



## VILLARREAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERPRISES

ENDEAVORS IN PROGRESS

### **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Resilience, Resistance, and the Right to Learn**

In the intellectual and cultural world of 17th-century New Spain, few people stand out like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She is remembered today as a brilliant writer and an early defender of women’s rights. But her life was not easy. From a young age, she had to push against the limits placed on her as a girl in a society that did not believe women should study or speak out (*Octavio Paz, 1988*).



Sor Juana was born in 1651 in San Miguel Nepantla, near Mexico City. Her full name was Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez de Santillana. She was born outside of marriage, which carried a social stigma at the time. Her father, a Spanish man, was mostly absent, and her mother, a criolla woman, raised her and her siblings. Because her household was less controlled by a traditional father figure, Sor Juana had more freedom to explore her curiosity (*Octavio Paz, 1988*).

As a child, she showed an incredible love for learning. She taught herself to read at a very young age and spent hours in her grandfather’s library. She read everything she could find—books on religion, philosophy, and literature. She even pushed herself to study harder by cutting her hair if she felt she was not learning fast enough. From early on, it was clear that learning was not just something she enjoyed—it was part of who she was (*Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.*).

Seeing her talent, her family sent her to Mexico City. There, she joined a household connected to the viceregal court. Her intelligence quickly caught people’s attention, and she was invited to the court of the Viceroy and Vicereine. She became a lady-in-waiting to the Vicereine, Leonor Carreto. At court, she impressed scholars and leaders with her knowledge. Some even tested her in public, and she amazed them with her answers (*Library of Congress, n.d.*).



However, life at court came with pressure. Women were expected to marry and focus on family life. Even though Sor Juana was admired, her intelligence was seen as unusual for a woman. She knew that if she married, she would likely lose the freedom to study and write (*Latin American Women Writers: An Encyclopedia, 2007*).

Because of this, Sor Juana made a bold decision—she chose not to marry. Instead, she entered a convent. This may seem surprising, but for her, it was a smart choice. In the convent, she could continue learning, reading, and writing. After trying a stricter religious order, she joined the Convent of San Jerónimo, where she had more freedom to study (*A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture, 2008*).

In the convent, Sor Juana created her own intellectual world. She built a large library and wrote poems, plays, and essays. But not everyone approved. Some Church leaders believed women should not study or write about serious topics, especially religion (*The Poetry Foundation, n.d.*).

This conflict became serious after her work was criticized by a Church official. In response, Sor Juana wrote *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, where she defended her right—and all women’s right—to education.

“I do not study to know more, but to ignore less.”  
— from *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (translated) (*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1691/1994*)

This quote shows how strongly she believed in the importance of learning. She saw education as something necessary for everyone, not just men.

She also spoke out about unfair treatment of women in her poetry:

“Foolish men who accuse  
women without reason,  
not seeing you are the cause  
of the very thing you blame.”  
— from *Hombres necios que acusáis* (translated) (*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1691/1994*)

In this poem, Sor Juana points out the hypocrisy of men who blame women while ignoring their own actions. Her words are still powerful today.

Even though she defended herself, the Church had more power. Sor Juana was pressured to stop writing. She was forced to sell her books and give up her studies. In the end, her voice was silenced. She spent her final years helping others in the convent and died in 1695 while caring for sick nuns (*UNESCO, n.d.*).

Even though she was silenced during her lifetime, her work survived. Today, Sor Juana is seen as one of the most important writers in Hispanic literature. Her ideas about education, equality, and justice continue to inspire people around the world (*UNESCO, n.d.*).

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is more than a historical figure—she is a symbol of courage. She reminds us that learning matters, that questioning unfair rules is important, and that one voice can make a lasting impact, even in the face of powerful opposition.



## References (APA 7th Edition)

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Here are three discussion questions designed to connect Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to themes of **resilience and resistance** in your Chicana/o/x Studies classroom:

- **Resilience and Identity:**

Sor Juana challenged the limits placed on her as a woman in colonial society. In what ways do you see similar struggles for access to education or voice in Chicana/o/x communities today? How can resilience shape identity?

- **Resistance Through Learning:**

Sor Juana used education as a form of resistance. How can learning, reading, and writing be acts of resistance in your own life or community? Can knowledge be a form of power?

- **Speaking Out Against Injustice:**

In works like *Hombres necios*, Sor Juana directly challenged unfair treatment of women. What risks come with speaking out against injustice? When is it worth taking that risk, and why?