home," he wrote a story about an old man who lived down the block from him.) Not until he began typing papers in college did he gain "a new appreciation for how [his] reader" would see his words. He writes that he is now "struck by the opportunity" that writing presents to engage with an unknown reader. He writes that his imaginary reader is "of no particular race or sex," but that this reader "has had a long education and that his society, like mine is often public (*un gringo*)."

This passage reflects Rodriguez's development into the writer he is today. It is important to note that Rodriguez does not explicitly link this transformation to his education; when it comes to his maturation as writer, it seems that time and life experience, rather than formal education, was required. Another key aspect of this passage is that, while Rodriguez claims he does not picture a reader of a certain race or sex, he ascribes both to the imaginary reader he discusses: he uses a male pronoun to refer to this reader, and he defines his reader as un gringo *(a white person). It seems possible that Rodriguez is attempting a redefinition of gringo, using it to designate an educated person with a public identity, rather than explicitly a white person. However, it is more likely that Rodriguez is admitting that most of the people who read his work will be white—contradicting his statement that he does not write for a reader "with a face erased." Rodriguez's complicated awareness of his audience might itself provide a clue to the occasionally contradictory nature of Rodriguez's prose.*

Rodriguez describes struggling to explain to his parents his impulse to write. Once, when his mother asked him what a psychiatrist did, he realized that his mother could never imagine talking about her personal life with a physiatrist. He writes that his parents "remain aloof from the modern temptation that captivates many in America's middle class: the temptation to relieve the anonymity of public life by trying to make it intimate." Rodriguez realizes that his parents "will be as puzzled by [his] act of self-revelation as they are by the movie star's revelations on the talk show." However, he says he continues to write because he still believes that "there are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers."

Rodriguez's conclusion that some things are so personal they can only be revealed to strangers (in other words, the reason that he writes) blatantly contradicts many of his previous claims. Earlier in the book, Rodriguez firmly argued that trying to force public life to resemble private life is both vulgar (a sentiment he seems to share with his parents) and dangerous. Yet, here, he admits that his writing is an act of self-revelation—and that he believes in its value. Passages like these, which seem to lend themselves to charges of hypocrisy, make Rodriguez a difficult writer to pin down.

Rodriguez begins to reflect on what is contained in his parents' **silence**. He wonders about his parents' memories of his childhood, about how different his mother's version of *Hunger of Memory* might be. He writes that many people have congratulated him on being the first in his family to write a book. "I stand on the edge of a long silence," he writes. "But I do not give voice to my parents by writing about their lives." He argues that his parents are not accurately represented in his writing. Even though he "may force their words to stand between quotation marks," his parents' words, spoken only to him, were never meant to be revealed to the public. (Rodriguez also explains the essay's title: his mother has begun calling him Mr. Secrets because he refuses to tell her about his writing.) Rodriguez finally reveals that the reason he writes is because "by finding public words to describe one's feelings, one can describe oneself to oneself." He broadens this argument by claiming: "It is not enough to say that my mother and father do not want to write their autobiographies. It needs also to be said that they are unable to write to a public reader. They lack the skill."

Rodriguez expresses complicated, even contradictory, feelings toward his parents. He wonders what memories they harbor and cannot share with him, what kind of books they would write about their lives, and how their memories of shared experiences might be substantially different than his own. However, he comes to the conclusion that his parents lack the skill to write about their lives because they don't know how to write for a public reader. This makes Rodriguez's interest in what his mother's version of Hunger of Memory *would be like seem rather disingenuous, since he actually believes such a book could never exist. This passage is a good example of the way that Rodriguez's philosophizing tone has a tendency to slip into condescension.*

Rodriguez writes that he responded to his mother's letter, trying to explain to her that he had not meant to hurt her by publishing the autobiographical essay. The first time he saw his mother after sending his reply letter, she did not bring it up. Instead, he writes, she "sensed that afternoon that the person whose essay she saw in a national magazine was a person unfamiliar to her, some Other," and she gave him the gift—"the freedom so crucial to adulthood"—to be a different person in public than who he was at home. Rodriguez elaborates that the Rodriguez in *Hunger of Memory* is not the person his siblings know, but that he hopes they will also understand that, sometimes, one must "escape to the company of strangers, to the liberation of the city, in order to form new versions of oneself."

It is important to note that Rodriguez and his mother communicate via letter rather than in person. This detail, perhaps, underscores the power of the written (versus the spoken) word. Additionally, this is one of the few instances in which Rodriguez expresses a sense of explicit gratitude for something his parents did: he is thankful for their sacrifice and struggle to give him a middle-class life, and for his mother's decision to allow him a public identity. This not only indicates how important public identity is to Rodriguez's understanding of himself, but it also demonstrates how Rodriguez subtly riffs on typical themes of American immigrant stories.

Rodriguez writes that he sees his brother and sisters a couple of times a year, but that the whole family only gathers on holidays, at the behest of his mother. He reflects that, at these holiday dinners, she often seems lonely and unable to participate in conversation, speaking only in her "visitor's voice." Rodriguez recounts a Christmastime conversation with his older sister, whose questions about his writing he evades. His sister says excitedly says of her son, "Tommy reads and reads, just like you used to." Rodriguez wrestles with the question of whether he could see himself in this child, whose father is a fourth-generation American of German descent who has spoken English all his life. He continues to narrate the rest of the evening, describing his father—whose hearing and English are both bad—sitting in **silence**, "a witness to the evening." When his mother stands in the doorway to see her children off, Rodriguez writes that she looks, to him, small and worried. "I am tempted to ask her quietly," he writes, "if there is anything wrong." His father asks if Rodriguez is going home too, and Rodriguez realizes this is the only thing his father has said to him all evening.

On a formal level this passage is noteworthy because Rodriguez narrates it in the present, rather than the past, tense. This gives the passage a strange, almost dreamlike quality—as if these events and conversations have been played over many times. Rodriguez's contemplation of his nephew demonstrates how difficult he finds it to connect with people in person, even if they share interests. This passage also emphasizes the link between Mexican masculinity and silence, highlighting the vast difference between Rodriguez's brand of silence and his father's.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Grimm, Alexandra. "*Hunger of Memory.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 9 Aug 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Grimm, Alexandra. "*Hunger of Memory.*" LitCharts LLC, August 9, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hunger-of-memory.

To cite any of the quotes from *Hunger of Memory* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Rodriguez, Richard. Hunger of Memory. Dial Press. 2004.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rodriguez, Richard. Hunger of Memory. New York: Dial Press. 2004.