

CATEGORY: ARGENTINA: 19th CENTURY

CONCEPTS: FOLKLORE, Agriculture, work

ACTIVITY: THE GAUCHO POEM MARTIN FIERRO. The gaucho is a major figure in Argentine popular culture. Like the North American cowboy he has come to symbolize the spirit of the nation. The epic poem Martín Fierro, written by José Hernández in 1872 has become a classic of Argentine literature. We are reproducing a translation of a short section of the poem so that students can become familiar with this Argentine national figure.

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to describe the heroic symbol of the gaucho and compare it to the familiar figure of the cowboy.

MATERIALS: Copies of the poem which follows.

PROCEDURE: Explain that a gaucho is the Argentine equivalent to a cowboy. Explain also that the short poem they will read was written when the gauchos were disappearing much like U.S. cowboy literature made its appearance in the final days of the "Wild West."

After reading the poem students should be able to point out some of the basic characteristics of this hero: independence, toughness, love of the outdoors, fairness, anti-materialism, hard work, etc. Many of these are the same characteristics we give our cowboy heroes. Have the students discuss the following or similar questions:

1. What is a hero? What is a folk hero?
2. Do you think the picture of the gaucho in the poem is a true picture of the life of the gaucho? What about our image of the cowboy on television and in movies?
3. Why do you think the gaucho and the cowboy became folk heroes only after their way of life had mostly disappeared?
4. What is nostalgia? Was the past better than the present? Adults often want to go back and be children. Why? Was the "childhood" of a country an easy time? Can a country go back?

VOCABULARY: Gaucho, pampas, folk hero, nostalgia

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985/1989.

The Gaucho Martín Fierro

I am a gaucho, so please understand,
I must sing my own song.
For me the earth is small
And could far larger be.
The pampa snakes do not bite me
And the sun does not burn my face.

My glory is to live as free
As the birds in the sky.
I make no nest on earth
Where only suffering lies,
And the day I choose to fly
No one will follow me.

There is no love in my life
To make demands on me.
Like the beautiful birds
Which hop from branch to branch
My bed is the prairie grass
And my blanket the stars.

And I want it well understood
While you listen to my tale
That I've never fought to kill
Unless another's evil hand
Forced me to such a plan.

I have known this dear land
Where gauchos used to live
In peace each with a small ranch
And wife and children . . .
It was a delight to see
How he spent his days.

Back then, when the morning star
Glowed in the saintly heavens
And the singing rooster
Told of the approach of the day,
Every gaucho set out with eager stride
To the morning campfire and breakfast time.

Scarcely had the dawn
Begun to color the sky
Wrapped in his warm poncho,
Each commenced his work.

This gaucho ties on his spurs,
While another rides off singing.
One saddles up his mare,
Another searches for lassos
Meanwhile the horses in the corral
Whinny a greeting to the new day.

Oh, times past! Such pride!
To see the gauchos ride.
Every good gaucho,
Though his spirited horse buck and twist
Soon had the cattle well in hand.

I remember, glory me!
How the gauchos rode
Always in good cheer and well-equipped
But nowadays . . . alas . . .
All this has disappeared.

(Translated and adapted from Martín Fierro, by José Hernández, 1872.
Many complete versions of this epic poem are available in both
English and Spanish.)

