

SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ

Lesbian Mexican Nun and Poet (1651-1695)



Early feminist Sor Juana was a 17th century poet, nun and scholar. With a remarkable aptitude for everything from Latin to geometry, she took her novitiate at the age of 16. As a nun she was free to study the more than 4000 books she collected in her cell – one of the largest private libraries in the New World. Her poetry and plays were widely read and brought her renown in Europe and Spanish America for celebrating the “magicas infusions (magical infusions)” of Native American cultures – all of which earned her a reputation as one of the greatest lyric poets of the age. In her work as in her life, she acknowledged being “en dos partes dividida (divided in two parts),” torn between passion and reason, sensuality and religious devotion. Contemporaries spoke of her liaisons with other nuns (and with the wife of the viceroy of the Court of Mexico City), but it in the end it was her audaciously brilliant verse, and the threat to traditional authority it posed, that proved her undoing. In her most famous work *Reply to Sor Filotea* she defended the intellectual rights of women and condemned the Church for helping keep women uneducated. As a result of challenging societal values and ecclesiastical dogma she was officially censured. In 1694 she signed documents that may have been conscious rejections of her past life and donated many of her books to help the suffering poor in the city. She died the following year at the age of 43, while nursing her sister nuns in the midst of an epidemic. Nobel Prize winning author and poet Octavio Paz said of her poetry that it was the most important produced in the Americas until the advent of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Sor Juana – who is currently pictured on Mexico’s 200-peso note – has been an inspiration and a focus of study for centuries. Her former convent is now the University of the Cloister for Sor Juana.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Read the biographical information found at <https://www.biography.com/writer/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>.
2. Why is Sor Juana thought of as an early defender of women’s rights? How did she become the first published feminist of the New World with so many forces arrayed against her?
3. Group Discussion: Describe how Sor Juana questioned the status quo as a nun in Spanish society.
4. Extend Knowledge: Choose two of the poems by Sor Juana at <http://www.poemhunter.com/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz/> How does she depict the role of men and her love for friend(s)?
5. Summarize for your classmates how Sor Juana’s primary interests are revealed in the poems you read.

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Sor Juana explored feminism centuries before the word became part of common language. Select three of her poems at <https://mypoeticside.com/poets/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz-poems> and explain how they address the importance of education, equality for women, and proto-feminist constructs.
2. Website Investigation: Explore the resources listed at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>. How would you incorporate the story of Sor Juana into your classroom for students who not interested in poetry or feminism? Why should she be considered an important cultural influence and historical figure?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Explore this link: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/philosophers/cruz.html>. Trace the steps in the timeline for Sor Juana’s life and explain how she developed her own approach to learning as a young woman.
2. Based upon her acclaimed writings, Sor Juana approached gender awareness and women’s rights long before such studies were commonplace. In what ways did she express this understanding through her friendship with Maria Luisa?
3. Explore <http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2010/04/sor-juana-nun-who-loved-countess.html>. How did Sor Juana remain “true” to her own convictions despite her circumstances, societal values, and the censorship she experienced because of ecclesiastical dogma?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Sor Juana has received critical acclaim for her writings and for beliefs she championed outside of accepted social boundaries; but few people have ever heard of her. Explain why she should be considered a role model for modern feminists.
2. Website investigation: Search “Poetry” or “Latinx” at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced> and choose someone whose story resonates with you. Explain why in an essay describing what actions people could take today to carry on their work?