It is a warm day, and even in this barrio the autumn sun feels like a kiss, un besito, on my head. Today I feel like an iguana seeking a warm rock in the sun. I am sitting on the top step of the cement stairwell leading into our basement apartment in a city just waking from a deep and dark winter sleep.

The sun has warmed the concrete, rays falling on me like a warm shower. It is a beautiful day even in this barrio, and today I am almost not unhappy.

I am a different María, no longer the María Alegre who was born on a tropical island, and who lived with two parents in a house near the sea until a few months ago, nor like the María Triste, the lonely barrio girl of my new American life. I am fifteen years old.

Call me María.

**Words to Know**

barrio: n. a Spanish-speaking neighborhood

**Writing**

1. What point of view does the author use? Find words in the text to support your answer. What is the effect of using this point of view?

   Because the author uses the pronouns ____ , ____ , and ____ , I can tell that she is writing in the ____ person. The effect of using this point of view is ____ .

**Point of View**

Point of view is the perspective from which a story is told.

In first-person point of view the narrator is part of the story (I, me, my, we, us, ours).

In second-person point of view the narrator gives information or addresses someone (you, yours).

In third-person point of view the narrator tells another person’s story (he, she, her, they, them).

**Literary Analysis**

2. Find details in lines 12–24 that describe María Alegre and María Triste. Why does the author include these descriptions? Which “Maria” does the narrator associate with her “new American life”?
Literary Analysis
3. What is the effect of comparing Maria Alegre to a “bird” and a “dove” and comparing Maria Triste to an “underground creature” and a “mouse”? Provide examples from the text.

Writing
4. How do similes and metaphors in the poem help the reader better understand Maria?

The similes express 

The metaphors express 

They help the reader because 

Simile and Metaphor

A simile is a comparison of two unlike things using the words like or as.

- The soccer player is like a tiger on the field.

A metaphor compares two unlike things by stating that one is the other.

- The soccer player is a tiger on the field.

25 Sometimes, when I feel like a bird soaring above all that is ugly or sad, I am María Alegre.

Other times, when I am like a small underground creature, when I feel like I will never see the sun again, I am María Triste.

35 My mother used to call me her paloma, her dove, when I was alegre, and her raioncita, her little mouse, on the days when I was triste.

Today I am neither.

You can just call me Maria.

My Mother, the Rain. El Fin

It is April of the first year of my American life when my mother finally comes to visit us.

I sit on the top step as the hour of Mami’s arrival approaches. It is a warm evening and the sidewalk is crowded with people sitting on folding chairs, mainly women and

Words to Know

soaring: (v) flying like a bird
children. The noise level rises steadily as radios are brought out and people adjust the volume of their voices to compete with the music. I like to listen to the old women talking about their previous incarnations as island puertorriqueñas. Some of them talk only about how much better life was en La Isla: the people were kinder, the weather perfect, the arroz y habichuelas, plátanos, pollo frito, café con leche, mavi—talking about the food as cooked by their mamás makes some of them stand up on the top step like poets inspired to recite verses to their native land. ¡Ay, ay, ay, bendito! But someone always points out that beautiful scenery did not fill empty stomachs. "¡Hay que comer, hijas!" One has to eat. No one disagrees with this opinion.

I listen, but do not speak. I know that even though I am in their circle, I am not really a part of the powerful barrio women’s society yet. They all know that a different kind of hunger brought my father and me to this island in the city, but one more difficult to satisfy than food hunger or money hunger. My father missed the barrio of his younger days; he had to come home, and I wanted an American education. The barrio women, Pura, Isabel, Clara, Cordelia, Concepción, and their new American children, Lynette Gómez, Janice García, Joey Flores, and all the ones that would come after them, were here new like me—and the new barrio dwellers would have to take on new colors to survive. I know this from having studied island chameleons as a child, the talented little lizards always come back to their original colors when they feel safe in their environment. I can see the women in front of this building in our American city are not that different from the women in their porch rockers on the Island.

In the late afternoons and sometimes even at night, I sit on our building’s front stoop to enjoy their Spanglish poetry slam and gossip sessions. As I wait for Papi’s car to drive up, with my mother in the passenger seat, I dream that Mami will now join me on these old steps. Here I will teach her about my new American life, and she will decide to stay with us.

Words to Know

incarnations: (n.) former or future lives
chameleons: (n.) lizards that change color to match their environment
15 Papi pulls up in front of our building in his sleek parrot-green Thunderbird. There are wolf whistles and wild clapping from some of the women. The car has barely stopped moving when several children wearing only underwear or shorts climb on its shiny hood. Papi is wearing a new red shirt and black pants and his hair and mustache are blue-black from the Nice ’n Easy hair color I put in it. He is not the same man as he is in his blue workman’s uniform. He is not strutting as usual, and I can tel something is wrong. He is trying hard to be a gentleman, but after he opens the passenger door for Mami—she swings her tanned legs out of the car with the grace of a dancer; her movements are a ballet—he slams it hard. He pulls away too fast, wheels squealing. Something has happened between them. But I do not want to think about problems just then, I just want to run into my mother’s arms.

It has been a whole year since I have seen her. I notice that Mami’s face is as perfectly made up as that of a model in a glossy magazine. Her flawless complexion and athletic body are the result of a lot of hard work. She always said to me: *María, you do not need to be rich to be healthy and look good; money buys you dermatologists, orthodontists, and hair stylists, but exercise is free, and a person who takes care of her looks tells the world that she respects herself.* I had put on my happy mouth today, just for her—Berry Berry Red, a new shade, and I had curled my hair. *Alegre, Alegre.* Call me María Alegre!

17 Mami gives me a big, big smile and opens her arms for me to come to her. I feel like I am in a play. I feel the eyes of the barrio women behind me. They are watching me to see who I really am. Am I an Island woman or a barrio woman? Can I be both?

I see Mami’s eyes sweep over the scene on the stoop leading to our building. I know she disapproves of this society, definitely not the kind of club that she wants.

**Words to Know**

- *complexion:* (n.) color and appearance of skin on the face
- *dermatologists:* (n.) skin doctors
me to join. I know what she sees: the old women with legs spread wide to cool themselves blatantly staring at us, the sweaty children running up and “tagging” Papi’s car, leaving dirty handprints on its gemstone finish, while he is trying to maneuver into a tight spot. The same things that normally make up my front-yard world, one I thought I was finally beginning to understand, now embarrass me. I imagine seeing the crude scene through Mami’s eyes. Her eyes that open every morning to the turquoise sea, _un cielo azul_, to her ears that hear Spanish spoken in a completely different way than the way we use the mother tongue here.

¶9 I run to hug her, to protect her.

I will get her past the evil tongues, _las malas lenguas_. And once we are safely inside our little basement apartment that I have scrubbed and cleaned for her visit, she will see that I have made a true _casa_ for Papi and me in the middle of this foreign place, this cold city.

¶11 There are murmurs and giggles from some of the barrio women as they watch the elegantly dressed Mami and me walk down into our apartment, our arms around each other. She is wearing an ivory suit of some soft material, perhaps silk, and big, dark, and matching soft brown leather shoulder bag and pumps. Very island Puerto Rican dressy. And very unusual _attire_ on our block, where men walk around in their T-shirts and cut-off shorts at this time of year and women wear as little as they can. It is a matter of surviving the heat in the city.

“_Mira, the fancy pájara_ is about to inspect her golden cage,” Clara points her nose at my mother, speaking loudly enough for us to hear. Some of the children take up the chant, “_Pájara, pájara_. Pretty bird, pretty bird.”

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**Close Reading**

**Writing**

11. In **paragraph 8**, the author describes how Mami sees the barrio women. In **paragraph 11**, she describes how the barrio women see Mami. How do their different perspectives affect María? Find details in the story that illustrate María’s reaction to each perspective.

*When Mami notices ___ about the barrio women, María feels ___.*

*When the women notice ___ about Mami, María feels ___.*

Being aware of both perspectives creates a conflict because ___.

**Words and Phrases in Context**

12. In **paragraphs 9 and 10**, why does María want to protect Mami and show her that she and Papi have “a true _casa_” in the barrio?

**Perspective**

**Perspective** is a personal opinion or attitude about something.

**Words to Know**

*blatantly* (adv.) impolitely and obviously

*attire* (n.) style of dress
There is unabashed laughter in the circle. I am ready to defend my mother against their rudeness, though I know I would also be condemning myself to their persecution. They are enjoying el gufo, goofing off, Spanglish style. The catcalls and verbal abuse inflicted on the ones who act snobbish around the gate keepers, as Whoopee calls the old women who sit, watch, and comment on everything that happens on our street, are a familiar part of daily life here. Everyone gets humbled by the viejas. They teach the game to the younger ones. But el gufo is not what I wanted Mami to endure on her first minutes in the barrio. At the risk of my own future, I start to tell them to shut up. But Mami squeezes my hand. I look at her calm face, the cool smile that says, Do not worry.

They cannot touch me. She leads me slowly past them, bearing with grace their laughter and sarcastic gazes. Some of the younger women clap and whistle as if we were putting on a show for them. The old ones look at us in solemn silence. They were once Island women themselves. They know. Sometimes you are born to be one or the other. Sometimes you can cross over.

I know the viejas respect my mother’s self-control. I lead Mami by the hand down the steps and into #35½ Market Street, our apartment under the ground. We sit close together on the sofa, not saying anything for a few moments. She had asked Papi for a few hours alone with me. She looks around and then leans over to switch on a lamp. I had forgotten that she couldn’t stand dim rooms.

We talk about everything for a while. I can tell that she has something on her mind. But I already know she will not stay. It is obvious that this is a visit. It is only when I offer to show her the little white painted room where Abuela had stayed—I had painted it yellow for Mami—she begins to cry.

She admits that she will not be moving in with us. She has fallen in love with another man, a fellow teacher. Did I remember him? Julio? He teaches history at her...
school. They are in love. She is asking Papi for a divorce. He had been furious when she told him on the way here.

"María, I thought that he would have gotten used to the idea of our separation by now. I believed we could present this to you like civilized people. Pero tu papi no cambia. He is the same papi-lindo I met in high school. He expects to be loved unconditionally by everyone—at least by all the women. It has always been this way with him."

§19 I just shake my head. Both my parents are wrong about each other. It is breaking my heart to hear her speak about my father this way. I decide it is better for me to be silent for now. I had learned long ago that fights between my parents could not be resolved by me. If I defend him, she will be hurt, and vice versa.

She asks me to return to the Island and live with her and Julio. She says this is not the place she had imagined for me.

§21 My head hurts. My chest hurts. I smell her familiar perfume, I listen to her voice until she says all she has come to say. Then I show her my little, cave-like bedroom. I show her how I can feel the giant boiler, the Dragon, in the winter by putting my ear to the wall.

When we come back to the living room, she is calmer. I let her sit at my desk under the street-level window where I watch legs go by when I do my homework, when I write to her. I read her some of my Instant Histories. I tell her about Uma, Papi lindo, about Doña Segura, and about my best friend, Whoopie Dominguez, who had interested me even before she stuck her face at my window because of her combat boots and her powerful voice. Mami holds my poetry notebook in her hands a long time and then she presses it to her heart in a very dramatic, Puerto Rican-telenovela sort of way. "Eres una poeta, María," she said.

Close Reading

Academic Vocabulary

16. What does resolved mean? Why doesn’t María try to resolve her parents’ conflict?

Literary Analysis

17. The author uses sensory details in paragraphs 21 and 22 to convey María’s response to Mami’s request that she return to the "Island." Find details in the text that describe the senses. What effect does the author achieve by including these details?

Writing

18. The action of the story builds to a climax on this page: María makes an important decision. What is the decision? Infer from details on the page what she decides to do.

María must decide ______. After she listens to her mother, María tells Mami about ______. These details indicate that María has decided that she will ______.
“In three languages, Mami. I am a trilingual poet.”

“Three languages? English, Spanish…”

“...And Spanglish.” I read her my instant history of Whoopee.

Mami laughs at my third language. “You are good at Spanglish, María. You know it’s what your father spoke when he was growing up.”

“...And what he speaks again now, Mami.”

Then she began to cry again. “It is like we are from two different countries, hija. Both Puerto Ricans, but we have never spoken the same language.”

I know what that feels like. There are many ways to be a foreigner. I spend the evening comforting my mother.

Mami will not stay. The man she loves now, Julio the historian, who takes her to museums, was due to pick her up here, in front of our building. They are going to spend a day or two in New York, going to museums of course, and then they will return to the Island. Listening to her plans makes me feel as if a small black bird called el pájaro triste has just awakened inside my chest. It wants to be set free, to come out through my eyes as tears, through my mouth as angry words, black feathers that would shock and frighten my soft-spoken, well-dressed island mother. But I keep la tristeza inside me.

I let her talk. She keeps looking at her watch. She asks me again if I am completamente segura, certain without any doubt that I want to stay in this place. I just nod. How can I explain to her that what she called this place with so much disdain is now mi isla, mi casa. Also, I have responsibilities: I have to make sure the tenants of our building get their leaks fixed, their apartments painted, their favorite

Words to Know

trilingual: (adj) able to understand and speak in three languages
foreigner: (n) a person from a different country
tenants: (n) people who rent homes
songs sung by Papi. El Súper needs his assistant. Maybe, quizás, I say when she asks me if I will meet her and Julio at the Museo del Barrio. I do not tell her that I am not ready for outings with her and her future husband yet. Sí, claro, I will call her mañana.

I say good-bye to Mami in the street, adiós, Mami, adiós. The front stoop is now populated by the quieter night people. The old gate keepers who had worn themselves out during the day are now fanning themselves quietly, watching over the tired-to-the-bone single mothers holding sleepy babies on their laps.

She says in her most tender Mami-voice, her azúcar-coated voice, “Write, María. Mi María Alegre, call if you need me.”

Close Reading

Writing
21. Analyze how María’s building and New York have become “mi isla, mi casa” (“my island, my home”). Explain how setting details help the reader understand María’s decision.

María’s statements that __ and __ illustrate that __.

Literary Analysis
22. How does the tone shift in paragraph 31?

Words and Phrases in Context
23. What is the meaning of disdain in paragraph 31? Find the context clues that helped you determine its meaning.

Words and Phrases in Context
24. María says, “Maybe, quizás,” when her mother asks if María will spend time with her and Julio. Why do you think María responds this way? Which details in the text help you determine her reasons?

¶35 A black car pulls up. Mami waves to me as she hurries to a big Eldorado, a rental, already bearing the evidence of dirty little hands all over it. It is starting to sprinkle. The old women are folding their aluminum chairs and hurrying inside. I hear windows being raised, voices calling out “¡Que lluvia!” It is not a complaint. The smell of rain is a promise of a cooler night for my neighbors and for me. The rain, la lluvia, is a blessing on the long hot nights of this barrio. Tonight, I will wait until the street is wet, shiny, and transformed before going in to begin writing the letter to my mother, the one I want her to find waiting for her when she returns to the Island. I will tell her I am glad that she is happy. I will tell her not to worry about Papi and me. We are home.