A Child of the Revolution

Frida Kahlo was born in Coyoacan, just outside Mexico City, in 1907. Her parents probably thought her life would develop much as the lives of other girls of that time. The Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz had been governing for almost thirty years. Under his rule women were restricted from taking any part in public life. Furthermore, Frida’s parents gave her and her three sisters a strict Catholic upbringing. The girls were expected to be obedient daughters and to become good Catholic wives and mothers.

But in 1910, when Frida was three years old, everything changed in Mexico. The people overthrew Diaz and established a much more open government. The new government speedily set about making many changes that were long overdue. Education and health care became more widely available. More significantly for Frida Kahlo’s future, the new government set out to stimulate interest in the arts by supporting the work of Mexican artists.

Her three sisters were largely unaffected by these changes. But Frida, who was the rebellious one, took part in them. She seemed to enjoy shocking people. One of the ways she did this was to go about wearing men’s clothes. She was a firm supporter of the 1910 revolution; as an adult she claimed to have been born that year so that she could call herself “a child of the revolution.” Her Mexican mother and German father must have despaired of her at times. They couldn’t have known that their lively daughter would grow up to become one of Latin America’s most notable painters.

Frida Kahlo had a difficult childhood. At the age of six she contracted polio. That left her with a weakened right leg. Then, in her late teens, she suffered terrible injuries when she was thrown from a bus onto a metal spike. The spike penetrated her side, almost killing her.

While she convalesced, she began to paint. This was a way of taking her mind off the severe pain, from which she was seldom free for the rest of her life. Many of her paintings are self-portraits; in them she often included the parrots, monkeys, and other pets whose company gave her so much pleasure. Despite their bold, bright colors, however, the paintings clearly
express the pain that lies behind them. Kahlo’s art was her way of inviting
the viewer to share her suffering.

She first met her future husband, the painter Diego Rivera, in 1922,
when she was fifteen. They married seven years later. He was twice her age
and already a world-famous artist. The marriage was a tempestuous one
with many separations, a divorce, and later a remarriage. They both had
strong personalities and each found the other exasperating to live with.
Nevertheless, their love was strong and deep; Rivera appears frequently in
her paintings.

Toward the end of her life, they lived together in the house where she
was born, Casa Azul (the Blue House). After Kahlo’s death in 1954, Rivera
gave it to the people of Mexico. Now, known as the Frida Kahlo Museum, it is
dedicated to her life and work.

1. What detail in the passage suggests that President Diaz was accustomed
to being obeyed without question?

2. How did the Mexican people show their dissatisfaction with
President Diaz?

3. How do you know that Kahlo’s parents were not interested in
experimenting with different ways of raising children?

4. Why would Mexican artists have welcomed the 1910 revolution?
5. Why do you think Kahlo’s parents might sometimes have been **exasperated** with Frida?

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6. What is the meaning of **overdue** as it is used in the passage?

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7. In what way did Kahlo **rebel** against what was considered normal behavior?

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8. How do you think Kahlo’s weakened right leg affected her life?

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9. Why did Kahlo probably lose a lot of blood in her accident?

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10. What helped Kahlo to **convalesce**?

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11. What is the meaning of **dedicated** as it is used in the passage?

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12. How does the passage make clear that Kahlo never recovered completely from the accident?

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13. Why would it be incorrect to describe Rivera and Kahlo as a compatible couple?

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14. What did Frida Kahlo paint?

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15. Why are both Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo honored in the world of art?

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**FUN & FASCINATING FACTS**

- **Dictate** is formed from the Latin verb *dicere*, which means “to say” or “to speak.” Other words formed from this root include *diction*, “a person’s manner or way of speaking,” and *contradict*, “to say the opposite of.”

- Three nouns are formed from the verb *stimulate*. *Stimulation* is the act of stimulating. (The aroma of freshly baked bread was the only *stimulation* we needed to enter the bakery.) A *stimulant* is a substance that increases bodily activity. (The caffeine in coffee and cola drinks is a *stimulant.* A *stimulus* is anything that increases activity of any kind. (The reward of $50 was a *stimulus* to the children who were looking for the lost dog.)