

“My First Free Summer” by Julia Alvarez
Enrichment: Life and Literature

Julia Alvarez was not kidding when she wrote in “My First Free Summer” that she had to do all her learning at the American school “in that impossibly difficult, rocks-in-your-mouth language of English!” On her Web site, she says that when she and her family moved to the United States, she “couldn’t tell where one word ended and another began.” It was paying attention to each word that prepared her for a career as a writer.

Alvarez was born in the United States but returned with her family to the Dominican Republic when she was three months old. When her father realized just how brutal the Trujillo dictatorship was, he joined the underground. That action put the family in danger, and they left the country in 1960. Shortly afterward, three Dominican sisters, the Mirabels, were murdered in retaliation for their and their husbands’ opposition to the dictatorship. Shortly after that, Trujillo himself was assassinated. Alvarez has written a historical novel about the Mirabel sisters, titled *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Because she survived the dictatorship, she felt that she should use her skills to tell the story of these three brave women who did not survive to tell it themselves.

Alvarez has also shown her commitment to her former country by establishing an organic farm in the Dominican Republic. The farm raises shade-grown coffee. “Shade grown” means that the trees do not have to be cut down for the coffee to be harvested, thus enhancing the land and the economy. Alvarez also writes picture books for the families on the farm who are learning to read.

Alvarez writes in a variety of genres. In addition to the story of a young girl who grows up under a Latin American dictatorship, she has published poetry, folk tales, and autobiographical essays. Her novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* addresses one of her favorite topics—the immigrant experience.

DIRECTIONS: Answer these questions based on the information in the preceding passage.

1. What problems did Alvarez have learning English?

2. What led Alvarez’s father to join the underground?

3. Why did Alvarez write about the Mirabel sisters?

4. According to the passage, “Alvarez writes in a variety of *genres*.” What is a genre? Use context to figure out the meaning of the word. _____

5. How does Alvarez show her commitment to the country of her childhood?

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Open-Book Test

Short Answer Write your responses to the questions in this section on the lines provided.

1. At the beginning of “My First Free Summer,” the reader learns how the author spent many of her summers as a young child. Why did she spend her summers in this way? Use details from the selection to explain your answer.

2. At the beginning of “My First Free Summer,” the author says she vowed to become a better student. Since she vowed to take on this task, what can you assume about the outcome? Use the definition of *vowed* to explain your answer.

3. Toward the beginning of “My First Free Summer,” the author mentions holidays her friends celebrated in the Dominican schools. How does her description provide a historical context for the selection? Use information from the selection to respond.

4. Toward the beginning of “My First Free Summer,” the author writes about her school subjects. How does this information help set the historical context? Answer with details from the selection.

5. In “My First Free Summer,” the author explains that it was unlikely that she would ever be thrown out of the American school. Why was that an unlikely possibility? Use details from the selection to support your response.

6. In “My First Free Summer,” some of the children at the American school had parents who were diplomats. The diplomats had to know more than one language as part of their jobs. Why was this knowledge important in their jobs? Explain your answer.

7. In the middle of “My First Free Summer,” the author finally gets a free summer. Unfortunately, her summer does not turn out to be what she had expected. How do the circumstances of that summer reveal the historical context of the selection? Use details from the selection to respond.

8. In “My First Free Summer,” Julia Alvarez writes that “not everyone returned” from a small interrogation room at the airport. What is her purpose for explaining what might happen to people who were trying to leave the country? Use details from the selection.

9. Toward the end of “My First Free Summer,” the author finally understands that theirs “was not a trip, but an escape.” She uses a specific phrase to explain the “light” that went on in her head. What phrase does she use, and for what purpose?

10. What is the author’s attitude toward school in “My First Free Summer”? Use the organizer below to indicate how she feels at the beginning, middle, and end of the selection. On the lines, tell how her attitude changes over the course of the selection.

Beginning:
Middle:
End:

Essay

Write an extended response to the question of your choice or to the question or questions your teacher assigns you.

11. At the beginning of “My First Free Summer,” the author does not appreciate her school. Why does she lack this appreciation? Explain your response in a brief essay. Use details from the selection to support your description of the author’s attitude.
12. What are the political events that surrounded the author’s life in “My First Free Summer”? In a brief essay, discuss the historical context of this selection. Use details to support your response.
13. Keeping in mind the author’s age during “My First Free Summer,” how much do you think she understood about what was happening in her country? In an essay, analyze the perspective of the young girl at the beginning, middle, and end of the selection. Use details from the selection to support your points.
14. **Thinking About the Big Question: What is the best way to find the truth?** In “My First Free Summer,” the word *free* has many meanings. In a brief essay, explain the best way to find the true meaning of “free” or “freedom.” Consider whether you have to experience the opposite of freedom in order to understand it. Use examples from “My First Free Summer” as support.

Oral Response

15. Go back to question 1, 3, or 7 or to the question your teacher assigns you. Take a few minutes to expand your answer and prepare an oral response. Find additional details in “My First Free Summer” that support your points. If necessary, make notes to guide your oral response.