Central American History and Literature

To promote understanding of Central American history and literature during Latino Heritage Month and all year long.

TeachingforChange.org
Put Central America on the map!

TeachingforChange.org
Country Focus: El Salvador
Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980): El Salvador

- Catholic religious leader known as the "Voice of the Voiceless"
- Advocated for the rights of the poor and oppressed
- Assassinated during mass by the US-backed Salvadoran military

Biography
Video clip from Romero

TeachingforChange.org
"What good are beautiful highways and airports, beautiful buildings full of spacious apartments, if they are only put together with the blood of the poor, who are not going to enjoy them?“

-July 15, 1979 sermon
Archbishop Oscar Romero: The Last Sermon (1980)

Preached "liberation theology," a Catholic movement calling for equality and justice for all

Begged the National Guard to stop killing civilians

Targeted by the government for his advocacy of the poor

Full text of sermon
Definition of Liberation Theology
Farabundo Martí (1893-1932): El Salvador

- Rebel leader who dropped out of college in 1920 to fight against the corrupt dictatorship
- Founded the Communist Party of Central America
- Organized a peasant uprising in 1932 in which he was murdered by the Salvadoran military
"We should all die proud of our sacred mission, of our struggle to free an enslaved people. Long live the International Red Aid! Long live the ideal [of communism] and the Communist International!"

-1931
Maria Serrano (b. 1950): El Salvador

Organized the poor against the El Salvadoran government

Fought on the front lines with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) during the civil war in the 1980s
"To tell the truth you never get used to this war. One day you are planning an attack, the next day the army has you on the run. But we won't be running forever. One day I'll change these old boots for a pair of lady's shoes."

Maria Serrano (b. 1950): El Salvador
Maria's Story: A Documentary Portrait Of Love and Survival in El Salvador's Civil War

- A story of Maria Serrano’s daily life on the front lines
- Chronicles her struggles balancing both family and the war
- Includes scenes from within the FMLN guerrilla camps

Clip from the movie
Link to documentary

TeachingforChange.org
Manlio Argueta (b. 1935): El Salvador

- Exposed the military-led government's human rights violations during the civil war
- Exiled for twenty years for his revolutionary writing
- Currently the director of the National Library of El Salvador

Biography
Excerpt from "The Export of Colors"

TeachingforChange.org
"The problem lies in our awareness. The awareness we will have. Then life will become as clear as spring water...The problems can't be solved by a single person but only by all of us working together, the humble. The clear headed ones."

-One Day of Life, 1980

Manlio Argueta (b. 1935): El Salvador
Manlio Argueta: *One Day of Life*

- Historical fiction told through the voice of a female peasant during the civil war
- Highlights the role of the church and military
- Banned during the civil war (1979-1992)
- Won international award in 2005

[One Day of Life information](#)

Radical poet and journalist

Arrested in 1959, 1960 and 1965 for Communist Party membership

Escaped jail in 1965 and lived in exile for 8 years, then returned to continue fighting injustice

Assassinated by a rebel group

Biography
"Laws are created to be followed by the poor. Laws are made by the rich to bring some order to exploitation. The poor are the only law abiders in history. When the poor make laws the rich will be no more."

-1974
Roque Dalton: *Poemas Clandestinos*

- Returned from exile in 1973 in disguise
- Joined the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) as a soldier-poet
- During the fight, he secretly wrote the *Clandestine Poems*, a criticism of the government

[PDF of the poems](#)
Claribel Alegría (b. 1924): El Salvador

- Poet, novelist and translator
- Wrote to expose economic, social and gender injustice to advocate for nonviolent resistance
- Born in Nicaragua, grew up in El Salvador, exiled in the 1980s

Biography
Link to poem "Tamales from Cambray"
"It's very difficult sometimes to reconcile art and reality, but I have never thought that the poet had to be in an ivory tower just thinking beautiful thoughts. When there is so much horror around you, I think you have to look at it. You have to feel it and suffer with the others and make that suffering yours."

-1995

Claribel Alegría (b. 1924): El Salvador
Claribel Alegría: *Ashes of Izalco*

- Exposed the massacre in 1932 of 30,000 peasants in the city of Izalco, El Salvador
- Portrayed a love story between a Salvadoran woman and a man from the US based on her own marriage
Country Focus: Guatemala
Otto René Castillo (1934-1967): Guatemala

- Poet and revolutionary
- Exiled for 12 years
- Chief of Propaganda and Education for Revolutionary Armed Forces, the leftist guerrilla army
- Captured, tortured and murdered by the Guatemalan government

Biography

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"You have a gun and I am hungry
You have a gun because I am hungry
You have a gun therefore I am hungry
You can have a gun
You can have a thousand bullets and even another thousand
You can waste them all on my poor body
You can kill me one, two, three, two thousand, seven thousand times
But in the long run I will always be better armed than you if you have a gun and I only hunger."
Otto René Castillo: *Tomorrow Triumphant*

- Urged the moral necessity for peasant revolution
- Graphically exposed the government imposed massacres and corruption

Poem: *Tomorrow Triumphant*
Rigoberta Menchú (b. 1959): Guatemala

- Quiche Mayan grassroots organizer for women’s and labor rights
- Inspired by her parents
- Family murdered by the Guatemalan army
- Fought with rebels during the civil war
- Won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work advocating indigenous rights

Biography

Interview with Rigoberta

TeachingforChange.org
“My mother decided to travel...to attest to what she had seen [in Guatemala]. She said ‘As a woman it is my duty to tell my story so that other mothers don’t have to suffer like me, so that they don’t have to witness the torture and assassination of one of their children.’ ...My little sister, who was nine years old, said she was going to join the guerrillas, so that she wouldn’t die of hunger, nor wait to be killed by the troops”
Her book: *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

- Global bestseller
- Exposes the daily injustices of peasants and indigenous people in Guatemala
- Calls for universal human rights

*Quote from the first page*

[TeachingforChange.org](http://TeachingforChange.org)
Humberto Ak'abal (b. 1952): Guatemala

Mayan poet who writes in his native tongue K’iche and Spanish

Wrote about the marginalization of indigenous people

Biography

TeachingforChange.org
“Yesterday, the burial, today the whitewashing of the house. If he returns he will no longer find his way. The whiteness of the limewash, in the light of the moon, blinds the eyes of the dead”
Humberto Ak'abal: *Drum of Stone*

- Offered a window into Mayan culture
- Critics found his poems concise but profound
- Themes include nature, love, language, community, and politics

*Selection from the book*
Country Focus: Nicaragua
Augusto César Sandino (1895-1934): Nicaragua

- Revolutionary leader
- Worked at a Mexican oil company and was inspired by the labor unions’ advocacy for social equality
- Led a rebellion against U.S. military occupation

[TeachingforChange.org](http://TeachingforChange.org)
“To change an oppressive social system, the only need is the existence of a man with a minimum of dignity."
Sergio Ramírez (b. 1942): Nicaragua

- Political professor and journalist
- Leader against the Somoza government
- Vice President of Nicaragua from 1984-1990

Biography
Interview with him about Nicaragua
Sergio Ramírez: *Adios Muchachos*

- Insider’s account of the Sandinista revolution
- Includes Somoza dictatorship, war with the United States, and the Sandinista movement

[Detailed description](http://TeachingforChange.org)
Gioconda Belli (b. 1948): Nicaragua

- Poet, writer, and political critic
- Involved in the underground resistance movement in Nicaragua from 1970-1975
- Held government positions in communications, journalism, and public relations

Biography

TeachingforChange.org
“Who are we?
Who are these men, these women without language, scorned for their color
for their skins, their feathers, and their adornments?
So we would not read other than their sacred writings
They burned ours in bonfires
Our history, our poetry, the records of our people...
They burned our writings, carefully painted by the scribes
They burned the history that made us who we were.”
Gioconda Belli: *The Country Under My Skin*

- A personal narrative about her journey from the upper class to the Sandinista revolution
- Reflection of the social inequalities underlying the revolution

[Interview about the memoir](TeachingforChange.org)
Ernesto Cardenal (b. 1925): Nicaragua

- Catholic priest, FSLN member, and world-renowned poet
- Created a community of artists in the Solentiname Islands which originated the primitivist style of painting
- Nicaraguan Minister of Culture

Biography
“You can't be with God and be neutral. True contemplation is resistance. And poetry, gazing at clouds is resistance I found out in jail.”

-1981

Ernesto Cardenal (b. 1925): Nicaragua
Ernesto Cardenal: Zero Hour

- A call for social justice, deriving inspiration from biblical stories
- Focus on politics, history, Christianity, and indigenous peoples

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Rubén Darío (1867-1916): Nicaragua

- Poet, first published at age 13
- "Father of Modernism"- an important Spanish-American literary movement
- Read a poem to the Spanish court in 1892 in protest of the conquest on the 400th anniversary

Biography
“Would to God that these waters, once untouched, had never mirrored the white of Spanish sails, and that the astonished stars had never seen those caravels arriving at our shores!...

Evil mischance has placed afflictions, horrors, wars, and unending fevers in our way: Oh Christopher Columbus, unfortunate admiral, pray to God for the world you discovered!”

-From poem read to Spanish court
Rubén Darío: *Azul*

- Book of short stories and poetry
- Uses strong vowel sounds contrary to the typical Spanish style of poetry
- Themes include suffering, love, art, and Christianity
Carlos Mejia Godoy (b. 1943): Nicaragua

Folk musician committed to social justice

Wrote political lyrics with a sense of humor

Many of his songs were written to inspire the liberation movement

Biography

TeachingforChange.org
“If they take away our bread, we will be obliged to survive as our grandparents did—with corn fermented in the blood of our heros.”

Carlos Mejia Godoy (b. 1943): Nicaragua
Song: Nicaragua, Nicaraguita

Video
Managua, Nicaragua
THE END

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