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## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Realism

## “Cooking Lesson” by Rosario Castellanos

Realism is an attempt to reproduce faithfully the lives of ordinary people in everyday situations. Characters, settings, and events are presented in ways the reader should recognize as plausible. Realism often relies on appealing to the reader’s senses because the success of realistic fiction relies on an author’s ability to structure plots that ring true from emotional, psychological, and sensory perspectives.

Food and its preparation are an especially important part of Mexican culture. In “Cooking Lesson” by Rosario Castellanos, a newly married woman attempts to cook a roast for the first time. The kitchen, the meat, and the aromas are described in great detail and echo the narrator’s emotional condition. It becomes clear that the sterility of the kitchen and the narrator’s culinary failure symbolize her troubled marriage and her resistance to assuming a traditional role in her new household.

### Discussion Activities

Ask several students to read their homework aloud in class. Are the essays similar? If not, discuss students’ various reactions to the story as a class, remembering that reader-response criticism allows for different interpretations of the same story as long as the reader’s opinions remain grounded in the text. How much does personal experience affect the way students identify with this story? Is the same true for all works of literature?

Ask students to name several examples of images, thoughts, actions, or emotions in the story that are both realistic and believable. As a class, discuss how each element contributes to the success of the story.

Setting is the time and place in which the action of a story occurs. Often, setting is more than just background information. A particular setting can cause things to happen. Characters placed in a specific setting might behave in certain ways, have profound realizations, and reveal their innermost natures. Discuss the importance of setting in this story.

### Writing Exercise

Rosario Castellanos appeals to each of her reader’s senses to create realistic fiction. Ask students to write a short essay identifying ways Castellanos has appealed to all of the reader’s senses while writing “Cooking Lesson.”

### Homework

In their reader’s journals, have students write a short description of the story’s narrator, including a paragraph on each of the following questions. Who is the narrator? How does she feel about her marriage and the traditional roles of women in Mexican society? What parallels does the narrator see between herself and the ruined meat?