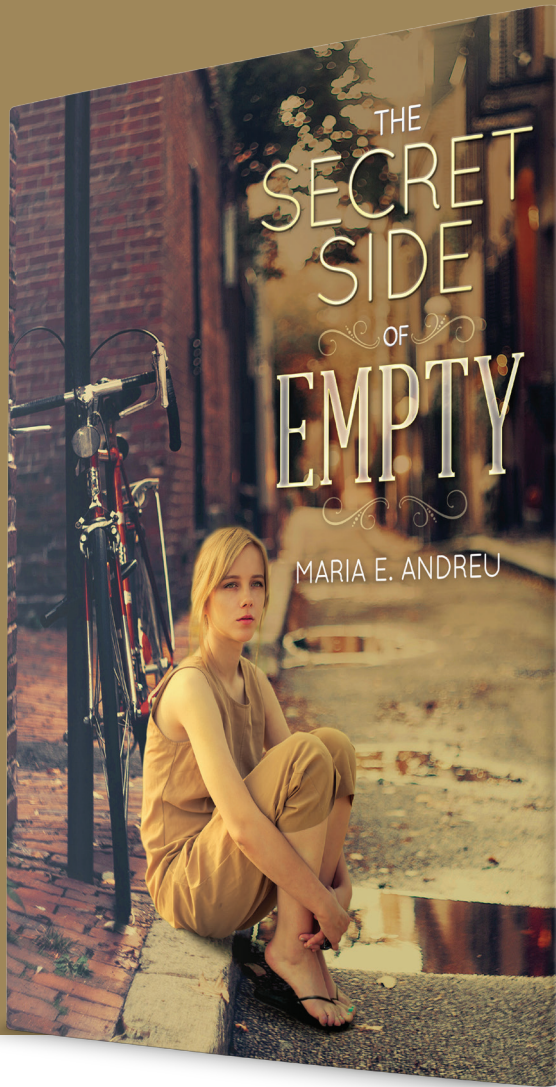


## DISCUSSION & WRITING GUIDE

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# THE SECRET SIDE OF EMPTY

by Maria Andreu

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

As a straight-A student with a budding romance and loyal best friend, M.T.'s life seems as apple-pie American as her blondish hair and pale skin. But M.T. hides two facts to the contrary: her full name of Monserrat Thalia and her status as an undocumented immigrant.

With senior year of high school kicking into full swing, M.T. sees her hopes for a “normal” future unraveling. And it will take discovering a sense of trust in herself and others for M.T. to stake a claim in the life that she wants.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARIA E. ANDREU is a writer and speaker whose work has appeared in Newsweek, The Washington Post, NJ.com, and the *Newark Star Ledger*. *The Secret Side of Empty* is her debut novel. Maria is a proud mother of two and an adoptive mother to various furry creatures. She was born in Spain, lived in Argentina for two years, and crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. at the age of eight. An American citizen due to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, Maria currently lives in New Jersey. You can visit her online at [mariaeandreu.com](http://mariaeandreu.com).

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING PROMPTS

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***You can't judge people by who they're related to. I am the poster child for that (15).***

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- Compare M.T. and Chelsea. List things that the girls have in common.
- Contrast M.T. and Chelsea. Tell of ways that the two are different.
- Explain why the girls are friends. What is the foundation for their long-term relationship?
- Examine Siobhan's character. What role does she play in the story?
- Describe the tone of M.T.'s observations and comments. Tell how M.T. views her world and why.
- Explain why M.T. has chosen to identify herself through the use of initials rather than her full name.
- How do the initials M.T. serve as a symbol for her self-image?
- Write an argument from M.T.'s point of view in support of the quote above. Consider the following questions when crafting a short essay:
  - What does M.T. mean by stating that she is a poster child?
  - Why does M.T. reference family relations?
  - How is M.T. influenced by her family? Her school? Her friends? Her race?
  - Are M.T.'s limitations valid or self-imposed? How so?

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***"Some people think it means disaster. But it just means a big change. It can feel like a disaster, but in the end, after it's over, it's what was supposed to happen (39)."***

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- Tell how the Tower tarot card read by the gypsy-like lady in the park predicts the theme of the story.
- List the disasters and changes M.T. experienced, classifying which were in or out of her control.
- Do you agree with the statement that in the end, after it's over, it's what was supposed to happen? How so.
- Tell of a personal experience or observation supporting this statement.
- Write an informative essay examining the overall theme of *The Secret Side of Empty* using the quote above as reference.
  - Describe the term 'disaster' as it relates to various plot points of the story.
  - Tell how, in M.T.'s story, disaster brought about big change.
  - Explain how disaster and change contributes to the theme, tone, and/or resolution of the story.

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***"You need a computer? For what? You can't get a real job here. You can't go to college. Stop fooling yourself. And if you ever sneak around behind my back like that again, you are going to be very sorry (56)."***

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- Tell how this piece of dialogue serves as foreshadowing for development of M.T.'s relationship with her father.
- Prior to this line of dialogue, M.T. states that she wants to make her father livid because it's the one thing she can do, even though he strikes her. Justify her reasoning.
- M.T.'s father takes the \$175 she has earned working as a tutor. Explain how this act serves as a defining moment or a catalyst, which is a scene that incites an emotional thrust in the story.
- Use the quote above as inspiration to write a narrative from M.T.'s point of view. In it, explain what she means by guerrilla warfare.

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***"Hey, Laurie said you were at the dance but I looked and looked and didn't see you. I got here kind of late, I guess that's why. I can't keep chasing you around town, so how about we be friends on here?"***

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***I lift my hopes back up and hold them in my hands as I click "Accept (82)."***

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- Describe Nate. What kind of guy is he? Use examples from the text to support your opinion.
- Has your impression of Nate as presented in the Chapter 1 changed at any point of the story? Explain your answer.
- Earlier M.T.'s mother describes details about her courtship with Jorge. Compare and contrast her story with M.T.'s relationship with Nate.
  - State ways that the two are similar.
  - List ways that they differ.
- List the risks involved in developing a close relationship with Nate.
  - With M.T.'s family?
  - With her illegal status?
  - With her poverty status?
- The term 'the point of no return' is defined as being a place where reversal is not possible and/or a critical point of decision-making. Write an argument stating whether or not M.T.'s choosing to 'Accept' Nate's friendship is a point of no return in story. Support your position by citing examples from the text.

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*I will always be a stranger everywhere. With my parents, I am too American. With Americans, I am a spectator with my nose pressed against their windowpanes, watching their weird rituals and rites of passage, never quite understanding them completely. A little chunk of me will always be a stranger everywhere, different chunks of stranger in different situations (98).*

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- Explain what being ‘too American’ means. Give examples from the text.
  - Describe what M.T. means by the term ‘spectator’? Support your observations by citing moments in the text.
  - Tell how this quote reveals the heart of the story.
  - The premise of a novel is defined as the basis of the plot that justifies the story’s conclusion. Write an informative essay examining the premise of *The Secret Side of Empty* using the quote above as reference. Consider the following points:
    - Describe the basis of the plot. What is the story about?
    - Explain how the quote justifies the story’s conclusion.
    - Tell how the role of the stranger contributes to the theme and premise of *The Secret Side of Empty*.
- 

*The Blonde Bear walks over to me. “So you’re kinda messed up, huh (100)?”*

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- Do you think M.T. is aware that she becoming ‘kinda messed up?’ Explain your answer.
  - Is it possible for others to become more aware of one’s personal unraveling than the person themselves? How so?
  - The Urban Dictionary defines the ‘downward spiral’ as “a depressive state where the person experiencing the downward spiral is getting more and more depressed, perhaps due to causes unknown. It is called a downward spiral because there is no way to stop it, it’s just going to get worse and worse... until the person crashes, and maybe finds their way back to happiness.” List ways that prove M.T. is caught in a downward spiral.
  - Write an informative essay examining M.T.’s downward spiral citing examples of her changed nature. Explore the following points:
    - Reasons for her feelings of hopelessness and depression.
      - Her increased use of alcohol and drugs.
      - Moments in the story when she pulls away from life.
- 

- Personality changes.
  - Thoughts of suicide.
- 

*“There are places we could go. Shelters (111).”*

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- Even though she does all she can for her daughter, M.T. bears a harsh level of disdain for her mother. Why is this so?
  - M.T.’s mother is resistant to the suggestion of going to a shelter. Why?
  - Do you think her resistance is founded only on the fact that they are illegal? Explain your answer.
  - What would be gained if they went to a shelter? What would be lost?
  - Could it be that this statement was M.T.’s last attempt to reach out for help? How so?
  - Write a narrative from M.T.’s mother’s point of view explaining why they cannot go to a shelter.
- 

*My universe has only a few lights in it, a big one just went out. I feel stupid feeling this way about a teacher (171).*

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- Explain why M.T.’s old way of thinking and achieving died when Ms. North left.
  - Why did M.T. run away when she heard the news?
  - Can one individual have such impact on the positive direction of another’s life? Explain your answer.
  - Does her father have a point in saying that M.T. should stop going to school? How so?
  - Write a narrative from M.T.’s point of view explaining why she lost hope when Ms. North left. What was it about Ms. North’s influence that kept M.T. on the right track?
- 

*“It’s a miracle the human race has survived at all. You idiots with death wishes only think of yourselves (202).”*

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- Quinn is uncharacteristically concerned about M.T.’s well-being. Why is this so?
  - Are Quinn’s words true? Are people with suicidal tendencies selfish? Explain your answer.
  - Though M.T. has given up on herself, there are a number of people who care a great deal about her. Tell why she is seemingly unaware of this.
-

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING PROMPTS CONTINUED

- Who would be affected the most should M.T. take her own life?
- Below is a list of symptoms many individuals who have suicidal thoughts experience. Cite moments in the story when M.T. demonstrated one or all of these symptoms.
  - Appearing to feel trapped or hopeless
  - Appearing to have an abnormal preoccupation with violence, dying and/or death
  - Being very moody
  - Changing personality
  - Changing routine
  - Changing sleeping patterns
  - Consuming (more) drugs
  - Consuming more alcohol
  - Engaging in risky behavior
  - Having depression
  - Impaired concentration
  - Isolating oneself
- The Canadian Medical Association states, “Suicide can be contagious.” Write an argument for or against this statement. Cite moments in the story in supporting your argument.

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*He’s quiet for a moment. “I know,” he says. “And that’s what scares me (244).”*

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- Interpret Nate’s words. What does he mean by being scared of the fact that M.T. loves him?
- Do you blame Nate for breaking up with M.T.? Why or why not?
- What does his willingness to take her to the prom say about his character?
- Over all of the troublesome things that have happened to M.T. – the beatings, the shame, Ms. North, dropping grades, poverty, illegal status complications – do you feel that Nate’s break up is her darkest point? How so?
- Earlier, the gypsy-like woman who read her tarot card said that what feels like a disaster, in the end, after it’s over; it’s what was supposed to happen. Can heart-breaks such as Nate’s break-up ultimately become beneficial? How so?
- Write a narrative from Nate’s point of view explaining why M.T.’s love scares him. Include reference to his prom experience and why he did not take advantage of her in the park.

It feels like we’re wading through soup, an angry bruise of a sky swirling above us as we walk home from the bus stop to the apartment (307).
- Writer’s Digest defines the term denouement as being “the final outcome of the story, generally occurring

after the climax of the plot. Often it’s where all the secrets (if there are any) are revealed and loose ends are tied up.” Discuss how, at this point of the story, the following secrets have been revealed and loose ends have been tied up:

- M.T.’s undocumented status?
- Her friendship with Chelsea?
- M.T.’s relationship with Quinn?
- Her relationship with her Mother?
- The break up with Nate?
- School issues?
- Her feelings about herself and her future?
- M.T.’s establishing of boundaries with her father?
- The phrase ‘angry bruise of a sky swirling about us’ is a metaphor describing M.T.’s state of being. Write an informative essay describing the effectiveness of this metaphor as a literary tool used in the denouement.

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*“I told you you’d go to college,” says my mom. A tear spills over the rim of her bottom eyelid and hangs there in her eyelash.*

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*“Yeah, you’re some kind of fortune-teller or something. So what are you going to do (318)?”*

---

- Tell how this closing scene differs from the beginning of the story.
- Discuss how M.T. has changed.
- What is the most important lesson M.T. learned as a result of her journey?
- Describe how M.T.’s change has affected her mother’s confidence.
- Explain the effect M.T.’s change has had on her father.
- The author’s choice to return to the fortune-teller image is an effective literary device that serves a shadow of a prior image that helps to create a satisfying resolution. Tell why you think the author chose the image of the fortune-teller to close the story.
- Write a narrative from M.T.’s point of view discussing the life-lessons she has learned from her trials and personal victories.



# CORE CURRICULUM STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » READING: LITERATURE

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### RL.6.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### RL.6.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

### RL.6.3

Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

### RL.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone

### RL.6.6

Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

### RL.6.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

### RL.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### RL.7.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

### RL.7.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

### RL.7.6

Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

### RL.7.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

### RL.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

### RL.8.3

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

### RL.8.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

### RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### RL.9-10.3

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

### RL.9-10.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise

### RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

# CORE CURRICULUM STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » WRITING

### W.6.1

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

### W.6.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

### W.6.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

### W.6.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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### W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### W.11-12.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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