

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A *Calavera* refers to imaginary obituaries (obituaries are short notices in newspapers announcing deaths of people known by the readers), which appear on newspaper broadsides all over Mexico. Poetic obituaries, or *Calaveras*, humorously criticize well-known individuals who are very much alive.

Calaveras are usually considered “popular” literature, that is, literature which is easily understood and appreciated by the majority of people and which deals with topics of tangible, immediate concern. Because of their popular nature, *Calaveras* are a very effective, far-reaching means of bringing about moral and political reform. Moreover, they promote a useful reflection of the feelings of ordinary people at the time they are written.

Calaveras are also considered a form of **satire**. A North American writer M.H. Abrams, defines satire as:

The literary act of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt or scorn.

Many *Calaveras* have been written about individuals in various professions: butchers, teachers, priests, housekeepers, artists, mail carriers, doctors, governors, shopkeepers, etc. Writers of *Calaveras* have satirized them all. However, sometimes these *Calaveras* are also written in memoriam of them.

Calaveras became especially popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Mexican Revolution inspired the writing of many *Calaveras* criticizing the revolutionaries under Francisco Madero as well as the deposed government of Porfirio Diaz.

In 1847, Mexico’s first illustrated newspaper appeared under the name of El Calavera. Because of the approach of the newspaper, which was highly critical of the existing government, its editors were arrested within a short time and the paper closed.

No one is certain of when the custom of writing *Calaveras* originated, but it resembles the *pasquín* of Spain. The *pasquín* was an anonymous written attack posted publicly. Hernán Cortés may be responsible for the introduction of the *pasquín* to Central America. Cortés once composed a *pasquín* to respond to some insulting graffiti, which had been written about him.

Robert V. Childs and Patricia B. Altman, Vive tu Recuerdo: Living Traditions in the Mexican Days of the Dead (California: University of California, 1982).

In this year’s Day of the Dead exhibition, students of Big Picture High School wrote a short Calavera in memoriam of fellow students. The teachers and students of the school created an altar installation to honor and remember Chicago Public School students who died as a result of violence throughout the last school year and displayed the following words:

**Hola, soy el espíritu que siempre anda en la calle, trata de volver a la vida.
Soy uno de los estudiantes que murió por violencia en la calle.
Recuerdo mi escuela, veo vacío mi asiento.
Mi presencia hace falta.
Pero ya no estoy aquí.**

DISCUSSION

1. After reading the teacher background information, talk to your students about *Calaveras* and what they are. During the time of Day of the Dead in Mexico, many *Calaveras* are written about friends and family to poke fun at one another. Remember to note, death is taken very lightly at this time, it is meant to be a celebration, a happy time. Day of the Dead is not a scary time for kids; these *Calaveras* are a good example of how kids take part in the tradition.

2. Share with them the following example of a *Calavera* that is written in couplets. You may introduce the idea of the couplet and how they are used in poetry. Notice the pattern of rhyme marked by the letters to the left.

a There's a mean old lady that lives next door
a She yells and she screams and stomps on the floor
b One day she sneezed so hard that her hat fell down
b I picked it up and looked at her with a frown
c She was really a skeleton from her toes to her head
c Don't be scared, one day you'll look like me, she said!

3. Point out that in this *calavera*, there are 3 couplets and each couplet rhymes in the end. Not all *Calaveras* rhyme, however. Some are very short, while others are very long. Here is another *calavera*, written for a teacher:

Mrs. Smith is so very boring
She'll go teach the dead and have them snoring
Oh Mrs. Smith we'll sure miss you
But please take the tests, and quizzes too!

4. For another example, write your own *calavera* about students in general, or someone in particular, such as the school principal. The idea is to have fun with the topic.

5. Discussion Questions:

- *Why do you think people began to write Calaveras?*
- *What kinds of traditions do you have in reading or writing during special days? Think about what you do during Valentine's Day, Holidays, and Thanksgiving.*
- *If you wrote a Calavera, whom would it be about? Why?*
- *What other types of "popular" literature are there?*

ACTIVITY

1. In this activity, students will write their own Calaveras. First have students think about what kind of calavera they will write. Will it be dedicated to someone in particular? A friend or family member? Other things they will need to decide are the length of their piece, the rhyme pattern and the tone of the calavera. Will it be funny? Do you want to write a satire to describe the things going on in society?
2. The next step is to have students plan their calavera. On a sheet of paper, have students list adjectives to describe the person or thing they will write about. This will help students with their creative writing and assist them in finding words that rhyme.
3. Now, have students write their own Calaveras. Give them enough time to write and revise their piece. Encourage them to have fun with the process and be as creative with their words as they can.
4. Finally, invite students to share their Calaveras with the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. You may ask students to describe differences and similarities between writing Calaveras and their reflection activity during their Museum visit. The topic is the same, but how was the experience of being in the gallery different from being in the class? Can you express your ideas better with poetry or with a narrative? Which form did you like better and why?
2. Celebrate Day of the Dead in your classroom. Set up your classroom *ofrenda*, decorate your room with the paper projects (hands-on activity in this guide), and have a few students read Calaveras each morning.
3. Research the *Calaveras* of Jose Guadalupe Posada.