

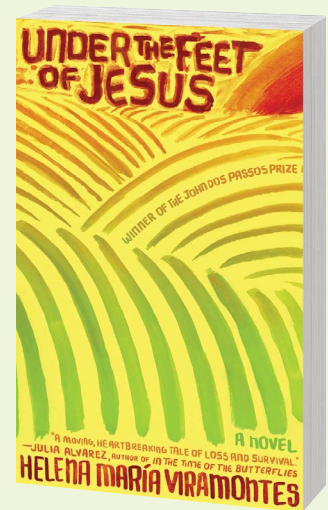
A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
**UNDER THE FEET
OF JESUS**

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Education

Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* offers both an engaging story and important insights into a pressing social issue. The novel portrays the experiences of matriarch Petra and her family as they work with other migrants to harvest raisin grapes in California. Through their story, high school students can explore the migrant worker and immigrant experience in the United States both historically and today. Most students may know that migrants are seasonal workers who generally do not have a permanent place of residence. However, students may not know that there are more than three million agricultural workers in the U.S., including migrants and other categories of seasonal and guest program workers ("Farmworker Health Fact Sheet" at <https://tinyurl.com/y9negbnr>). They may not know about the issues facing migrants like poverty, limited health care, below standard housing, lack of access to education, and lack of regulation. Immigrants often face similar marginal living and working conditions. Although the novel presents the dilemmas faced by a migrant family, students will find that they can also make connections to the lives of other immigrants in their communities. The novel encourages students to consider how their own lives compare with those of the novel's main characters, Estrella, a 13-year-old girl, and Alejo, a 16-year-old boy. These comparisons should lead to discussions of social justice and human rights—not only for migrants and immigrants, but for all citizens.



This guide provides chapter summaries, discussion questions, and key quotations to elicit student response. Activities ask students to build background knowledge, cite text evidence, draw inferences, determine multiple themes, and analyze critically while developing awareness of the issues facing migrant workers.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

PETRA'S FAMILY

Petra – Matriarch and caregiver

Estrella – Thirteen and the oldest child in the family

Ricky and Arnulfo – Younger brothers of Estrella

Perla and Cuca (Cookie) – Younger twin sisters of Estrella

Perfecto Flores – Petra's partner, handyman and migrant worker

OTHER MIGRANT WORKERS

Alejo – Sixteen-year-old migrant worker in the grape vineyards

Gumecindo – Fifteen-year-old cousin of Alejo

Maxine Devridge – daughter of a field hand and Estrella's friend

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

1. Engage students in a mini-research project on the working and living conditions for current migrant farm workers. Create jigsaw groups: each member of the group focuses on a different aspect of migrant life such as working conditions, housing, schooling, medical care, or other topics of interest. Group members will share their findings and together create a profile of a migrant worker to share with the whole class. As an extension activity, invite students to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper sharing what they have learned about migrant labor in their community.

Resources might include the following:

- The United Farm Workers: <https://ufw.org/>
- "Migrant Farm Workers: Our Nation's Invisible Population": <https://tinyurl.com/y9mqks9t>
- "Immigrant Workers in the U.S. Labor Force," Brookings Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/yecj3qb8>

- "In the Strawberry Fields": <https://tinyurl.com/y78wst6d>
- "Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farmworkers": <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/frmwrkr/>
- The National Farmworker Ministry: <http://nfwm.org/>
- "Farm Worker Conditions Likened to Modern Slavery" (video): <https://tinyurl.com/y92etoxd>

Following presentations, discuss with students:

- What is the overall quality of life for migrant workers and their children?
 - What are the major issues facing migrant families?
 - Based on what you have learned from your research, what is the impact of migrant and immigrant labor on the cost of goods and services for Americans?
2. The dedication page of the novel says, "In Memory of Cesar Chavez." As a class, brainstorm what students

know about Chavez and make predictions about why the novel is dedicated to him. Then have students work in small groups to research Chavez and his ideas. Once students have an overview of his life story, ask them to select one or two quotes from Chavez that they have encountered in their research and prepare a brief PowerPoint to present the quote and their interpretation of the ideas Chavez expresses. Students can learn about Chavez at these and many other sites:

- <https://ufw.org/research/history/story-cesar-chavez/>
- <https://chavezfoundation.org/>
- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/14/hunger-artist-2>
- <https://tinyurl.com/yc4fbgef>
- <https://ufw.org/research/history/education-heart-cesar-chavez-words/>

3. Focus students' ideas about immigration to the United States by using a K-W-L chart. In the "K" column students should list what they "know," in the "W" column what they "would like to know," and in the "L" column, what they "learned" about immigration after reading and discussion.

Have students put common beliefs in the "K" column and things they don't yet know in the "W" column. Then ask them to read "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants" from the Pew Research Center: <https://tinyurl.com/ycjg4zu8>. (This article is updated annually with current data.) Ask students to revisit what they "Know" about immigration and to make corrections in the "Learned" column, listing ideas learned from their research.

Then as a class, discuss these questions:

- What is the number of immigrants in the U.S. today? How does this number compare with previous years?
 - What is the top country of origin of most immigrants in the U.S. today? Is this changing?
 - What types of work do immigrants tend to do?
 - What affects proficiency in English among immigrants?
 - What variations are there in attitudes towards immigrants among U.S. citizens?
4. Ask students to examine the migrant/immigrant experience in the United States by making a two-column chart with the labels "Push" and "Pull." Under "Push," they should list reasons someone might leave their home country. Under "Pull," they should list reasons people immigrate to the United States. To add to their lists, ask students to brainstorm answers to the following questions: What motivates people to leave their home country? What attracts people to the United States? What are the fears and expectations of people making this life-changing decision?

Ask students to talk with their parents and grandparents about their experiences if they are immigrants to the U.S. Students can add these experiences to their charts under the appropriate label. Then assign students to read or watch one of the following resources, followed by a discussion of what they have learned.

"Why Does Migration Happen?" (pp. 9-15): <http://www.globalization101.org/uploads/File/Migration/migration.pdf>

"Here's the Reality About Illegal Immigrants in the United States": <https://tinyurl.com/y8ftot9t>

"After 40 Days Apart, A Migrant Family Reunites," (Video included in this article on Family Reunification): <https://tinyurl.com/ydfw3h>

"For Migrants Headed North, the Things They Carried to the End": <https://tinyurl.com/yc5p97hg>

Discussion Questions:

- Based on the resources, what leads people to leave their home countries? Were they primarily "push" or "pull" factors?
 - How are the labels "migrant" and "immigrant" used interchangeably in these reports?
5. Invite students to view one or more slideshows created by the Maine Migrant Health Program entitled "Farmers Feed Us All." The slideshows are at the bottom of the page at <https://tinyurl.com/yba2aold>. After viewing, ask students to record their impressions of the lives depicted in a journal reflection or creative response—their own collage or poem. After sharing these responses, discuss with students the issues that face farm workers and affect the quality of their lives.
 6. Invite students to view photos of migrant workers or art created to depict the immigrant experience at the following sites:
 - <https://tinyurl.com/y79hfkf8>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/y8leuwcu>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/ychzwsyf>

Ask students to choose two images that particularly caught their attention and journal about their impressions and reactions. Afterward, students can share their choices and reactions with partners or small groups. As a class, discuss what the photos or artwork depict about migrants or immigrants living in the United States.

DURING READING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to create a Character Map for each major character by recording:

- Physical and character traits
- Challenges faced by the character
- Ways in which the character changes/grows/meets challenges

An example of a digital character map can be found at: <http://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/character-map>

2. The Bildungsroman traces the education of a character from youth to adulthood by chronicling the trials experienced by the character and how his or her struggles enable the character to learn about the world, solve problems, overcome obstacles, and move toward maturity (for the definition and examples see <http://www.literarydevices.com/bildungsroman/>). The typical Bildungsroman has three parts:

- Introduction of the character, usually in childhood
- Chronicles of the experiences of the protagonist, which often lead to a crisis or loss of faith
- Resolution in which the character reaches maturity and often gains a sense of peace or belonging

Ask students to focus on Estrella and track her experiences as they read the novel. Discuss:

- What obstacles does Estrella face?
- Does Estrella grow in maturity as she overcomes these obstacles?
- Is the novel following the typical Bildungsroman structure? How?

3. The novel suggests multiple themes for class discussion. As students read each chapter, or at intervals in their reading, ask them to fill in examples from the text that fit the themes on the table below and provide a supporting quote. Students may also choose to add other themes they identify while reading.

Theme	Example	Quote from Text
Importance of family		
Impact of poverty		
Responsibility to others		
Reliance on superstition		
Enduring harsh living and working conditions		
Future dreams and possibilities		
Contrasts between wealthy/privileged/"native" vs. poor/not-privileged/"non-native"		

5. Funds of Knowledge are ideas, information, knowledge, and skills that children develop from their parents and families (see "Migrant and Bilingual Education: Funds of Knowledge" <https://tinyurl.com/yaqx6tkw>). Ask students to consider their own Funds of Knowledge and the Funds of Knowledge of Estrella, Petra, Perfecto, and

Alejo. Suggest that examples of Funds of Knowledge can include knowledge of animal care, crop planning, medicinal properties of herbs and plants, and ways of viewing work, family, and leisure. The goal of identifying Funds of Knowledge is to promote greater understanding of other people or characters. While migrants' or

immigrants' knowledge might not fit into traditional categories of "school knowledge," it still provides a valuable source of experiences and skills from which they draw. Becoming aware of these complexities may

help students to see migrants/immigrants through an asset perspective (what can they add?) instead of a deficit perspective (what are they lacking?).

My Funds of Knowledge (the knowledge and skills I have learned from my parents and family)	
Estrella's	
Petra's	
Perfecto's	
Alejo's	

Then discuss the following questions as a class:

- How do your Funds of Knowledge differ from those of the characters in the novel? Are there any similarities?
- How do the Funds of Knowledge of the characters in the novel help them to persevere in their difficult living conditions?
- How does this exercise of identifying characters' Funds of Knowledge change your perspective of them or contribute to a deeper understanding of them?

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Estrella and her family arrive in California to work the harvest in the raisin grape vineyards. As the family settles into a wooden bungalow and explores the surrounding area, cousins Gumecindo and Alejo, also migrant workers, steal peaches from a nearby orchard, planning to sell them for extra money. Alejo catches sight of Estrella and delivers a sack of peaches to the family.

Discussion Questions:

1. Early in the novel, the author shows the lack of security in the migrants' lives: "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (p. 4). How does the family react in the first chapter to their difficult move?
2. Describe the bungalow where the family is living. Does it fit your typical notion of a home? Why or why not?

3. From the opening scenes of the novel, Estrella is drawn to the old barn near their bungalow. Why do you think the barn intrigues her? What might the barn symbolize?
4. How is Perfecto different from Estrella's real father? What does Perfecto teach Estrella?
5. Why did Estrella's family have to leave their last labor camp?
6. What is Estrella's impression of Alejo when he brings the peaches?

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Petra, Perfecto, Estrella, and her younger brother Ricky begin working in the fields, harvesting grapes, enduring physical hardship and long hours in the sun. The author describes the monotonous and strenuous work in the fields. Alejo's mind wanders to his grandmother working in Texas and his own ambitions to return to school and then to college. Estrella remembers accompanying her mother to the fields to work when she was only 4 years old, pulled behind as her mother picked cotton.

Later, when Gumecindo and Alejo are stealing peaches from the orchard, pesticides rain down on them. The next morning Alejo, despite feeling ill, reports for work. During a break in the shade under a pick-up truck, he and Estrella talk together. When Alejo kisses her palm, Estrella flees to the barn, seeking its cool and quiet refuge.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is Estrella's experience picking grapes in the field different from the picture on the red raisin box?
2. What hope for his life does Alejo nurture as he is picking grapes?
3. Estrella fears being picked up by La Migra, or La Migración, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). However, Petra says to tell them that "the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus..." (p. 63). Why would Estrella's citizenship be questioned?
4. What are the signs of attraction between Alejo and Estrella?
5. Why do you think that Estrella refuses to help Perfecto tear down the barn?
6. What will happen to Alejo as a result of being sprayed with pesticide?
7. Why does Estrella return to the barn after Alejo kisses her hand?

CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY

Gumecindo comes to the family's bungalow seeking help for Alejo, who has become seriously ill. Gumecindo is impatient to return home to Mexico, where he can attend school, and Perfecto contemplates returning to Mexico for his final years. Petra moves Alejo into their home and tries to heal him. While Alejo is temporarily relieved to be around people, his illness persists. Petra remembers the first time she met Perfecto, and we learn that she is pregnant although she has not told anyone yet. On the way to a health clinic with Alejo, the family's car gets stuck in the mud.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Petra feel compelled to help Alejo?
2. What first attracted Petra to Perfecto?
3. Why does Petra make Estrella sleep with her?
4. Find descriptions from the chapter that describe the poverty of the family. Are they different from other members in the community?
5. When the family tries to take Alejo to a community health center, the car gets stuck in the mud. What might this foreshadow?

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY

When the family finally arrives at the health center, they are met by an unsympathetic nurse. She goes through required questions about Alejo's condition, charges the family \$10 for the examination, and concludes that she cannot help him and that he needs to go to the nearest hospital. Because the family has no money to buy gasoline to transport Alejo to the hospital 20 miles away, Estrella threatens the nurse with a crowbar and takes back their money. They bring Alejo to the hospital and leave him there to be cared for by the doctors.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is the nurse so uncaring and unsympathetic to the plight of the family?
2. How does Estrella transform in this chapter from a silent, obedient girl to one who chooses to act as she sees necessary?
3. Why is Estrella moved to thank Perfecto when they arrive at the hospital with Alejo? How do her words affect Perfecto?
4. Leaving the hospital, Estrella amazes her twin siblings as she pretends to magically separate the door with her arms. What does her action suggest about her?

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY

The family returns home, each one struggling with their thoughts. Perfecto contemplates the future, worried about the police investigating the hospital incident and about supporting another child with Petra. Petra suspects that Perfecto wants to leave and she goes to make an offering to Jesus. Beneath the feet of Jesus are the children's birth certificates and Petra's identification card. As she stands up, the statue tilts and crashes on the floor, and the head breaks off. Awake in the stifling room, Estrella goes a final time to the old barn. Pulling on a chain, she hoists herself up into the grain loft. She pushes open a trapdoor and stands outside under a sky full of stars.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Perfecto not leave the family and return to Mexico as he desperately desires?
2. What might the breaking of the statue of Jesus signify?
3. What does the scene in the barn with Estrella signify? What will be her future?
4. Will Alejo survive? What does the future hold for the other characters? What does the future hold for Petra's unborn baby?

READER RESPONSE

Quotes can be used for written responses or as discussion starters. Ask students to journal about a quote before discussing in pairs or as a group. Students may also choose significant quotes from the text, explaining their reactions in a journal or class discussion.

- “The silence and the barn and the clouds meant many things. It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing” (p. 4).
- “She remembered how one teacher, Mrs. Horn...asked how come her mama never gave her a bath. Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella that she was dirty, that the wet towel wiped on her resistant face each morning, the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother neatly weaved were not enough for Mrs. Horn. And for the first time, Estrella realized words could become as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet” (p. 25).
- “Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her” (p. 49).
- “Is that what happens? Estrella thought, people just use you until you’re all used up, then rip you into pieces when they’re finished using you?” (p. 75).
- “If we don’t take care of each other, who would take care of us? We have to look out for our own” (p. 96).
- “He had given this country his all, and in this land that used his bones for kindling, in this land that never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank you, this young woman who could be his granddaughter had said the words with such honest gratitude, he was struck by how deeply these words touched him” (p. 155).
- “It simply came down to this: there was no stopping Estrella, no harnessing the climate of circumstances, no holding back the will of her body” (pp. 163-164).
- “No longer did she feel her blouse damp with sweat. No longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart” (p. 175).
- “Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (p. 176).

SYNTHESIZING ESSAY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Review the various times the barn is described or mentioned in the novel. What is the significance of the barn to Estrella and her family? Why does Estrella escape to the barn at different times in the novel?
2. Alejo has dreams for the future—attending high school and making something of himself. Were these dreams ever realistic? Why or why not?
3. There is tension between the fact that migrant workers provide the food for Americans to eat yet migrants are not welcome in the communities. For example, Petra tells Estrella, “Don’t run scared. You stay there and look them [La Migra] in the eye. Don’t let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they’ll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them” (p. 63). Is this tension still evident today between those who labor in the fields and those who benefit from their labor?
4. Describing her school experiences, the narrator explains, “... Estrella realized words could become as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet” (p. 25). How do you explain the treatment of Estrella by the teachers at the school that she attends? Have you ever faced someone that belittled you verbally? How did you respond?
5. Reflect on the title, *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Besides identifying the location of the children’s citizenship papers, how is this title appropriate to the novel?
6. In many ways, this is a novel about endurance. What are the different sources of strength that enable Petra, Perfecto, and Estrella to endure?
7. What are the forces that propel Estrella to threaten the nurse with violence? How are her actions liberating for her? How might they further entrap her in the cycle of poverty?

SYNTHESIZING PROJECTS

1. Referring to earlier research about the current conditions for workers, ask students to write their own response to the following question: Is the account of migrant work depicted in the novel an accurate reflection of migrant work in the U.S. today? In what ways has migrant work changed and in what ways is it the same?
2. Create a diagram that shows all the members of Petra's family and other workers. Put Petra in the middle and arrange the names of the other characters in a way that shows their relationship to Petra and to each other. Compare your diagram with a partner. Discuss: What role does family play in Petra's life? How does she extend her family to others?
3. Write Chapter 6 of the novel in which you answer basic questions which readers may have at the end of Chapter 5. What happens next for Estrella, Alejo, Perfecto, and Petra?
4. Viramontes writes in lyrical and powerfully descriptive prose. Ask students to choose one chapter of the novel to create a Found Poem. Detailed instructions are available at <https://tinyurl.com/y77nmenr>. Then have students copy their poems to a digital format so they can be displayed. Read the poems, according to the chapters in the novel, giving students an opportunity to explain their choices and arrangement of the "found" words.
5. Ask students to study the screen-printed poster "Sun Mad" by the artist Ester Hernandez at <http://artinprint.org/article/ester-herandez-sun-mad/>. Discuss: What is the message the artist conveys in the print? What issues is she addressing? Then ask students to create their own artistic rendering of an issue or experience faced by the characters in the novel.

LITERATURE RELATED TO THEMES IN THE NOVEL

"Bent to the Earth" by Blas Manuel De Luna. From *Bent to the Earth*, 2006. Carnegie Mellon University Press. <https://tinyurl.com/yadxjpnj>.

"Everyday We Get More Illegal" by Juan Felipe Herrera. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/everyday-we-get-more-illegal>.

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, 1984. <https://tinyurl.com/ydfq4bdp>.

"Immigrants" in *Borders* by Pat Mora, 1986. Arte Publico Press. <http://www.mesacc.edu/~barmd97231/ImmigrantsPatMora.html>.

"Poem by Matthew Garcia," Posted April 1, 2009 by YAYA (Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry). <https://tinyurl.com/ycm7vgfk>.

"Selections from Tide-water Baptism" by Lenora Castillo. <https://tinyurl.com/yd3xe2l6>.

Note: For more suggestions and a bibliography of Mexican American writers, go to "The Migrant Experience in the Works of Mexican American Writers" by Sherry York at <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v30n1/york.html>.

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