

Immigration Blues by Bienvenido N. Santos

from Being People

This Level 3 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at http://www.rdlthai.com/t3/ellsa_iblues1.html

Lesson plan and text: Robert H. Abel, 1999
Adaptation: Jeffrey Taschner, 1999
Print and web-adaptation: John Morgan, 1999
© USIA, 1999. All rights reserved

Immigration Blues has been anthologized often and has won numerous literary awards. It is funny, sad, and eminently humane all at once—very much in the spirit of other stories by Bienvenido Santos.

“Alipio Palma is a Filipino American. Immigrating from the Philippines before World War 2, he has recently lost his wife and is now recuperating from a serious car accident. The future does not look bright. But what does he see outside his apartment? Perhaps a new chapter in his life is about to begin.”

Being People, p 132

1. The author

Read the biography of Bienvenido Santos below and choose the correct words at the end of each section to insert in the spaces. numbered 1 - 9. You can check your answers in the answer key and find descriptions of the incorrect words as well.

Bienvenido N. Santos' own life reads like a (1)_____ novel. Born in Manila and raised in the Philippines, where he is also highly regarded, Mr. Santos was (2)_____ to spend half his adult life in America. Largely as a result of historical circumstances, he became an American citizen in 1976. Exiled once by war, and exiled again for his political perspective, Mr. Santos found refuge in the USA. Mr. Santos first left the Philippines after earning a BA (Bachelor of Arts degree) from the University of the Philippines in 1932. He came to the USA during the (3)_____ years to study at the University of Illinois and Harvard. Because of the Japanese invasion of his homeland, however, he was called to service at the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C., where he served as a public information officer.

1. compulsive, compelling, compulsory

2. destination, distinguished, destined

3. Depression, Depressed, Depressive

Several of his stories reflect the lives of young Filipinos living in exile in the USA during World War II, all with tragic stories to tell about families or loved ones back home, all seeking comradeship and comfort from their fellow countrymen and American friends, and all with (4)_____ about what will happen to them and their country once the war ends. "The Scent of Apples" is a collection of stories that

focuses on this period and on the (5)_____ lives of several Filipinos in exile. "Immigration Blues" comes from this collection, but is distinguished by being from the most recent period in time. Also recommended from this collection, for people interested in reading more of his work, is "Hurt Men." In this story, a group of Filipinos in exile gather to play a game of poker. In the course of the story we learn that each of the players has suffered some tragedy as a result of the war.

Mr. Santos himself returned to the Philippines after the war years and quickly gained recognition as a writer of (6)_____. Ironically, his novel, A Praying Man, serialized in the magazine "Solidaridad" so offended the government of Ferdinand Marcos that he was forced into exile again and returned to the USA. What so offended the Marcos government was apparently Mr. Santos' sympathetic and frank description of the lives of poor Filipinos.

4. anxieties, anxious, animosity
5. interminable, interrogative, inter-related
6. statue, stature, station

In the USA, he continued his literary (7)_____, and sustained himself and his family by teaching in American colleges. Before his death in 1996, his last position was at Wichita State College in Wichita, Kansas. Besides "The Scent of Apples" and "A Praying Man", Santos authored the story collections "You Lovely People" and "The Day the Dancers Came". His novels include "Villa Magdalena", "The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor", and "What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco". He also wrote the poetry collections "The Wounded Stag" and "Distances in Time" and an autobiography. He won several literary awards both in the Philippines and in the USA. In America, he was awarded an American Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Endowment for the Arts award. He received the Philippines highest artistic award, The Cultural Heritage Award and in 1992 De La Salle University, Manila named a writing center in his honor. Perhaps the most surprising thing about Mr. Santos writing, given his personal history and the (8)_____ histories of both his native and adopted countries during his lifetime, is his enduring gentleness and humanity. A writer of political commitment, his novels and stories are nevertheless about people rather than ideas, and express far more caring concern than outrage. His stories are always gracefully told in a prose that moves unobtrusively from the colloquial to the eloquent. His themes are large—displacement, exile, identity, desperation, guilt—but always derive organically from the lives of the characters in his fiction and their very real experiences. And somehow, though his characters may suffer and fate or others may be cruel and full of (9)_____, Mr. Santos maintains a saving sense of humor. Without ever falling into the excesses of sentimentality or nostalgia, his stories are always anchored in a love for the people he writes about.

7. devices, endeavors, devotions
8. tumultuous, tumescent, turbulence
9. betrothal, betrayal, triviality

2. Pre-story

The blues

"Feeling blue" means to feel sad, as does the phrase, "got the blues."

- Have you ever lived in another country and had to visit the immigration department there?
- How would you feel if you were studying in the US for several years?
- Would you get homesick?
- What would you miss most about your homeland?
- What aspects of American life would be hard to get used to for you? If you have studied or lived in another country (and if you have not ask a friend or family member who has), write a short essay about your feelings when you were overseas.
- What does the title 'Immigration Blues' mean to you? Send a letter or an e-mail to a friend or family member who is living overseas (you may just cheer them up!)

3. In-story

Perspective

Like many of Bienvenido Santos' stories, "Immigration Blues" is deceptively simple. Although it is written in colloquial language, the story really has great artistry. For one thing, Santos shifts effortlessly from one point of view to another until we have a rich understanding of the psychological dynamics of the situation.

- How does he change the point-of-view of the story in the second column on p. 137?
 - _____
 - _____
- Where in the dialog is the point of transition?
 - _____
 - _____
- At what point does Santos take us back into Alipio's mind? Where is the first signal of transition?
 - _____
 - _____

Check your answers in the answer key

Comedy and Tragedy: the helpless combination

Although *Immigration Blues* can be described as a comedy, the tragedies that have brought these people together are very evident in the telling of the story.

Below you will see a list of events from the story that are either funny (comedy) or disheartening (tragedy).

Decide whether the scenes are comic or tragic and then check your answers with the answer key.

1. Monica's awkward shyness
Comedy r Tragedy r
2. Alipio is a widower. (His wife, Semiang, had died from heart trouble.)
Comedy r Tragedy r
3. Mrs. Zafra's 'pal'—God
Comedy r Tragedy r
4. Alipio, laughing at the memory of Carlito, spits some of the rice out of his mouth.
Comedy r Tragedy r
5. Carlito and his cocks that won't fight. (And most Carlito references.)
Comedy r Tragedy r
6. Alipio's house is a mess.
Comedy r Tragedy r
7. Alipio staring at Monica's legs at the end.
Comedy r Tragedy r
8. Alipio lives all alone.
Comedy r Tragedy r
9. Alipio missed out on his retirement benefits (because he was unable to work after the accident).
Comedy r Tragedy r
10. Mrs. Zafra's heavy-handed hints about Monica.
Comedy r Tragedy r
11. Alipio's perfectly white, but noisy dentures that almost fall out at times.
Comedy r Tragedy r
12. Alipio and Mrs. Zafra's obsession with food and grocery shopping.
Comedy r Tragedy r

13. Alipio's resignation to the fact that he will die in the US, not in his homeland, the Philippines.
Comedy r Tragedy r
14. Alipio's ugly experiences with American women.
Comedy r Tragedy r
15. Alipio walks with a limp. (His leg was badly injured in a car accident.)
Comedy r Tragedy r
16. Alipio is childless.
Comedy r Tragedy r
17. Immigration problems (extensions, overstays).
Comedy r Tragedy r
18. Mrs. Zafra's coaxing and coaching of Monica.
Comedy r Tragedy r
19. Alipio's immense stock of canned and frozen food.
Comedy r Tragedy r
20. Monica, in following her sister's lead, likes to eat everything Alipio eats, and gets carried away by adding 'I eat rice, too.' (Rice is the staple food in the Philippines, and it would be unthinkable that any Filipino wouldn't eat rice.)
Comedy r Tragedy r
21. Alipio cannot bear children.
Comedy r Tragedy r

Efficient exposition

Immigration Blues is very efficient in its progress.

- How many characters does Santos introduce in just the first two sentences of the story?
- What do we learn about Alipio in the first paragraph?
- How much of the setting is revealed?

Read the first paragraph (next page) and then compare your answers with ours. After checking your answers, think about Alipio.

- What are some of his problems?

check your answers in the answer key.

The first paragraph of Immigration Blues

“Through the window curtain, Alipio saw two women, one seemed twice as large as the other. In their summer dresses, they looked like the country girls he knew back home in the Philippines who went around peddling rice cakes. The slim one could have passed for his late wife Seniang's sister whom he remembered only in pictures because she never made it to the United States. Before Seniang's death, the couple had arranged for her coming to San Francisco, filing all the required petition papers to facilitate the approval of her visa. The sister was always "almost ready, all the papers have been signed," but she never showed up. His wife had been ailing and when she died, he thought that hearing of her death would hasten her coming, but the wire he had sent her was neither returned nor acknowledged.”

Being People, page 132

The matchmakers: dropping hints

Again, as in many comedies, the plot is if and how this boy-meets-girl story will end happily. The obstacles to this happy union and happy ending are first, Alipio, because he does not understand the hints he is offered; and second, Monica, because of the guilt she feels at trying to "seduce" Alipio into accepting—and marrying—her.

Mrs. Zafra does her best both to alert Alipio to the benefits of joining forces with Monica and to encourage Monica herself to take some initiative.

Hints: Identify points in the story where the two women try to 'drop hints' or make subtle suggestions to Alipio about Monica's availability and desire to get married. Check the following lines in your book and continue the sentences below. You can check your answers in the answer keys.

(p.134, bottom of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells

(p. 135, bottom of first column)

Mrs. Zafra tells

(p. 135, middle of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells

(p. 135, bottom of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells

(p. 136, top of first column)

Monica rejoins

(p. 138, second column)
Monica announces

(p. 139, second column)
Monica says again and again

All's well that ends well (?)s

What does Santos reveal to us through this excerpt from the ending of Immigration Blues on page 140? 'Alipio chuckled. He wanted to say, talk of lightning striking same fellow twice, but he thought better of it...and this girl Monica...Moni, nice name also. How can this one be lightning?'

Check the answer key

You may recall from the Level 2 story, The Cask of Amontillado, that Edgar Allan Poe believed that the ending of the story should leave the reader with the 'fullest sense of satisfaction.' How does Santos satisfy the reader with the ending of 'Immigration Blues'?

Check the answer key

4. Exercises

Cases of Immigration Blues

The exercises below summarize how have each of these characters experienced Immigration Blues. Fill in the missing words from the list of words before each paragraph.

Mrs. Zafra

marry tracked nun extension illegal employment elderly

Once she quit being a _____, Mrs. Zafra, was no longer entitled to stay in the US and could not obtain _____, either. She became an _____ alien and had to hide from the immigration investigators. After the Italian-American immigration officer _____ her down, he only thing she could do to stay was to _____ an American citizen, so she decided to find an _____ Filipino with US citizenship, Carlito. She married him before her one-week visa _____ ran out.

Seniang, Monica and Seniang's sister

scheme officers probably become file visa stay especially citizen

Seniang also had to hide from the Immigration _____. She married Alipio because he was a US _____ (even though Alipio could not have children) so she could _____ in the US. Monica had to agree to her sister's _____ to get Alipio to marry her so she could _____ an American citizen and stay in the US. Alipio and Seniang had to go through the trouble to _____ all the petition papers for her _____ and she was almost ready but never came. She _____ changed her mind and did not want to leave the Philippines, and stay with Alipio and her sister, perhaps _____ if she knew her sister was ill.

5. Follow-up

Discussion

1. Think of some situations with family, friends or associates, or people from other cultures, in which it is necessary to make a request or offer a criticism with considerable delicacy or indirection.
2. Have you ever been in a situation in which you wanted to make a request of someone but felt the request was embarrassing or inappropriate? Have you ever been in a conversation in which you suddenly realized something was being asked of you that was a bit embarrassing to the person making the (subtle or hidden) request?

Debate

1. Debate whether Mrs. Zafra and her sister are out to exploit Alipio. One side defends their actions, the other finds evidence of deception and exploitation.
2. Debate whether Alipio really knows right from the start what Mrs. Zafra and her sister want.

Role-Play

Mrs. Zafra and her sister have a "hidden agenda" in their meeting with Alipio. A "hidden agenda" is a purpose that is disguised or concealed, usually because it is embarrassing to one of the parties involved, or expressing the purpose outright would be regarded as socially inappropriate. Therefore, the purpose of the conversation must be revealed through hints or suggestions and depends to a great extent on the ability of the person who is the subject of the hidden request to understand the clues being given.

1. One person wants a loan of money from a friend or family member to buy something extravagant or unnecessary. The first speaker must try to appeal to the second speaker and get the loan without making a direct request or telling a lie.

2. An employee wants some time off to spend with a friend or some other personal business not allowed by company policy. He or she tries to get the boss to understand the employee needs some time off without saying so directly.

3. A young person wants to go to a dance with some friends, but his or her school grades have not been good lately and he or she is afraid the parents might object. How can the young person steer the conversation with the parents to get the desired results?

Writing

1. If you were to live abroad for a long time, what do you anticipate would be the most difficult adjustments you would need to make?

2. Write a description of a place you know well

a) from the point of view of a person who has been exiled, without mentioning exile;

b) from the point of view of a person who has recently had quite good luck (without mentioning luck);

c) from the point of view of a person who has just suffered a tragedy, without mentioning tragedy. The challenge is to make the reader aware of background emotions without stating them.

3. Write a dialogue between two people, one of whom (at least) has a "hidden agenda."

ANSWER KEY

1. The author

Compelling is the correct answer.

It suggests a novel that is difficult to stop reading.

- Compulsive is more readily associated with behavior that is difficult to control.
- Compulsory means something that is obligatory (a regulation).

Destined is the correct answer.

It is used in the passive verb form (destine). It is important to note here that destine is never used in the active voice as we have no control over destiny.

- Destination is the end location of a journey. And while the USA was Bienvenido Santos' destination, the sentence structure requires the use of a passive verb.
- Distinguished is recognition of important features that differentiate one thing or person from others.

Depression is the correct answer.

Note the use of the capital "D" in this example, which refers to a specific period in the history of the United States, during the 1930s. It is used as a proper noun.

Anxieties is the correct answer.

It is used as a plural, countable noun. It could equally be used as the singular "anxiety".

- Anxious is an adjective.
- Animosity is bearing bad feelings towards somebody else.

Inter-related is the correct answer.

The sentence describes the closeness of human relationships.

- Interrogative refers to questioning (interrogation) or the grammatical form of questions.
- Interminable means never-ending, which can be used symbolically to refer to situations that appear to be very slow, boring or mundane (and often with situations of poverty, injustice and hardship).

Stature is the correct answer.

It refers to a high position or status.

- Statue is an ornament or object that is erected in a public place, e.g. The Statue of Liberty.
- Station, while also meaning a place where buses or trains stop, is an old-fashioned word that refers to a person's position in life. It is common in Irish literature.

Endeavors is the correct answer.

It means hard, enterprising (often rewarding) work.

- Devices usually refers to habits, like smoking, drinking, gambling. etc.
- Devotions is more commonly associated with religious studies and prayer.

Tumultuous is the correct answer.

It refers to violent, troubled situations that are fraught with difficulties.

- Tumescence means swollen or enlarged.
- Turbulence is a noun. The adjective, turbulent, would be acceptable in place of tumultuous as it can be used to refer to the same meanings.

Betrayal is the correct answer.

It means to secretly hurt the feelings of another person by giving away or revealing secrets about them to other people. It is also used in political situations (to betray a country, government or monarchy, is treason).

- Betrothal is a promise to get married.
- Triviality means unimportance.

3. In-story

Changing the point of view: Santos changes the 3rd person point of view from Alipio's perspective over to Mrs. Zafra's.

The transition: "Let me continue," Mrs. Zafra said. Notice how 'she' begins as the subject of the next paragraph and we have now switched to Mrs. Zafra's story from her perspective.

Signalling transition: This time the shift in perspective is gradual. The line on page 138: "'We got lots of thieves between here and there,' Alipio said, but his mind seemed to be on something else" brings Alipio back into focus and tells us that he is reminiscing about Seniang. And then Santos allows Alipio gradually to resume control, 'Seniang was like you also...' Finally, 'Alipio appeared tired, pensive and eager to talk so they listened' signals the complete shift back to Alipio's perspective and story.

Comedy/Tragedy answers

1. comedy 2. tragedy 3. comedy 4. comedy 5. comedy
6. tragedy 7. comedy 8. tragedy 9. tragedy 10. comedy
11. comedy 12. comedy 13. tragedy 14. tragedy 15. tragedy 16. tragedy
17. tragedy 18. comedy 19. comedy 20. comedy 21. tragedy

Efficient exposition

In the space of a few dozen words, we are already introduced to the four major characters, including Seniang, now deceased; we know Alipio is older, formerly of the Philippines, a widower, that his memories of the Philippines are still vivid, and that he has had previous dealings with immigration officials. We also have a pretty clear indication of how he thinks, since he categorizes the women simple as fat and thin country girls and recalls an incident in which he tried fruitlessly to help Seniang's sister to come and live with them in San Francisco, the city where the story takes place. In a few deft strokes, Mr. Santos has set the scene and taken us inside Alipio's mind.

What are some of Alipio's problems?

We are also quickly introduced to Alipio's pain and the run of terrible luck he has experienced in the immediate past. We see that he is handicapped, at least temporarily, and we are prepared to accept (later in the story) the fact that, as an older man recently bereaved and badly injured, he might not be the swiftest or most perceptive of thinkers. This contributes to some of the story's humor: we, as readers, can see before Alipio does what Mrs. Zafra and her sister, Monica, are really after. We also know that although Alipio is battered and damaged by fate, he is not desperate: he has some retirement and social security income. Later still, the implication is clear that there is a community of Filipinos who know about him and in an unobtrusive way look after, and care about him. (Mrs. Zafra and Monica, we are told, know all about Alipio before they arrive.) He is, that is, as in many comedies of social manners, a reasonably desirable catch for someone with Monica's needs and limitations. That Alipio himself is in need of some caretaking we can see from the condition of his flat. It is a mess. The fish tank water is a "haze"; magazines are strewn about; the carpet is black.

Continuing sentences

(p.134, bottom of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells Alipio that Monica has never been married.

(p. 135, bottom of first column)

Mrs. Zafra says tells Alipio that 'it's not good to be alone.'

(p. 135, middle of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells Alipio that he 'needs help better than crutches'.

(p. 135, bottom of second column)

Mrs. Zafra tells Alipio that Monica loves raw onions.

(p. 136, top of first column)

Monica rejoins that she likes raw onions and adds that she also likes sardines, and finally adds that she eats rice, too.

(p. 138, second column)

Monica announces that she's eaten all of her food and that she's loves the way Alipio eats his sardines.

(p. 139, second column)

Monica says again and again how lonely Alipio must feel.

Commentary on above answers

For all their hard work at hinting, however, their only reward is Alipio's seeming

stoicism ("God dictates") and Monica's growing sense of shame and frustration with the tactics they have chosen. At one point, as Mrs. Zafra, tries to talk about her sister, Alipio prefers to remember and talk about her husband, Carlito, his old sidekick. When Mrs. Zafra offers a strategic retreat to the grocery store, which would allow Alipio and Monica a chance to talk, Alipio tosses the suggestion aside. Clearly, Alipio is , on the one hand, a really difficult adversary for Mrs. Zafra; and, on the other hand, since we can see that Alipio (with his hallucinations and messy house and pantry full of canned goods) would certainly benefit from some companionship, is perhaps also his own worst enemy. We begin to feel that Alipio's density, Monica's lack of initiative, and the inadvisability of Mrs. Zafra's tactics may doom this worthy enterprise. The stalemate continues even after an exchange of stories. We learn that Mrs. Zafra herself entered into a marriage of convenience with Alipio's old friend Carlito in order to outwit the immigration authorities after she left the convent. (Note, by the way, the sympathetic sketch of the immigration officer, someone presumed to be Italian-American , and therefore possibly also of immigrant heritage himself.) Alipio seems to show some understanding of this when he confesses, in turn, that his marriage to Seniang took place for very similar reasons. At this point, Monica makes her best effort to bring Alipio to some understanding of her situation, without saying so directly. When Alipio fails to get the hint, she feels rebuffed and defeated, and appears to surrender. There follows a delightful passage in which the two sisters "talk" to each other without words, as if they could read each others' minds. the women have a secret understanding. All seems lost at this point. Finally, in answer to Alipio's question to Monica about how long she has been in America, Mrs. Zafra replies in an outburst that is forthright and clear and which finally awakens Alipio to what the women have been seeking all along. "It was visas right from the start," he muses. "Marriages . . . Now it was visas again." The hidden agenda has been revealed. The masks of deception have been removed and the real purpose of the women's visit is manifest. Alipio, rather than feeling deceived and exploited, however, responds with understanding and generosity. After all, he has seen this all happen before, and the results have been good. He offers snacks, not dismissal, and this time when Mrs. Zafra offers to depart for the grocery store, Alipio encourages it. When she returns, the marriage has already been arranged.

What does Santos reveal to us through this excerpt from the ending of Immigration Blues on page 140?

Santos reveals that Alipio would marry Monica.

How does Santos satisfy the reader with the ending of 'Immigration Blues'?

As reader, we find the ending completely gratifying. This would not be the case if we didn't care about Alipio—and about Monica. How Mr. Santos brings us to like and accept Monica as something other than a visa hunter is one of the gentle artistic strokes of the story. After all, she and her sister have both come armed with prior information that Alipio is a prime prospect and they have obviously worked out a

strategy to take advantage of him. Mrs. Zafra's own story is frank and touching, and we appreciate also her concern for her sister—both saving graces. She is, therefore, not exactly on a mission of evil. And, after all, some of her arguments about Alipio's and his need for companionship ring perfectly true. She is trying to do the right thing. Monica, for her part, is shy, and quite attentive to Alipio (she leaps up as he struggles from the chair) and has enough morality to know that her sister's deceptions are just that—deceptions. In the end, she shows herself willing to give up everything Alipio represents—the possible end to her immigration blues—with her confession about her motives. This reveals a good heart. Finally, we can guess why Monica would accede to the more deceptive approach in the first place. After all, she would not want to come to Alipio as a beggar, and throw herself at his mercy. She is not without qualities and perhaps, out of simple pride, she had hoped that Alipio would recognize and reward them. She hopes, that is, to salvage some self-respect, somehow, and for that reason alone might reject a more open, frontal assault. Perhaps in approaching Alipio as she did gave Alipio after all a chance to see that Monica was not just an opportunist out to exploit him and his bad luck. In the end we find both Alipio and Monica have found worthy companionship and are the kind of people who will make the most of their situation. Lightning has indeed struck Alipio twice.

4. Exercises

Mrs. Zafra

Once she quit being a **nun**, Mrs. Zafra, was no longer entitled to stay in the US and could not obtain **employment**, either. She became an **illegal** alien and had to hide from the Immigration investigators. After the Italian-American immigration officer **tracked** her down, the only thing she could do to stay was to **marry** an American citizen, so she decided to find an **elderly** Filipino with US citizenship, Carlito. She married him before her one-week visa **extension** ran out.

Seniang, Monica and Seniang's sister

Seniang also had to hide from the Immigration **officers**. She married Alipio because he was a US **citizen** (even though Alipio could not have children) so she could **stay** in the US. Monica had to agree to her sister's **scheme** to get Alipio to marry her so she could **become** an American citizen and stay in the US. Alipio and Seniang had to go through the trouble to **file** all the petition papers for her **visa** and she was almost ready but never came. She **probably** changed her mind and did not want to leave the Philippines, and stay with Alipio and her sister, perhaps **especially** if she knew her sister was ill.