



Behind the Mountains

Overhead

Celiane Esperance lives in the Haitian countryside with her mother, Manman, and her brother, Moy. All have been patiently waiting to join their father, who has been living and working in Brooklyn, New York, trying to raise money and establish paperwork for his family to leave Haiti. When Celiane receives a journal from her teacher for her excellent schoolwork, she decides to record her thoughts on the events that take place around her as her family prepares to move to America. Through her writing, the reader is introduced to her family and all of the places that they visit, including Port-au-Prince during election time, where a bomb nearly kills Celiane and her mother. Their struggles in Haiti come to a close as they travel to meet her father in New York at Christmastime. Now their new struggles begin, as they have to become accustomed to American life.

Objectives

Students will be able to read, discuss, and write about the immigration experience as depicted through a first-person narrative in order to extrapolate motivations for immigration and hardships faced before and after the journey to the U.S.

Specifically students will:

- Research Haiti and its history, Haitian culture, and Haitian immigration.
- Read [*Behind the Mountains*](#) by Edwidge Danticat.
- Keep a journal and discuss the important elements of the novel as it relates to the development of theme.
- Understand the “push-pull” factors of immigration and the various reasons people immigrate.
- Understand how “duality of cultures” and “stages of adaptation” function in the lives of immigrants.
- Illustrate and understand figurative language in proverbs.
- Write an essay analyzing the development of key themes in the novel.

Grades

- 9-10 (adapt as appropriate).

Texts & Materials

In addition to the novel *Behind the Mountains*, the following resources are available:

- [Define the Terms Handout](#)
- [Haitian Art Internet Research Response Handout](#)
- [Deciphering Meaning in Haitian Proverbs and Art](#)
- [Stage of Adaptation Reading Tracker Handout](#)
- [Dialectic Journal](#)
- [Push and Pull Immigration Factors Handout](#)
- [Cumulative Task Essay Handout](#)
- Companion texts: “[Sawfish Soup](#)” and “[We Are Ugly but We Are Here](#)” by Edwidge Danticat
- YouTube Video: [Interview with Edwidge Danticat, Author of *Behind the Mountains*](#)

Lesson Procedure

Pre or During Reading Activities

1. Immigrant Interviews

Prepare for reading *Behind the Mountains* by having students brainstorm about why people immigrate and have students interview family members and friends about their family immigration stories. Discuss the reasons people immigrate.

- Tips for conducting an interview can be modified from our lesson [An Immigrant Experience](#)

As a follow up to the discussion, have students begin researching stories of immigration to the U.S.

- ### 2. Have students research the following terms in relation to immigration: Refugee; Stages of Adaptation; Culture Shock; Recovery; Assimilation; Acculturation. Have students apply their research about these terms to the interviews and stories of immigrants.
- ### 3. Read articles on current immigration issues and policy and discuss in class as informational text close-reads.
- For the most current reports and issues, please see: [Immigration Impact](#) and [Immigration In and Out of the Classroom](#)

Close Reading

Keep a [dialectic journal](#).

Read the first entry of the novel (October 18) and discuss Celiane’s “sweet little book.” You may ask students to read independently or complete a first read aloud as a class either by having you or a proficient reader read aloud. Have students consider why Celiane decides to use her notebook as a personal journal.

Distribute small journals to students. Explain that their journals are to be used to record their reactions to the readings and discussions of *Behind the Mountains*. Ask students to create a *two-column dialectical journal (evidence on the left, analysis on the right)* to note their reactions, details about characters or settings, themes, symbols, anecdotes and proverbs.

[Model](#) this first entry to the class and assist students as they keep their journals.

Dates refer to entries in Celiane’s journal.

Differentiate: You may pose struggling students the questions suggested below for each of Celiane’s journal entries in order to focus their thinking. Advanced students can come up with their own questions in addition to or in place of the suggested questions.

Tip: This novel is compartmentalized for students to read in small groups or pairs. Literacy strategies such as jigsaws, read-alouds, think alouds, and chunking close reads would all be appropriate to use.

October 18: After reflecting on the purpose and private nature of Celiane’s journal, ask students: What details best reveal Celiane’s cultural experience?

October 19: Ask students why they think Celiane’s father immigrated to the United States and why they think he left his family behind. Why does he send cassettes instead of writing, calling, or visiting?

- Good time for [Deciphering Meaning in Haitian Proverbs and Art](#)

October 20: Ask students: Why is Celiane having difficulty writing to her father? What does it reveal about the immigration experience? Then as a follow-up ask students to write a letter from Celiane to her father. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and have the partner respond to the letter as Celiane’s father.

October 23: Ask the students: What are some of the reasons why the Esperance family decides to immigrate?

- Good time for [Push and Pull Immigration Factors Handout](#)

October 27: Ask students: What is the relationship between the mountain folk and the city folk? Follow up with a discussion on how might this entry connect to the novel’s title?

October 30: Ask the students: How does the political situation affect the Esperance family? Follow up with a discussion on push and pull immigration factors.

November 5: Ask the students to record what they think happened to Celiane and to Manman. Ask students to point to specific details in the text to support their thinking. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and report back to the class.

November 6-25: Ask the students to discuss the violence and the characters' reactions to it. Have the students read "[Sawfish Soup](#)" and "[We Are Ugly but We Are Here](#)" by Edwidge Danticat. Ask the students to write a reflection on the poem and the incidence of violence in *Behind the Mountains*. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and report back to the class.

November 26: Ask the students why they think Tante Rose votes and why Moy feels he must go with her. Have students role-play the various points of view about going to the polls on that day -- Tante Rose's view, Moy's view, Manman's view.

December 13-17: Ask the students to explain Celiane's conflict about leaving. What "push-pull" factors are operating within Celiane? Ask students to draw a description of Celiane's conflict and to create a proverb to explain this conflict.

- Good time for [Define the Terms Handout](#)

December 18: Ask the students: What is the role of fear in immigration? Specifically touch upon the additional medical examination in this entry, but also extend to a larger discussion of the novel and in the immigration experience.

December 20: Ask the students: What type of man is Celiane's father? How do you know? Review characterization.

December 21-22: Ask the students: How does each of the family members view their reunification? Have the students write a reaction to Celiane's reunion with her father in New York. Ask them to surmise what Moy must be feeling and respond in writing. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and report back to the class.

December 22- 24: Ask students to draw a diagram contrasting Celiane's feelings out on the streets of New York to her feelings inside the church. How does the recently arrived Esperance family create a home?

December 26: Ask student: What is the source of the conflict between Manman and Papa? Then ask students to explain the nature of the argument between Manman and Papa in terms of their different stages of adaptation.

- Good time for [Stage of Adaptation Reading Tracker Handout](#)

January 2: Ask students to respond in writing to Celiane's first day of school in terms of her stage of adaptation. What stage of adaptation is Celiane in? How do you know?

January 4-17: Ask students break into small groups to discuss how they think Faidherbe and Immacula will make a difference for Celiane. Students must use the text to support their thinking. Have the group reporter, report back to the class. As the students report back, ask the class to offer suggestions or examples of helping someone who is new to the school community.

January 18-22: Ask students: how do presidents influence the perception of immigrants? Ask students to elaborate on Celiane's reactions to the speeches of the outgoing and the incoming Presidents and to compare what each President says about immigrants.

January 24-29: Ask students to break into small groups to compare the information given to Celiane by Faidherbe and Immacula on this day to the information that was given to her on her first day of school. Have the group reporter, report back to the class.

January 29: Ask students: What multigenerational conflicts develop in the Esperance family? Why? Push students to explain the significance of Granpe's ice story.

January 30: Ask students to draw a Venn Diagram comparing Immacula's and Therese's lives. Ask students: what factors might drive a person to immigrate or stay?

February 4-15: Ask students: What is the source of the conflict between Moy and his father? Ask students to respond to the disagreement between Moy and his father. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and report back to the class.

- Good time for [Haitian Art Internet Research Response Handout](#)

February 18-19: Ask students: What is the theme of Celiane's letter to her father? Ask students to respond to Celiane's letter. Have students share what they wrote with a partner and report back to the class.

February 21-22: Ask students to respond to how the issues are resolved between Moy and his father. Ask them to reflect on their feelings about this resolution and connect to the stages of adaptation.

February 16, February 20, February 23: Ask student how the new developments at Immacula's house have altered things for Immacula. Ask students to reflect on how they would feel in Immacula's situation.

February 25, February 26: Ask students: how do immigrants maintain their ties to their home country? Ask students to elaborate on Celiane's response to what she has learned from Therese's letters. Have students write a letter to Therese from Celiane.

March 3: Ask students: What is the significance of Moy's paintings in their new home?

- Good time to complete [Stage of Adaptation Reading Tracker Handout](#)

Extension Activities

1. Students will research Haitian Proverbs and Haitian Art. Each student will illustrate a Haitian proverb using Haitian art techniques.
2. Students will read “My Personal Journey” by Edwidge Danticat (161-166) and [watch our interview](#) with Edwidge Danticat, who revisits her novel 14 years later and offers advice to young writers. Students will write an essay comparing and contrasting Edwidge Danticat’s immigration experience to those in the novel, and extend this comparison to the immigration experiences they have learned about through their study, research and interviews on immigration.

Culminating Task Essay

Ask students to choose from one of the following essay questions or differentiate as necessary. Click [here](#) for a student handout.

Prompt 1: How does a title develop theme? After reading Behind the Mountains, write an essay in which you explain how the meaning of the novel’s title demonstrates a central theme of an immigrant’s story. Support your position with evidence from the text

- Imagine you and your family had to leave your home. What would you miss and how would you try to keep connected to a place?

Use the question above as preparatory /exploratory writing for prompt 1 or as a personal essay.

Prompt 2: What motivates a person to immigrate? After reading Behind the Mountains, write an essay in which you explain the causes of immigration and the effects of acculturation in the novel. Support your position with evidence from the text.

- How difficult would your life have to be in order for you to be willing to cross a desert alone or to risk going by ocean to another country?

Use the question above as preparatory /exploratory writing for prompt 2 or as a personal essay.

Assessment

Provide checklists and rubrics to assess the journal responses, the essay, and the proverb illustration. Recommended Essay Rubric from the Literacy Design Collaborative: <http://ldc.org/sites/default/files/LDC-Argumentation-Rubric-2.0.pdf>

Common Core Standards

High School

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6

Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

About Us

The American Immigration Council is a non-profit, non-partisan, organization based in Washington D.C. Our legal, education, policy and exchange programs work to strengthen America by honoring our immigrant history and shaping how Americans think and act towards immigration now and in the future. We strive to promote a better understanding of immigrants and immigration by providing free educational resources that inspire thoughtful dialogue, creative teaching and critical thinking.

Tell Us How You Use This Lesson in Your Classroom

We'd love to know how you have adapted this lesson or any feedback you want to share with us. Please send us a message at teacher@immcouncil.org

Please note that as a teacher, you are eligible for community grants, books for your classroom, professional development, leadership opportunities, and more!

We welcome contributing book reviews and guest blog posts from educators. Stay connected by following our blog, [Immigration In and Out of the Classroom](#), and our twitter [@ThnkImmigration](#)