

# Illegal by Bettina Restrepo

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## Elements of a Novel

*The basic elements of a novel (and all stories, really) are characters, plot, setting, perspective, and theme. Please use these questions, projects or ideas as ways to engage your students. It isn't intended that you use all of them, but use some as a resource "bank" to dip into as needed. Some questions are written for the teacher to adapt to their own class and purpose in having students read the novel; others are ready-to-go questions for the students. The questions vary in intent: class discussions, others are more project-oriented, and still others are possible ideas for essays or writing (both quick and lengthy and personal response and analysis of text).*

## Characters

1. DISCUSSION/ WRITING: How is Nora like her family members? How is she unlike each? Compare to her father, her mother, and her grandmother.
2. GROUP WORK: Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist, designed a model to describe how people develop their moral system. He believed that there are six levels of moral development. All people do not reach the highest levels. Examine Kohlberg's Levels of Ethical Development. Create a chart, with the character's name, the level, and your justification of why the character fits that level. Then in a group, discuss your placement and come up with a consensus. Justify your group's choices to the class.
  - Consider each of these characters on the levels: Nora, Mama, Grandma, Papa, Cecelia, Jorge and Manuela, Flora, Keisha, Mr. Mann, the Columbian woman, the truck driver.

Level 1	acts to avoid pain or punishment
Level 2	acts to get a reward
Level 3	acts to gain approval
Level 4	acts because of belief in the law
Level 5	acts for the welfare of others
Level 6	acts because of a self-formulated set values

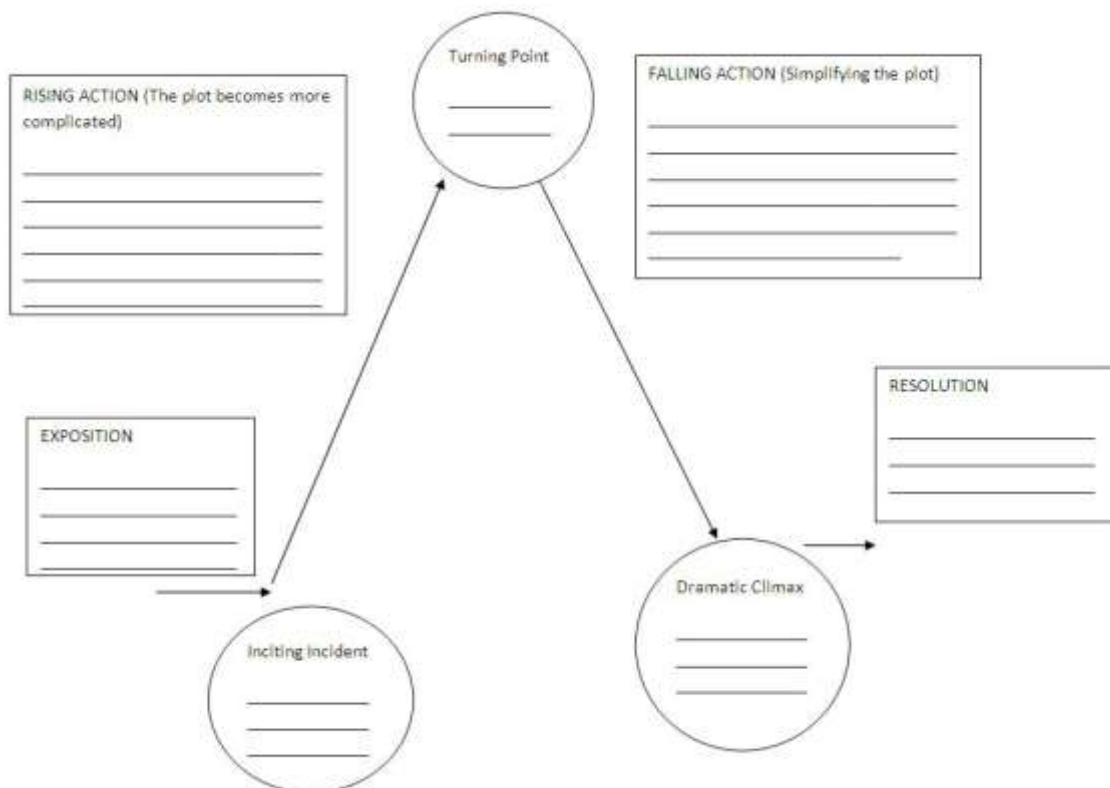
3. GROUP PROJECT: Provide a character sketch (body bio) for the main characters: Nora, Mama, Grandma, Papa, Manuela, Jorge, Flora, Keisha, Mr. Mann, etc. Split the students into groups (or adjust to singles) and distribute body outlines. Have each group work with a major character to analyze that character. On the outline, where the heart would be, the students should describe the motivation of the character (or one if it changes) labeling it, then supplementing it with both a illustration (non-linguistic representation) and a quote from the text with page number that portrays that motivation. Each characteristic should have an accompanying non-literal symbol (i.e. a wealthy character needs to not have money coming out of his pockets, but could have a dollar sign on a chain around his neck). The character needs at least three traits and the accompanying quotes with the page numbers to support the ideas. For example:
  - Character's Name—outline in a representative or symbolic color (one that represents the character)
  - Left hand—(can be holding) one of the main symbols or items associated with the character and an accompanying quote with the page number supporting your idea
  - Right hand—main thing that he or she does to affect the plot or other characters and an accompanying quote with the page number supporting your idea
  - One of the arms—the character's strength and an accompanying quote with the page number supporting your idea
  - Head—what the character thinks about

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- Right foot—what he or she hurts (accidentally or on purpose) during the course of the novel and an accompanying quote with the page number supporting your idea
  - Torso—cover with characteristics that describe the person;
  - Heart—what’s the primary motivation for the character and an accompanying quote with the page number supporting your idea
  - Background—surround your character with items or images with which he or she is associated
4. DISCUSSION/ WRITING: In literature, authors often use similar characters to highlight qualities in the main character. Flora serves this function for Nora. Name a few ways they are similar (see chapter 26 “... she was illegal, in a different way, but just like me.”) What traits of Nora’s are highlighted because of Flora’s actions or attitudes (how are they different)?
  5. PROJECT/ WRITING: Write “Dear Abby” styled letters for each of the main character (or a selected character) over the course of the novel. What would “Abby’s” advice be?

## Plot

1. GROUP WORK: Use Freytag’s pyramid of plot (exposition, rising action, turning point, falling action, dramatic climax, and resolution) and a list of the major events of *Illegal* to create a chart, showing the development of the story. Compare your ideas to that of your group and then create a chart representing your group’s consensus.  
*Turning point (also called the technical climax) is the moment when the plot begins to shift away from becoming more and more complex—where the final conflict becomes more clear). The dramatic climax is the point of highest interest for the audience, usually the conflict to which the entire story has been building.*



## Setting (time and place)

*Main idea: setting reveals and enforces ideas about characters or theme.*

1. DISCUSSION/ WRITING: Compare Cedula, Matamoros, and Houston as villages/cities presented in the novel.

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2. DISCUSISON/ WRITING: Compare Nora’s home in Cedula (including the orchard) and her apartment (including the park) in Houston.
3. PROJECT: Have students draw the various settings labeling their illustration with textual evidence (the author’s description) on each part.
4. DISCUSISON/ WRITING: How dependent is this story on time? Could this novel have taken place fifty years ago? A hundred?

## **Perspective/ Point of View**

*Main idea: POV is a technical term: the novel is in the first person. Perspective describes a character’s ideas and affects the development of the novel through use of detail and attitude.*

1. DISCUSISON/ WRITING: Describe Nora. How does Nora’s perspective and narration affect our understanding of the novel? Consider how different it would be if Mama (or another character) were narrating. What would be the effect of an omniscient third person narrator?
2. WRITING: Rewrite a section of the novel from another character’s perspective. Consider :
  - a. The fight with Grandma in Mexico with Nora hiding up the tree from Grandma’s point of view
  - b. The introductory pool scene from Flora’s point of view, then from Keisha’s.
  - c. Consider what Jorge or Manuela might have written in their diaries upon meeting Nora.
  - d. Chapter 28 from Mama’s perspective.

## **Themes (and thematic subjects)**

*Teaching theme can be confusing because of differing definitions. The literary term “theme” always implies a **theme statement**, a declarative sentence. However, many people use “theme” to mean **thematic ideas or subjects**. You will often hear people talk about the theme of Romeo and Juliet as love. Technically, that is a subject or idea of the play, not a theme. A **theme** would answer the question of what does Romeo and Juliet tell us about love, what comment does it make on the human condition, and, furthermore, that theme would be applicable to other works of literature. Example theme statements for Romeo and Juliet (and other works): A. Revenge can destroy both avenger and victim. B. Even well-intended deceptions and secrets can be destructive. C. There are forces in life over which people have no control.*

WRITING/ GROUP WORK: Create your own themes for *Illegal* using the following technique then compare your themes to other members of the class:

1. Ask: what is this novel is really about?
  2. Make a list of your answers, avoiding plot-, character-, or setting-related items.
  3. Connect related items on your list, determining which is the largest/most important cluster.
  4. Formulate a theme statement about the largest, most important cluster. Follow these “rules.”
    - \*Use a declarative sentence.
    - \*Avoid clichés, moralizations (should, ought, must, good, bad, right, wrong, etc.)
    - \*Keep it universal (relates to anybody, anywhere, any time.)
    - \*Be sure it reflects the “big idea” about life that the author wants us to think about.”
- The following are questions all based on the thematic subject **family**.
  - DISCUSISON/ WRITING: How is family important throughout the novel? How does each character express his or her commitment to family? Do any seem to reject family?
  - DISCUSISON/ WRITING: Nora repeatedly remembers sayings and advice from her family. Is there anything your own family seems to repeat that is advice for you to live by?

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- DISCUSISON/ WRITING: Which characters seem to support their families and which reject them? Which seem to be going against their families, but are actually working for the good of the family?