

Grade 8: Unit 6

In the Time of the Butterflies: Introduction

Purpose: Why This Unit?

In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez is a powerful historical fiction novel about the four Mirabal sisters during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. During the next few weeks, you will help your scholars love and deeply understand *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

Your job, though, is first and foremost that of a reading teacher. You must ensure that your scholars enlist the basic tools of great readers — envisioning, reading with fluency, engaging in word attack, and of course, using plot, setting, and character development — to understand the book's provocative ideas. You must know your scholars' Fountas & Pinnell levels and ensure that they are swiftly growing as readers. You must ensure that your scholars are reading and writing at home and that your scholars' parents are invested in their learning.

You are also a teacher of writing. You must ensure that your scholars are deeply invested in improving their writing and that they give you their best work. Always set sky-high expectations and settle only for scholars' best efforts. It is your responsibility to dramatically improve your scholars' writing capacities. You will need to study the Top 5 Writing Tactics and ensure that scholars know how to be critics of their own writing.

In particular, you are responsible for the following outcomes:

- First and foremost, you must get 100% of your scholars independently reading at least four books per month.

- You are responsible for 100% of your scholars completing nightly literacy homework that will develop them as readers and writers.
- You are responsible for getting any of your scholars who are still reading below grade level, as measured by the Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessment, to Level Z.

You will not achieve 100% without setting clear expectations for your scholars and their parents, and driving relentlessly toward these goals. If you hold scholars and parents accountable and are an absolute stickler at the beginning, you will make it easier for yourself and frankly for your scholars and their parents. The worst thing you can do as a teacher is let scholars slide and then get tough. You will breed resentment and distrust, whereas clear expectations and utter consistency breed trust and respect.

Themes in *In the Time of the Butterflies*

In order to successfully teach this unit, you must be intellectually prepared at the highest level. This means reading and studying the entire book before launching the unit, and understanding the major themes that Julia Alvarez communicates through the book. By the time your scholars finish reading *In the Time of the Butterflies*, they should be able to articulate and explain these themes.

The table below outlines the major topics and themes highlighted in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Note that you should not review these with scholars before they begin reading the book. Rather, scholars will uncover the themes organically through their reading. As a teacher of reading, you need to facilitate rich conversations about the meaning of each chapter. You will do this by posing the discussion questions provided in each seminar. As scholars read the text, you will press them to analyze how the author uses events in the book to communicate the major themes.

While there is not one correct thematic statement for each major topic discussed in the book, there are accurate (evidence-based) and inaccurate (not evidence-based) interpretations of what the author is arguing. Therefore, we have provided exemplar thematic statements in the table below.

Topic	Theme
The Importance of Family	Family bonds greatly influence individuals' actions and decisions. Family relationships can provide both a network of support as well as a source of hardship.
Sacrifice	Not all friendships are true friendships, but true friendships are invaluable. It is noble to give up one's own comfort and safety — and even one's own life — in pursuit of a greater good.
Feminine Strength	Women and men possess equal agency and strength. Although gender norms dictate culturally appropriate behavior, women can circumvent these norms and find ways to assert their strength.
Justice	Although elusive, justice is worth pursuing, even in the face of grave personal sacrifice and danger.
The Power of the Individual	The actions of one individual — whether a malevolent dictator or a compassionate revolutionary — can shape the course of history.