

## PREPARING to Read

# An Hour with Abuelo

Short Story by JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

“Así es la vida.”

*That's the way  
life is.”*

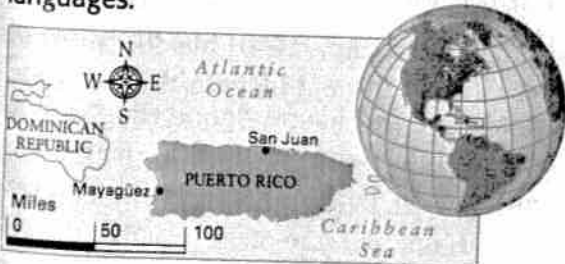
### Connect to Your Life

Do you know an elderly person, such as a grandparent, who likes to talk about life in the “old days”? With a classmate discuss why a very old person might want to tell a young person about his or her life. What might a young person get out of hearing the stories?

## Build Background

**CONNECT TO HISTORY** In the story you are about to read, the narrator's grandfather talks about being drafted into the U.S. Army while he was a young man in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico, an island about 1,000 miles southeast of Florida, is a self-governing commonwealth associated with the United States. The island was settled by Spaniards beginning in 1508 and remained under Spanish control for nearly four centuries. Puerto Rico has developed a rich culture with Spanish, African, and Native American aspects.

At the end of the Spanish-American War, in 1898, Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States. In 1917 Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship. Thousands of Puerto Ricans have served in the U.S. armed forces since World War I. On July 25, 1952, Puerto Rico became a largely self-governing commonwealth where both Spanish and English are official languages.



### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

ammunition    orderly    suite  
embroidered    parchment

## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

In a story told from a first-person point of view, the **narrator**—the teller of the story—is also a character. As the narrator tells the story, the words and phrases he or she uses are clues to his or her character. “An Hour with Abuelo” is told by Arturo, a teenager who is the main character. As you read, try to form an idea of Arturo's character as it is revealed by what he says and how he says it.

**ACTIVE READING DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** Active readers often need to **draw conclusions** about aspects of the works they read. To draw conclusions, combine information from what you have read and heard with firsthand knowledge you have gathered from your own experience.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read the selection, write down clues you find in the story and combine them with what you know from your own experience to draw conclusions about Arturo and his grandfather.

Clue	My Experience	Conclusion
Arturo keeps a stack of books beside his bed to study for AP English.	To read on your own means you are motivated.	Arturo is a motivated student.

# AN HOUR

with

# Abuelo

BY JUDITH ORTIZ COFER



Painting by Jan Wahlin.

“Just one hour, *una hora*,<sup>1</sup> is all I’m asking of you, son.” My grandfather is in a nursing home in Brooklyn, and my mother wants me to spend some time with him, since the doctors say that he doesn’t have too long to go now. I don’t have much time left of my summer vacation, and there’s a stack of books next to my bed I’ve got to read if I’m going to get into the AP English class I want. I’m going stupid in some of my classes, and Mr. Williams, the principal at Central, said that if I passed some reading tests, he’d let me move up.

Besides, I hate the place, the old people’s home, especially the way it smells like industrial-strength ammonia and other stuff I won’t mention, since it turns my stomach. And really the abuelo<sup>2</sup> always has a lot of relatives visiting him, so I’ve gotten out of going out there except at Christmas, when a whole vanload of grandchildren are herded over there

to give him gifts and a hug. We all make it quick and spend the rest of the time in the recreation area, where they play checkers and stuff with some of the old people’s games, and I catch up on back issues of *Modern Maturity*.<sup>3</sup> I’m not picky, I’ll read almost anything.

## ACTIVE READING

**MAKE INFERENCES** How is the narrator different from his cousins?

Anyway, after my mother nags me for about a week, I let her drive me to Golden Years. She drops me off in front. She wants me to go in alone and have a “good time” talking to Abuelo. I tell her to be back in one hour or I’ll take the bus back to Paterson. She squeezes

1. *una hora* (oo’na o’ra) Spanish.

2. *abuelo* (ah-bwe’lo): the Spanish word for grandfather.

3. *Modern Maturity*: a magazine for retired people.

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## *I was named after him.*

my hand and says, “*Gracias, hijo*,”<sup>4</sup> in a choked-up voice like I’m doing her a big favor.

I get depressed the minute I walk into the place. They line up the old people in wheelchairs in the hallway as if they were about to be raced to the finish line by orderlies who don’t even look at them when they push them here and there. I walk fast to room 10, Abuelo’s “suite.” He is sitting up in his bed writing with a pencil in one of those old-fashioned black hardback notebooks. It has the outline of the island of Puerto Rico on it. I slide into the hard vinyl chair by his bed. He sort of smiles and the lines on his face get deeper, but he doesn’t say anything. Since I’m supposed to talk to him, I say, “What are you doing, Abuelo, writing the story of your life?”

It’s supposed to be a joke, but he answers, “*Sí*,<sup>5</sup> how did you know, Arturo?”

His name is Arturo too. I was named after him. I don’t really know my grandfather. His children, including my mother, came to New York and New Jersey (where I was born) and he stayed on the Island until my grandmother died. Then he got sick, and since nobody could leave their jobs to go take care of him, they brought him to this nursing home in Brooklyn. I see him a couple of times a year, but he’s always surrounded by his sons and daughters. My mother tells me that Don<sup>6</sup> Arturo had once been a teacher back in Puerto Rico, but had lost his job after the war. Then he became a farmer. She’s always saying in a sad voice, “*Ay, bendito!*”<sup>7</sup> What a waste of a fine mind.” Then he usually shrugs her shoulders and says, “*Así*

*es la vida*.”<sup>8</sup> That’s the way life is. It sometimes makes me mad that the adults I know just accept whatever is thrown at them because “that’s the way things are.” Not for me. I go after what I want.

Anyway, Abuelo is looking at me like he was trying to see into my head, but he doesn’t say anything. Since I like stories, I decide I may as well ask him if he’ll read me what he wrote.

I look at my watch: I’ve already used up twenty minutes of the hour I promised my mother.

Abuelo starts talking in his slow way. He speaks what my mother calls book English. He taught himself from a dictionary, and his words sound stiff, like he’s sounding them out in his head before he says them. With his children he speaks Spanish, and that funny book English with us grandchildren. I’m surprised that he’s still so sharp, because his body is shrinking like a crumpled-up brown paper sack with some bones in it. But I can see from looking into his eyes that the light is still on in there.

“It is a short story, Arturo. The story of my life. It will not take very much time to read it.”

“I have time, Abuelo.” I’m a little embarrassed that he saw me looking at my watch.

“Yes, *hijo*. You have spoken the truth. *La verdad*. You have much time.”

4. *Gracias, hijo* (grä’syās ē’hō) *Spanish*: Thank you, son.

5. *sí* (sē) *Spanish*: yes.

6. *Don*: a Spanish title of respect, used before a man’s name.

7. *Ay, bendito!* (ī bēn-dē’tō) *Spanish*: Oh, goodness!

8. *Así es la vida* (ā-sē’ ēs lā vē’dā) *Spanish*.

WORDS **orderly** (ôr’dēr-lē) *n.* an attendant who performs nonmedical tasks in a hospital or  
TO similar institution  
KNOW **suite** (swēt) *n.* a group of rooms used as a unit

Abuelo reads: “I loved words from the beginning of my life. In the *campo*<sup>9</sup> where I was born one of seven sons, there were few books. My mother read them to us over and over: the Bible, the stories of Spanish conquistadors and of pirates that she had read as a child and brought with her from the city of Mayagüez;<sup>10</sup> that was before she married my father, a coffee bean farmer; and she taught us words from the newspaper that a boy on a horse brought every week to her. She taught each of us how to write on a slate with chalks that she ordered by mail every year. We used those chalks until they were so small that you lost them between your fingers.

“I always wanted to be a writer and a teacher. With my heart and my soul I knew that I wanted to be around books all of my life. And so against the wishes of my father, who wanted all his sons to help him on the land, she sent me to high school in Mayagüez. For four years I boarded with a couple she knew. I paid my rent in labor, and I ate

#### ACTIVE READING

**CLARIFY** How does Arturo’s grandfather feel about books and learning?

vegetables I grew myself. I wore my clothes until they were thin as parchment. But I graduated at the top of my class! My whole family came to see me

that day. My mother brought me a beautiful *guayabera*,<sup>11</sup> a white shirt made of the finest cotton and embroidered by her own hands. I was a happy young man.

“In those days you could teach in a country school with a high school diploma. So I went back to my mountain village and got a job teaching all grades in a little classroom built by the parents of my students.

“I had books sent to me by the government. I felt like a rich man although the pay was very small. I had books. All the books I wanted! I taught my students how to read poetry and plays, and how to write them. We made up songs and put on shows for the parents. It was a beautiful time for me.

“Then the war came, and the American President said that all Puerto Rican men would be drafted. I wrote to our governor and explained that I was the only teacher in the mountain village. I told him that the children would go back to the fields and grow up ignorant if I could not teach them their letters. I said that I thought I was a better teacher than a soldier. The governor did not answer my letter. I went into the U.S. Army.

“I told my sergeant that I could be a teacher in the army. I could teach all the farm boys their letters so that they could read the instructions on the ammunition boxes and not blow themselves up. The sergeant said I was too smart for my own good, and gave me a job cleaning latrines. He said to me there is reading material for you there, scholar. Read the writing on the walls. I spent the war mopping floors and cleaning toilets.

“When I came back to the Island, things had changed. You had to have a college degree to teach school, even the lower grades. My parents were sick, two of my brothers had been killed in the war, the others had stayed in Nueva York. I was the only one left to help the old people. I became a farmer. I married a

9. *campo* (käm'pō) *Spanish*: countryside.

10. *Mayagüez* (mí'a-gwěz'): a port city on the western coast of Puerto Rico.

11. *guayabera* (gwä-yä-bä'rä) *Spanish*.

#### WORDS TO KNOW

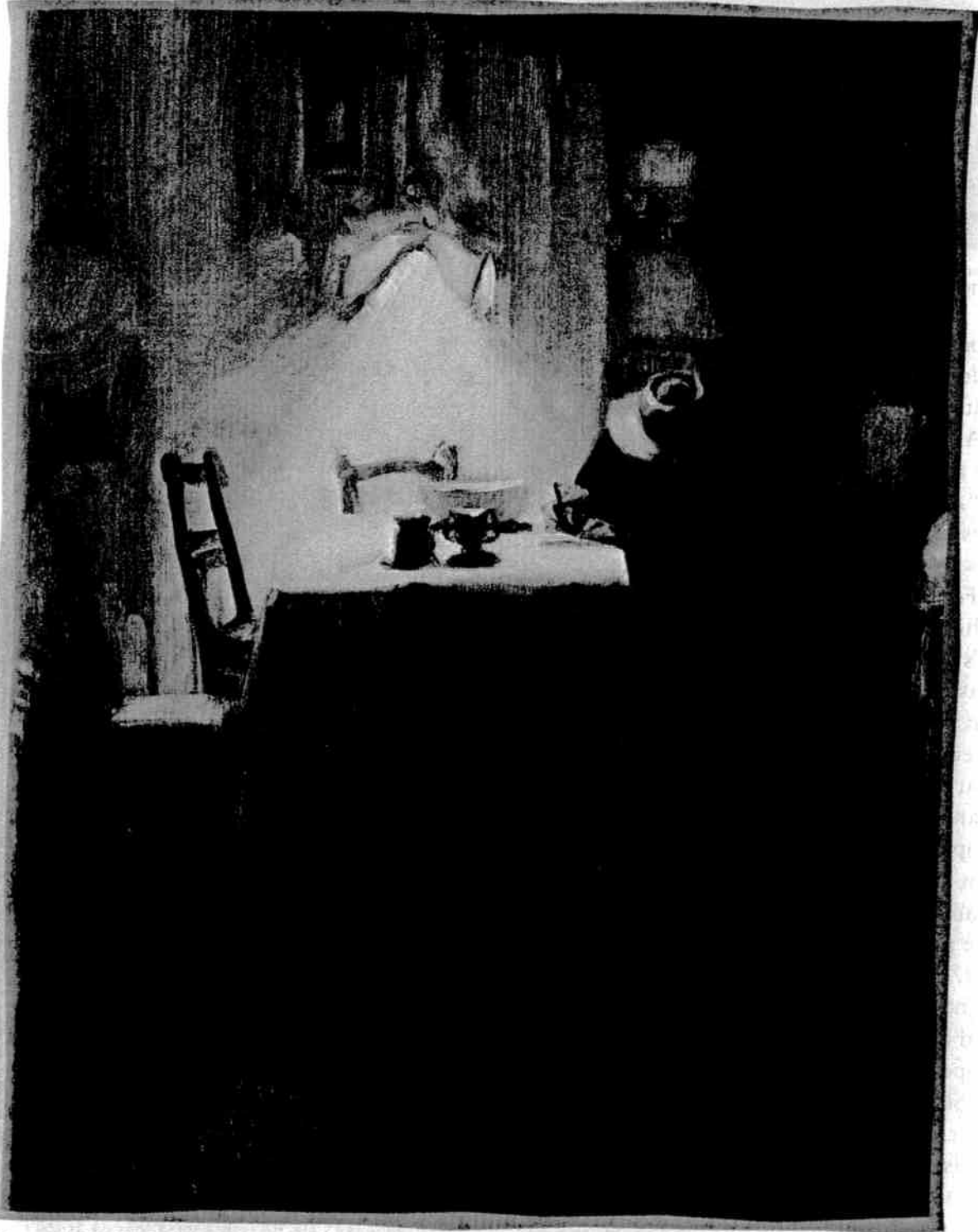
**parchment** (pärch'mənt) *n.* a paperlike writing material made from the skins of sheep or goats

**embroidered** (ēm-brōi'dərd) *adj.* ornamented with stitched designs **embroider** *v.*

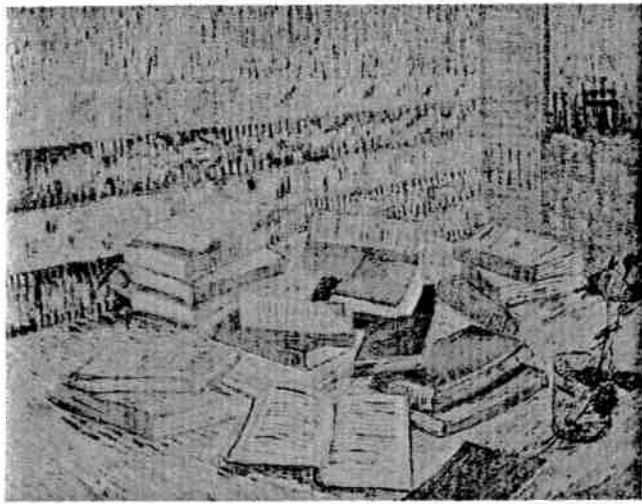
**ammunition** (äm'yə-nīsh'ən) *n.* the explosive cartridges or shells designed to be used in guns



*I loved words from the beginning of my life.*



*Letters* (1992), Kim English. Oil, 17" × 18". Private Collection.



*The Yellow Books* (1887), Vincent Van Gogh. Oil on canvas, 73 cm × 93 cm. Private Collection, Switzerland/Giraudon, Paris/SuperStock.

*“Así es la vida”  
is the title of my book...*

good woman who gave me many good children. I taught them all how to read and write before they started school.”

Abuelo then puts the notebook down on his lap and closes his eyes.

“*Así es la vida* is the title of my book,” he says in a whisper, almost to himself. Maybe he’s forgotten that I’m there.

For a long time he doesn’t say anything else. I think that he’s sleeping, but then I see that he’s watching me through half-closed lids, maybe waiting for my opinion of his writing. I’m trying to think of something nice to say. I liked it and all, but not the title. And I think that he could’ve been a teacher if he had wanted to bad enough. Nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want with my life. I’m not going to let *la vida* get in my way. I want to discuss this with him, but the words are not coming into my head in Spanish just yet. I’m about to ask him why he didn’t keep fighting to make his dream come true, when an old lady in hot-pink running shoes sort of appears at the door.

She is wearing a pink jogging outfit too. The world’s oldest marathoner, I say to myself. She calls out to my grandfather in a flirty voice, “Yoo-hoo, Arturo, remember what day this is? It’s poetry-reading day in the rec room! You promised us you’d read your new one today.”

I see my abuelo perking up almost immediately. He points to his wheelchair, which is hanging like a huge metal bat in the open closet. He makes it obvious that he wants me to get it. I put it together, and with Mrs. Pink Running Shoes’s help, we get him in it. Then he says in a strong deep voice I hardly recognize, “Arturo, get that notebook from the table, please.”

I hand him another map-of-the-Island notebook—this one is red. On it in big letters it says, *POEMAS DE ARTURO*.<sup>12</sup>

I start to push him toward the rec room, but he shakes his finger at me.

“Arturo, look at your watch now. I believe your time is over.” He gives me a wicked smile.

Then with her pushing the wheelchair—maybe a little too fast—they roll down the hall. He is already reading from his notebook,

#### ACTIVE READING

##### DRAW CONCLUSIONS

How do you think Arturo feels about visiting his grandfather now?

and she’s making bird noises. I look at my watch and the hour is up, to the minute. I can’t help but think that my abuelo has been timing me. It cracks me up. I

walk slowly down the hall toward the exit sign. I want my mother to have to wait a little. I don’t want her to think that I’m in a hurry or anything. ♦

12. *POEMAS DE ARTURO* (pō-á-mäs dä ä-r-tōō’rō)  
*Spanish:* Arturo’s poems.

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What especially do you remember after reading "An Hour with Abuelo"? Explain.

### Comprehension Check

- When has Arturo visited his grandfather in the past?
- What were Arturo's grandfather's two ambitions?
- What does Abuelo say "with a wicked smile" to Arturo at the end of Arturo's visit?

## Think Critically

2. How does Arturo's understanding of his grandfather change during his visit?

THINK ABOUT

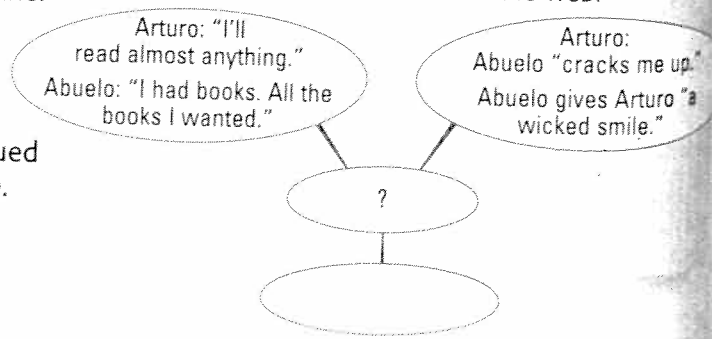
- Arturo's plan to visit for exactly one hour
- Arturo's usual feelings about adults
- A surprise visit from "Mrs. Pink Running Shoes"

3. **ACTIVE READING** **DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** With a partner compare the notes you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. Did you draw similar conclusions? How did they differ?

4. Arturo's mother feels that her father's life has been "a waste of a fine mind." What do you think?
5. Arturo says, "I go after what I want." How does this attitude affect his relationship with his grandfather?
6. Why do you think the grandfather reads his life story to Arturo? What does Arturo gain from hearing it?

## Extend Interpretations

7. **Different Perspectives** Imagine that "Mrs. Pink Running Shoes" had overheard Arturo's visit with his grandfather. How might she describe it to a friend? What kind of a person is the grandfather from her perspective? What kind of person is Arturo?
8. **Connect to Life** Many observers say that elderly people are no longer valued or respected in modern American life. What is your opinion?



## Literary Analysis

### FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

A **first-person narrator** in a literary work tells the story in which he or she is a character directly to the reader, using pronouns like *I* and *me*. In "An Hour with Abuelo," the main character, Arturo, is the narrator. The reader learns a great deal about him from the words and expressions he uses and the attitudes he displays. For example, early in the story Arturo mentions how he escapes to the recreation area during earlier visits with his grandfather:

*I catch up on back issues of Modern Maturity. I'm not picky, I'll read almost anything.*

Arturo's words reveal that he both likes to read and has a sense of humor, two characteristics he shares with his grandfather.

**Paired Activity** With a partner create a web in which you note things Arturo has in common with his grandfather. Go through the story and find examples that support your observations. When you are finished, see what conclusions you can draw about the similarities of these two characters. Write that conclusion at the center of the web.