

Before You Read

World Literature
Argentina



The Censors

Meet **Luisa Valenzuela**

(born 1938)

As the political situation in her homeland grew increasingly violent, Luisa Valenzuela turned to writing to cope. One of the most recognized Latin American writers in the United States, Valenzuela writes novels and short stories that expose the injustices of society through satire and wit.



"[Luisa Valenzuela] wears an opulent, baroque crown, but her feet are naked."

—Carlos Fuentes

Luisa Valenzuela was born in Argentina to a well-respected physician and a writer. She began her career as a journalist working for magazines and newspapers in Buenos Aires. When she was just seventeen, Valenzuela wrote and published her first story. In 1966 her first novel, *Hay que sonreír* (translated as *Clara*), was published. During the 1970s, Argentina's economy deteriorated and the political situation in the country became very volatile. According to Valenzuela, the political atmosphere in Argentina pushed her to leave her home: "I decided to leave in order not to fall into self-censorship. Exile may be devastating, but perspective and separation sharpen the aim."

A Unique Style Known for her experimental style, Valenzuela blends the ordinary with the fantastical. Critics often note her ability to play with words and language. Many critics also classify her work as "magical realism," a type of fiction that inserts fantastic events

into a very believable, ordinary reality. However, Valenzuela seeks to push the boundaries of the genre. She says that "Magical realism was a beautiful resting place, but the thing is to go forward."

Politics and Society Valenzuela's most popular novel, *The Lizard's Tail*, details a sorcerer's rise, fall, and return to power. The book gives voice to the political upheaval and social change that took place in Argentina during the 1970s. Using dark humor, Valenzuela offers a powerful satire of government censorship and the difficult circumstances of war. Her stories identify the absurdities of society and expose the shameful operations of totalitarian regimes. As she says, "If the country is to heal, each and every shadow of the dark times has to come out into the open."

Achievements and Endeavors Valenzuela has published numerous novels and collections of short stories, and many of her works have been translated into other languages. Currently, she teaches creative writing in New York. She frequently returns home to Buenos Aires.

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Author Search For more about Luisa Valenzuela, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL59794u1.

Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Story

How might your life be altered if you lost your freedom of speech? Discuss this question with a small group.

Build Background

"The Censors" was first published in 1976, the year that a military faction overthrew Argentina's government. The new government severely restricted constitutional liberties and systematically began to eliminate any opposition to their regime. Innocent citizens as well as dissidents were tortured and killed. Thirteen to fifteen thousand citizens were killed in the *Guerra Sucia*—the "Dirty War," as it came to be called.

Set Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Making Choices

As you read "The Censors," ask yourself, What choices does Juan make to "protect" himself and Mariana from the censors?

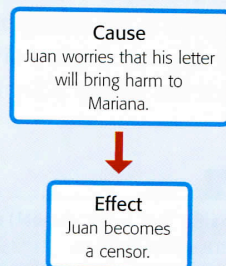
Literary Element Satire

Satire is the use of humor or wit to ridicule institutions or humanity with the goal of entertaining or causing change. Recognizing satire can help you discern a persuasive argument presented as a witty portrayal. As you read, ask yourself, What is Valenzuela satirizing and what might she like to change?

Reading Strategy Analyze Cause-and-Effect Relationships

One event often impacts another event. Knowing how to **analyze cause and effect** can help you understand both the relationships between those events and the literary work as a whole. As you read, ask yourself, How is each event influenced by the events that have preceded it?

Tip: Identify Sequence Use a graphic organizer to help you determine the order of events.



Learning Objectives

For pages 172–177

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing satire.

Reading: Analyzing cause-and-effect relationships.

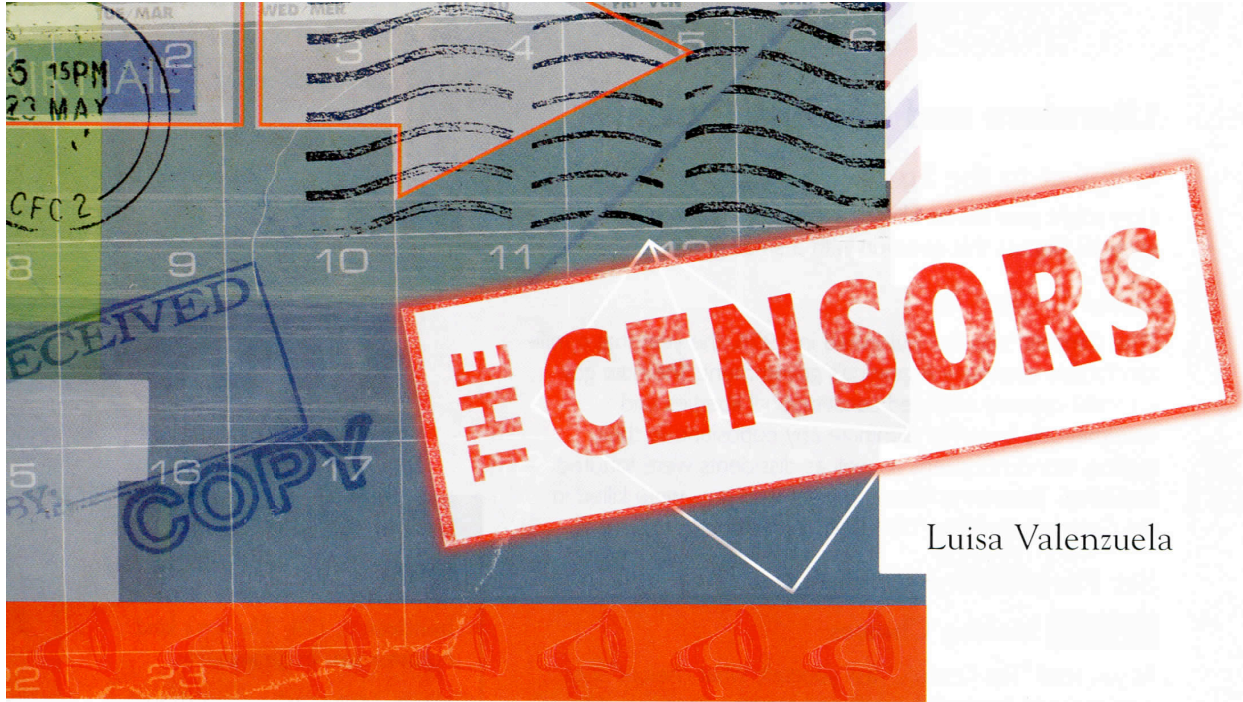
Vocabulary

irreproachable (ir' i prō' chə bəl) *adj.* free from blame or criticism; faultless; p. 174 *The boy's kind behavior was irreproachable.*

albeit (əl bē' it) *conj.* although; even if; p. 175 *I like the fall, albeit I am always eager for spring.*

ulterior (ul tēr' ē ə) *adj.* intentionally withheld or concealed; p. 175 *Sam had an ulterior motive for not wanting to tell the truth.*

subversive (səb vur' sɪv) *adj.* seeking to weaken, destroy, or overthrow; p. 176 *Subversive people wished to overthrow the government.*



Luisa Valenzuela

Postal Montage. Natalie Racioppa.

Poor Juan! One day they caught him with his guard down before he could even realize that what he had taken as a stroke of luck was really one of fate's dirty tricks. These things happen the minute you're careless, as one often is. Juancito¹ let happiness—a feeling you can't trust—get the better of him when he received from a confidential source Mariana's new address in Paris and knew that she hadn't forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his table and wrote her a letter. *The* letter that now keeps his mind off his job during the day and won't let him sleep at night (what had he scrawled, what had he put on that sheet of paper he sent to Mariana?).

Juan knows there won't be a problem with the letter's contents, that it's **irreproachable**, harmless. But what about

the rest? He knows that they examine, sniff, feel, and read between the lines of each and every letter, and check its tiniest comma and most accidental stain. He knows that all letters pass from hand to hand and go through all sorts of tests in the huge censorship offices and that, in the end, very few continue on their way. Usually it takes months, even years, if there aren't any snags; all this time the freedom, maybe even the life, of both sender and receiver is in jeopardy. And that's why Juan's so troubled: thinking that something might happen to Mariana because of his letters. Of all people, Mariana, who must finally feel safe there where she always dreamt she'd live. But he knows that the *Censor's Secret Command*

Vocabulary

irreproachable (ir' i prō' chə bəl) *adj.* free from blame or criticism; faultless

1. *Juancito* (wan sē' tō)

Businessmen Reading the Fine Print.
Bruno Budrovic.

View the Art In this illustration, the artist presents a satirical view of businessmen. How does this image complement the tone of the story?



operates all over the world and cashes in on the discount in air fares; there's nothing to stop them from going as far as that hidden Paris neighborhood, kidnapping Mariana, and returning to their cozy homes, certain of having fulfilled their noble mission.

Well, you've got to beat them to the punch, do what everyone tries to do: sabotage the machinery, throw sand in its gears, get to the bottom of the problem so as to stop it.

This was Juan's sound plan when he, like many others, applied for a censor's job—not because he had a calling or needed a job: no, he applied simply to intercept his own letter, a consoling **albeit** unoriginal idea. He was hired immediately, for each day more and more censors are needed and no one would bother to check on his references.

Ulterior motives couldn't be overlooked by the *Censorship Division*, but they needn't

be too strict with those who applied. They knew how hard it would be for the poor guys to find the letter they wanted and even if they did, what's a letter or two when the new censor would snap up so many others? That's how Juan managed to join the *Post Office's Censorship Division*, with a certain goal in mind.

The building had a festive air on the outside that contrasted with its inner staidness.² Little by little, Juan was absorbed by his job, and he felt at peace since he was doing everything he could to get his letter for Mariana. He didn't even worry when, in his first month, he was sent to *Section K*

2. *Staidness* (stād' nəs) is the state or quality of being serious, steady, or conservative in character.

Vocabulary

albeit (əl bē' it) *conj.* although; even if

ulterior (ul tēr' ē ə) *adj.* intentionally withheld or concealed

where envelopes are very carefully screened for explosives.

It's true that on the third day, a fellow worker had his right hand blown off by a letter, but the division chief claimed it was sheer negligence on the victim's part. Juan and the other employees were allowed to go back to their work, though feeling less secure. After work, one of them tried to organize a strike to demand higher wages for unhealthy work, but Juan didn't join in; after thinking it over, he reported the man to his superiors and thus got promoted.

You don't form a habit by doing something once, he told himself as he left his boss's office. And when he was transferred to *Section J*, where letters are carefully checked for poison dust, he felt he had climbed a rung in the ladder.

By working hard, he quickly reached *Section E* where the job became more interesting, for he could now read and analyze the letters' contents. Here he could even hope to get hold of his letter, which, judging by the time that had elapsed, had gone through the other sections and was probably floating around in this one.

Soon his work became so absorbing that his noble mission blurred in his mind. Day after day he crossed out whole paragraphs in red ink, pitilessly chucking many letters into the censored basket. These were horrible days when he was shocked by the subtle and conniving ways employed by people to pass on **subversive** messages; his instincts were so sharp that he found behind a simple "the weather's unsettled" or "prices continue to soar" the wavering hand of someone secretly scheming to overthrow the Government.

Vocabulary

subversive (səb vur' siv) *adj.* seeking to weaken, destroy, or overthrow

His zeal brought him swift promotion. We don't know if this made him happy. Very few letters reached him in *Section B*—only a handful passed the other hurdles—so he read them over and over again, passed them under a magnifying glass, searched for microprint with an electronic microscope, and tuned his sense of smell so that he was beat by the time he made it home. He'd barely manage to warm up his soup, eat some fruit, and fall into bed, satisfied with having done his duty. Only his darling mother worried, but she couldn't get him back on the right track. She'd say, though it wasn't always true: Lola called, she's at the bar with the girls, they miss you, they're waiting for you. Or else she'd leave a bottle of red wine on the table. But Juan wouldn't overdo it: any distraction could make him lose his edge and the perfect censor had to be alert, keen, attentive, and sharp to nab cheats. He had a truly patriotic task, both self-denying and uplifting.

His basket for censored letters became the best fed as well as the most cunning basket in the whole *Censorship Division*. He was about to congratulate himself for having finally discovered his true mission, when his letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally, he censored it without regret. And just as naturally, he couldn't stop them from executing him the following morning, another victim of his devotion to his work. 🍷

Analyze Cause-and-Effect Relationships What do the cause and effect in this sentence reveal about Juan's superiors?

Satire Explain what is satirical in this passage.

Making Choices How does Juan's choice affect his final outcome?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. Did your feelings about Juan change during the course of the story? Explain.
2. (a)What does Juan fear will happen to Mariana as a result of his letter? (b)What does this tell you about the kind of government Juan lives under?
3. Why are “more and more censors” needed, making it easy for Juan to get hired?

Analyze and Evaluate

4. (a)What parts of this story seem logical and believable to you? (b)Are there any parts that are unbelievable? Use details from the story to support your answer.

Connect

5. **Big Idea Making Choices** Do you think Juan’s choices or the government’s had a greater impact on the outcome of the story? Explain.
6. **Connect to the Author** How might Valenzuela’s perspective as both an insider and an exile have influenced her writing in this story?

Literary Element Satire

Humor—an element of **satire**—can often be persuasive as well as entertaining because it is less likely to alienate people who might initially disagree.

1. How does Juan’s transformation into the perfect censor become the “punch line” for this satire?
2. Is the author’s satire aimed more at the government or at individuals like Juan?

Reading Strategy Analyze Cause-and-Effect Relationships

When authors do not tell their stories chronologically, the reader must pay close attention in order to determine the actual sequence of events and the **cause-and-effect relationships** of those events to one another. Review the chart you made on page 173 and respond to the following items.

1. Describe how the story is organized.
2. How would the impact of the story change if events were ordered differently?

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Selection Resources For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL59794u1.

Vocabulary Practice

Practice with Word Parts For each bold-faced vocabulary word in the left column, identify the related word with a shared root in the right column. Write both words and underline the part they have in common. Use a dictionary to look up the meaning of the related word. Explain its relation to the root word of the vocabulary word.

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|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1. irreproachable | convert |
| 2. albeit | interior |
| 3. ulterior | although |
| 4. subversive | biodegradable |

Writing

Write a Journal Entry Put yourself in Juan’s place. Write a journal entry in which he responds to his mother’s efforts to get him “back on the right track.” Use satire in the entry by having Juan unwittingly reveal some of the negative aspects of his job as a censor—aspects to which he is now blind.