

Día de los Muertos GRADES K-12

Conjuring with Words and Art



INTRODUCTION

Día de los Muertos is a Mexican tradition of personal and collective remembrance for those who have died. On this day, the dead return and are a part of the community, sharing in the celebration. The observance of Día de los Muertos is now popular across Latin America, and combines indigenous traditions along with some elements of Catholicism. The altar or *ofrenda* tradition builds a bridge for the dead to travel between this world and the next. Family and friends place food, drink, objects, photographs, and personal items of the deceased on the altar to entice them to return. The powerful smell of marigolds makes a kind of aromatic trail leading the departed back. The tradition is meant to be welcoming and celebratory—not frightening. It is done with love, respect, and sometimes even humor.



In this photograph by Dana Salvo, we see a family's home altar decorated with items memorializing loved ones who have died. Photographs, fragrant flowers, fragments of lace, and brightly colored cloth accompany an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. When we look closely at the photographs placed on the altar, we see that they are old, some worn, representing multiple generations and different individuals. This is a space created in the home that is both profoundly personal and spiritual. We can imagine the family lighting the candles, perhaps preparing a favorite meal of the departed, and sharing stories.

Día de los Muertos and the tradition of *la ofrenda* is as much about life as it is about death. When we speak of those we loved, we remember them as if they have come back to us. Indeed, each item on the altar becomes a vessel for remembrance.

THE TRADITION TODAY

Artists have always had a central place in Día de los Muertos as interpreters and synthesizers of the tradition. To see some examples of how contemporary artists and art organizations are responding right now, visit the following two websites and explore the artists featured:

[Self-Help Graphics, Los Angeles](#)

[National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago](#)

ACTIVITY: CONJURING POEMS

What the altar does with physical items, we can do with words. We are calling these conjuring poems, because the idea is to create such a strong sense of the person through the details in the poem, that they in a sense, come back. The poem is a kind of altar of words. By reconstructing memories, in effect, it conjures or brings back the people we are honoring and whose presence we miss. The magic of the words, the details of speech, physical description and thought, bring these characters to life.

ACTIVITY: CONJURING POEMS

Definition of conjure:

1: to charge or entreat earnestly or solemnly.

2 a: to summon by or as if by invocation or incantation.

b (1): to affect or effect by or as if by magic.

(2): imagine, contrive—often used with up:

We conjure up our own metaphors for our own needs - R. J. Kaufmann.

(3): to bring to mind: *words that conjure pleasant images*. Often used with up:

Conjure up memories.

WORKSHEET

- Select the person who has died to whom you want to address your poem.
- Write down a smell or scent you associate with this person.
- Name a food, drink, or taste of something they loved to eat or drink.
- Write down a sound you associate with them. This can be music or the sound of them hammering or chopping in the kitchen, a car horn, a whistle, a laugh, a cough, anything.
- Remember a favorite article of clothing, a sweater, or a pair of shoes they always wore. Write those down.
- Was there a favorite saying they had? Something you associate with them, a nickname, a way of teasing? How would they greet you?
- What would you say to them if they came back? What might they say to you?
- What activity might you do together? Who else, if anyone, would join you?

STARTING TO WRITE

- You might think of your poem as an informal letter to this person. Address them by name, like Tío Manuel, or by a nickname or term of endearment, such as Grammy.
- Some possible starts are “When you come back...” or a direct appeal “Come back...”
- The memories and details from their lives are what you are offering as the lure to bring them back. Let them know what will happen if they return.

Image Credits

José Guadalupe Posada (Mexican, 1852-1913), *La Calavera Catrina*, ca. 1900. Zinc etching. SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by the 20th Century Acquisition Fund, 1998.49.1. © Artist's Estate.

Dana Salvo (American, b. 1952), *Nicho, Family History Table, Chiapas, Mexico*, from the series, “*Nichos y Nacimientos*,” 1989. Chromogenic print. SBMA, Gift of Bruce and Nancy Berman, 1998.57.45. © Dana Salvo.

SAMPLE POEMS BY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

1

For you, Grammy, I put your false teeth in a glass of water
next to the jewelry box with the dancing ballerina on top,
and inside, those green glass earrings that I bought you at
Uncle Tony's church rummage sale,
and which you wore on Christmas.
Underneath, I put our aprons, the matching ones with red rick
rack trimmed pockets,
and all my Barbie doll dresses you sewed from Dad's ties.
I sprinkled a little of that pink face powder you used
and added some vanilla and molasses.
I set out African violets, and dahlias big as lions' heads, and
Christmas wreaths made of
coat hangers and Kleenex.
For dinner we'll have beef stew with celery and just a little
flour to thicken the sauce.
Can you see them, Grammy?
The candles look pretty behind the orange carrot Jell-O molds.
And if you come,
I promise I'll sit up straight,
just like you always told me to.

2

Angel, when you come back
I bet you'll come back on your black cruiser
moving slowly
with a lit sweet swisher cigar in your mouth
you'll be wearing a black buttoned up shirt with a collar
But only buttoned up half way
and baggy jeans
and your Ipod will be playing Tupac loud enough so everyone
can hear -
When you come back, Angel
me you and Hans will skate together out at UCSB
and maybe the skate park.
We'll just ride around
you'll say "Whas up den?"
and I'll tell you

we are good friends
like I meant to do
I guess I did
when you were here.

3

Hey, Grumpy
If you come back will you put on that guy cologne, the
one with the fresh smell
like cool water.
We'll leave out a pizza for you
Plain, just with pepperoni and cheese
and a cold 40 bottle of Mickies.
You were so sensitive... we'll talk about your girlfriend
Tania.
Do you still want to go back with her?
She's somewhere,
who knows where.
I'll try not to get you mad- the way you do when
someone insults your friends.
When you see us Julio, will you go "OH" in that
breathy voice
And say hello with the accent on the O?
You can wear your Dallas Cowboys' jersey (I forgot
the number)?
And your dark baggy jeans
and the blue handkerchief hanging out of the pocket
and your plain super white super clean Nikes.
You are my good friend, Julio
I can talk to you like no one else.
Come back Julio,
you can imitate Mr Capone
and goof around
and even though I know your jokes are stupid.
You can make me laugh.



CREATING A HOME ALTAR

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

Home altars or *ofrendas* are personal expressions of who people were in life. Traditional altar items include images of a deceased loved one(s), their favorite objects and food, and are sometimes decorated with marigolds and *calaveras*. Museum Teaching Artist Tina Villadolid created a personal version of a home altar on her mantelpiece. Images of its elements are below to hopefully inspire ideas for your own *ofrenda*.



Objects that represent where your loved one is from



Votive candles, sage, cedar, or Palo Santo smudges



Objects from nature that are meaningful for you



Animal spirits



Objects that represent family or history



Handmade or handwritten cards that speak to your loved one's memory

