

Feraco
SFHP – Period
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...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*: Notes and Thoughts (Glencoe)

Although brief and seemingly simple, Tomás Rivera's ...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* is regarded as a groundbreaking work. The novel demands that readers make connections between the stories and come to their own conclusions about the identity and relationships of the characters and the meaning of nameless people's actions. As professor of Chicano studies Eliud Martínez explains:

Rivera points no accusing fingers, does not judge or indict; the incidents or his characters' stories speak for themselves. The reader draws his own conclusions. Subjectivity of selection of scenes, stories, overheard conversations, however, permit the author to comment, to lament, to express compassion, in order to touch the reader's emotions and feelings.

In the novel, Rivera tries to give voice to migrant workers like the ones he grew up with. His goal is to reveal their hopes, dreams, frustrations, and deprivations as they suffer, pray, celebrate, and remember.

...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* consists of twenty-seven episodes. Twelve of these are titled stories. Thirteen of the episodes are brief, untitled vignettes, or short stories, that make a point. The remaining two episodes are introductory and concluding narratives that frame the novel and help unify it. Each anecdote is related by subject or theme to the story that comes before or after it. Some characters appear in more than one story; others do not. Some characters are identified; many remain nameless.

Rather than having a traditional plot with rising action, climax, and resolution, the novel presents the fragmented memories of a young boy. Some of the stories and anecdotes are told by the boy, some by a third-person narrator, and still others through the use of dialogue.

Rivera's storytelling technique has been called "fragmented" because he presents incomplete or isolated bits of information. This method allows him to cover a large range of experiences without the normal constraints of a chronologically ordered series of events. The structure of the novel seeks to mimic the way in which memory works and to present the feelings of disorientation – of feeling lost – experienced by many of the migrant workers as they struggle to make sense of a culture that is sometimes very different from their own. Together, the anecdotes and stories vividly depict a community's struggle against incredible odds.

The History of a Word

During the 1940s and 1950s, immigrants from Spain, Portugal, and from anywhere below the southern border of the United States were referred to simply as Spanish, regardless of their place of birth. As more people came to the United States from Mexico, Central America, Cuba, and other countries, a new term was added to describe the ancestry of these immigrants. "Hispanic" was widely used during the 1960s, but it was improperly applied to define the entire Spanish-speaking population as a race and culture. Furthermore, the term was coined by mainstream Americans [(rather than by the people it applied to)]. The use of the term "Hispanic" by the dominant American culture resulted in the stereotyping of a widely diverse group of people. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, young Mexican Americans began calling themselves *Chicanos*. In the 1980s, the term Hispanic reappeared to refer to any person living in the United States who is of Spanish ancestry. More recently, Latino has become a term of choice for many Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans living on the mainland.

A Literal View of the Book

Considered a landmark of Chicano literature, Rivera's 1971 novel tells the story of a community of migrant workers in the United States in the 1940s and '50s. A compilation of stories, internal monologues, vignettes, and scraps of conversation, the novel focuses on a year in the life of a boy from a south Texas community. The boy faces bigotry, poverty, illness, and confusion about his own history and identity, but finds strength in himself and in those around him. "By discovering who he is," writes Julián Olivares in *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works*, "this adolescent becomes one with his people. Through his quest, he embodies and expresses the collective conscience and experiences of his society."

Note: For the purposes of this class, I have chosen to examine the boy as a symbol rather than as a sentient being. I have many reasons for this choice, one of the most important being that “The Lost Year” makes Olivares’s type of reading extremely difficult. You can argue that the boy’s forgetfulness is symbolic (while the boy himself is not), and I could agree with you; if you believe the boy is real, then it is the people around him – the community the book describes – who are symbols instead of “real” people. The interpretive choice is yours, and you may study this as you see fit.

The Issues Here

When asked what this book is about, I usually reply that it’s about people. If pushed to explain myself better, I start talking about the book in terms of the themes I assigned you, and that usually satisfies curious parties. An answer that takes into account the “issues” at hand, however, is a little more detailed. Kanellos has more (please note that he sees the boy more literally than some critics do, and believes that the characters in the vignettes symbolize the Chicano community instead):

This book is much, much more about some of the more intimate, poetic, and personal moments of coming to terms with one's identity, and family, and society. And therefore looks beyond the mere, political movements, the mere politics of resisting domination from outside. It's much more a query of the community itself. What are you going to do to get outside of the vicious cycle of poor schools? What are you going to do to get outside of the vicious cycle of being treated like a beast of burden? But in a very much more poetic and intimate way, not couched in the rhetoric of party politics.

Now, some of the issues brought up obviously are shocking. Children that get shot because they want to go have a drink of water. Kids that could burn to death in their house because they have to be left alone while their parents are out working the fields. These are tragedies. And they go beyond just pointing fingers. The book is full of irony. And those unidentified voices in the dialogues at the end of the chapters kind of represent the collective conscious in the book -- they're injecting the irony. For example, in one chapter, the boxing gloves the kids were using to play with when they were at home, when they were alone, didn't burn in the fire, but the little bodies burned. So one of these little anonymous voices says, "Well, they sure make boxing gloves durable these days, don't they?" So it questions the values of the society -- materialism, you know, we make these kinds of things to last, but we can't make kids last and aspirations and hopes last.

I’m not sure I agree with all of Kanellos’s phrasing, for the book certainly takes the “politics of resisting outside domination” into account. His underlying message, however, underscored what I discussed when talking about religion’s role in the book: Rivera is concerned with individuals and communities at the same time, and in studying how the latter allow people to move beyond their bonds – whether externally or internally imposed. Don’t simply accept a terrible lot in life if you haven’t earned it.

Conflicts Inside and Out

What “hurts” in “It’s That It Hurts?” Why does the boy really keep jamming his hand in his pocket – and why can’t he throw the ring away? What’s the real source of pain for the mother in “A Prayer,” or for the child in the first vignette? Keep an eye out for what’s *really* happening in these stories, as opposed to what you think seems obvious. Some conflicts will be obvious; some of them will be hidden so well that you only glimpse the symptoms. Look at each story, try to figure out what each character is doing, and why they are really doing it; this may make it easier to spot the conflicts.