

EYES OPEN

Educator Guide



Portugal, 1967

Sónia thinks she knows what her future holds. She'll become a poet, and together she and her artist boyfriend, Zé Miguel, will rise above the government restrictions that shape their lives. The restrictions on what Sónia can do and where she can go without a man's permission. The restrictions on what music she can enjoy, what books she can read, what questions she can ask.

But when Zé Miguel is arrested for anti-government activities and the restaurant belonging to Sónia's family is shut down, Sónia's plans are upended. No longer part of the comfortable middle class, she's forced to leave school and take a low-paying, grueling, dangerous job. She thought she understood the dark sides of her world, but now she sees suffering she never imagined. Without the protection of her boyfriend or her family, can Sónia find a way to fight for justice?

Lerner

Historical Background

Between 1926 and 1974 Portugal endured the second-longest dictatorship in Europe in the twentieth century, exceeded only by the Soviet Union. It began with a military coup that toppled an unstable and financially struggling democracy. The civilian finance minister, António de Oliveira Salazar, quickly maneuvered to become the undisputed leader of the country. He ushered in a regime called the Estado Novo (New State) in which the Catholic Church, large landholders and corporations, and the government controlled every aspect of daily life.

For women in Portugal, life was especially bleak. They were considered the property of their fathers or husbands. A woman could not travel outside the country without official written permission from a man in her life. Women had no reproductive rights, because having babies was considered an interest of both their husbands and the State. Although many women worked out of financial necessity, they received lower wages and were vulnerable to exploitation (including sexual exploitation) and dangerous conditions. It was against the law to form a union, and strikes were met with police violence.

Despite this repression, workers began to organize in the 1960s. Most unions had ties to the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which formed in secret in the 1930s and grew after World War II. In 1958, opposition to Salazar coalesced around the presidential campaign of General Humberto Delgado, who promised to dismiss Salazar if he won. The vote count was rigged in Salazar's favor, and after the election Salazar banned all opposition parties. The underground PCP and its unions became the only organized opposition to the regime.

Portugal controlled colonies in several African countries, including Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau), and Cabo Verde. Pro-independence guerrillas in these countries rebelled, and Portugal spent years trying to quell the uprisings. Young Portuguese men were drafted into the military. These wars were deeply unpopular in Portugal, but in a country where dissent was prohibited, people could not legally protest. Even the military's power was limited. Both Salazar and his successor, Marcelo Caetano, demoted, fired, or assassinated military officials who threatened their power—including General Delgado, murdered in 1965.





Historical Background cont.

As colonial conflicts escalated during the 1960s, some low-level officers interacted with and were influenced by independence leaders in colonized African nations. Some began to consider alternatives to the Estado Novo.

After Salazar suffered a debilitating stroke in 1968, the regime's new leader, Caetano, liberalized some of the more repressive laws. Many artists, intellectuals, and opposition political figures living in exile returned to the country in what came to be known as the Marcellist Spring. In 1970, though, Caetano cracked down once again.

On April 25, 1974, a contingent of Portuguese soldiers carried out a military coup to topple the regime. The long-subjugated people flooded the streets along with the soldiers, demanding their freedom and the end of the wars in the Portuguese colonies of Africa. They placed carnations—a popular spring flower—in the rifles of soldiers to show that guns would never again be used against the people.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Sónia prefer to write free verse instead of rhyming poetry? What do you learn about her personality through the poems she writes?
2. Sónia writes about her father's disappointment at having only daughters. How does this affect Sónia's sense of herself?
3. Why do you think dictatorships punish the entire family for one member's actions?
4. Why does Sónia decide not to go with Zé Miguel when he leaves the country?
5. Sónia asks, "Who is a hero? Who deserves a poem?" What makes a person a hero? What do you think disqualifies someone from being a hero?
6. How does the question of whom to trust impact Sónia's life? Who betrays her over the course of the story? Whom does she betray or let down?
7. By the end of the novel, how has Sónia's approach to romantic relationships evolved?
8. What parallels do you see between life in the United States today and Sónia's life in 1960s Portugal?





Literary Elements and Devices

Motifs

A motif is a pattern that's repeated within a story. It can be a word, a phrase, an image, or a symbol. Through repetition, as well as variations on the motif, a reader's attention is drawn to certain themes and characters. *Eyes Open* uses several phrases as motifs, as they are repeated throughout the story. One of them is “to think / to question / to dream.” Why are those words so important to Sónia? How do they show her relationships to other characters and to her society?

Another motif—the one that first appears in “Genesis: Eve” (p. 9) as “the apple from the tree of / Knowledge”—stands out because of its different variations in the book. Where are the other two “apples” and what do they show about Sónia, her family, and her boyfriend?

Find another motif in *Eyes Open*. Does this motif stay the same, or are there variations in the course of the story? How does this motif show Sónia's change?

Similes and Metaphors

Similes and metaphors are symbols in which objects are used to represent other objects, characters, events, relationships, or ideas. Similes use the words “like” or “as” to make the connection, while metaphors do not, leaving the reader to figure out the comparison and its meaning.

An example of a simile appears in the poem “Free Verse” (p. 5) when Sister Lucía throws Sónia's poems across the room, bending the pages “like seagulls' wings.” Why are this and so many other similes in the novel drawn from the sea? What do they tell us about Sónia's world?

The metaphors at the end of the poem “Sleepover” (p. 169) are drawn from similes that Sónia first reads in the poems of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. How do those metaphors connect to Sónia's feelings about Zé Miguel at that moment?

Turning points

In the poem “Ex-Best Friend,” (p. 188) the story “turns” in a major and surprising way. Yet in rereading, you may find earlier signs of this turning point approaching. What are the moments in the story that foreshadow, or hint at, such a betrayal? How does that turning point affect Sónia and the subsequent course of her story?



Activities

Real People

Along with the fictional characters, several real people receive mention in the novel: Vasco da Gama, Luís de Camões, António de Oliveira Salazar (often referred to simply as the Leader), Amália Rodrigues, Fernando Pessoa, and Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. Choose one of those real people to research and explain how their lives and work connect to Sónia's story.

Fado vs. the Beatles

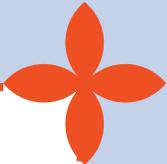
Music is an important part of Sónia's life. Her family owns a fado restaurant featuring live performances every night. She also listens to the rock music of the Beatles with her friend Nídia and later with Emílio. These musical styles are very different but each one contributes to Sónia's poetry.

Listen to some songs by Amália Rodrigues, Portugal's most famous fado musician. Write down the words that come to mind when you hear these songs. Now listen to the Beatles' best-known songs from the mid-1960s. Write down the words that come to mind when you hear their songs. How do the different kinds of music reflect different aspects of Sónia's life?

Choose a poem from *Eyes Open* and select a song or two for a playlist to accompany that poem. Why did you choose that song? What does it tell us about Sónia and her thoughts and feelings at the time?

Now choose your favorite song of all the ones you've listened to for this activity. Why did you choose this song? How does it reflect what you're thinking and feeling?





Activities Cont.

Other Perspectives

Eyes Open is told exclusively from Sónia's perspective, and in moments of disagreement or conflict the narrative reflects her side of the story. (And she definitely has opinions!) Choose a scene where there's disagreement or conflict and, in verse or prose, rewrite it from the point of view of a different character in the scene.

What Happens Next

Sónia's story doesn't end with the last poem in the novel. Her future is unknown, most of all by her. What do you think her life will be like in her new home? Will she ever be reunited with her sisters? Her friends? Her former boyfriends? Imagine an encounter in the future between Sónia and another character in the novel. When and where does it take place, and what happens? Write a scene of this future encounter that you have imagined.

**"From now on
I'll only write
my words
my truth
my story."**

**—Sónia
Eyes Open, p. 318**



Eyes Open

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