Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SANDRA CISNEROS

Sandra Cisneros grew up as the only daughter in a family of six boys, and her family moved frequently between Chicago and Mexico City as her father took different jobs. Cisneros's mother was her strongest positive female influence, as she encouraged Sandra to read and continue her education. Cisneros began writing poems at the age of ten, and she later attended Loyola College and then the Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Iowa she began writing about her own unique experiences instead of trying to imitate the primarily white male voices of the traditional literary canon. Cisneros is best known for *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. She has become a leading figure of the Chicano literary movement, and has taught at several high schools and colleges. She currently lives and writes in San Antonio, Texas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Woman Hollering Creek often concerns itself with the process of immigration and integration into a new country, a process that began in America when the US won the Mexican-American War in 1848, thereby seizing large amounts of land from Mexico and allowing the Latino people who lived in these areas to become official US citizens. When the Mexican Revolution flared up in the 1910s, many Mexicans fled their violent country and sought safety north of the border. Cisneros's story "Eyes of Zapata" examines this time period in particular with its focus on Emiliano Zapata, a revolutionary leader who fought for peasants' rights. The other stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* deal not with the history of immigration, but rather the various personal consequences of assuming a multicultural, multinational identity. In addition, Cisneros's work has become a landmark for American minority women writers, and she is one of the most famous Chicana and Latina writers. Her work criticizes both the sexism of the Mexican-American community and the racism and classism of English-American culture, and has become an important part of the increasing dialogue surrounding these issues.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Woman Hollering Creek & Other Stories belongs to the Chicana Literary canon, a genre of literature by or about Mexican or Mexican-American women. This genre includes Cisneros's well-known *The House on Mango Street*, which—like *Woman Hollering Creek*—examines the cultural positioning of Latinas in contemporary times. Another important work of Chicana Literature is Gloria E. Anzaldúa's semi-autobiographical book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestizas*, a text that scrutinizes the role borders play in Latin-American life, both in terms of identity and sexuality. It's also worth mentioning that famous Latino novels like Robert Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* have notoriously presented Latina sexuality in a male-centric manner that books like *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek* ultimately challenge by providing nuanced perspectives of female subjectivity and power.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories
- **When Published:** April 13, 1991
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction, Contemporary Chicana Literature
- **Genre:** Short Fiction, Vignette
- **Setting:** The majority of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* take place near the Mexican-American border, either in Texas or in Mexico.
- **Climax:** Since *Woman Hollering Creek* is a collection of short stories, there is no single climax. However, certain stories—like "Never Marry a Mexican," "Eyes of Zapata," "Bien Pretty," and the titular "Woman Hollering Creek"—serve as focal points in the text, since they are longer pieces that grapple most significantly with the collection's themes regarding love, interconnection, cultural identity, female objectification, and power.
- **Antagonist:** In most of the stories, infidelity and misogyny act as the two most prominent antagonistic forces that threaten to drive lovers apart and oppress the book's otherwise strong and independent female characters. In some cases, cultural barriers also contribute to this dynamic, ultimately making it hard for characters to relate to one another because they come from different backgrounds.
- **Point of View:** The vast majority of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* are written in first-person narration by unidentified speakers. However, these speakers often tell stories about *other* people, meaning that the text sometimes reads as if it's written in the third-person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Total Immersion. While writing the story "Eyes of Zapata," Cisneros was so immersed in her work that Inés—the piece's protagonist—entered her dreams. She even awoke one night thinking that she *was* Inés and that she was having a conversation with Zapata. This conversation later made its way into the story itself.

Reinvention. Like many of her characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* who often seek new lives and new identities, Cisneros moved to Texas (from Illinois) so that she could "disappear into" herself and "reinvent" herself.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," a young girl describes her friend, Lucy, who smells like tortillas and chips and warm bread. One leisurely day, the narrator decides she wants to be as dark-skinned as Lucy, so she sits in the sun and tries to tan. As the day progresses, the two friends wear each other's shoes on their hands and make dolls out of household materials. "We could be sisters, right?" the narrator asks in the last paragraph.

In "Eleven," a girl named Rachel posits that "when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one." On her eleventh birthday, her teacher finds a ratty old sweater in the classroom and tells Rachel that it must be hers. Right before lunch, another classmate remembers that the sweater is hers, but it's too late: forced to wear the sweater, Rachel has already started crying like a three-year-old, wishing all the while she were one hundred and two.

The third story, "Salvador Late or Early," simply describes a boy named Salvador, who has "crooked hair and crooked teeth." The teacher can never pronounce Salvador's name correctly, and the boy has no friends because he's always helping his mother care for his two younger brothers. Noticing how run-down the poor boy seems, the narrator looks on as Salvador walks his brothers home from school, watching as the three boys shrink into the distance and the "bright horizon."

In "Mexican Movies," a child narrator considers the joy of going to the movies with her parents and younger brother, Kiki. When characters undress onscreen, her father gives her and Kiki quarters to use in the lobby, where the siblings delight in a moment of autonomy as they decide how to spend their new money.

In "Barbie-Q," two young girls play with their Barbie dolls, dressing them up and even fashioning a new dress out of a sock. Later, they're overjoyed to find new Barbie characters on sale for low prices at a flea market. The dolls have apparently been damaged in a toy warehouse fire, but the girls don't mind because they're happy just to finally own Barbie's friends.

In "Mericans," a young girl named Micaela waits with her brothers for their "awful grandmother" to emerge from church. While waiting, they encounter a foreign couple who ask them directions in garbled Spanish. When the brother responds in English, the young woman is shocked, saying, "But you speak English!" To this, the brother says, "Yeah, we're Mericans."

The first section, "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," ends with the story "Tepeyac." The narrator of this piece describes visiting his grandfather's store near Tepeyac, a religious destination to which people make pilgrimages. The narrator fetches his grandfather from the store and walks down the familiar streets. He then moves forward in time, skipping ahead to when he returns to Tepeyac years later to find that everything has changed and that he doesn't know anybody.

The second section is called "One Holy Night," which is also the title of the first story. In this piece, an eighth-grader named Ixchel lives with her Mexican grandmother in the United States and falls in love with Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, a man who calls himself Boy Baby and claims to be the descendant of Mayan kings. While selling cucumbers from a pushcart, Ixchel follows Boy Baby into his dirty bedroom behind the auto repair shop where he works. There, he tells her he's destined to have a son who will bring back the "grandeur" of his people. When she leaves, she is no longer a virgin, and she forgets to bring the family pushcart home. She says the pushcart was stolen, but her grandmother doesn't believe her and goes to the auto repair shop only to discover that Boy Baby has fled. Later, Ixchel learns she's pregnant, and her grandmother arranges to have her sent to Mexico. The family later discovers that Boy Baby isn't Mayan and that he has killed eleven girls in the last seven years, hiding all their bodies in what's known as the *Caves of the Hidden Girl*.

In "My Tocaya," a girl named Patricia tells the story of a classmate who has disappeared. This classmate's name is also Patricia, but the narrator critiques her for going by Trish, speaking with a fake English accent, and acting like a "British Marilyn Monroe." She claims she wouldn't normally pay attention to Trish's disappearance, but Trish has been acting as an intermediary between her and Max Lucas Luna Luna, a boy she likes. Right when the narrator starts warming up to Trish—using her for information about Max—Trish goes missing and, later, is found dead in a drainage ditch. Suddenly everybody in school acts like they were Trish's best friend, a fact that annoys the narrator. Three days later, though, Trish appears at the police station. Apparently her parents were so hysterical that they mistakenly thought the corpse was their daughter. "All I'm saying," the narrator writes, "is she couldn't even die right."

Section three, "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman," begins with the story "Woman Hollering Creek," which details Cleófilas's relationship to a man named Juan Pedro. When the couple gets married in Mexico and decides to emigrate to the United States, Cleófilas's father predicts his daughter will soon regret her decision and return home without her new husband. Sure enough, in the United States Juan Pedro proves himself to be slovenly, misogynistic, and abusive. As the passion in their relationship dies, Cleófilas and Juan Pedro have a son. Still, Juan Pedro continues to hit and yell at his wife, and she gets pregnant again. Finally, she tells her nurse during a pregnancy-

related appointment that she's in danger, and the nurse arranges for her friend Felice to retrieve Cleófilas at a gas station the next day and drive her to San Antonio, where she will take a bus to Mexico. When Felice arrives, she's driving a pickup truck, and Cleófilas is astonished by the fact that this woman lives her life however she wants. On the way to the bus station, they drive over Woman Hollering Creek and Felice whoops aloud. By way of explanation, she says, "Did you ever notice how nothing around here is named after a woman?" She then adds that this is why she likes Woman Hollering Creek, saying that a name like that "makes you want to holler like Tarzan."

In "The Marlboro Man," two unidentified speakers have a conversation about the actor who played the Marlboro Man on TV, although because the role has been filled by many people, they often get confused. Still, their conversation revolves around the iconic figure and the various celebrities with whom he consorted.

In "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta," an unnamed narrator describes Carmen, an attractive woman who often catches men's eyes because she has big breasts. While casually dating a man named José, Carmen becomes involved with a famous senator from Texas. Upon finding this out, José tries to kill her, then tries to kill himself. In the end, Carmen elopes with a wrestler, travelling to Helotes, Texas, where the narrator sees her in a bar.

In "Remember the Alamo," a gay dancer whose stage name is Tristán writes about his own act in the third-person. He explains that every Thursday night he puts on a wonderful show, in which he dances with death herself, gloriously twirling her around. It later becomes clear that Tristán is ill, but instead of focusing on his physical decline, he fixates on the kind of love "that is never used to hurt anybody."

In "Never Marry a Mexican," an artist named Clemencia reflects on her long-term affair with her lover, who's married and has a child. Though she hates that he loves his wife, she also feels powerful, asserting that he's "nothing" without her. When his child is a teenager, she sleeps with him, too. Despite her independence, though, she remains conflicted and hurt by the fact that her lover has chosen to spend his life with somebody else. In the wake of her emotion, she watches people on the street, saying, "Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it's all right, honey."

In "Bread," two lovers drive around the city while eating large loaves of bread. The narrator speaks Spanish and her lover speaks Italian, and so they share phrases with one another. As they drive, they look out the window and talk about the city; as he offers his impressions of the passing buildings, the narrator explains her memories of the same buildings. Between larges bites of bread, they give each other kisses.

The story "Eyes of Zapata" is set in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. Inés, the narrator, is in love with Emiliano Zapata, an agrarian revolutionary leader and the father of her children. Though their relationship is passionate and loving, Emiliano leaves Inés for long periods at a time, attending to his duties as a leader while also sleeping with women in other towns. In her telling of the story, Inés develops the ability to lift out of her body like a bird at night and fly above the buildings. While doing this, she sees Emiliano making love to another woman. Apparently he has had children with this woman, who is also his actual wife. Nonetheless, he continues to return to Inés, and eventually takes Nicolás (the son they had together) with him to join the Revolution. At one point, his enemies burn Inés's house, remarking, "Even the stones here are Zapatistas." Even so, Inés goes on loving Emiliano, watching him sleep in her bed and saying, "My sky, my life, my eyes. Let me look at you. Before you open those eyes of yours. The days to come, the days gone by. Before we go back to what we'll always be."

In "Anguiano Religious Articles Rosaries Statues Medals Incense Candles Talismans Perfumes Oils Herbs," the narrator advises readers not to go into the store Anguiano Religious Articles. She claims the owner is a "crab ass" because he once said she should leave because it was clear she wasn't going to buy anything.

"Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is comprised of a group of letters left on religious altars. These letters are written by people who are either thanking various saints or asking them for something. Many of these strangers write about similar topics, such as finding a love partner, escaping illness or death, or achieving financial stability.

In "Los Boxers," a man speaks at a laundromat to an unnamed woman and her small child, though his voice is the only one included on the page. He talks at length about how to do laundry, rambling until finally revealing that everything he knows about washing clothes comes from his wife, who is dead. "Now that she's dead, well, that's just how life is," he says.

In "There Was a Man, There Was Woman," a lonely man goes to the Friendly Spot Bar when he gets paid every other Friday. On the Fridays between his paydays, a lonely woman goes to the same bar. Both of them sit at the bar on their respective nights and hope drinking will awaken the words to describe how they truly feel, but this never happens. Every night, they both go home feeling desperately alone. Before sleep, they stare up at the same moon.

"Tin Tan Tan" appears as a prose poem by a character named Rogelio Velasco, who professes his love to Lupita. The first letter of each stanza is written in large, bold font, making it obvious that Rogelio has spelled out LUPITA.

"Bien Pretty" picks up on "Tin Tan Tan" by providing Lupita's perspective of their love. An artist living in Texas, she meets Rogelio when he comes to exterminate cockroaches for her.

After Rogelio agrees to pose for one of her paintings, the two start dating, but find it difficult to navigate their cultural differences, since he is proud of his Mexican identity while she has embraced the life of a Mexican-American. One day, Rogelio tells her he needs to return to Mexico to address family obligations, and she discovers that he has been married twice and has four children.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lucy Anguiano – A young girl who is friends with the narrator of "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn." As the title makes clear, one of Lucy's most defining traits is that she smells like corn, specifically in the form of "chips" and "tortillas." Lucy is eccentric, but the narrator admires her, impressed by the fact that she dares to eat dog food. The narrator says that Lucy's entire family—which consists of her parents and eight sisters—is dark-skinned. As Lucy and the narrator spend the day together, they play with handmade dolls and tease another little girl, Janey Ortiz, saying, "We're never ever going to be your friend again forever!"

The Lucy Narrator – A girl who describes Lucy Anguiano to readers in "My Lucy Friend Who Smells like Corn." As the narrator talks about her friend, it becomes clear that she covets Lucy, a sentiment confirmed by her assertion that she wants to lie in the sun so that her skin will be as dark as Lucy's. The narrator teases Janey Ortiz and revels in her friendship with Lucy, asking her, "We could be sisters, right?"

Rachel – The narrator of "Eleven." Rachel outlines her theory about growing older, insisting that a younger age can sometimes creep up and take over a person's behavior. This happens to her on her eleventh birthday, when her teacher Mrs. Price maintains that a raggedy old sweater is Rachel's, insisting that she wear it. By the intensity of Rachel's reaction, it's obvious she's embarrassed to be seen in an unflattering piece of clothing, a fact that suggests she's self-conscious about her looks and perhaps also about her socioeconomic standing, since the sweater is old and cheap. When her classmate Sylvia Saldívar corroborates Mrs. Price's theory that the sweater belongs to her, Rachel is incensed and calls Sylvia "stupid." Finally, she puts on the sweater, crying like a three-year-old even though she's eleven. Afterward, Phyllis Lopez—another classmate—admits the sweater actually belongs to her, but at this point Rachel has already embarrassed herself by weeping.

Mrs. Price – A teacher in "Eleven" who thinks that a disgusting old sweater found in her classroom belongs to Rachel. Despite Rachel's protests, she urges the young girl to wear the sweater. This implies that Mrs. Price harbors a certain idea about Rachel and what kind of clothes she can afford to wear. As such, she emerges as a rather judgmental teacher who's quick to jump to conclusions and who fails to sympathize with a student's embarrassment.

Phyllis Lopez – A student in Mrs. Price's class in "Eleven," and the rightful owner of the battered sweater that Rachel detests. Phyllis only realizes (or only cares to admit) that the sweater belongs to her after Rachel has already put it on and started crying. For this, Rachel privately says that Phyllis is "even dumber than Sylvia Saldívar."

Salvador – A young boy with "crooked hair and crooked teeth" in the story "Salvador Late or Early." Salvador's teacher frequently forgets his name, and none of the other children are his friends. Regardless of his social isolation, Salvador has more responsibility than most children because he helps his mother raise his two younger brothers, whom he walks to and from school. Salvador is described as having a small body full of a "history of hurt" and marked by a "geography of scars," but still, he never fails to care for his siblings, ferrying them home and fading away into the "bright horizon" as the sun sets.

The Movies Narrator – The narrator of "Mexican Movies," a boy or girl (the gender remains unidentified in the story) who likes going to the cinema because doing so provides an opportunity to roam the lobby. When the characters onscreen start undressing, the narrator's father gives them and Kiki (a younger brother) a quarter to go spend in the lobby, where the two siblings enjoy the chance to do whatever they want and the freedom to spend their newly earned money.

The Barbie-Q Narrator – The narrator of "Barbie-Q," a young girl who enjoys playing with Barbie dolls with her friend. The narrator and the Barbie-Q narrator's friend each own one Barbie and wish they could afford to buy more so that they could complete their set. As it stands, they create scenarios in which one Barbie steals Ken, the other Barbie's boyfriend, but the girls just imagine the Ken doll because they don't own one. "We don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas," the narrator says. It's worth noting that the narrator's gender is never explicitly revealed throughout "Barbie-Q." The choice to use female gender pronouns in this guide is merely an attempt to avoid confusion, but readers should consider the fact that Cisneros has neglected to assign a gender to some of her characters.

Micaela (Michele) – The narrator of "Mericans." Micaela is a tolerant young girl who puts up with her brothers, Junior and Keeks, as they horseplay outside the church where they're all waiting for their grandmother, whom Micaela refers to as "the awful grandmother." While playing, Micaela's brothers tell her to pretend to be undesirable characters, and she doesn't object because she doesn't want them to exclude her entirely on the grounds that she is a "*girl*," which she says has become their "favorite insult." Finally tiring of her brothers, Micaela goes into the church and kneels beside her grandmother, but she can't sit

still.

Junior – Micaela's older brother in "Mericans," who waits with her and Keeks as their "awful" grandmother prays in church. At the end of the story, a foreign couple approaches Junior and asks in Spanish to take his picture. When he speaks to his siblings, the couple is astounded to hear him speak English. "But you speak English!" they say. In response, he says, "Yeah, we're Mericans."

Keeks – Micaela's younger brother in "Mericans," who is full of energy while he waits with her and Junior for his "awful" grandmother to emerge from church. To pass the time, Keeks pretends he's a fighter plane, running around and pretending to fly as he tells Micaela that she has to pretend to be the enemy German planes. Just when Micaela decides to go along with this, he switches his game, telling her that now he's the Lone Ranger and she is Tonto.

The Awful Grandmother – An old woman who makes her grandchildren Micaela, Junior, and Keeks wait outside while she goes to church (in "Mericans"). Inside, she prays for all of her family members who aren't pious enough, taking the burden upon herself to save their souls. The awful grandmother is very strict, and when Micaela comes inside to escape her brothers, she tells the young girl to go back outside unless she can sit still and properly pray.

The Foreign Couple – Two foreigners who come upon Micaela, Junior, and Keeks as they wait for their "awful" grandmother just outside the church (in "Mericans"). The foreign couple asks Junior if they can take his picture, giving him a piece of gum in return. When he asks his siblings if they too want some gum, the couple is surprised, saying, "But you speak English!"

The Tepeyac Narrator – The narrator of "Tepeyac," an unnamed person who describes the small store his Abuelito (grandfather) owns by the Hill of Tepeyac, a religious destination where it is believed by Catholics that Saint Juan Diego saw an apparition of the **Virgen de Guadalupe** (the Virgin Mary). One evening, the narrator comes to Abuelito's shop and walks the old man home, passing through the familiar streets. The narrator then skips forward in time, describing his experience of returning to Tepeyac years later, when all of the landmarks and people have changed. The narrator proves himself to be a wistful, sentimental person by the fact that he is sadly reminiscent of the times he spent with his Abuelito and Abuelita in Tepeyac.

Ixchel – The protagonist of "One Holy Night," an eighth grade girl who falls in love with an older man who calls himself Boy Baby and claims to be the descendant of Mayan kings. Though her Abuelita (grandmother) is strict and frightening when it comes to Ixchel's love life (perhaps because Ixchel's mother got pregnant when she was young and had to be sent from the United States to Mexico, where Ixchel was born), she stations the family pushcart in front of Esparza & Sons Auto Repair shop, where Boy Baby lives. After selling cucumbers throughout the day, Ixchel accompanies Boy Baby to his back room, where he shows her his collection of guns and tells her that his son is destined for greatness. Ixchel has sex for this first time on this night, and when she returns home, she realizes she left the pushcart at the Auto Repair shop. Hoping to protect both herself and Boy Baby, she lies to Abuelita, saying that the cart was stolen, but Abuelita quickly finds out the truth. Not long thereafter, Ixchel learns she's pregnant, and Abuelita tries to track down Boy Baby, who's nowhere to be found. When Ixchel finally learns the truth about Boy baby—that he isn't Mayan and that he's been arrested for murdering eleven girls—she remains in love. A dark romantic, she explains that (unlike her friends Rachel (One Holy Night) and Lourdes, who have grand ideas about romance) being in love is like a crazy person breathing steadily through a harmonica without trying to play it—the breath simply moves in and out, creating music. Even so, her conception of womanhood and sexuality is grim, as she tells her younger cousins that falling in love is like "a bad joke."

Chaq Uxmal Paloquín ("Boy Baby") – A man in "One Holy Night" who claims to be the descendant of Mayan kings, though this is a lie. Boy Baby seduces Ixchel even though he's 37 and she's only in eighth grade. He even shows her his collection of guns, telling her that he wants her to "understand" what kind of person he is, but this doesn't scare her away. When Abuelita comes looking for him after he impregnates Ixchel, he's nowhere to be found. Later, he's arrested for having killed eleven girls in the past seven years and putting them in caves known as the Caves of the Hidden Girl.

Abuelita – Ixchel's strict grandmother in "One Holy Night." Abuelita blames her son, Uncle Lalo, for Ixchel's pregnancy, since Uncle Lalo should be the one working the family pushcart, not young Ixchel. Abuelita is protective of her granddaughter, most likely because she has seen what can happen when teenagers misbehave—indeed, her own daughter (Ixchel's mother) got pregnant at an early age and was sent to Mexico in order to hide from neighbors. Now, though, Abuelita finds herself dealing with the same problem on the other side of the border, and she's forced to send Ixchel *back* to the United States to once again save face from shame and humiliation in front of neighbors. Even when Abuelita is most furious with Ixchel about her relationship with Boy Baby, she shows a certain tenderness, often sitting side by side with her granddaughter and teaching her to knit when the young girl must be taken out of school.

Patricia (the Tocaya narrator) – The narrator of "My Tocaya," who shares the same name as Patricia Bernadette Benavídez, or "Trish." Highly critical of Trish, the narrator is prone to making callous remarks, even daring to say that she wouldn't care very much about Trish's disappearance if it weren't for the fact that Trish serves as her only line of communication with

her crush, Max Lucas Luna Luna. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the narrator is jealous of the large reaction Trish elicits from the entire school when everybody thinks she's dead. When Trish finally turns up at the police station, the narrator snidely remarks, "she couldn't even die right."

Patricia Bernadette Benavídez (Trish) – A girl in "My Tocaya" who has skipped several grades in school and works for her father at Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2. Trish wears "glitter high heels" to school, a choice the Tocaya narrator critiques by saying that anybody who styles herself in this manner is "destined for trouble." She also speaks in a "breathless and sexy" fake voice like "a British Marilyn Monroe." When she goes missing, the narrator guesses that she ran away from home, perhaps to escape her abusive father. In her absence, everybody (except the narrator) says nice things about her, even if they hardly know her. The narrator, for her part, only cares about Trish's absence because Trish was in the middle of setting her up with Max Lucas Luna Luna. After Trish is declared dead, she wanders into the police station, relieving everybody but the narrator, who jokes that she doesn't even know how to "die right."

Max Lucas Luna Luna – Trish's neighbor in "My Tocaya." Max is friends with Ralphie Benavídez, Trish's brother, and develops a crush on the narrator. As a result, Trish acts as an intermediary between the Tocaya narrator and Max, delivering messages for them before finally going missing. In the end, the narrator never winds up spending time with Max.

Trish's Father – The owner of Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2, where he employs Trish, his daughter, in "My Tocaya." The Tocaya narrator states that Trish's father used to beat her brother—who quit his job at the taco restaurant because of this—and suggests that he may have done the same thing to Trish before she ran away.

Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández – The protagonist of "Woman Hollering Creek," a woman who marries Juan Pedro and moves with him from Mexico to the United States despite her father's misgivings. Cleófilas yearns for passion, but when she starts her new life in America, she realizes she's married an abusive, slovenly man prone to drinking and abuse. Still, she and Juan Pedro have a child, Juan Pedrito, and she tries to endure her sorrow. Feeling alone in Texas, she misses the *telenovelas* she used to watch in Mexico, and even tries to peer through the windows into her neighbor's house to watch the episodes. When she gets pregnant a second time, Cléofilas makes arrangements to secretly leave Juan Pedro, planning to return to Mexico. When Felice, the nurse who helps her escape, collects her and Juan Pedrito in a pickup truck, Cléofilas is astounded by the woman's autonomy and free spirit, delighting in the power of this independent woman helping her regain her agency and life.

Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez – Cléofilas's husband in "Woman Hollering Creek." Juan Pedro is a heavy drinker and an abusive husband, though Cleófilas strives to see the positive in him. Despite her efforts, though, he proves himself to be unworthy of her love—as a result, he loses his wife, his son Juan Pedrito, and the baby the couple is about to have.

Don Serafín – Cléofilas's father in "Woman Hollering Creek," who immediately intuits that her marriage to Juan Pedro will only end in despair. When Juan Pedro asks Don Serafín for his daughter's hand, he predicts that Cleófilas will soon return to Mexico wishing she'd never left with this man. As she leaves, Don Serafín looks her in the eye and tells her, "I am your father, I will never abandon you."

Graciela – A nurse or doctor (her title is never specified) in "Woman Hollering Creek" who sees Cleófilas for a pregnancy checkup. During this appointment, she sees Cleófilas's many bruises—left on her body by Juan Pedro—and hatches a plan to help her escape, slipping into another room and calling one of her colleagues, Felice. On the phone, she arranges for Felice to pick Cleófilas and Juan Pedrito up the following Thursday at a Cash N Carry, explaining that she only needs to drive the mother and son to San Antonio, where they will board a bus bound for Mexico. "When her kid's born she'll have to name her after us, right?" she jokes with Felice.

Felice – Graciela's colleague in "Woman Hollering Creek," and the woman who drives Cleófilas and Juan Pedrito safely to San Antonio so that they can board a bus bound for Mexico and thereby escape the abusive Juan Pedro. Felice is a free spirit and independent woman who drives a pickup truck and uses vulgar words like *viega*, calling smaller calls "pussy cars." When she drives over Woman Hollering Creek, she lets out a loud yell and explains that she does that whenever she crosses the river, since it is the only landmark in the area named after a woman. "Makes you want to holler like Tarzan," she says.

Soledad – One of Cleófilas's elderly neighbors in "Woman Hollering Creek." Soledad calls herself a widow, but nobody is sure whether her husband is absent because he died or because he ran away with an "ice-house floozie." Soledad, for her part, never mentions his name. Sometimes, when Juan Pedro is out, Cleófilas peers through Soledad's window to watch the *telenovelas*.

Dolores – One of Cleófilas's elderly neighbors in "Woman Hollering Creek." Dolores is a widow and burns too much incense on the little religious altars she has set up around her house, which she has constructed to commemorate the memory of her sons (who both died at war) and her husband (who died of grief).

The First Speaker – An unidentified person of unspecified gender in "The Marlboro Man," who speaks with her friend (the second speaker) about the Marlboro Man, upholding that her other friend, Romelia, used to live with the man. At the end of the conversation, this speaker admits that she might be

thinking of the wrong actor, but nonetheless clearly wants to keep talking about this man who used to live with Romelia. This casual attitude suggests that she wants, above all, to simply chat with her friend; the details of their conversation don't matter as long as they are talking.

The Second Speaker – An unidentified person of unspecified gender in "The Marlboro Man," who speaks with her friend, the first speaker, about the Marlboro Man. The second speaker tells her friend about how she saw a special on *60 Minutes* about the Marlboro Man, who she claims died of AIDS. Like the first speaker, it is apparent that this person is primarily interested in talking, regardless of the subject, though her interest in the Marlboro Man is a bit more specific, since she reveals that she used to dream that he'd be "the father of [her] children."

Romelia – A friend of the first speaker in "The Marlboro Man." Romelia used to live with a man the first speaker claims was the Marlboro Man, though at the end of the conversation it becomes clear that this is likely inaccurate. Nonetheless, the man Romelia lived with was gay and lived wildly, often taking his clothes off in public—a fact that entertains the two speakers in their rambling conversation.

The Fabulosa Narrator – The narrator of "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta," an unnamed person of unspecified gender who tells the story of Carmen Berriozábal. At the end of the piece, the narrator mentions that she saw Carmen recently in Helotes, Texas. "Hell," she writes, "she bought us a beer, two-stepped and twirled away […]."

Carmen Berriozábal – A woman in "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta" who likes to call herself "Spanish" even though she's from Laredo, Texas. Because Carmen has very large breasts, men rarely make eye contact when talking to her, preferring to lustfully stare at her chest. Though this is unfortunate, Carmen has found ways to subvert this kind of misogyny, turning the power she has over men into personal agency. When a famous senator named Camilo Escamilla takes an interest in her, she doesn't hesitate to leave behind her "sometimes boyfriend" José, who goes crazy with jealousy and tries to kill her, then tries to kill himself. In the end, Carmen winds up running away with a professional wrestler named King Kong Cárdenas. Despite José's violence and this whirlwind of love triangles, Carmen seems to be doing well these days, as evidenced by the fact that she buys the narrator a drink in Helotes, Texas and spends the night dancing.

José – A handsome young corporal in "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta" who dates Carmen in San Antonio, even though he has a high school sweetheart waiting for him in his hometown. José reveals himself as a hypocrite by going crazy when Carmen starts seeing another man, the famous Texan senator Camilo Escamilla. Crazed, he tries to kill her, and when this is unsuccessful, he tries to kill himself. At this point, the Fabulosa narrator admits that what she knows is mainly gossip—according to José's friends, he succeeds in carving his initials into Carmen's breasts. According to others, though, he goes "AWOL" and becomes a bullfighter in Mexico, "just so he [can] die like a man."

Camilo Escamilla (The Texas Senator) – A famous Texan senator who dates Carmen in "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta." Camilo pays for Carmen to stay in an expensive condominium, and when José tries to kill her, he makes sure the newspapers don't report about the scandal. Carmen eventually leaves Camilo for a wrestler named King Kong Cárdenas.

Rudy (Tristán) – The narrator of "Remember the Alamo," a dancer and performer whose stage name is Tristán. Initially, Rudy uses first-person narration, but he quickly slips into third-person narration to describe Tristán's act to readers. This is because when he performs, Rudy is no longer Rudy, but Tristán, a fantastic dancer who mesmerizes crowds with flamenco, salsa, tango, fandango, merengue, cumbia, or the cha-cha-chá. Throughout the story, it slowly becomes clear that Tristán is a gay man and that he's terminally ill, which he hints at by writing about dancing with Death herself. Despite his family's homophobia, they accept him for who he is and even brag about his artistic accomplishments. Still, Tristán must face bigotry when he goes to bars and men come up to him and ask him if he is a "fag." Above all, Tristán just wants to be accepted by the people watching him dance, and he embraces Death because she wants him so badly; indeed, he's obsessed with finding a love that "is never used to hurt anybody" and "never ashamed," a love that can "create a universe where nothing is dirty, no one is hurting, no one sick."

Clemencia – The protagonist of "Never Marry a Mexican," a woman whose Mexican-American mother tells her to never marry a Mexican man. Clemencia takes this advice to heart, even declaring that she'll never marry *any* man because she has "witnessed their infidelities." Instead, she has made peace with the fact that she is somebody who steals other women's husbands, as she does by falling in love with Drew. Indeed, Clemencia's relationship with Drew is long and complicated, beginning even before Drew and his wife Megan have a son together—and when this son is born, Clemencia makes sure that Drew isn't by his wife's side in the hospital, but rather at home having sex with her (Clemencia). When Drew's son is old enough, Clemencia takes him under her wing and begins sleeping with him too. And though she is strong and independent—upholding that Drew is "nothing" without her—she can't help but feel jealous and hurt when she imagines Drew lying next to Megan in bed. In response to this pain, she turns her attention outward, watching people pass her on the street and feeling that "all humanity" is "lovely."

Drew – Clemencia's lover in "Never Marry a Mexican." Drew is a white man with a wife named Megan, with whom he has a son. Nonetheless, Drew can't keep himself away from Clemencia,

who takes pride in being able to draw him from his wife. When they make love together, Drew speaks Spanish into Clemencia's ear, intimately using her language in moments of great passion. Despite his strong feelings for her, though, he always goes back to Megan. He tries to explain to Clemencia that he could never possibly marry her, but this only infuriates her, casting him as heartless and cold.

Megan – Drew's wife in "Never Marry a Mexican," and the mother of his son. When Megan runs into Clemencia for the first time in an art gallery, Drew introduces them by saying, "*This* is Megan" (a statement that deeply wounds Clemencia). In another scene, Clemencia calls Drew late at night and Megan answers the phone so politely that all Clemencia can do is laugh at the fact that this woman is so proper and oblivious to her husband's philandering.

Clemencia's Mother – A Mexican-American woman in "Never Marry a Mexican" who warns Clemencia against ever marrying a Mexican man. She herself married a Mexican man at a young age, and when he died, she married a white man who already had kids. Clemencia and her sister Ximena hold this against their mother, who tries to justify her actions by saying that she married so young that she never got to experience young love.

The Bread Narrator – The narrator of "Bread," a woman who drives around with her Italian lover one day, enjoying his company and sharing large loaves of bread with him with him while winding through the city. The narrator is a sentimental person who appreciates the small things in life, like spending time with a lover on a care-free afternoon.

Inés Alfaro – The narrator or "Eyes of Zapata." Inés is in love with Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the Mexican Revolution with whom she has two children, Nicolás and Malena. As she watches Emiliano sleep on one of his rare visits (they aren't married), she lets her mind wander through her past and future, revealing her history with Zapata as well as what the lives of her children will look like in the years to come. At one point, Inés refers to herself as a "witch," though she seems to be borrowing this word from people who have clearly used it to insult her. Nonetheless, it's true that her mother taught her long ago how to lift above the earth and observe things happening far away. This, apparently, is a skill all of the women in her family have always had, and she herself passes it on to her daughter, Malena. In addition to describing Emiliano's infidelity—which she once witnessed by lifting out of her body and watching him sleep next to his true wife, María Josefa—Inés also describes her father's distrust of Emiliano, the failing war effort, and the intensity of her love for the man sleeping next to her. A tragic character, Inés is bound by love to an emotionally inaccessible man.

Emiliano Zapata – A historical leader of the Mexican Revolution, and a character in "Eyes of Zapata." Emiliano Zapata believed that farmers and other peasants had the right to own and rule the land, and he fought against many of Mexico's most powerful leaders, ultimately establishing a following devoted to promoting the agrarian concept that the social system ought to center around farming. In Cisneros's story, Emiliano is a freewheeling figure who keeps multiple lovers at once. Although he is married to María Josefa, he also loves Inés, with whom he has two children, Nicolás and Malena. The nature of his devotion to Inés is unclear, but it's obvious that she means something to him, as he cares deeply about Nicolás, whom he takes with him to battle—he returns the boy to Inés almost immediately, after a violent experience puts Nicolás in harm's way. Despite this obvious affection, Emiliano refuses to talk to Inés about their relationship, avoiding all discussions that might define their love.

Remigio Alfaro – Inés's father in "Eyes of Zapata," who dislikes Emiliano because of his renegade politics and revolutionary character. Inés thinks that Remigio and Emiliano are such "perfect enemies" because they're so similar to one another. The only difference, she says, is that Remigio isn't a good fighter, a fact made obvious by how badly he gets injured in battle. He eventually dies with a hole in his back that sucks air in and out like a mouth. On his deathbed, he calls out his wife's name, the syllables of which issue forth from the strange hole in his back.

The Anguiano Narrator – The narrator of "Anguiano Religious Articles Rosaries Statues Medals Incense Candles Talismans Perfumes Oils Herbs," a woman hoping to buy a statue or holographic picture of the **Virgen de Guadalupe** from a religious store. The narrator recalls her frustration when Aguiano, the owner of the store, insults her by suggesting that she won't have enough money to buy anything. This upsets her, as she was already self-conscious of her appearance when he looked her up and down as if she might rob him.

The Girl Who Cut Her Hair – A girl in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" who writes a letter to the **Virgen de Guadalupe** and leaves it on an altar. Thanking the Virgen for helping her avoid a pregnancy, she describes her transformation away from atheism, a process that took place once she realized that the Virgen—as well as her own mother and grandmother—was a strong, independent woman.

The Boxers Narrator – The narrator of "Los Boxers," a man who talks to a woman and her child in a Laundromat. The narrator is good-natured but lonely and prone to rambling. Fond of mentioning his dead wife, he seizes the opportunity to chat with somebody who will listen to him, even if this person is a stranger just trying to do her laundry.

A Man – A character in "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman," an unnamed man who goes to the Friendly Spot Bar every payday and drinks with the hopes of summoning the words to describe how he feels. Lonely and sad, he goes home and looks at the moon, thinking about how many people have

stared at the same glowing orb and felt the same kind of sadness.

A Woman – A character in "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman," an unnamed woman who goes to the Friendly Spot Bar every payday and drinks with the hopes of summoning the words to describe how she feels. Unfortunately, this woman's paydays don't align with the lonely man's paydays, and so she—like him—goes home lonesome and depressed, looking up at the moon and weeping.

Flavio Munguía Galindo ("Rogelio Velasco") – A character in "Tin Tan Tan" and "Bien Pretty." A Mexican man living in Texas, Flavio writes poems using the pen name "Rogelio Velasco." Proud of his Mexican heritage, he disparages his girlfriend Lupita for her inauthentic attempts to assume a Mexican identity with which she's unfamiliar. Although he treats her well in the beginning and shows great passion for their love in his poetry, he is actually rather self-centered, as evidenced by the fact that he fails to tell Lupita that he has seven children and two ex-wives in Mexico. Without paying any heed to how it might make her feel, he casually tells her one day that he has to return to Mexico to tend to "family obligations."

Lupita – A character in "Tin Tan Tan" and "Bien Pretty," an American woman of Mexican heritage who moves from Northern California to Texas to work as an art director. Lupita is interested in New Age spirituality and wants badly to be seen as Mexican. Unfortunately, her Mexican identity seems to pale in comparison to her boyfriend Flavio's, a fact that enrages her while perhaps also drawing her to him all the more. When Flavio turns out to be insensitive and callous, Lupita spends hours at a time watching *telenovelas* as a way of escaping from the world. It isn't until after a conversation with a cashier at a Mexican supermarket—in which the cashier calls her shawl pretty—that she's able to accept her heartache and start to move on with her life.

The Cashier – A woman who works at a Mexican supermarket in "Bien Pretty." Roughly the same age as Lupita, the cashier looks much older despite her makeup. After telling Lupita that she likes her shawl, the two women discuss the upcoming episode of a *telenovela* they both love. With her *telenovela* obsession, the cashier represents to Lupita what it might look like to continue along the path she's on—a path that consists of watching TV every night and neglecting to pay attention to the outside world.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Janey Ortiz – A girl whom Lucy and the Lucy narrator tease in "My Lucy Friend Who Smells like Corn." Janey lives nearby, and the two other girls make a special trip to her house just to taunt her by saying that they'll never be her friend again.

Sylvia Saldívar – A student in Mrs. Price's class who claims a ratty old sweater belongs to Rachel (in the story "Eleven"). Because of this assertion, Rachel privately refers to Sylvia as "stupid."

Kiki – The Movies narrator's younger brother in "Mexican Movies." Kiki is rambunctious and enjoys running up and down the halls of the cinema, throwing popcorn into the air and buying treats in the lobby during sexually explicit scenes.

The Barbie-Q Narrator's Friend – A young girl who plays with the Barbie-Q narrator and shares her interest in Barbie dolls. Like the narrator, the narrator's friend is never actually assigned a gender in the story.

Abuelito – The "Tepeyac" narrator's grandfather, who owns a store in Tepeyac.

Abuela – The "Tepeyac" narrator's grandmother, who lives with Abuelito in an apartment the narrator visits many years later only to discover he doesn't know the people living inside anymore.

Uncle Lalo – Ixchel's uncle and Abuelita's son in "One Holy Night." Abuelita blames Uncle Lalo for Ixchel's pregnancy, arguing that such a thing never would have happened if he were working the cucumber pushcart like he's supposed to, instead of coming home late and letting his niece shoulder the responsibility.

Rachel (One Holy Night) – Ixchel's friend in "One Holy Night," and one of only two people—along with Lourdes—who knows about her pregnancy. Rachel tells Ixchel that love is like somebody pushing a piano from the top of a building and asking another person to catch it.

Lourdes – Ixchel's friend, and one of only two people—along with Rachel—who knows about her pregnancy. Lourdes upholds that love is like a top that is spinning so fast that its colors blend together to create a "white hum."

Delfina Benavídez – Trish's mother in "My Tocaya," who puts a message in the paper when Trish goes missing: "Honey, call Mommy y te quiero mucho" (Honey, call Mommy and I love you so much).

Ralphie Benavídez – Trish's brother in "My Tocaya," who works at Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2 until quitting because his father beats him. Ralphie is friends with Max Lucas Luna Luna, which is why Trish knows that Max has a crush on the Tocaya narrator.

Juan Pedrito – Cleófilas and Juan Pedro's son in "Woman Hollering Creek," who is born in Texas. Juan Pedrito travels with his mother from Texas to Mexico as they escape his abusive father.

King Kong Cárdenas – A professional wrestler in "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta" who the Fabulosa narrator describes as a "sweetie." Carmen runs off with King Kong, escaping both José and Camilo Escamilla.

Drew's Son – Drew's son in "Never Marry a Mexican," a boy

whose name is never mentioned. When he's a senior in high school, Drew's son sleeps with Clemencia.

Clemencia's Father – A Mexican man in "Never Marry a Mexican" who married Clemencia's mother when she was only 17. When Clemencia's father dies, she is extremely upset and can't forgive her mother for quickly running off with a new lover.

Ximena – Clemencia's sister in "Never Marry a Mexican," with whom she lives when she first leaves home.

The Bread Narrator's Italian Lover – An Italian man in "Bread" who passes the day eating bread and laughing with the Bread narrator. The narrator's lover teaches her phrases in Italian and talks about the buildings as they pass outside the car's window.

Nicolás – Inés and Emiliano's son in "Eyes of Zapata." When Nicolás loses his first tooth, his father fetches him and brings him to battle, only to bring him back to Inés after a close call that puts his life in danger.

Malena – Inés and Emiliano's daughter in "Eyes of Zapata." Like all the women in Inés's family, Malena has special powers that allow her to see things other people are unable to see—this is a skill Inés teaches her daughter, just as Inés's mother taught her.

Inés's Mother – A character in "Eyes of Zapata," a woman who is raped and killed by her neighbors after Inés—her daughter—causes a hailstorm as a child that ruins the town's crops. In one of her visions, Inés sees her mother's eyes as they fix upon the sky during her terrible death.

Tía Chucha – Inés's aunt in "Eyes of Zapata." When Inés's mother dies, Remigio takes her go to live with Tía Chucha, who slowly takes on the role of Inés's mother.

María Josefa – Emiliano's true wife in "Eyes of Zapata." Though María has two children with Emiliano, they both die before ceasing to breastfeed. During one of her flights through the night sky, Inés sees María Josefa and Emiliano sleeping side by side—an image that strikes her to her core.

Anguiano – The owner of Anguiano Religious Articles, a store that sells relics and statues of various saints. Anguiano is a "crab ass" who insults the Anguiano narrator by suggesting that she doesn't have enough money to buy anything in his store.

Beatriz Soliz – Lupita's best friend in "Bien Pretty," who lives in California and thinks Lupita is crazy for moving to Texas, where she insists people still lynch Mexicans.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE, THE JOY OF LIFE, & INTERCONNECTION

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros is interested in exploring how romance can inspire characters to appreciate the joy of being alive. Of course, this recognition doesn't always arise from completely positive situations. In fact, messy, discordant, and heartrending relationships often encourage Cisneros's characters to reexamine their circumstances, ultimately opening their eyes to the world and realizing that all of humanity experiences love. By doing this, they gain a sense of interconnectedness, coming together in their acknowledgement that love is part of the human condition. And because so many of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* are about lust, infidelity, marriage, or motherhood, readers are able to see that love is a varied but common thread that runs throughout human life, something that discretely connects characters even if they exist in separate stories. As such, love is cast as something that leads to joy and connection.

Mining humanity's general sense of interconnectedness, Cisneros's protagonists frequently look beyond themselves after experiencing intense romantic moments (whether these moments are good or bad), proving that love encourages people to turn outward. For example, Clemencia, the narrator of "Never Marry a Mexican" is jealous of her lover's wife. Hurt by the flawed romantic relationship she's so involved in, she writes: "And now you're probably [...] going back to sleep, with that wife beside you, warm, radiating her own heat, alive under the flannel and down and smelling a bit like milk and hand cream, and that smell familiar and dear to you, oh." Overcome by this image of her lover with his wife, she projects herself outward, saying, "Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it's all right, honey. There, there, there." In this moment, the narrator chooses to address her love-related pain by comforting *other* people, telling strangers that "it's all right." Instead of wallowing in her sorrows, she appreciates the joy of life and the beauty of sharing it with others, saying, "Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely." What's more, one might argue that she is—in a way—speaking to the characters in the book's other short stories, characters whose lives resonate "as if they were guitars," ultimately adding to her own story by existing harmoniously alongside it.

As the many stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* work together to create a sense of unity and to foster an appreciation of everyday life, Cisneros demonstrates that even failed love and suffering can in some ways be joyous. More than anything, these are mood pieces that plunge readers into the human condition, and this results in a kind of mindfulness that sometimes grows not out of happiness, but out of passion or

even brutality. After all, as Cleófilas of the story "Woman Hollering Creek" puts it, "to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end." It is this "sweet" "pain" that Cisneros implies connects "all humanity," and this is perhaps what the author Ann Beattie means when she says that the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* are about "how and why we mythologize love." Indeed, by telling story after story about romance, Cisneros connects her readers, holding up the experience of love and turning it into a common tale everybody can share.

FEMALE OBJECTIFICATION & POWER

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, female characters both accept and push back against how men treat them. Sometimes they acquiesce to gendered expectations, but more often than not they find ways to subvert negative treatment and disingenuous attention, leveraging misogyny to gain power. For many of these women, this means embracing and even accentuating their own sexual attractiveness and, in doing so, reclaiming control over an otherwise imbalanced relationship. By highlighting this process, Cisneros suggests that being a woman in a patriarchal society often requires finding creative ways to navigate (and upend) the idea of male dominance.

The women in *Woman Hollering Creek* often find themselves at the center a man's attention. Unfortunately, though, this attention isn't always very genuine—in moments of lustful attraction, the male gaze becomes overwhelming and inescapable, a kind of attention that lacks authenticity. In "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta," the narrator introduces readers to a woman named Carmen, writing, "Big *chichis*. I mean big. Men couldn't take their eyes off them. She couldn't help it, really. Anytime they talked to her they never looked her in the eye. It was kind of sad." The fact that men are so singularly interested in Carmen's large breasts colors the way they treat her, as they completely ignore her and focus only on one of her traits (and a rather superficial one, at that).

However, Cisneros suggests that this doesn't necessarily have to bear completely negative consequences, since Carmen can leverage men's otherwise unfortunately lustful attention. Indeed, the narrator of "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operretta" confirms this in a passage about Carmen's single-minded boyfriend José, saying, "Yeah, sure, he was her sometime sweetheart, but what's that to a woman who's twenty and got the world by the eggs. First chance, she took up with a famous Texas senator who was paving his way to the big house. Set her up in a fancy condo in north Austin." In this passage, the narrator upholds that, though men objectify and thereby demean Carmen, she actually draws power from the very same circumstances working against her personal agency in the first place. And regardless of the good or bad that comes from this dynamic, Cisneros implies that navigating unsavory male attention is all too often part of being a woman. So while the women in these stories can't seem to escape male chauvinism, they can sometimes subvert it and use it to their advantage.

Another illustrative example of the role female power and independence play in *Woman Hollering Creek* appears in "Never Marry a Mexican." In this story, the narrator, Clemencia, writes the following about her married lover, Drew: "You're nothing without me. I created you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to." The fact that she says Drew is "nothing without [her]" indicates that she's far from willing to be seen as somebody whose agency can be ignored—indeed, it is *his* identity that depends on *her*, and not the other way around. She solidifies her power two sentences later, when she asserts that she can "snuff" him between her "finger[s]" if she ever "want[s] to." Out of this mentality arises a sense of romantic agency all too often ascribed only to men, a sense that it's up to Clemencia whether or not this relationship will proceed. Of course, it's worth noting that she only feels empowered insofar as she has the opportunity to take her lover away from his wife. The idea of ownership, then, becomes highly tenuous, and it's difficult to determine whether Clemencia really has as much control over Drew as she thinks. Nonetheless, her pride and sexual influence shows that she's capable of using her lover's lustful attention to her own benefit. She therefore transforms the male gaze—which otherwise threatens to rob women of their personal agency—into power.

By creating dynamic female characters like Carmen and Clemencia, Cisneros offers readers examples of women who manipulate the patriarchal system in which they live. In doing so, these women are able to gain independence and strength against oppressive men and an oppressive society. Beginning with the small wonders and insecurities of girlhood and moving all the way through the complexities of womanhood, Cisneros looks at what femininity means in a multitude of contexts and how each woman's situation might require her to act differently in order to retain a sense of personal agency, power, and independence.

CULTURAL & NATIONAL IDENTITY

Though the characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* have cultural identities that follow them throughout their lives, Cisneros portrays identity itself as flexible and mutable. Indeed, many of her characters are from Mexico but have lived in the United States for long periods of time, an experience that can influence their original sense of home and self. Above all, Cisneros is interested in what happens when cultures come together, and she examines the intersection between Mexicans, Americans, and Mexican-Americans in order to show the difficulties and possibilities of negotiating identity.

In some stories, overcoming cultural barriers is an easy and

rewarding process, like when the protagonist of "Bread" recounts a happy day spent with a foreign lover; "The whole car smelled of bread. Big sourdough loaves shaped like a fat ass. Fat-ass bread, I said in Spanish, *Nalgona* bread. Fat-ass bread, he said in Italian [...]." This cross-cultural union shows how different people can merge their lives to create new perspectives—as this couple drives around literally breaking bread and sharing their native languages, they look at the city passing them by and form a composite view; "Driving down streets with buildings that remind him, he says, how charming this city is. And me remembering when I was little, a cousin's baby who died from swallowing rat poison in a building like these. That's just how it is. And that's how we drove. With all his new city memories and all my old." This, Cisneros implies, is the unexpected and joyous alchemy that can come from adopting cross-cultural open-mindedness.

Sometimes, though, it can be difficult to mingle two different cultures to create new perspectives or composite identities. For example, when Lupita, the Mexican-American narrator of "Bien Pretty," falls in love with Flavio—a man born in Mexico who's often troubled by her Americanized ways—the couple cannot ignore their cultural differences, even if these differences are slight. In this story, Cisneros examines the idea of purity of cultural identity, as Flavio is a man fully committed to not allowing the United States, where he lives, to change his Mexican identity. Lupita, on the other hand, has lived in the States for a long time and she can't relate to Flavio's fully-Mexican identity. When in passing Flavio uses the phrase "you Americans" to refer to her, she is offended that he so easily ignores her Mexican heritage, "lump[ing]" her into a group of Americans. After an argument about Mexican authenticity, she writes, "I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican." Unlike the couple in "Bread," who embrace the multicultural nature of their relationship, Lupita and Flavio feel they must carefully navigate their differences, pointing out to one another how they aren't the same. When Flavio leaves Lupita to return to Mexico, then, readers intuit that an inability to view identity as adaptable can ultimately lead to unsuccessful relationships.

It's worth mentioning that the notion of national identity usually surfaces in *Woman Hollering Creek* when characters ponder how they've been influenced by emigration. However, national identity also plays a specific role in stories like "Eyes of Zapata," a piece that considers politics in order to examine what it means to be Mexican. Because the narrator, Inés, is in love with Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the Mexican Revolution (and a nonfictional character), she finds herself aligned with his agrarian idea that Mexico should belong to peasants and farmers. Due to her affiliation with Zapata, she is eventually driven out of town, ultimately thrown headlong into an argument about who deserves to prosper in Mexico. By highlighting the discord of the Mexican Revolution, Cisneros ultimately proves that even people from the same country can have different ideas about national identity. Once again, then, she advocates for open-mindedness, showing that adopting a flexible mindset when it comes to identity is beneficial not only in moments of cross-cultural misunderstanding, but also in times of national disagreement.

LOSS, LONGING, & GRIEF

The stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* often center around loss, but the nature of this loss varies greatly. Some characters pine over having lost control of a loved one due to infidelity. Others feel an acute loss of culture after having moved from Mexico to the United States. When faced with these feelings, many turn to religion with high expectations, hoping God or a saint will help them regain what they've lost or perhaps even obtain what they've never had. These kinds of desires appear with such frequency in these stories that it seems Cisneros believes longing—for happiness, for romance, for stability—is inherently, unavoidably human. And rather than condemning her characters' bottomless desires, she allows prayers and requests and private wishes to proliferate throughout each story, subsequently underlining the fact that such yearnings are natural and are themselves part of being alive.

Lost love is common in *Woman Hollering Creek*, and in many cases it's treated as ordinary. In "Los Boxers," a man rants about the best way to do laundry before finally divulging, at the end of the story, that he owes all his knowledge to his dead wife. This man's conflation of his wife's death with an everyday activity like doing laundry illustrates the extent to which loss works its way into and through human life—after all, the poor narrator can't even talk about washing his clothes without evoking his loss. While this sounds sad, he retains a healthy levelheadedness, ending his story by plainly stating the facts: "[...] now that she's dead, well, that's just how life is." His acceptance of reality reminds readers that it's possible for somebody to miss a loved one while also going about his day, living his life *alongside* the grief rather than in spite of it.

However, in some stories, Cisneros' characters cannot cope with their grief. In "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," for example, characters leave letters on religious altars, the majority of which are asking Jesus, God, or a Saint for intervention into their sorrow. Many of these letter-writers seem to have come to the altar in the wake of personal loss, whether financial, health-related, or love-related. In contrast to the widower's sad but realistic acceptance of his wife's death in "Los Boxers," the characters in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" are unwilling or unable to embrace the idea of loss as natural, instead praying for divine intervention to lessen their suffering. This struggle ultimately emphasizes how intensely some people long to be happy and how desperate they are to remedy any kind of loss

they've experienced. Whether her characters rage against loss and suffering or accept that sadness is intertwined with ordinary life, Cisneros shows that there isn't simply one way to deal with grief and loss, though the experience of suffering is common to all.

COMING OF AGE

Many of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* portray growing up as a process full of contradiction and uncertainty. The children in these pages are striving to understand many things at once: social class, sexuality, cultural and national identity, religion, and attraction. Often times they ignore the complexity of things they don't completely understand, as is the case when—for example—the narrator of "Mexican Movies" says that she *enjoys* being told to leave the movie theater when the characters onscreen undress, since this means she can go buy candy in the lobby. What's interesting is that this simplistic mindset (in which nudity is ignored in favor of a more innocent pleasure) is actually complex in its own way. Indeed, the narrator of "Mexican Movies" enjoys being treated like a kid precisely because it enables her to go to the lobby without her parents, thereby granting her adult autonomy. So while she may not fully understand the implications of why she's being asked to leave, she *does* understand the grown-up freedom the experience enables her to have. As such, naivety turns into a form of maturity. This happens throughout the collection in a variety of different ways, such as when the narrator of "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn" is jealous that Lucy gets to sleep in one bed with all of her sisters. On the one hand, the narrator naively fails to grasp that this is an indication that Lucy's family is financially strained. On the other hand, she proves herself capable of experiencing the very adult feeling of loneliness. Children and teenagers alike undergo similar moments throughout *Woman Hollering Creek*, navigating the world with partial understandings of complex concepts. In turn, these partial understandings frequently lead to self-awareness and maturity, proving that coming of age is a complex process that actually depends upon a child's capacity to comfortably exist in uncertainty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE

La Virgen de Guadalupe, otherwise known as the Virgin Mary, appears in many of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*. These appearances are often brief and secondary to the story's action, but because the image of the Virgin is fraught with cultural significance, these moments function rather symbolically. Indeed, *Woman Hollering Creek* is a book that grapples with femininity and power, two things the Virgin Mary embodies because of the vital role she played in nearly every religion still practiced today. Having given birth to Jesus via immaculate conception, she is the epitome of single-motherhood and womanly independence. For young women like the girl who cut her hair in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," Mary represents a woman who has managed on her own—a significant thing, considering that this girl has recently been under the impression that she was pregnant. The Virgin, then, is a role model of sorts for independent women facing hardships, and her presence throughout the collection is a constant reminder of Cisneros's focus on how women can still triumph even in trying times.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage Books edition of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* published in 1991.

My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn Quotes

I'm sitting in the sun even though it's the hottest part of the day, the part that makes the streets dizzy, when the heat makes a little hat on the top of your head and bakes the dust and weed grass and sweat up good, all steamy and smelling like sweet corn.

I want to rub heads and sleep in a bed with little sisters, some at the top and some at the feets. I think it would be fun to sleep with sisters you could yell at one at a time or all together, instead of alone on the fold-out chair in the living room.

Related Characters: The Lucy Narrator (speaker), Lucy Anguiano

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator lounges in the street, she exalts Lucy's family, expressing to readers a certain jealousy of the fact that her friend gets to "sleep in a bed with little sisters." This is appealing to the narrator because she herself has to sleep "alone on the fold-out chair in the living room." As such, she proves herself capable of registering loneliness while also taking note of the ways in which families from the same community—in this case a Latino community—can differ from one another. At the same time, she fails to grasp the full implications of the fact that Lucy must share a bed with

her sisters, implications regarding wealth and poverty. Indeed, it's clear to adult readers that Lucy's parents must not have much money, since all of their children must sleep in the same bed. So although the narrator is mature enough to articulate rather adult emotions, she's not yet mature enough to make informed inferences about other people's socioeconomic realities. By showcasing this simultaneous maturity and naivety, Cisneros demonstrates to readers that coming of age isn't a straightforward process. As such, the children in stories like "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn" are both perceptive and ignorant, a strange mixture Cisneros implies is itself a condition of childhood.

Eleven Quotes

❝ This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

Related Characters: Rachel (speaker), Mrs. Price, Sylvia Saldívar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rachel can't help but finally express how upset she is about having to wear the unflattering red sweater Mrs. Price claims belongs to her. Much like the narrator of "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," her level of maturity is still in flux. On the one hand, she is cognizant of the social and economic implications of owning the sweater (namely that, because the sweater is so worn out, the person it belongs to most likely comes from a family struggling financially to keep their children clothed). On the other hand, she attributes her subsequent meltdown not to this dynamic, but rather to the strange idea that her three-year-old self is cropping up to the surface of personality. What's more, she equates her emotions to purely physical ailments that tend to befall children. "My whole head hurts," she notes, "like when you drink milk too fast." Once again, then, Cisneros crafts a young character capable of harboring two mentalities at once, capable of existing in a state of half-maturity and half-naivety. In doing so, she provides another snapshot of growing up and the emotional nuances this process entails.

Salvador Late or Early Quotes

❝ Salvador inside that wrinkled shirt, inside the throat that must clear itself and apologize each time it speaks, inside that forty-pound body of a boy with its geography of scars, its history of hurt, limbs stuffed with feathers and rags, in what part of the eyes, in what part of the heart, in that cage of the chest where something throbs with both fists and knows only what Salvador knows, inside that body too small to contain the hundred balloons of happiness, the single guitar of grief, is a boy like any other disappearing out the door, beside the schoolyard gate, where he has told his brothers they must wait.

Related Characters: Salvador

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Salvador, the melancholic yet heroic subject of this lush vignette. Salvador is a melancholic character because he has already accumulated a "history of hurt" even though he's only a small boy. In spite of this, though, he's also heroic, as he cares for his younger brothers, shepherding them to and from school. Cisneros highlights in this passage how young people internalize struggle and hardship, asking "in what part of the eyes," and "in what part of the heart" the young boy keeps his pain. She asserts that something exists inside him that "only" he "knows," rendering his experience with adversity something that is compartmentalized and seemingly untouchable, so that others can't help him. This is most likely purposeful, since Salvador needs to be able to convince his mother that he's capable of shouldering her burden by taking care of his siblings. With this admirable but very sad demeanor, Salvador stands in stark contrast to the other children in *Woman Hollering Creek*, who spend their time playing with Barbies, eating popsicles, and worrying about rather trivial

things like having to wear ugly sweaters in front of their classmates. In this way, Cisneros reminds readers that, like adults, children are capable of experiencing great sorrow, ultimately demonstrating that the coming of age process can include more than just wonder and discovery.

Barbie-Q Quotes

❝ Yours is the one with mean eyes and a ponytail. Striped swimsuit, stilettos, sunglasses, and gold hoop earrings. Mine is the one with bubble hair. Red swimsuit, stilettos, pearl earrings, and a wire stand. But that's all we can afford, besides one extra outfit apiece. Yours, "Red Flair," sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included. Mine, "Solo in the Spotlight," evening elegance in black glitter strapless gown with a puffy skirt at the bottom like a mermaid tail, formal-length gloves, pink chiffon scarf, and mike included. From so much dressing and undressing, the black glitter wears off where her titties stick out. This and a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and here and here, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free, off-the-shoulder look.

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, Okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas.

Related Characters: The Barbie-Q Narrator (speaker), The Barbie-Q Narrator's Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cisneros shows how children mimic adult life while playing together. As the narrator describes her and her friend's Barbies, she displays a thorough knowledge of clothing and fashion, pointing out that her friend's doll has a "Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat." What's more, the dialogue they ascribe to their dolls imitates a kind of love-related maturity they've most likely heard on television or perhaps from their parents. "You dumbbell!" one doll says to the other while fighting over an invisible boyfriend. "He's mine." However, their sophistication is mixed with a childish element, as made clear by the second doll's response: "Oh no he's not, you stinky!" Though the dolls (and the girls controlling them) are involved in the rather adult scandal of fighting over a man (a dynamic that arises in many of the collection's other stories), their language reveals a loose grip on adult culture. When one of the girls uses the word "stinky," readers are reminded that these are mere children miming their way through an otherwise mature scenario, and Cisneros is able to demonstrate how kids pick up on and try to make sense of adult conceptions of love, romance, lust, and sexual possession.

One Holy Night Quotes

❝ About the truth, if you give it to a person, then he has power over you. And if someone gives it to you, then they have made themselves your slave. It is a strong magic. You can never take it back.

Related Characters: Chaq Uxmal Paloquín ("Boy Baby") (speaker), Ixchel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This short paragraph appears as the epigraph to "One Holy Night." What's more, it's attributed to Boy Baby, though the character himself never actually utters these words in the story. As such, Cisneros gives readers an extra lens through which to view the story; indeed, this epigraph makes it even more clear than it already is in the story that Boy Baby's relationship to "the truth" is highly tenuous, ultimately portraying him as a manipulative man. This is evident by the fact that he equates "truth" with "power," arguing that the best way to retain power over someone else is to withhold information. "And if someone gives [the truth] to you," he writes, "then they have made themselves your slave." This is a dangerous mentality, especially considering the fact that Ixchel is an innocent teenager who has no reason to withhold anything about herself from Boy Baby, an older man she apparently worships and trusts. That Boy Baby considers this a "strong magic" confirms the idea that he wants to manipulate the truth to use against people like Ixchel. And in the same way that Ixchel can't reverse the consequences of allowing this older man to take her virginity and impregnate her, Boy Baby asserts that giving someone else "power" by giving them the "truth" is something that can "never" be taken back.

> I'm not saying I'm not bad. I'm not saying I'm special. But I'm not like the Allport Street girls, who stand in doorways and go with men into alleys.

All I know is I didn't want it like that. Not against the bricks or hunkering in somebody's car. I wanted it come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds. The way it's supposed to be, the way I knew it would be when I met Boy Baby.

But you must know, I was no girl back then. And Boy Baby was no boy. Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. Boy Baby was a man. When I asked him how old he was he said he didn't know. The past and the future are the same thing. So he seemed boy and baby and man all at once, and the way he looked at me, how do I explain?

Related Characters: Ixchel (speaker), Chaq Uxmal Paloquín ("Boy Baby")

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Ixchel explains in this passage how she used to envision her first time having sex. Although she has no qualms breaking her grandmother's rules by sleeping with a man before she's even out of eighth grade, she doesn't want to lose her virginity like a prostitute in a car or against a brick wall. Rather, she wants her first time to be special, wants it to "come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds." Her belief that this is "the way [sex] is supposed to be" casts her as both idealistic and admirable. In one sense, she's right to think that sex for the first time should be as special as "gold thread"—after all, there's no reason this shouldn't be the case. At the same time, though, adults understand that this isn't always the case, and this is exactly why her relationship with Boy Baby is so problematic: he *is* an adult, and thus approaches sex and love with a much different mentality. This unavoidably creates an imbalance of power in their relationship, one Ixchel tries to rectify by saying that she "was no girl" before having sex with Boy Baby. Taking this argument a step further, she states that even Boy Baby wasn't really a full grown man, either—rather, he was "boy and baby and man all at once." This conceptualization of her lover's age essentially rationalizes away the power imbalance that flows between them due to their age difference, but it's also a rather weak attempt to ignore the problematic nature of their relationship. Ultimately, the mere fact itself that Ixchel thinks this kind of reasoning will erase the power imbalance in her relationship with Boy Baby is an indication of her naïve attitude when it comes to the complexities of love and sex.

> The truth is, it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't any deal at all. I put my bloody panties inside my T-shirt and ran home hugging myself. I thought about a lot of things on the way home. I thought about all the world and how suddenly I became a part of history and wondered if everyone on the street, the sewing machine lady and the *panadería* saleswoman and the woman with two kids sitting on the bus bench didn't all know. *Did I look any different? Could they tell?* We were all the same somehow, laughing behind our hands, waiting the way all women wait, and when we find out, we wonder why the world and a million years made such a big deal over nothing.

I know I was supposed to feel ashamed, but I wasn't ashamed. I wanted to stand on top of the highest building, the top-top floor, and yell, *I know*.

Related Characters: Ixchel (speaker), Chaq Uxmal Paloquín ("Boy Baby")

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Ixchel contemplates how her experience having sex for the first time has influenced her as a person. Her views regarding this are at odds with one another, as she seems to think losing her virginity isn't "a big deal" while also thinking that she may have physically changed because of it; "*Did I look any different?*" she wonders, which suggests that she really *does* think losing her virginity has been a monumental and life-altering moment. Indeed, she begins to act as if she has suddenly been initiated into womanhood itself, looking around at other women and feeling that they are "all the same somehow." But then this line of thinking also subverts itself, such that the grand secret women share is not a "big deal." These, it seems, are the complicated thoughts that can run through a girl's mind on the brink of womanhood, and Cisneros's treatment of this moment beautifully represents a joyful confusion as well as an exhilarating sense of certainty. What Ixchel seems to suddenly understand is that sex, love, a person's self-conception— none of these things are ever just one thing, can never be flattened or simplified. This jumbled complexity is perhaps what she's referring to when she says she wants to "stand on top of the highest building, the top-top floor, and yell, *I know*."

Woman Hollering Creek Quotes

They want to tell each other what they want to tell themselves. But what is bumping like a helium balloon at the ceiling of the brain never finds its way out. It bubbles and rises, it gurgles in the throat, it rolls across the surface of the tongue, and erupts from the lips—a belch.

If they are lucky, there are tears at the end of the long night. At any given moment, the fists try to speak. They are dogs chasing their own tails before lying down to sleep, trying to find a way, a route, an out, and—finally—get some peace.

Related Characters: Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez, Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the men in the ice house and what they want when they drink heavily night after night. The inarticulate nature of machismo culture—a culture that prizes toughness and brutal masculinity—is framed as something that stands in the way of a man's happiness and his ability to express his own discontent. As Cleófilas sits by her husband Juan Pedro and listens to him speak foully with his friends, she realizes that these men "want to tell each other what they want to tell themselves." Of course, she never reveals what exactly they want to tell themselves, which suggests that they don't even *know* the nature of their discontent. Whatever they'd like to express lurks in their minds and remains undefined. This is why Cisneros writes that the men are "lucky" if "there are tears at the end of the long night," since at least this provides them with some sort of outlet or cathartic moment. And it is this form of catharsis they also seek with their "fists." This portrait of male repression is useful because it sheds light on the emotional process many of the men in *Woman Hollering Creek* are presumably experiencing when they act out and mistreat others, particularly women.

Never Marry a Mexican Quotes

I guess she did it to spare me and Ximena the pain she went through. Having married a Mexican man at seventeen. Having had to put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado*, the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor. But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware.

Related Characters: Clemencia (speaker), Clemencia's Father, Clemencia's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Clemencia describes in this passage why her mother has always advised her to avoid marrying a Mexican man. Her description of her mother's history with Mexican men evokes a wide array of concerns regarding cultural identity. The fact that her mother's family thinks nothing can "be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who [can't] even speak Spanish" suggests that they're suspicious of multicultural people and individuals who lay claim to a certain identity without fully embodying everything that that identity typically encompasses. Furthermore, Cisneros's use of the word "ridiculous" in this moment perfectly captures the utter confusion this family feels upon having to understand why a Mexican-American woman isn't either fully Mexican or fully American. Existing in a cultural middle ground is, for them, incomprehensible, and so Clemencia's mother has to "put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl."

I paint and repaint you the way I see fit, even now. After all these years. Did you know that? Little fool. You think I went hobbling along with my life, whimpering and whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back to her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?

Related Characters: Clemencia (speaker), Megan, Drew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Clemencia says this to Drew, her married lover. Although Drew clearly has strong feelings for Clemencia, he always goes back to his wife, leaving Clemencia waiting and hoping for his next visit. Because this arrangement takes away Clemencia's agency, she reasserts it here, telling him that she paints him "the way [she] see[s] fit." By doing so, she's able to gain control over him, presenting him however she wants, "making the world look at" him through her "eyes." This clearly gives her a sense of empowerment; she swells with confidence in this passage, even calling Drew a "little fool." Indeed, Clemencia is able to use her artistic and representational skills to her own advantage, regaining the personal agency and independence Drew has stolen from her by keeping her in a passive and rather submissive state as a romantic partner.

Eyes of Zapata Quotes

❝ We drag these bodies around with us, these bodies that have nothing at all to do with you, with me, with who we really are, these bodies that give us pleasure or pain. Though I've learned how to abandon mine at will, it seems to me we never free ourselves completely until we love, when we lose ourselves inside each other. Then we see a little of what is called heaven. When we can be that close that we no longer are Inés and Emiliano, but something bigger than our lives. And we can forgive, finally.

You and I, we've never been much for talking, have we? Poor thing, you don't know how to talk. Instead of talking with your lips, you put one leg around me when we sleep, to let me know it's all right. And we fall asleep like that, with one arm or a leg or one of those long monkey feet of yours touching mine. Your foot inside the hollow of my foot.

Related Characters: Inés Alfaro (speaker), Emiliano Zapata

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Inés makes these observations while sitting in her bed and watching Emiliano—her lover and the father of her children—sleep heavily on one of his rare visits to see her. She emphasizes the importance of the physical world, pointing out that life often works on the body, weighing people down. Inés's negative view of the very simple fact that humans are bound to earth by their bodies makes sense considering the fact that she has to be apart from Zapata so often—if he could, for instance, be in two places at once or travel faster than the body allows, then she would be able to spend more time with the man she loves. As it stands, though, she laments the fact that people can't "free" themselves from their bodies like she can (with her supernatural ability to lift herself up into the sky). Furthermore, her assertion that Zapata doesn't "know how to talk" recalls Cisneros's meditation on masculine inarticulateness in the story "Woman Hollering Creek." Once again, it seems, the woman is expected to rescue the man from his own inability to express emotion.

Little Miracles, Kept Promises Quotes

❝ Dear San Antonio de Padua,

Can you please help me find a man who isn't a pain in the naglas. There aren't any in Texas, I swear. Especially not in San Antonio.

Can you do something about all the educated Chicanos who have to go to California to find a job. I guess what my sister [...] says is true: "If you didn't get a husband when you were in college, you don't get one."

I would appreciate it very much if you sent me a man who speaks Spanish, who at least can pronounce his name the way it's supposed to be pronounced. Someone please who never calls himself "Hispanic" unless he's applying for a grant from Washington, D.C.

Can you send me a man man. I mean someone who's not ashamed to be seen cooking or cleaning or looking after himself. In other words, a man who acts like an adult.

[...] I'll turn your statue upside down until you send him to me. I've put up with too much too long, and now I'm just too intelligent, too powerful, too beautiful, too sure of who I am finally to deserve anything else.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This letter is one of the many notes left on altars to various saints in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." Of all the other letters, this one stands out because of the writer's demanding tone and the frustration she feels regarding

romance and men. Unhappy with the selection of potential lovers available to her, she expresses that she wants to be with a man who hasn't completely abandoned his Mexican roots, "a man who speaks Spanish, who can at least pronounce his name the way it's supposed to be pronounced." As such, Cisneros shows readers how important it is for some people to find a partner who aligns with their own cultural identities. Indeed, this person seems to have the same mindset as Clemencia's grandparents have in "Never Marry a Mexican"—a mindset that prioritizes Mexican authenticity. Furthermore, the writer of this letter thinks that she *deserves* to be "sent" a suitable lover, deciding to take fate into her own hands by turning this saint's "statue upside down." Although this act is perhaps somewhat disrespectful and impious, it's also powerful and full of personal agency—rather than waiting around for others to decide how her life will turn out, this character seeks to control her own life.

M3rlc5l45s Bl1ck Chr3st 4f 2sq53p5l1s,

3 1sk y45, L4rd, w3th 1ll my h21rt pl21s2 w1tch 4v2r M1nny B2n1v3d2s wh4 3s 4v2rs21s. 3 l4v2 h3m 1nd 3 d4n't kn4w wh1t t4 d4 1b45t 1ll th3s l4v2 1nd sh1m2 th1t f3lls m2.

B2nj1m3n T.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

This is yet another letter left on a saintly altar in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." Written in code to obscure its message, the letter says: "Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas, I ask you, Lord, with all my heart please watch over Manny Benavides who is overseas. I love him and I don't know what to do about all this love sadness and shame that fills me. Benjamin T." Once readers have deciphered these lines, it becomes clear why this Benjamin doesn't want strangers to be able to interpret his message: he is a gay man in a Christian religious context. Because Christianity is so often unaccommodating of and even sometimes vigilant in condemning homosexuality, Benjamin must hide his sexual preferences. What's interesting, though, is that he is still writing this letter to a saint, meaning that his code is only intended to keep other worshippers from judging him. That he actively wants to communicate the truth of his homosexuality to a saint implies that he believes that, contrary to popular belief, there is space in his religion for gay men. By including Benjamin's message, Cisneros explores her interest in love and all its many difficulties, this time training her attention on what it's like to be gay in an unaccepting community.

Bien Pretty Quotes

"Who dresses you?"
"Silver."
"What's that? A store or a horse?"
"Neither. Silver Galindo. My San Antonio cousin."
"What kind of name is Silver?"
"It's English," Flavio said, "for Silvestre."

I said, "What *you* are, sweetheart, is a product of American imperialism," and plucked at the alligator on his shirt.
"I don't have to dress in a sarape and sombrero to be Mexican," Flavio said. "I *know* who *I* am."
I wanted to leap across the table, throw the Oaxacan black pottery pieces across the room, swing from the punched tin chandelier, fire a pistol at his Reeboks, and force him to dance. I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican. Instead of the volley of insults I intended, all I managed to sling was a single clay pebble that dissolved on impact—*perro*. "dog." It wasn't even the word I'd meant to hurl.

Related Characters: Lupita (speaker), Flavio Munguía Galindo ("Rogelio Velasco")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Lupita and Flavio in which the couple tries to work out between them the various nuances, obstacles, and difficulties of navigating a multicultural relationship. In this scene, Cisneros demonstrates how small confusions can sometimes work their way into everyday conversation when someone is operating in a culturally unfamiliar context. Indeed, when Flavio calls his cousin "Silver," he mistakenly assumes that this is what the name Silvestre translates to in English. Of course, this is a reasonable thing to think, since many Spanish names *do* have English translations. This one, however, is not "Silver" but "Sylvester," and Lupita's holier-than-thou response insensitively highlights the fact that Flavio is in this moment overcompensating, trying too hard to Americanize himself. Regardless, his retort—that he doesn't need to wear a "sarape" or "sombrero" to "know

who" he is—clearly expresses his confidence with his own identity; this is not a person uncomfortably torn between two cultures. In fact, it is precisely because he *is* so comfortable with his Mexican identity that Lupita feels inadequate and ill-at-ease with her own cultural identity, and her feeling of being out of touch with her Mexican heritage comes to bear when the only Spanish insult she can summon is the word *perro*.

> And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to. Not loves that are *tormentosos*. Not men powerful and passionate versus women either volatile and evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. The ones I've loved all my life. *If you don't like it* lárgate, *honey*. Those women. The ones I've known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. *Las* girlfriends. *Las comadres*. Our mamas and *tías*. Passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce.

Related Characters: Lupita (speaker), Flavio Munguía Galindo ("Rogelio Velasco")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lupita contemplates the difference between real women and the women she sees on *telenovelas*. In doing so, she endorses the power of women who triumph in everyday life, women "who make things happen." She isn't interested in modeling herself any longer on women engaged in tormented love affairs; rather, she wants to behave like the kind of person who can say, "*If you don't like it, [take off], honey*" to men who don't want to accept her power and independence. This attitude is a perfect encapsulation of the kind of passionate and resilient mindset Cisneros champions throughout *Woman Hollering Creek*; if all the female characters (and perhaps more importantly, the male characters as well) in this collection could embrace the ideas Lupita puts forward in this moment, they would likely find themselves capable of leading happier, freer, and more independent lives.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

MY LUCY FRIEND WHO SMELLS LIKE CORN

The story opens with a description of Lucy Anguiano, a girl whom the narrator of "My Friend Lucy..." describes as smelling "like corn, like Frito Bandito chips, like tortillas, something like that warm smell of *nixtamel* or bread." The narrator says that this smell is strongest when she leans close to Lucy, perhaps while making a doll out of paper or when playing with marbles on the porch. Lucy asks the narrator if she's ever eaten dog food, an idea that disgusts the girls' other friend, Janey Ortiz. Nonetheless, the narrator admires Lucy for eating dog food and likes that they both wear the same flip-flops, which they purchased together at K-mart for 79 cents.

In this opening story, Cisneros establishes her authorial interest in the ways young girls make sense of each other as they grow up side by side. For the narrator and Lucy, connecting with one another means bonding over shared items like cheap flip-flops, and it also includes alienating Janey Ortiz, something the girls do as a way of further establishing the closeness of their own relationship. Right from the beginning, then, Cisneros shows how women—in this case little girls—are often in competition with one another, a dynamic she explores later in the collection by examining infidelity.

The narrator of "My Friend Lucy..." declares she's going to sit in the sun even though it's incredibly hot outside. She wants her skin to "get so dark it's blue where it bends like Lucy's." Apparently, Lucy's and her eight sisters all have "eyes like knife slits." The narrator describes how Lucy's mother is often in the kitchen "feeding clothes into the wringer washer," and the narrator herself frequently helps pin laundry onto the clothesline, carefully stringing up a "pink sock of the baby" and a "flowered T-shirt" along with blue jeans and a blouse. She explains that Lucy and her sisters all wear each other's clothes; "There ain't no boys here," she says. "Only girls and one father who is never home hardly and one mother who says *Ay! I'm real tired* and so many sisters there's no time to count them."

The narrator's fascination with Lucy's dark skin is an example of how children put together ideas regarding race and identity. The fact that she tries to be as dark as Lucy by simply lying in the sun suggests that she doesn't fully grasp the concept of race. At the same time, she is aware that she and Lucy are different from one another despite how close they are as friends. Difference, it seems, surrounds the narrator and defines her life, as she also takes note of the different societal roles that men and women play (in this case observing that Lucy's father is absent while her mother is left to run the house).

The narrator of "My Friend Lucy..." imagines having sisters of her own, wishing she could sleep with them instead of by herself on a fold-out chair in the living room. She envisions coming home that night and dealing with her grandmother, who will inevitably be angry with her because she's wearing the same dress she's supposed to wear tomorrow. Nonetheless, she resolves to "jump off an old pissy mattress in the Anguiano yard" and scratch her mosquito bites and trade shoes with Lucy and wear them on her hands. Continuing this list of things she wants to do with Lucy, she says they're going to walk over to Janey Ortiz's house and say, "We're never going to be your friend again forever!" Then, in the late afternoon she and Lucy will eat popsicles; "And when we look at each other, our arms gummy from an orange Popsicle we split, we could be sisters, right?"

Once again, the narrator and Lucy seek to solidify their bond by emphasizing the difference between them and Janey Ortiz, who they have deemed unworthy of their friendship. In doing so, they define themselves by way of negation, seeking to understand who they are by articulating who they aren't. At the same time, they also take delight in their own friendship, basking together in the small joys of childhood like getting dirty and playing with one another like sisters.

ELEVEN

Rachel, the narrator of "Eleven," explains that "when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one." This is why when she opens her eyes on the morning of her eleventh birthday, she's surprised to realize that she doesn't feel any different—she feels ten, and also like all the other ages below eleven. "Like some days you might say something stupid," she explains, "and that's the part of you that's still ten." She makes clear that this is also the case when it comes to crying, because sometimes "you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay."

While Rachel's conception of age is innocent and juvenile, it also expresses an understanding of the fact that human beings contain multitudes. Although she simplifies this idea by conceptualizing it in terms of age itself, her theory suggests that human emotion fluctuates and that it's wrong to think people can be expected to always act in one particular manner. Ultimately, this acceptance of emotional fluidity is very wise, proving that children are capable of embracing complex notions about identity even when they do so in simplistic ways.

Today, though, on her eleventh birthday, Rachel wishes she didn't have a collection of younger ages "rattling inside." Rather, she wishes she were 102 years old, because then she'd know just how to respond when her teacher, Mrs. Price, pulls an ugly red sweater out of the classroom closet and asks who owns it. Looking at the sweater—which has "plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope"—the children all deny ownership. Then Rachel's classmate Sylvia Saldívar pipes up, saying, "I think it belongs to Rachel." Rachel doesn't know why Sylvia would say this, guessing, "Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me." Regardless of why Sylvia decides to make this declaration, Mrs. Price believes her and puts the ugly sweater on Rachel's desk.

Rachel's and her classmates' hesitancy to claim ownership of the sweater suggests that owning stretched out, unstylish clothing symbolizes something unsavory to them. Indeed, the general grunginess of the sweater bears implications about its owner's financial stability, ultimately communicating something about the child's family. In this moment, Rachel believes that if she were older she might be able to explain to Mrs. Price that the sweater doesn't belong to her—this suggests that Mrs. Price doesn't listen to her students, an important thing to consider when one takes into account that Mrs. Price's name indicates that she isn't Latina; as such, readers can reasonably draw the conclusion that Mrs. Price is dismissive of Rachel because she harbors previously conceived notions about the young girl's cultural identity, believing that it makes sense that a young Latina wouldn't be able to afford a more expensive sweater.

Rachel tries to explain that the sweater doesn't belong to her, but Mrs. Price merely says, "Of course it's yours. I remember you wearing it once." Suddenly, as Mrs. Price is turning her back to resume the lesson, Rachel feels sick. She feels like the part of her that is three years old wants to "come out of [her] eyes," but she squeezes her lids tight and tries to focus on the fact that her mother is making a cake for her birthday, which she'll be able to eat with her family that night.

That Rachel thinks of her family in order to hold back tears suggests that familial love can often ground a person, helping him or her through difficult moments. Unfortunately, this is only a coping mechanism, allowing Mrs. Price to easily proceed with her preconceived notions about the kind of sweater Rachel can afford to own.


Upon opening her eyes, Rachel uses a ruler to move the sweater to the edge of her desk until it drapes over the side, at which point Mrs. Price demands that she put the sweater on that very instant. "Now!" she says, and Rachel can't hold back her tears anymore—all the younger ages in her crop up at this moment, and as she puts her arms through the sweater's sleeves, she starts crying in front of the entire class. Right before lunch, Phyllis Lopez, who Rachel says is "even dumber than Sylvia Saldívar," recalls that *she* owns the sweater. Rachel takes it off immediately and gives it to Phyllis, and though she's relieved to have gotten rid of the sweater, she still wishes she were 102 so that today could be "far away already."

Rachel's wish that she were 102 years old shows a surprising self-awareness about how she's not acting her age in this moment. At the same time, though, this mindset also ignores her own logic, since if she were 102, she would also still contain a little girl somewhere inside—a little girl who could crop up and start crying at any moment. As such, there's an illogic to her thought process, but this illogic actually further establishes the fact that the children in these stories are capable of living in complexity and willing to accept and exist in uncertain conclusions.

SALVADOR LATE OR EARLY

An unidentified narrator hashes out a brief character study of Salvador, a boy with "crooked hair and crooked teeth" who has no friends. Even his teacher can't remember his name, and people often see him rushing toward a section of town where the houses are "the color of bad weather." Salvador lives in a house with an unpainted door, and rouses himself every morning to wake his little brothers, tie their shoes, comb their hair, and feed them breakfast. He arrives either late or early at school everyday, his two disheveled brothers in tow. At day's end, he waits for his brothers, standing there in his small body "with its geography of scars" and "history of hurt" until they emerge, at which point he takes their hands and sets off, leading them back to their mother (who is preoccupied with an infant), fading into the distance against a "bright horizon."

In this vignette, Cisneros once again suggests that children are often more complex than people think. Indeed, this small boy has already lived long enough to experience an entire "history of hurt," and he assumes the responsibilities of a caretaker even though he himself presumably still needs parental guidance. Though Salvador is able to rise above hardship, he receives little recognition for his efforts, as even his teacher periodically forgets his name. Cisneros implies that Salvador's relative invisibility has to do with the fact that he comes from poverty. That his teacher doesn't give him the attention he needs recalls Rachel's struggle with Mrs. Price in "Eleven," since in both cases Cisneros presents children who are ignored because of their cultural identities and the preconceived notions people harbor about those identities.

MEXICAN MOVIES

A narrator—whose gender remains unspecified—describes going to the movies with her younger brother Kiki and their parents. The narrator confesses that she likes it best when "the man starts undressing the lady" onscreen because this means her father will give her and Kiki quarters to be spent in the lobby, where the two siblings run over the thick red carpets, touch the velvet curtains, and play with machines in the ladies' room that dispense tic-tac-toe games or lipstick. Alternatively, she says, they spend their money at the candy counter. Back inside, the narrator enjoys curling up and falling asleep until the lights turn on and her parents carry her to the car. Upon reaching home, she pretends to be asleep so they'll carry her to bed.

"Mexican Movies" fluctuates between childhood innocence and mature curiosity. The fact that the narrator enjoys when characters undress onscreen simply because it means she can go buy candy in the lobby shows that she's not yet interested in sexuality. At the same time, she enjoys other forms of maturity, such as having the freedom and autonomy to spend money however she wants. When she tries to decide whether to buy tic-tac-toe games or lipstick, innocence and maturity converge in one experience, suggesting that coming of age is a process in which the juvenile and the sophisticated exist side by side—as such, Cisneros implies that growing up isn't a linear progression, but rather a complicated swirl of curiosity and discovery.

BARBIE-Q

the narrator of "Barbie-Q" talks about her and her friend's interest in Barbie dolls, referring to her friend as "you." Although the narrator never reveals her or her friend's gender, Cisneros implies that that they're both young girls, both of whom each own one Barbie. Because they have limited access to new outfits for their dolls, they fashion a dress out of an old sock. The game they play is always the same: "Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight." However, because neither girl owns a Ken doll, the boyfriend figure is imaginary. After all, both of them would rather ask for new outfits for their Barbies for Christmas rather than for "a stupid-looking boy doll."

Like the narrator of "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," the two protagonists in "Barbie-Q" define themselves—or at least their dolls—by articulating some kind of difference. In this case, the girls call male dolls "stupid-looking," thereby raising their female dolls up as more desirable. Indeed, they covet their Barbies, and the game they play in which one Barbie steals the other's boyfriend foreshadows stories like "Never Marry a Mexican," in which women compete while a man simply follows his lustful desires.

One Sunday, the "Barbie-Q" narrator and her friend are at a flea-market and find an inexpensive new Barbie lying on a table. Looking around, they realize there are multiple dolls and outfits, including a "'Career Gal' ensemble." Apparently a nearby toy factory recently burned down, and so these dolls are on sale even though they only sustained minor damages. "So what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them," the narrator says. And so what if one of the new dolls has a melted left foot? She points out that nobody will notice these things if the girls dress the dolls in their beautiful new outfits.

The girls' joy at finding these new Barbies allows them to ignore the toys' imperfections, a fact that indicates the strength of desire. Just as characters in later stories accept various unsavory traits about their lovers because they desire them so badly, the girls look past their Barbies' melted feet and smoky hair. In turn, Cisneros indicates that longing for something is a powerful experience capable of changing the way a person views the people and things surrounding him or her.

MERICANS

Young Micaela describes waiting with her brothers—Junior and Keeks—for their "awful grandmother" to emerge from inside a church, where the old woman is lighting votive candles, blessing herself, and frantically praying while letting rosary crystals slide through her fingers. The grandmother mostly prays for her family members, "interced[ing]" on their behalf because they never go to mass. Unfortunately, her duties inside take a long time, meaning that Micaela and her brothers must wait nearby and entertain themselves, though they're not allowed to stray from the church's entrance. This means they can't visit the balloon vendors along the streets or spend their allowances on comic books or cookies or chase each other through the cemetery behind the church. Instead, they must stay where the awful grandmother left them, watching people walk to church with bandages on their limbs and shawls over their faces.

Micaela and her brothers are faced with an age-old childhood challenge: keeping themselves entertained while adults are busy completing long and inscrutable tasks. It's clear that Micaela resents this plight by the way she calls her grandmother "awful"; not wanting to stay outside with her brothers but also not wanting to go inside with her grandmother and mime her way through a religion she's clearly uninterested in (like many of her other family members), she finds herself stuck in a purgatory of boredom.

While the children wait, Keeks runs around, pretending to be a fighter plane. "I'm a B-Fifty-two bomber, you're a German," he yells at Micaela, who doesn't tell him that she'd rather play "flying feather dancers" because she's afraid this might make him not play with her altogether. She explains that her brothers have taken to calling her a girl as a way of insulting her. "You *girl*," they say. Just when Micaela decides to be a German, Keeks runs by again and says, "I'm Flash Gordon. You're Ming the Merciless and the Mud people." The idea of playing the "Mud people" make Micaela want to cry, but she doesn't let herself, because "crying is what *girls* do." She escapes the situation by slipping into the church. "I'm the Lone Ranger, you're Tonto," she hears Keeks yelling behind her.

Cisneros demonstrates how women are taught from an early age that femininity is something that exempts them from interacting equally with men. Rather than feeling like she can express what she really wants—which is to play "flying feather dancers"—she goes along with Keeks's uninteresting game. Worse, she has to wrap her head around playing the antagonist, as if it's her duty not only to conform to her brother's game, but also to indulge him by letting him be the hero. This, it seems, is indicative of the position in which society puts women, a position that requires them not only to accept a sexist reality, but also help ensure the continuation of that reality by justifying the validity of a patriarchal system.

The inside of the church smells like incense, and Micaela wonders why holy water smells like tears. She stares at her grandmother beside her, who's praying for a family member to recover from the worm. The prayer kneeler is uncomfortable, so Micaela shifts her weight back and forth until her grandmother tells her to go outside if she can't sit still, but she says it in Spanish, which Micaela only understands when paying very close attention. "What?" she asks, but knows her grandmother hears this as "*¿Güat?*" The awful grandmother gives her a dirty look and pushes toward the door.

In the same way that Micaela isn't allowed to be herself in her brother's male-centric world, there seems to be little room for her in her grandmother's conception of religion, which uses Spanish as its language, thereby denying Micaela—a multicultural child who has trouble understanding Spanish—entry. As such, she must contend with both sexism and the complications of navigating a multicultural identity. Essentially, she finds herself caught between two mindsets, both of which have trouble accommodating her and accepting her for who she is.

Micaela sits outside, where Junior is talking to a foreign couple. Micaela can tell this man and woman aren't from the area because the man is wearing shorts—which everybody here knows not to do—and the woman is wearing pants to church. The woman asks Junior in poorly pronounced Spanish if he'd like a piece of gum, then asks if they can take his photograph. As she clicks her camera, Junior says, "Hey, Michele, Keeks. You guys want gum?" Surprised, the woman says, "But you speak English!," to which Junior responds, "Yeah, we're Mericans."

Junior's conviction that he and his siblings are Americans is admirable in its simplicity—rather than questioning his claim to a certain national identity based on how other people treat him, he straightforwardly states that he is American. After Micaela has just bounced back and forth between her brother's unaccommodatingly male world and her grandmother's unwelcoming religious world, though, one has to wonder if some of Junior's admirable confidence is only available to him because he is a male; given the trouble Micaela has finding a context that will accept her for who she is, it seems unlikely that she would so confidently lay claim to an American identity.

TEPEYAC

The narrator of "Tepeyac" describes Tepeyac, a religious site where his Abuelito (grandfather) has a small shop. Around the hill (which is said to be where Saint Juan Diego saw an apparition of La Virgin de Guadalupe), vendors sell balloons and souvenirs, shine shoes, take photographs, and fry food. At the end of the day, Abuelito tells his shop helper to pull the "corrugated metal curtains" over the windows, and the narrator arrives to walk his grandfather home. Abuelito counts money under a bare lightbulb, tallying the dollars given to him by women who sell food in the plaza, by the "souvenir photographers," by the shoe-shiners, by the "blessed vendors of the holy cards, rosaries, scapulars, little plastic altars," and by "the good sisters who live in the convent across the street."

"Tepeyac" is a perfect example of a story in which Cisneros puts on display the joys inherent in tightknit and vibrant communities. There is a deep sense of culture in this town's collective devotion to this religious site, and the bustling commerce surrounding the hill seemingly feeds upon itself as shoe-shiners and food vendors and nuns all frequent Abuelito's store, sustaining the shop with money that circulates throughout the plaza. This, Cisneros seems to be suggesting, is what it looks like to be part of a healthy community.

Together, the narrator of "Tepeyac" and his Abuelito walk through the streets, passing the spot where Juan Diego "brought down from the *cerro* the miracle." They pass neighbors and vendors they know well, arriving at their house, which has always been theirs. Mounting the stairs, they count the steps. The narrator includes these numbers, interspersing them throughout the story, which shifts away from this moment, projecting him into the future when he returns years later and finds that the shop has been "repainted and redone as a pharmacy." None of the vendors are familiar, and his grandparents' house is occupied by strangers. The house itself looks smaller and darker, and the streets are packed with cars. "Who would've guessed," he writes, "after all this time, it is me who will remember when everything else is forgotten, you who took with you to your stone bed something irretrievable, without a name."

The narrator's melancholy return to Tepeyac highlights the way sadness and grief can come on the heels of happiness and accord. Indeed, the memory of his grandfather and the vibrant community he was part of has stayed with the narrator so vividly that now—when everything is different and people have moved on—he feels only loss and a longing for the past. In turn, Cisneros accentuates the complexities of human emotion and memory, illustrating that great happiness can lead to extreme solemnity and nostalgia.

ONE HOLY NIGHT

Ixchel—an eighth grade Mexican-American girl—explains that it has been eighteen weeks since Abuelita, her grandmother, chased off a man named Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, whom Ixchel calls Boy Baby. Boy Baby, she says, is the descendant of Mayan kings. Ixchel confesses that she has never told anybody this story except her two friends Rachel and Lourdes. Boy Baby, she continues, promised to love her "like a revolution, like a religion," but Abuelita has sent her to Mexico so that she is as far as possible from this supposed Mayan royalty. Now Ixchel lives with "one wrinkled witch woman who rubs [her] belly with jade," as well as with 16 cousins.

From the very beginning of "One Holy Night," love takes center stage. Ixchel's relationship with Boy Baby is defined by the allure of forbidden love, since Abuelita so vehemently tries to prevent the two from seeing one another. In addition to the shadowy draw of forbidden love, though, Ixchel's affinity for Boy Baby contains a certain amount of mystery, since his entire personality is predicated on the strange and enticing claim that he comes from a long line of Mayan kings. By including this detail, Cisneros is able to lure readers toward Boy Baby with the same kind of curiosity that attracts Ixchel to him.

The story of Ixchel's fall from grace begins with her time spent selling cucumbers from the family pushcart. "I don't know how many girls have gone bad from selling cucumbers," she says. "I know I'm not the first. My mother took the crooked walk too, I'm told, and I'm sure my Abuelita has her own story, but it's not my place to ask." Abuelita, for her part, blames Uncle Lalo because she thinks he should be the one working the pushcart, not Ixchel, who is "too foolish to look after herself." In defense, Uncle Lalo says that if the family never left Mexico in the first place, "shame enough would have kept a girl from doing devil things."

As if Boy Baby's mysterious history weren't enough already to attract Ixchel (and readers, for that matter) to him, Abuelita's strict rules and seemingly puritanical reaction to Ixchel's involvement with Boy Baby renders the relationship even more irresistible. As such, Cisneros demonstrates how that which is forbidden so often feels unavoidable.

When Ixchel first meets Boy Baby and asks how old he is, he tells her he doesn't know. "The past and the future are the same thing," Ixchel writes. "So he seemed boy and baby and man all at once, and the way he looked at me, how do I explain?" One Saturday, Ixchel stations the pushcart in front of a grocery store. Boy Baby arrives and buys a mango on a stick—every Saturday thereafter, he comes to buy fruit from the cart, telling Ixchel each time to keep the change. One day he brings her Kool-Aid in a small plastic cup, and that's when she starts to recognize her feelings for him. She notes that readers might not be so fond of him, especially since his fingernails are greasy and his long hair dusty. All the same, she waits for him every Saturday in a pretty blue dress.

The fact that Boy Baby doesn't know his age adds to his mysterious allure, and it becomes clear that Ixchel enjoys the fact that she can't contextualize him. Indeed, she likes that he is "boy and baby and man" all at once, so much so that she's able to look past his dirty fingernails and unwashed hair. Though her acceptance of his mysteriousness demonstrates that humans are often attracted to that which they don't fully understand, it also suggests that she is naïve and innocent, since a mature adult would naturally question such a shady character.

One night, Ixchel stations the pushcart outside Esparza & Sons Auto Repair, where Boy Baby lives in a small old closet with "pink plastic curtains on a narrow window" and a cot blanketed by newspapers. Inside, they stand under a single exposed light bulb hanging from the ceiling as Boy Baby shows her his collection of 24 guns—"rifles and pistols, one rusty musket, a machine gun, and several tiny weapons with mother-of-pearl handles that looked like toys." As he takes them out and displays them on the bed, he tells her he wants to show her these weapons so that she'll "see who" he is; so that she'll "understand." "But," she notes privately, "I didn't want to know."

Ixchel's assertion that she "didn't want to know" who Boy Baby really is confirms that she is perhaps too taken by the idea of mystery. Rather than examining the many disturbing warning signs that Boy Baby is a dangerous person, she would rather move forward as if he is a man with no background. Above all, this willful ignorance is a sign of her immaturity and an indication that she is most likely unprepared to advance in this romantic relationship.

Boy Baby talks about his lineage, saying that the stars have predicted his future son's birth. He claims this son will "bring back the grandeur of [his] people." Years ago, he tells Ixchel, his father brought him to the Temple of the Magician and forced him to promise that he would "bring back the ancient ways." As he tells this story, he lies down next to the guns on the newspaper and weeps. Ixchel touches him, but the look he gives her is cold and faraway. "You must not tell anyone what I am going to do," he says. The next thing Ixchel remembers is the look of the moon, how "pale" it seems as it glows through the pink plastic curtains. Then something inside seems to bite her, and she whimpers softly, crying for another version of herself that seems to leap out of her body and run away forever.

There's little doubt that this strange part of Ixchel that leaps out of her body and runs away forever is her innocence. Only an eighth-grader, she has crossed the threshold of adulthood long before she can fully conceptualize the implications, and yet she still experiences the feeling of suddenly entering a new realm of maturity. In this way, Cisneros spotlights the internal process of coming of age, which sometimes expresses itself in abstract ways, proving that young people are capable of feeling intense and advanced emotions even if they experience them inarticulately, as Ixchel does in this moment with the surreal image of a version of herself leaving her own body.

Regarding this moment on the newspaper bed with Boy Baby, Ixchel writes: "So I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir—Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. I, Ixchel, his queen." Following this statement, though, she writes, "The truth is, it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't any deal at all." After lying with Boy Baby, she hides her bloody underwear under her T-shirt and runs home while hugging herself, thinking all the while that she has now become "a part of history," wondering if she looks suddenly different to the people she passes on the street. And though she understands that she is "supposed to feel ashamed," she feels no remorse at all. In fact, she wants to stand on a rooftop and yell, "*I know*."

Once again, coming of age is portrayed as vastly complex, as Ixchel vacillates between grandiosity and nonchalance; in one moment, she sees herself as a Mayan queen anointed by a "mighty heir"—the next moment, she casually says, "It wasn't a big deal." In a way, she's right in both cases. On the one hand, something monumental has just happened in her life, an experience that deserves to be exalted if only for how much it will change her conception of the world. On the other hand, every single person in the history of the world has been the product of sexual reproduction, rendering the entire act a rather ordinary thing. This attitude is perhaps what helps her avoid feeling "ashamed" for engaging in an act that almost everybody engages in at some point in their lives.

Feeling suddenly wise, Ixchel comes confidently back home, laughing at her newfound knowledge until Abuelita takes one look at her and asks, "Where's the pushcart?" Scrambling for an excuse, she tells her grandmother it was stolen, and the family searches the town for the thieves. In the following days, Abuelita learns more and more of the truth. A neighbor tells her that Ixchel takes the pushcart to Esparza & Sons every Saturday and talks to a "dark Indian" man who wheels the cart into his garage, at which point they go inside together. Hearing this, Abuelita goes to the garage to find Boy Baby, but discovers he has moved away, leaving the pushcart behind as a way of paying his outstanding rent. The family then pays $20 to get the pushcart back, and Ixchel tells Abuelita the real story, though she leaves out the bit about her sexual encounter.

Baby Boy's willingness to use the pushcart to pay his outstanding rent further indicates that he is morally corrupt. Not only has he now had sex with a girl who is only 13 or 14 years old, but he also has seemingly no qualms with paying rent using something that doesn't belong to him. As such, his previously mysterious qualities begin to seem sinister, and whatever tenderness he has showed Ixchel becomes even more disturbing.

Despite her best efforts to hide the fact that she and Boy Baby had sex, Ixchel's secret becomes obvious when her period never comes and her stomach swells. When Abuelita discovers her granddaughter is pregnant, she weeps and blames Uncle Lalo, who blames the United States. Overcome, Abuelita burns the pushcart and calls Ixchel a *sinvergüenza*—a woman without shame. In the coming weeks, Abuelita periodically returns to the garage in the hopes of gaining information about Boy Baby—the *demonio*, in her words—and his whereabouts. Picking up his mail, she finds a letter from a convent in another town. She writes to this convent and asks the nuns if they know where Boy Baby might be hiding. Meanwhile, she removes Ixchel from school when her uniform stretches tightly over her stomach.

By blaming Uncle Lalo for Ixchel's pregnancy instead of Ixchel herself, Abuelita strips her granddaughter of personal agency. Rather than accepting the notion that Ixchel made a conscious decision to indulge her own sexual desires, she blames the nearest man in her life, as if only men can influence women when it comes to sex. At the same time, it is fair to say that Ixchel didn't *actually make a consenting decision, since she's so young. In this moment, Cisneros plumbs the murky waters surrounding agency and sexual independence, once more demonstrating how the process of coming of age is complex and difficult to navigate.*

Only her friends Rachel and Lourdes know about Ixchel's pregnancy, and Abuelita wants to keep it that way. Consequently, she arranges to send Ixchel to live with her cousins in Mexico, where she was originally conceived. When her mother got pregnant, Ixchel explains, Abuelita decided to send her to the United States so that the neighbors "wouldn't ask why her belly was suddenly big."

Given that Ixchel is now moving from Mexico to the United States to avoid the shame and embarrassment of her neighbors discovering that she's pregnant, it's ironic that her mother moved to Mexico to avoid the same kind of humiliation in the United States. It seems that no matter where a family lives, then, young people often find themselves drawn to sexual encounters before they're ready to handle the consequences.

A letter arrives from the convent. In it, the nuns tell Abuelita what they know about Boy Baby: that he was born to a knife sharpener and a fruit vendor; that he's 37 years old; that his name is Chato, meaning "fat-face"; and that his blood contains not an ounce of Mayan heritage.

The nuns' letter to Abuelita confirms what readers have already guessed: that the mystery that so attracted Ixchel to Boy Baby was, in fact, only an indication that he was lying about his past. In this moment, it becomes even more clear that he has manipulated Ixchel, capitalizing on and exploiting her young naivety.

As the baby grows inside her, Ixchel can feel the "ghost" of Boy Baby circling through her innards, refusing to "let [her] rest." Not long after she arrives in Mexico, Boy Baby visits Abuelita's house looking for Ixchel, but Abuelita chases him away with a broom. When the family next hears about him, it is in a newspaper article displaying a picture of him held by two police officers. The paper reveals that "eleven female bodies" in "the last seven years" have been found in "the Caves of the Hidden Girl." Boy Baby, it seems, is responsible for these deaths. Ixchel stares at the article and the photograph, unable to do anything but look at the "little black-and-white dots that make up the face [she is] in love with."

Even upon finding out that Boy Baby is a serial killer who preys on young women like herself, Ixchel remains in love with him. In turn, Cisneros illustrates that love is not a rational feeling, but rather an illogical and impulsive emotion. Simply put, the feelings humans experience for one another are often out of step with what makes sense, and longing frequently overtakes a person despite her better judgment.

In Mexico, Ixchel's female cousins are hesitant to talk to her. The ones that do engage her in conversation are young and ask questions the others know they shouldn't pose—questions about what it's like to "have a man." "They don't know what it is to lay so still until his sleep breathing is heavy," she writes, "for the eyes in the dim dark to look and look without worry at the man-bones and the neck, […] to stare at how perfect is a man." However, she doesn't say this to them. Instead, she merely states, "It's a bad joke. When you find out you'll be sorry."

The tragedy of Ixchel's story comes to the forefront when she tells her younger cousins that love is a "bad joke." Though many women likely agree with her, this pessimistic attitude is no doubt the direct result of the fact that she has been led into a complicated romantic and sexual relationship before she's old enough to grapple with the implications of such a serious and intimate connection. Of course, the fact that Boy Baby is a murderer only further complicates this dynamic, leaving Ixchel even more conflicted—she cares for this man and suddenly knows the joy of love, but she also has been scarred by this experience and hasn't actually encountered a healthy form of love, since her relationship with Boy Baby was disingenuous and wrong.

Ruminating on the nature of love, Ixchel writes about how her friend Rachel thinks love "is like a big black piano being pushed off the top of a three-story building and you're waiting on the bottom to catch it." Lourdes, on the other hand, thinks love is like spinning a top and watching all the colors whirl together until everything is just a "white hum." But Ixchel has her own conception of love. She remembers a crazy man who used to live upstairs. Unable to talk, he used to keep a harmonica in his mouth at all times. Instead of playing the instrument, he would simply breathe through it, "wheezing, in and out, in and out." For Ixchel, this is what love is like.

Ixchel's metaphor casts love as inevitable and expressive. In the same way that the crazy man's every breath is transformed into music, every little action of a person's life leads to love and relationships, creating music but also proving such raw emotion to be inescapable. This is both beautiful and deeply complicated, something to be appreciated but also something that can become a burden. By using this metaphor for love, Ixchel reveals a nuanced and varied understanding, a conception of romance that is far beyond her years. In turn, Cisneros shows how intensely romantic relationships can alter young people, suddenly initiating them into a messy world of emotion whether or not they're prepared.

MY TOCAYA

The narrator of "My Tocaya" describes a thirteen-year-old girl in her class who has the same name as her: Patricia. This girl goes by "Trish"—a fact that annoys the narrator—and gains something like fame when she dies and newspapers and TV programs start reporting about her, interviewing anybody who knew her, even teachers obligated to say nice things like, "She was full of energy, a good kid, sweet." The narrator begrudgingly wonders why nobody asks *her* what *she* thinks of Trish.

The narrator's begrudging jealousy of the attention Trish gets upon her disappearance indicates that she—the narrator—is rather immature. Indeed, she has clearly not yet reached a point in her life at which she feels comfortable with her own identity, and so she puts Trish down as a way of solidifying her own self-importance. In addition, her annoyance that Trish goes by Trish instead of Patricia indicates her scorn for Latinas who (unlike her) readily abandon their Mexican culture in order to assume fully American identities.

The narrator of "My Tocaya" explains that Patricia Benavídez—Trish—has always been the "'son' half of Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2 even before the son quit." She notes that Trish wears rhinestone earrings and glitter high heels to school. Anybody who wears such flashy clothing, she says, is "destined for trouble." In any case, Trish skipped several grades, which is why she's in high school at the age of thirteen. The narrator wonders if Trish perhaps runs away from home because Trish's father beats her, since this what her brother did; fed up with constantly fighting with his father, he left one day and never returned. Maybe, though, Trish simply got tired of serving tacos, thinks the narrator.

The narrator fluctuates between blaming Trish and sympathizing with her, as she acknowledges that Trish's life was perhaps not so easy before her disappearance. This fluctuation indicates that the narrator is still working through Trish's disappearance, trying to make sense of it any way she can. Because she's still young, though, she has trouble fathoming what Trish has gone through, and thus posits theories that vary greatly from one another, all the while trying to seem as if she doesn't really care very much, though the mere fact that she's telling this story makes it obvious that she is fascinated and obsessed with Trish's experience.

Several weeks after Trish's disappearance, her mother takes out an ad in the newspapers asking if anybody has seen her daughter. At the end of the ad, she includes this message: "Honey, call Mommy y te quiero mucho." The narrator of "My Tocaya" admits she would have no reason to care about Trish's disappearance if it weren't for the fact that Trish was, at the time of her vanishing, acting as an intermediary between her and Max Lucas Luna Luna, a senior at an all boys' school affiliated with their own school. The narrator explains that the two schools sometimes put together "Youth Exchanges," sexual education sessions in which the boys and girls sit side by side and listen to lectures with names like "The Blessed Virgin: Role Model for Today's Young Woman" and "Petting: Too Far, Too Fast, Too Late." This is how she first meets Max.

Once again, the narrator tries to convince readers that she doesn't care about Trish's wellbeing, ultimately striving to appear independent and callous. And though it might be true that she's disappointed to lose her primary connection to Max, it also seems to be the case that she would probably be telling this story even if he weren't involved. As it stands, Max serves as a convenient excuse for her to spend time analyzing Trish's disappearance without having to admit she has taken an interest in this girl who is not only younger than her, but who also represents a slightly more Americanized version of herself. Indeed, with her high heels and Anglicized name, Trish signifies a certain multicultural identity about which the narrator is curious but hesitant to embrace herself.

One day before her disappearance, Trish tells the narrator of "My Tocaya" that Max Lucas Luna Luna has a crush on her. "Yeah right," the narrator says, not wanting to be seen talking to Trish. Nonetheless, Trish insists, and the narrator's interest slowly grows until she suddenly feels kinship with Trish for having given her such important information. From then on, the narrator asks Trish to pass messages to Max. She even starts visiting Trish at the taco restaurant, but then one day a nun comes on over the intercom at school and announces the following message: "I am sorry to have to announce one of our youngest and dearest students has strayed from home. Let us keep her in our hearts and in our prayers until her safe return."

Considering that the narrator has never talked to Max, it seems unlikely that her sudden close friendship with Trish is merely due to the fact that Trish has a connection with this boy. Indeed, the narrator even starts visiting Trish at the Taco restaurant, going out of her way to spend time with this girl. Despite how much she obviously wants to be friends with Trish, though, she only does so under the pretext that Trish can act as a liaison between her and Max.

The narrator of "My Tocaya" is upset to hear about Trish's disappearance because it means she has lost an important part of her relationship with Max. Worse, the entire school starts talking about Trish, and everybody acts like they were her closest friends. After a while, though, people stop obsessing over her, and the narrator is glad to finally be able to mention Trish's name again without having to deal with the hype surrounding her disappearance.

The narrator's annoyance at her peers for obsessing over Trish is likely the result of the fact that she herself has been secretly obsessed with her for far longer than anybody else. Now, though, everybody wants to talk about Trish—the Americanized iteration of the narrator's own identity—and the narrator feels as if she must therefore once again reject Trish. This notion becomes even clearer when the narrator is happy to be able to talk about Trish again without getting everybody else worked up—indeed, it's clear that not *talking about Trish takes a great amount of effort for her.*

Just as the commotion around Trish's disappearance dies down, a group of children playing in a drainage ditch find a dead body, which is later identified as Trish. Once again, newscasters descend upon the "My Tocaya" narrator's high school, and everybody resumes their hysterics. Strangely enough, though, Trish waltzes into the police station three days later and says, "I ain't dead." Apparently, her parents misidentified the corpse because they were so upset. "I never did get to meet Max Lucas Luna Luna, and who cares, right?" the narrator says. "All I'm saying is [Trish] couldn't even die right." And the narrator notes that even though Trish botched death, she still got to have her face plastered on the front page. As if she's been in conversation with somebody else for the entire story, she concludes by saying, "Girl, I'm telling you."

Some people need to talk about others in order to feel comfortable about themselves and their own identities. When the narrator says, "Girl, I'm telling you," she gives readers the impression that she has been gossiping with a friend about Trish the whole time. As such, it's clear she's incredibly interested in Trish but that she doesn't want to reveal her obsession. But when she says, "I never did get to meet Max Lucas Luna Luna, and who cares, right?" she reveals that she never really was very interested in making a connection with him—rather, she wanted to make a connection with Trish, but this attempt seems to have failed, and so she resorts to criticizing her, saying things like, "she couldn't even die right."

WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK

As soon as Don Serafín gives Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to marry his daughter Cleófilas and take her from Mexico to the United States, he predicts the marriage will fail and that Cleófilas will soon return to him. As the two young lovers depart, he looks at his daughter and says, "I am your father, I will never abandon you," but Cleófilas is too wrapped up in the exciting moment to pay attention to these important words. It's only later, when she's living in the United States as a neglected mother that she remembers Don Serafin's parting sentence. As she and her son Juan Pedrito sit by a river called Woman Hollering Creek, she thinks about love, about "how when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent's love for a child, a child's for its parents, is another thing entirely."

Many stories in Woman Hollering Creek *examine romantic love and lust, but Cleófilas's tale also studies the nature of familial love. In this piece, Cisneros frames parental love in terms of loyalty, suggesting that it never "sours" and that it's undying. The beginning of Cleófilas's story hints at trouble to come without articulating the nature of this trouble; for now, Cisneros goes out of her way to establish that a parent's relationship with his or her child is one of unmitigated support and companionship.*

Cleófilas is used to a slow life in Mexico, a life comprised of long afternoons spent going to the cinema to watch that week's film, walking to get a milk shake, or watching the most recent *telenovela* episode with friends. For her entire life, she has been waiting for passion, but only the kind of passion that is "in its purest crystalline essence." She thinks often about the title of her favorite *telenovela*, "Tú o Nadie"—"You or No One." She adores the star of this show, as well as the title itself; "Somehow one ought to live one's life like that, don't you think?" she muses to herself. "You or no one. Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end."

Cleófilas's desire to lead a passionate love life is understandable, since most people yearn for intense romantic experiences. At the same time, though, it's not hard to see that a love that brings on "suffer[ing]" and "pain" is highly volatile. Indeed, this kind of love stands in stark contrast to the steady and loyal love Don Serafin harbors for his daughter, and so Cleófilas's thirst for passion further hints at the fact that there is trouble to come. Not only is she now venturing away from the safety of familial love, but she's also physically removed from her home environment, thereby estranged from the familiar, putting her in an even more vulnerable position.

Living in Seguin, Texas, Cleófilas wants to know how Woman Hollering Creek—which runs behind her house—got its name. Unfortunately, though, nobody seems to know, and when she asks a Laundromat attendant, the woman only says, "What do you want to know for?" She says this in rough, rude Spanish—the same kind she uses to yell at Cleófilas for using too much soap in the machines or for letting Juan Pedrito run around without a diaper in public. Since this woman is clearly uninterested in establishing a friendship, Cleófilas turns her attention to the women who live on either of her house. On the left lives Soledad, who is a widow (though nobody knows how her husband died). On the right lives Dolores, an old woman who burns altars and pines over her dead sons and husband.

The Laundromat attendant's rudeness demonstrates to readers just how alone Cleófilas is in the US. Not only is she far away from her loving father, but she's also in a place where people are unwilling to answer even the simplest of questions. Criticizing her mothering techniques, the Laundromat attendant seems to resent Cleófilas for being an immigrant, turning away from her instead of welcoming her into the country. Worse, Cleófilas is seemingly surrounded by lonely women, as Soledad and Dolores remain cooped up in their houses thinking about the men who have—in one way or another—abandoned them. As such, alienation (both cultural and relational) exists all around her.

The first time Juan Pedro hits her, Cleófilas doesn't even try to defend herself. Although she's always vowed to herself that she'd hit back if a man ever laid his hands on her, she just stands there as her lip bleeds. Later, she strokes Juan Pedro's "dark curls" as he weeps "tears of repentance and shame."

That Cleófilas must console Juan Pedro after he hits her—and not the other way around—is indicative of how much men expect of woman in a patriarchal society. Not only does Juan Pedro expect his wife to endure his violence and misogyny, he also expects her to provide him emotional support when he feels guilty for mistreating her. This of course leaves no room in their relationship for her to express her grievances, and so she finds herself in a toxic marriage that only benefits Juan Pedro.

Juan Pedro frequents the local ice house, where a group of men hang around drinking and joking. Sometimes Cleófilas comes along, sitting quietly and slowly sipping her beer as the men make disgusting jokes. She gets the sense that these men drink because "they want to tell each other what they want to tell themselves," but this proves more difficult than they'd like to imagine. After these nights, Juan Pedro often hits Cleófilas, his "fists try[ing] to speak." When Cleófilas wakes in the morning and watches her husband sleep, or after they've made love, or when they're sitting quietly at the dinner table, she often thinks, "This is the man I have waited my whole life for."

Cisneros scrutinizes the toxic qualities of machismo, especially in terms of how men turn away from healthy communication and instead gravitate toward violence and alcohol. Indeed, Juan Pedro appears unable to articulate his emotions, which is why he tries to "speak" with his "fists," a cowardly attempt to express himself and acknowledge the fact that he has feelings. Observing this husband of hers—who is so afraid and incapable of showing true emotion—Cleófilas tries to reckon with the idea that he is the man she has "waited" her "whole life for," a notion that seems less and less genuine the more she gets to know him.

Despite Cleófilas's sorrow, there are moments of happiness, like when she comes home from the hospital after giving birth to Juan Pedrito and takes delight in the comfort of her house. Still, she thinks about her father's house, wondering if she can ever summon the courage to return—she considers what the neighbors would say if she came back "with one baby on her hip and one in the oven" (a statement revealing that she's pregnant once again). Confused, they'd ask, "Where's your husband?" Indeed, she dreads the gossip that would swirl through the town.

Cleófilas's fear of gossip recalls Abuelita's mentality regarding Ixchel's pregnancy in "One Holy Night." By spotlighting how women must contend with criticism in the public eye, Cisneros reveals the undue pressure women must face regarding arbitrary notions of what's deemed acceptable; while nobody would question why a man doesn't have a wife, people are seemingly deeply disturbed by the idea that a woman can exist and raise children on her own.

While Cleófilas does the dishes one afternoon, she hears one of Juan Pedro's friends say that what she needs is to be taken sexually from behind. The men laugh in response, and she merely mutters "*Grosero*" under her breath. This same man, she knows, is rumored to have killed his wife at the ice house when one day when the woman attacked him with a mop. "I had to shoot," Cleófilas has heard him say to the laughter of his friends, "she was armed." Juan Pedro tells her that she overreacts to comments like these, but she can't escape the feeling that these stories proliferate throughout the community, as newspapers constantly report similar instances of women found dead and "beaten blue" on the roadside.

It's clear that Cleófilas is living amidst a culture of abuse, one in which violence against woman has been normalized. In fact, spousal violence has become such an ordinary thing that men find themselves joking about legitimate murder, fraternizing without guilt with genuine killers. It's no wonder, then, that Cleófilas feels trapped in a helpless relationship—after all, who will pay attention to her complaints when such intense violence is an everyday phenomenon?

When Juan Pedro's out of the house, Cleófilas goes to the window and watches the *telenovelas* playing in Soledad's house. She thinks about how she used to expect that her love life would be like the ones she sees played out onscreen, which are passionate and perfect—at the same time, though, she notes that even the *telenovelas* seem to have taken on new solemnity, and each episode gets sadder and sadder. Pondering this phenomenon by Woman Hollering Creek one night, she wonders what she would change her name to if she ran away from Juan Pedro.

At this point in her life, Cleófilas turns to telenovelas to find an escape from her violent marriage. She also does so as a way of reconnecting with her Mexican identity, since telenovelas are popular in Mexico. In this small way, then, she's able to regain part of who she was before moving to Texas and cutting herself off from everything familiar to her.

Cleófilas insists to Juan Pedro that she has to go to the doctor's to "make sure the new baby is all right." As she begs him to take her, he makes her promise that she won't mention anything about how he treats her, telling her to say that she fell down the stairs if the doctor asks about her appearance. She also suggests to Juan Pedro that they write to her father asking for a loan to cover the upcoming pregnancy-related expenses, but Juan Pedro rejects this idea. Still, he agrees to drive her to the doctor's the following Tuesday.

Once again, Juan Pedro's machismo attitude brings itself to bear on Cleófilas's life when he refuses to let her ask for a loan from her father. In this moment, he indulges a foolish sense of pride, believing that to ask for help is to show weakness. This fear of weakness is recognizable in other facets of his personality and is responsible for his inability to open himself up to emotion. Indeed, it's clear Juan Pedro has a narrow conception of what it means to be a man, a vision of masculinity predicated on independence and pride regardless of the circumstances.

When Cleófilas goes to the doctor's office, a nurse named Graciela steps out of the room and makes a call to her friend—another nurse—named Felice. "This poor lady's got black-and-blue marks all over," she whispers into the phone. Graciela asks Felice if she can help, asking her to drive Cleófilas and Juan Pedrito to the Greyhound station San Antonio so they can board a bus bound for Mexico. "If we don't help her, who will?" she says. Felice agrees to meet Cleófilas the following Thursday in the parking lot of a Cash N Carry. "Thanks Felice," says Graciela. "When her kid's born she'll have to name her after us, right?" In response, Felice says, "Yeah, you got it. A regular soap opera sometimes."

When Felice jokingly refers to Cleófilas's situation as a soap opera, readers realize that Cleófilas has finally obtained the dramatic passion she once wanted so badly, since her current situation is one that could easily be shown on TV for entertainment. In real life, though this passion has led to nothing but sorrow, and Cleófilas's love for Juan Pedro has "sour[ed]." Passion, then, emerges as a volatile and dangerous kind of love, one that is inferior to the stability of familial love.

When Felice arrives at the Cash N Carry on Thursday, Cleófilas is surprised that she's driving a large pickup truck. On their way to the bus station, they drive over Woman Hollering Creek, and Felice lets out a loud yell that scares both Cleófilas and Juan Pedrito. "I scared you two, right?" she says, laughing. "Sorry. Should've warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler." Going on with her laughter, she points out that nothing else in the area is named after a woman, unless it's named after the Virgin Mary. "I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin," she jokes. In any case, she explains that this is why she likes the name Woman Hollering Creek. "Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?"

Felice's bold attitude and care-free way of talking embodies the kind of agency and power Cleófilas so desperately needs in her own life. Her celebration of Woman Hollering Creek is a welcome sentiment in a story so mired in misogyny and toxic machismo. For the first time, Cleófilas is given a reason—and the permission—to believe in and sing the praises of female independence.

Cleófilas is astonished and impressed by Felice's behavior. She asks if the pickup truck belongs to Felice's husband, and Felice says she doesn't *have* a husband. She explains that she picked out the truck and bought it with her own money. "I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird," she says. "But those cars are for *viejas*. Pussy cars. Now this here is a *real* car." Cleófilas wonders what kind of woman could ever talk like this, but then realizes Felice isn't like any woman she's ever met. And as Felice starts laughing once more, her voice starts "gurgling out of her" throat, "a long ribbon of laughter, like water."

Until this point in the story, Cleófilas has only ever heard foul language issue forth from the mouths of ice-house misogynists talking about assaulting women. Now, though, she listens as Felice—a woman who needs no husband and who makes her own decisions—reclaims this kind of sexist vulgarity, weaponizing the word "pussy" and using it to her own advantage as a way of reinforcing her choice to buy a car most people would think only a man would buy.

THE MARLBORO MAN

Two unidentified speakers have a conversation about the Marlboro Man. "Durango was his name," says the first voice. She explains that her friend Romelia used to live with him. "You *know* her, in fact," she says to the other speaker. "The real pretty one with big lips." In any case, Romelia's friend apparently lived with the Marlboro Man for a year despite the fact that the Marlboro Man was much older than her. "For real?" asks the second speaker. "But I thought the Marlboro Man was gay." The first speaker is surprised to hear this, saying Romelia never mentioned this detail. "Yeah," says the second speaker. "In fact, I'm positive. I remember because I had a bad-ass crush on him, and one day I see a commercial for *60 Minutes*, right? SPECIAL. TONIGHT! THE MARLBORO MAN. I remember saying to myself, Hot damn, I can't miss that."

Cisneros provides no narrative context for this story. There are no visual descriptors, no markers of setting, place, or time. Instead, there are only two voices. And though these voices discuss a very specific cultural icon, their conversation manages to ramble in a circuitous manner. Latching onto the Marlboro Man, they gossip about whether or not the actor who played him was gay, and tell stories about a mutual friend. That they can cover so much conversational ground even when talking about such a specific thing indicates that these two women are good friends simply passing the time, perhaps spending the afternoon chatting on the phone and enjoying one another's voice. In this way, Cisneros evokes a unique kind of love, one that is different from the kind the other stories in Woman Hollering Creek explore: platonic love.

The second speaker reveals that she learned from *60 Minutes* that the Marlboro Man volunteered at an AIDS clinic in his later years before eventually dying of AIDS himself. The first speaker interjects here, saying the Marlboro Man died of cancer, not AIDS. She goes on to say that Romelia lived with him in the countryside, where the couple threw huge parties. Apparently the Marlboro Man was quite eccentric, liking to take his clothes off in public. The second speaker hates to hear this, since she used to have such a crush on him. "Well, yeah," says the first speaker, "That is if we're talking about the same Marlboro Man. There've been lots of Marlboro Men." Eventually she says that perhaps the man Romelia lived with wasn't the *real* Marlboro Man, "but he *was* old" and used to give Romelia hell, "always chasing any young *thang* that wore a skirt."

The first speaker's nonchalance regarding whether or not her story actually relates to the conversation about the Marlboro Man is yet another indication that the actual content of her back and forth with the second speaker matters less than the mere fact that they're having a conversation in the first place. When she admits she might not be talking about the "real" Marlboro Man but then continues her story, readers get the sense that this conversation will continue regardless of its content, that the first speaker will keep telling her friend about Romelia, that the two women will spend the day talking and telling stories, reveling in the joy of close friendship, which so often centers around good conversation and intriguing anecdotes.

LA FABULOSA: A TEXAS OPERETTA

The "Fabulosa" narrator describes Carmen Berriozábal, a woman who likes to call herself "Spanish" even though she's from Laredo, Texas. Because Carmen has very large breasts, men pay a lot of attention to her, but most of the time they just stare at her chest. "Anytime they talked to her they never looked her in the eye," the narrator writes. "It was kind of sad." As one of her lovers, Carmen "keeps" a corporal named José Arrambide, who lives in Fort Sam Houston, away from his home (where he has a long-term girlfriend waiting for him). And even though José is clearly not the love of Carmen's life, he becomes possessive and obsessed with her, allowing her to turn him into her "genuine guaranteed love slave."

The narrator implies that, like most men, José is primarily interested in Carmen because of her large breasts. This lustful attention quickly turns to a sense of ownership, but Carmen doesn't let this curtail her sense of autonomy. Instead, she recognizes the power she holds over José, making him into a "slave." In this way, she subverts his misogyny in order to subordinate him, thereby drawing power from an otherwise oppressive relationship.

"I don't know why, but when you treat men bad, they love it," says the "Fabulosa" narrator. When Carmen meets a well-known Texas senator named Camilo Escamilla, she quickly abandons José. As the senator pays for her to stay in a "fancy condo," José fumes at having lost his lover. First he tries to kill her, but Camilo makes sure the story doesn't reach the newspapers. Then José tries to kill himself. The narrator notes that the story changes depending on who's telling it; José's friends say he eventually carves his initials into Carmen's breasts, but others say he runs off and becomes a bullfighter. Regardless, the narrator explains that Carmen soon leaves the senator for a professional wrestler named King Kong Cárdenas. The narrator herself later sees Carmen in a bar in Helotes, Texas, and Carmen buys her a beer and then "twirl[s] away" to dance.

Carmen appears to somehow remain uninfluenced by José's attempts to claim ownership over her. Her tendency to drift from one lover to the next entails a kind of autonomy that enables her to retain a sense of freedom and independence even when people like José come after her to take revenge for wounding their fragile male egos. Though her experience with José is seemingly turbulent—regardless of whether or not he succeeded in carving his initials into her breasts—she seems unscathed at the end of the story, when the narrator sees that she's still able to dance with a carefree attitude despite the stress and pain of her love life. This, Cisneros implies, is what it looks like to prosper despite an abundance of negative male attention.

REMEMBER THE ALAMO

The narrator of this story is named Rudy, but when he performs as a dancer behind the Alamo theater in Texas on Thursday nights, he becomes Tristán. As the piece progresses, he refers to himself only as Tristán, slipping into the third-person as if watching himself from afar. Between the paragraphs of his narrative run a long list of names: "*Gustavo Galindo, Ernie Sepúlveda, Jessie Robles, Jr., Ronnie DeHoyos, Christine Zamora….*" These names sit alongside his descriptions of his own act, and he neither explains nor addresses their existence.

At the outset of "Remember the Alamo," the inclusion of this long list of names is difficult to understand. Later, though, it becomes clear that Tristán is gay and that he seems to have some kind of terminal illness. Given that Woman Hollering Creek *was published in the early 1990s—as the AIDS death toll in the US continued to rise at an alarming rate—readers can reasonably assume that these are the names of people who have died during the AIDS epidemic, which began in full force in 1981. This haunting presence serves an important role in the entire collection, since this is a book interested in exploring the various ups and downs of love—while other stories have examined the negative consequences of abusive love, "Remember the Alamo" reminds readers that consensual love is unfortunately not without its own possible dangers.*

When Tristán was a child, he explains, he used to listen to rice pop and sizzle in hot oil, and he'd bow and blow kisses to an imaginary crowd. These days, he dances at the Travisty behind the Alamo Mission—"One-man show, girl. Flamenco, salsa, tango, fandango, merengue, cumbia, cha-cha-chá. Don't forget. The Travisty. Remember the Alamo."

During the Texas Revolution, when Mexico and the US vied for control of Texas, a religious mission in San Antonio known as the Alamo was seized from Texan troops by Mexican forces after 13 days of battling for its control. As such, the Alamo is a cultural landmark that represents San Antonio's fraught multicultural identity. The fact that Tristán dances behind a landmark so laden with meaning lends gravity to his story of coming to terms with his own identity as a Mexican-American gay man.

When Tristán dances, the crowd "throb[s]" along with him, watching as he twirls La Calaca Flaca—the skinny skeleton—in his arms. As he dances with Death herself, the crowd is mesmerized; "Tristán takes the fag hag by the throat and throttles her senseless. Tristán's not afraid of La Flaquita, Thin Death." He notes that his family loves him "no matter what" and that his mother's proud of his fame. His sisters are jealous of how pretty he is, but they also adore him, and even his father—skeptical at first of his feminine dancing—sends newspaper clippings of him to relatives in Mexico. Tristán lives the fast, wild life of an entertainer and isn't afraid of tough guys at bars who ask him if he's a fag.

In most of the stories in Woman Hollering Creek, *identity is examined in terms of cultural or national concerns. While this dynamic is certainly at play in "Remember the Alamo"—considering the national and cultural history surrounding the Alamo—the story's main consideration has to do with Tristán's identity as a gay man. The fact that he dances with Death in a highly performative manner aligns with the notion that slowly dying of AIDS in the 1990s often revealed a man's homosexuality, since most people at the time associated the illness with gay men.*

Tristán's dance with Death expands throughout the narrative as he speaks to her (Death) like a lover. He feels best, he says, when he's dancing with her in front of everybody at the Travisty—in these moments he doesn't have to think about "hospital bills or bloody sheets." What he wants is a love "that is never used to hurt anybody. Never ashamed." Addressing the audience directly, he says, "Say it. Say you want me. *Te quiero*. Like I want you. Say you love me. Like I love you. I love you. *Te quiero, mi querido público. Te adoro*. With all my heart. With my heart and with my body." After a particularly long list of names, he ends his narrative with two words: "This body."

When Tristán asserts that he yearns for a kind of love that can't be used to "hurt anybody," a love void of "shame," he evokes and condemns the stigma surrounding AIDS and homosexuality. By drawing attention to his "body," he reminds readers of his humanity, pointing out that AIDS is like any other illness—a physical ailment and nothing more.

NEVER MARRY A MEXICAN

Clemencia explains that her mother has always told her to never marry a Mexican. Having taken this to heart, she says, "I'll *never* marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, and I've helped them to it." Although she used to want nothing more than to "belong" to a man, now she simply "borrow[s]" other women's husbands. And given her mother's advice, it's even less likely that she'll ever marry a Mexican man than it is that she'd marry a non-Mexican man. She posits that her mother instilled this value in her as a way of "spar[ing]" her and her sister Ximena "the pain she went through" after marrying a Mexican man when she was seventeen. Because her mother was born in the US, her husband's family was suspicious of her and felt that their son was marrying "down" by marrying her.

Prejudices abound in the opening of "Never Marry a Mexican," especially as Clemencia describes her mother's advice and its origins, which take root in a the concept of marrying "down." This is an inherently classist notion, as Clemencia's paternal grandparents seem to have believed that anybody of mixed heritage—that is, somebody who isn't fully Mexican—deserves less respect than somebody whose familial lineage remains firmly planted in one culture.

Clemencia thinks of herself as "amphibious," a person who "doesn't belong to any class." When she was young, she moved away from home and lived with Ximena, whose husband recently left her. At this point, Clemencia coveted the idea of becoming an artist, hoping to be like Frida Kahlo. But she and Ximena lived in a dangerous neighborhood, where gunshots rang out all night long. This reminded Clemencia of her childhood, since the two girls grew up in an even worse neighborhood. Once their father died, their mother married a white man despite their protests, justifying her decision by pointing out that she married so young that she never got the chance to be young—"your father," she said, "he was so much older than me." Clemencia holds this against her mother so much that she has disowned the old woman entirely.

The anger Clemencia feels toward her mother has to do with the idea that her mother is disloyal to her father. In her eyes, not only has her mother betrayed her father's love, but she's also betrayed her cultural identity by marrying a white man—of course, this is in keeping with her mother's belief that no woman should ever marry a Mexican man. And while Clemencia seems sometimes to agree with this sentiment, she still appears to want her mother to respect her father's legacy. As such, she condemns marriage in general, turning away from it in her own life in favor of independence.

Clemencia addresses a man named Drew in her narrative, asking him if he remembers speaking Spanish to her as they make love. When Clemencia and Drew lie together, she writes, her skin is dark against his, and he calls this beautiful. He whispers Spanish into her ear while "yank[ing] [her] head back by the braid." Despite these intense moments, though, every morning he leaves before the sun rises. Still, Clemencia admits that she likes when he speaks to her in her own language; "I [can] love myself and think myself worth loving," she says.

When Clemencia says she can conceptualize herself as "worth loving" when Drew talks to her in Spanish during intercourse, it becomes clear that her notions of self-worth and love are entangled in a broader consideration of cultural identity. This makes sense, considering how much attention she pays to her mother's ideas about how romance and cultural identity interact with one another. For her, then, love is a complicated mix of identity and passion.

Clemencia asks Drew if his son knows the role she played in his birth. Pushing on, she insists that *she* was the one who convinced Drew to have the baby—when his wife was pregnant, he was unsure whether or not it was a good idea to have a child, but Clemencia convinced him to not suggest that his wife get an abortion. When it finally came time for his son to enter the world, Drew wasn't next to his wife in the hospital room; while she was in the throes of labor, he was having sex with Clemencia in the very same bed in which his son was conceived. "You're nothing without me," Clemencia tells him now. "I created you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to."

Clemencia's assertion that Drew is "nothing without" her communicates the kind of power she envisions herself as having over him. She prides herself in her ability to steal Drew from his wife. The fact that she takes credit for the birth of his son indicates how influential she thinks she is when it comes to persuading him. However, the idea that she's actually responsible for his son's birth is a bit far-fetched, and readers get the sense that Clemencia is overcompensating for a lack of actual control or power in her relationship with this married man.

Turning her attention more completely to Drew's son, Clemencia says she's been "waiting patient as a spider all these years." And although she has been using "you" to refer to Drew, she suddenly uses the pronoun to address his son, saying, "[…] your father wanted to leave your mother and live with me." She explains that she started sleeping with Drew when she was only 19, which means that she was "his student" in the same way that his son is now *her* student. Indeed, he now sits at her kitchen table and talks to her, and she reflects upon the fact that she could be his mother if he "weren't so light-skinned."

The notion of racial and cultural identity once again comes to the forefront of Clemencia's thoughts regarding love when she notes that Drew's son could be hers if only his skin were darker. What's more, her seduction of his son further solidifies the idea that she approaches romantic relationships with a sense of ownership; in the same way that she draws power from sexually possessing Drew while his wife gives birth, she sleeps with his son as a way of further implicating herself into his life.

Clemencia admits that she has slept with many men while their wives are in labor. "Why do I do that, I wonder?" she asks. "It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it." One night, years after Drew's son is born, Clemencia gets drunk on margaritas and calls his house. His wife picks up and is exceedingly proper, which makes Clemencia laugh. When Drew finally comes to the phone, she says, "That dumb bitch of a wife of yours." She then notes that a Mexican woman would never react in such an obliviously polite manner to a phone call from a woman in the small hours of morning.

Yet again, Clemencia's conception of romance and love is intertwined with the notion of ownership—the "crazy joy" of metaphorically "kill[ing]" women by sleeping with their husbands—and with various ideas regarding racial or cultural identity. Indeed, she calls Drew's wife a "dumb bitch" so that she can cast herself as superior by saying that a Mexican woman would never be as stupid as his wife. As such, she defines her own identity by way of negation, highlighting the difference between her and this "dumb" woman.

Clemencia reveals to Drew's son that she's only met his mother once, when she accidentally ran into her at an art gallery. Drew saw Clemencia and walked over, saying, "Ah, Clemencia! *This* is Megan." Clemencia upholds that "no introduction could've been meaner," and tells Drew's son that she went directly home and put a washcloth on her forehead. On another occasion, she tells Drew's son, she went through his house putting gummy bears in Megan's accessories—Megan was away, and Drew was having Clemencia over for dinner. After Drew made a comment that offended her, Clemencia snuck through the house, smushing candies into Megan's lipstick canister, her nail polish, her diaphragm case. She then found a Russian nesting doll, opened it until finding the smallest doll at the center, and put a gummy bear in its place, pocketing the small figure. On the way home, she dropped it into a muddy stream.

Given Clemencia's childlessness, there's a sense of symbolism to her decision to drop a small nesting doll into a murky creek. It's as if she has made her peace with the fact that she will never have a family, that she is a woman who only takes love from other people rather than finding it for herself. Because she has resolved to never marry, it's unlikely she'll ever have a child of her own, and the act of throwing a baby-like doll into the water—lost forever—speaks to this reality.

"These days," Clemencia writes, she wakes up in the morning and makes coffee for herself, "milk for the boy." She searches for hints of Drew in his son, but can't see any, as if Megan conceived him "by immaculate conception." She says she knows she has this boy in her power, but late at night she gets crazy, and something "poisons the blood," overrunning her with fury. She can't shake the image of Drew lying in bed with Megan, a idea that leaves her distraught. But then she looks around and tries to calm down; "Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it's all right, honey."

Clemencia is a complex character in that she embodies both a fierce sense of independence and a melancholic sense of loneliness. On the one hand, she proudly asserts her will to live independently, bragging that Drew is "nothing" without her but insinuating that she herself doesn't rely on anybody at all. On the other hand, she finds herself deeply troubled by the idea that Drew loves somebody else more than her. Torn between these two poles, she looks beyond herself, reaching out to "all humanity" and realizing that there is a beautiful sense of interconnection that runs throughout human life, as everybody has—at one point or another—experienced both passionate independence and harrowing loneliness. With this realization, she overcomes the divisive mindset her mother has instilled in her about the difference between Mexicans and Americans, finally able to open herself up to a broader understanding of love.

BREAD

The narrator of "Bread" describes a pleasant day spent with her Italian lover. The couple goes to a bakery and fills the entire backseat of their car with loaves of bread. She calls these loaves "fat-ass bread" in Spanish, and her lover responds in Italian. Together they tear into the loaves and play loud tango music. The narrator says everything feels perfect, "like when he wasn't married, like before his kids, like if all the pain hadn't passed between [them]." As they drive through the city, the lover talks about how "charming the buildings are." Meanwhile, the narrator indulges her own perspective, remembering when she was younger and her cousin's baby ate rat poison in one of these buildings and died. "That's just how it is," she says, and the couple drives on, letting their new and old memories mingle as they kiss "between big bites of bread."

In "Bread," Cisneros looks at the transcendental and fleeting moments of connection that often arise between lovers. There's no doubt that this is a happy memory, one that celebrates the small joys of life like eating bread and listening to loud tango music with a loved one. By dwelling in this moment, she reveals an understanding that even bad relationships contain happy moments, since it's clear from the narrator's reference to "all the pain" that "passe[s]" between them that this relationship is not blissful in the long run. Still, the lovers are able to bask in this joyous day, sharing bits of their respective languages and cultures with one another and allowing their memories—new and old—to mingle, creating a composite perspective through which they can both view the world, if only for an afternoon.

EYES OF ZAPATA

As she watches her lover—Emilano Zapata—sleep in her bed, a Mexican woman named Inés reflects on their relationship, the history of the Mexican Revolution, and her relationship with her parents. Zapata is a revolutionary leader fighting for agrarianism in the Mexican Revolution, and before he can wake up and rush away once again, Inés seizes the opportunity to observe him, studying his clothes and body. In the past, he has told her that he doesn't sleep well anywhere but in her bed. Knowing that the war is going badly, she is aware of the fact that Zapata has grown nervous and skittish; as his men begin to fear him and the enemy looms large, he worries that his vision of land reform and prosperity for peasants will die with him whenever he's killed. As she watches him sleep, Inés wishes she could "rub the grief" from him.

"Eyes of Zapata" is the only story in Woman Hollering Creek *that takes place in a bygone era, and Cisneros's choice to focus on the Mexican Revolution is indicative of her greater interest in examining Mexican and Mexican-American cultural and national identity. In "Remember the Alamo" she fleetingly references some of the history that has contributed to the construction of what it means to be either Mexican or Mexican-American, but in this story she more pointedly studies Mexico's history by presenting Emiliano Zapata, a man who lived in real life and led a revolutionary group advocating for land reform. In doing so, she doesn't neglect her other major themes regarding love or female objectification and power, both of which are brought to bear by Inés and her strong feelings for this complicated man.*

Inés, whose two children—Nicolás and Malena—also belong to Emiliano, reveals to readers her ability to rise like a bird over the town. From her high vantage point, she surveys the village and the land surrounding her home, the sound of her "wings" beating in the air. Inés believes that, though she can "abandon" her body whenever she wants, humans never "free [themselves] completely until [they] love." She explains to readers that her father has disowned her because of her relationship with Emiliano; he begs her to reconsider her love, and when she won't do so, says, "Well then, God help you. You've turned out just like the *perra* that bore you." She never feels more alone than after this conversation, packing up her belongings and leaving her father's house forever, though she wants to return and sleep once more against the "cane-rush wall."

Inés's dispute with her father recalls a similar—though less argumentative—moment in "Woman Hollering Creek," when despite her father's misgivings Cleófilas leaves home to live with Juan Pedro. In this case, Cisneros once again highlights the tension that can often arise between familial and romantic love, showing that it's complicated to determine where allegiances and responsibilities lie when a person must juggle lovers and family members. Of course, Inés's father ultimately disrespects her by calling her a "perra" (a bitch) and insulting her mother, thereby chauvinistically demeaning her and driving her away.

Emiliano hates talking about Inés's father. Inés thinks these two men make such "perfect enemies" because they're so much alike. The only difference, she notes, is that her father has always been a terrible fighter, even when he's enlisted to help the government fight off Pancho Villa, yet another revolutionary leader. Her father is injured while fighting and never fully recovers, living the rest of his life with a strange hole in his back that gasps with air as he breathes; when he finally dies, calling out his wife's name, "the syllables came out sucked and coughed from that other mouth, like a drowned man's, and he expired finally in one last breath from that opening that killed him."

Yet again, Cisneros shows that love is a complicated thing, as Inés's father refers to her mother as a "perra" but then dies calling out her name in sorrow. The fact that her name sounds from the hole in his body—near his heart—suggests that his love for her is a visceral, almost bodily force that escapes the mind's control. In other words, while he might think he hates her, his spirit knows otherwise, forcing her name from the depths of his body in the last moments of his life. (For clarity's sake, it's worth noting that Inés has not yet revealed why, exactly, her father calls her mother a "perra.")

Inés continues to tell the story of her relationship with Emiliano. Upon returning from fighting with the cavalry (years ago), Zapata stays with Inés and leads her to believe that he has forgotten about politics, but within the year he gets involved in the governor's campaign. Around this time, he gives Inés a wedding gift of two gold earrings, but reiterates to her that he hasn't agreed to actually marry her. Now, as he sleeps in her bed, she wonders, "What am I to you now, Miliano? When you leave me? When you hesitate?" She admits that she never voices these thoughts aloud because she knows he will tell her "these aren't times for that," insisting that she should wait to bring such things up in conversation. "But, Miliano," she writes, "I'm tired of being told to wait."

When Inés says, "I'm tired of being told to wait," she is unfortunately only saying this to herself, pretending to finally stand up to Emiliano even though he's fast asleep. Herein lies the problem with their relationship—Inés only dares to stand up for herself in private, when Emiliano isn't listening. In real life, Emiliano discourages her from trying to define their relationship, thereby keeping her from possessing any form of romantic power or autonomy. Indeed, he recognizes that she loves him dearly, and exploits this to his advantage, knowing her adoration of him will allow him to act however he wants, even when that means ignoring her feelings.

Overtime, Inés has learned there are women in other villages that Zapata loves, too. One of them is María Josefa in the nearby Villa de Ayala. During the daytime, Inés finds it easy to cope with this knowledge, since she can distract herself with chores. But at night she finds herself distraught at the idea that Emiliano might be with another woman, and one evening she lifts out of herself and flies over the town, eventually spying Zapata sleeping next to María Josefa, who she now reveals is his true wife. Shocked that María Josefa isn't what she imagined, Inés flies close and studies her carefully until María Josefa makes a small noise and Emiliano gently—lovingly—pulls her toward him, at which point Inés feels "a terrible grief inside."

Jealousy and rejection swirl through Inés in this moment as she watches the love of her life give somebody else the attention she wants for herself. Zapata claims he doesn't sleep well anywhere but in Inés's bed, but he seems perfectly at ease next to María, sleeping peacefully in a romantic embrace. On the contrary, the only glimpse readers catch of Zapata in Inés's bed involves no cuddling at all—instead, Emiliano lies separately as Inés watches him.

Inés says that people believe she is the reason María Josefa's children have all died. Apparently certain neighbors think she cast her jealousy and pain onto the children, who perished before even stopping breastfeeding. "You married her," Inés, writes, "that woman from Villa de Ayala, true. But see, you came back to me. You always come back. In between and beyond the others. That's my magic. You come back to me." Still, she wonders what Emiliano has told María Josefa about her. She imagines her lover saying, "That was before I knew you, Josefa. That chapter of my life with Inés Alfaro is finished." Nonetheless, she doesn't allow her confidence to be shaken, saying, "But I'm a story that never ends. Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels."

Inés's pride in the fact that Emiliano always "come[s] back" to her mirrors the delight Clemencia takes in being able to lure Drew away from Megan in "Never Marry a Mexican." In keeping with this kind of loose connection that holds different stories together, Inés evokes the idea of interconnection when she says, "Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels." In this moment, Cisneros seems to be commenting on the construction of Woman Hollering Creek *itself, acknowledging that these stories—and the lives they contain—exist in concert, ultimately depending upon each other despite their differences.*

Since the war, Inés explains, she and her children have grown accustomed to sleeping in hills and forests to escape Zapata's enemies. These enemies even burn her house one night while she's weak with a fever. Hearing a commotion outside, she puts Malena on her back and sets off toward the hills, hardly able to support herself, let alone her daughter. When she returns in the morning, the village looks completely different, and their house is gone. Apparently, Emiliano's enemies have razed everything because, in their words, "Even the stones here are Zapatistas." In response, Inés's neighbors point their fingers at her, saying it's her fault the soldiers destroyed the village. "Then I understood how alone I was," she writes.

That Inés is ultimately punished for her association with Zapata only further emphasizes how unfair and thoughtless it is of him that he won't fully accept her as his primary lover. Having committed her life to this man, Inés now must shoulder an enormous burden without even benefitting from her lover's unmitigated emotional support. This is why she comes to the sudden realization that she's utterly alone as she stands amidst the wreckage, surveying everything she's lost, which includes not only her worldly possessions, but her reputation, too.

Inés relates another tale of similar hardship, this time drawing from her childhood. When she was a small girl, it's rumored she "caused a hailstorm that ruined the new corn." To take revenge, the fellow villagers murdered her Inés's mother, returning her corpse to Inés on her parents' front door. Shunned, she and her father went to live with her aunt, Tía Chucha, who slowly took on the role of her mother. In fact, Tía Chucha is the one who taught her how to rise into the air and look around at hidden things happening far away. Apparently Chucha's own mother taught her how to do this, and now Malena is capable of these powers, too, since Inés has taught her.

As a way of counterbalancing the intense disrespect and hardship the women in "Eyes of Zapata" are forced to undergo, Cisneros imbues Inés and her female family members with an otherworldly power. It's worth considering that this power of sight involves hovering over the village, as if these downtrodden women are literally able to rise above their oppressors, a significant metaphor for resilience in the face of suffering.

As their strange relationship continues, Inés explains to readers, Zapata continues to come and go as he pleases. Eventually he takes their son Nicolás with him, right after the boy loses his first tooth. After leading the boy into battle, though, Zapata quickly brings him back, terrified because Nicolás was captured by the enemy and only narrowly avoided death before Emiliano was able to save him. At this point, Inés's attention strays from this story, and she decides to accept the idea that she might be a witch; "If I am a witch, then so be it," she tells herself, resolving to eat only "black things."

That people think Inés is a witch trivializes her powers, giving them a negative connotation rather than recognizing that she deserves to lift above the town, considering all the hardship she must endure at the hands of a sexist and apathetic man. That she embraces the idea of being a witch—resolving to eat "black things"—is troubling, since it suggests that public perception can negatively influence how a woman sees herself. At the same time, there's no particular reason to think that Inés sees this new label as a negative influence—indeed, her acceptance of the term "witch" ultimately renders the insult harmless.

As Zapata's revolutionary successes rapidly decline, Inés tries harder and harder to understand the nature of their love. "Are you my general?" she asks. "Or only my Milianito? I think, I don't know what you say, you don't belong to me nor to that woman from Villa de Ayala. You don't belong to anyone, no? Except the land." Rising once more above the village into the black night's sky, she sees her future and her past, sees her mother's violent death, watching as male villagers rape her in a field of flowers until finally her lifeless eyes stare into the sky, her braids taken out, a sombrero perched on her head, and a cigar fixed into her mouth.

When the desecration of her mother's body comes to Inés, her ability to see into the past and future works against her, bringing back haunting images of the ways in which men disrespect women. If Inés had a true lover—one who devoted himself to her and supported her emotionally—perhaps she could turn to him and seek his help in shaking from her mind such horrid visions, but Emiliano doesn't "belong" to anyone, thereby remaining closed off to nonsexual intimacies in the same way that a character like Juan Pedro in "Woman Hollering Creek" refuses to open himself up to true emotion.

Looking into the future, Inés sees that Malena has two female twins who will never marry, instead spending their lives selling herbs in Mexico City. She also sees Nicolás as an adult, a man who disgraces the Zapata name by quarrelling with the government because he thinks he deserves a larger portion of land due to his father's prominent reputation. Returning to the present, Inés looks once again at Emiliano as he sleeps, disappointed because the sun has risen, meaning he'll soon leave her. She remembers the first time he kissed her, a beautiful moment under her father's avocado tree. "My sky, my life, my eyes," Inés writes fragmentarily. "Before you open those eyes of yours. The days to come, the days gone by. Before we go back to what we'll always be."

Inés's last line cuts to the heart of the story's conflict: that no matter what happens—terrible violence, passionate love, the birth of children—Zapata will always "go back to what" he is, a man unwilling to commit himself to just one woman. Unfortunately, Inés plays her own part in this dynamic, knowing that she too will go back to being Emiliano's "sometime lover" (as the narrator of "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta" puts it). As such, she will once again resume the role of a passive lover, ignoring her extraordinary powers and the ability to lead an autonomous life, a sacrifice made in the name of a hopeless love.

ANGUIANO RELIGIOUS ARTICLES

The narrator of "Anguiano" warns readers that the owner of a certain religious store is a "crab ass." In need of a **Virgen de Guadalupe** statue one day, she knocks on his shop door and sees him sitting in the dark, ignoring her. When he finally opens up, he looks at her like she's "one of those ladies from the Cactus Hotel […] com[ing] to rob him." Once inside, the narrator has trouble deciding what to buy. Interrupting her decision, the owner approaches, saying, "I can see you're not going to buy anything." In response, she says, "I just need a little more time to think." Unconvinced, the owner replies, "[…] you just go across the street to the church to think—you're just wasting my time and yours thinking here." Disgusted, the narrator yearns to tell him to go to hell, but decides not to, figuring "he's already headed there" anyway.

This story centers around the narrator's rage at the fact that Anguiano dares to pass judgment about her based on her looks. Because she doesn't provide a description of herself to readers, it's difficult to say why, exactly, Anguiano is so eager to banish her from the store, but the fact that he looks at her like she's somebody from the Cactus Hotel suggests that he thinks she's some sort of prostitute or drifter (since the narrator references the Cactus Hotel in such a negative way). Above all, his gruff attitude implies that he thinks only certain kinds of people belong in a religious store, and clearly the narrator doesn't match the stereotype he has in mind. As such, this is a vignette about what it means to belong somewhere, and Cisneros proves that people often form their own opinions about what somebody else can or can't be.

LITTLE MIRACLES, KEPT PROMISES

This story displays letters that have been left on religious altars. Taken together, the letters don't form a cohesive narrative, though some express similar interests and concerns. For example, several worshippers bring up the financial burdens of immigration and moving away from home, writing phrases such as, "My wife and kids and my in-laws all depend on what I send home," and, "I would like for you to help me get a job with good pay, benefits, and a retirement plan." Other letters focus on love and its many difficulties. One woman, for instance, voices her wish that San Antonio de Padua send her a suitable man; "I'll turn your statue upside down until you send him to me," she writes. I've put up with too much too long, and now I'm just too intelligent, too powerful, too beautiful, too sure of who I am finally to deserve anything less."

The letters Cisneros includes in this piece illustrate the kind of expectations people have when it comes to religion. Indeed, the worshippers in this story all seem to expect something in return for their own piety, and some even act as if the saints to whom they're praying owe them something. In these cases, pious respect falls by the wayside as worshippers write phrases like, "I'll turn your statue upside down until you send [a decent man] to me." However, Cisneros presents this with a sense of humor, suggesting that human longing is often accompanied by this kind of humorous petulance and that such behavior is only natural.

In the final letter of the story, which is also the longest, a girl writes to the **Virgen de Guadalupe** and tells her that she has cut her hair off and placed the lock on the altar. Apparently this act has upset her mother, who asks her how she could "ruin in one second what [her] mother took years to create." Having never cut her hair in her entire life, the girl now feels as if she's "shed" it "like a snakeskin." For the past few months, the girl has thought she might be pregnant, but it turns out that she's only had a thyroid problem, a fact for which she thanks the Virgen. "I don't want to be a mother," she says. "I wouldn't mind being a father. At least a father could still be artist, could love some*thing* instead of some*one*, and no one would call that selfish."

The girl's assertion that men can step into parenthood without giving up their entire lives illustrates the sexist misconception running rampant throughout her patriarchal society, a misconception that exempts men from having to fully apply themselves to raising children. Yet again, expectations arise in this story, though this time these expectations are applied to society rather than to the religious world, and this young girl feels the crushing weight of responsibility even before she's even had children.

The girl who cut her hair explains in her letter that she wants to live alone and that she has had a hard time accepting the **Virgen de Guadalupe** into her life because she has always been upset about "all the pain" her mother and grandmother and "all [her] mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God." Because of her unwillingness to accept religion, her family has long called her a heretic and atheist, but she has always refused to hide her beliefs. Now, though, she feels believes in religion and feels as if everything makes sense—"during a farmworkers' strike in California" she realized that "maybe there is power in [her] mother's patience, strength in [her] grandmother's endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power […]."

In this moment, the girl frames religious belief as liberating rather than oppressive. For the first time in her life, she realizes that the women in her family have all grappled with the same idea she herself had trouble accepting—that society expects different things of men and women, especially when it comes to parenting. It's worth keeping in mind that she is writing all of these thoughts to the Virgen de Guadalupe, otherwise known as the Virgin Mary: Jesus' mother and the ultimate symbol of motherhood. Having birthed Jesus by way of immaculate conception, Mary is the epitome of an independent woman, and the girl comes to understand this upon realizing the harsh expectations that men put on mothers.

LOS BOXERS

The narrator of "Los Boxers" speaks to a woman about her child, saying "Whoops!" as the boy spills her soda water in the Laundromat. Cisneros only includes the man's voice, so readers only experience his side of the conversation. Making small talk with this stranger, he says, "But oh kids, they's cute when they're little, but by the time they start turning ugly, it's too late, you already love them." He then starts talking about how expensive this Laundromat is compared to one he used to go to before his wife died. This leads to a longwinded explanation of how he likes to do his laundry, as he tells her that he'd rather hang-dry his jeans than spend an extra fifty cents to use a drying machine. Rambling on, he tells the woman that she should separate her wash loads by weight, putting "towels with towels" and "jeans with jeans."

The narrator of "Los Boxers" is marked as a lonely man by the way he eagerly seizes the opportunity to talk to a stranger. Laundromats are particularly good places for lonely people to hold long-winded conversations with people they don't know, since everybody sits helplessly in front of their machines waiting for the clothes to finish. And although the narrator isn't an unlikeable character—most readers probably pity him for his lonesomeness—it is true that he deigns to tell the woman he's talking to how to do her laundry, as if she herself is incapable of successfully completing such a straightforward task.

The best way to prevent a stain from setting into clothing, the narrator of "Los Boxers" explains, is to put an ice cube on it. He proudly attributes this knowledge to his late wife, saying that though he used to think she was crazy for setting forth such an unconventional method, he now swears by her technique. "Oh boy, she was clean," he says, describing how tidy she kept the house and all of his clothes. "Starched and ironed everything," he says. "My socks, my T-shirts. Even ironed *los* boxers. Yup, drove me crazy with her ice cubes. But now that she's dead, well, that's just how life is."

When the narrator says, "But now that she's dead, well, that's just how it is," he abandons any attempt to make sense of his loss; instead of teasing it out and analyzing the fact that he now misses something that used to annoy him (his wife's laundry techniques), he accepts the reality of his situation, which is that his wife is dead and never coming back. Despite his loneliness, then, he shows himself to be rather well-adjusted, a person who has made peace with the notion that life and love are fleeting.

THERE WAS A MAN, THERE WAS A WOMAN

This piece tells the story of a man and a woman who don't know each other even though they live very similar lives. The man gets paid every other Friday and goes to the Friendly Spot Bar to spend his money on drinks. The woman gets paid on the Fridays in between the man's paydays, and she too goes to the Friendly Spot Bar to drink when she receives her money. The man likes to drink with his friends because he believes "the words for what he [is] feeling [will] slip out more readily" than they might otherwise, but each payday he says almost nothing, simply sitting at the bar and sipping his drink. The woman hopes for the exact same thing, but she too only ever sits quietly at the bar and focuses on the glass in front of her.

The man and woman's desire to articulate a feeling they don't understand—perhaps a feeling of loneliness or discontent—recalls the trouble Juan Pedro and his friends have in "Woman Hollering Creek" with expressing their emotions. Blocked up for whatever reason, these characters hope for some grand epiphany that never comes. The simultaneity of their situations suggests that this is perhaps a universal experience, and the fact that they're never able to make a connection feels like a cruel joke, a trick of fate that keeps them apart.

At night when the moon rises, the woman lifts her eyes to it and cries. At home in bed, the man stares up at the same moon and thinks about "the millions" of people who have looked at it "before him," who have "worshiped or loved or died before that same moon, mute and lovely." As it takes on a bluish hue and comes through his window—shedding itself over him and his "tangled sheets"—he continues watching this mysterious glowing orb, swallowing hard to keep back his tears.

The moon acts as a unifying force in this moment, though it also emphasizes the unlucky rift separating this man and woman from coming together. And while their story is sad and lonely, it's also hopeful, since neither one of them would ever even suspect that the other is out there feeling the same exact thing in the same exact scenario. By allowing readers to see how these two characters are unknowingly connected, Cisneros suggests that nobody is ever as alone as he or she might think.

TIN TAN TAN

A poet named Rogelio Velasco professes his love to a woman named Lupita, whose name he spells out using the first letter of every paragraph (or stanza) in this prose poem. "I have the misfortune of being both poor and without your affection," he writes. "Until death do us part, said your eyes," one of the stanzas begins, "but not your heart. All, all illusion. A caprice of your flirtatious woman's soul." He explains the feeling of having met his "destiny" upon seeing her for the first time, when he arrived in front of her dressed in his uniform and "carrying the tools of [his] trade." Later, he suggests that perhaps he "can exterminate the pests of doubt that infest [her] house." In the final stanza, he asks how "a love so tender and sweet" can "become the cross of [his] pain."

Rogelio's grand proclamations in "Tin Tan Tan" are first and foremost included in this story collection to accompany the following piece, "Bien Pretty." Nonetheless, Cisneros's interest in love and fraught relationships is once again evident, this time taking shape in Rogelio's melodramatic poetry. As such, she prepares readers to learn more about Lupita and the nature of her romantic partnership with Rogelio.

BIEN PRETTY

Lupita opens her story by saying that Flavio Munguía isn't pretty unless you're in love with him. Still, she finds him attractive and knows that "once you tell a man he's pretty, there's no taking it back." As for her own looks, she upholds that Flavio has worn all her prettiness away. This is perhaps because he's such a charmer, a pest exterminator who writes ravishing poetry under the name Rogelio Velasco. One day, Lupita finds an ad for pest extermination and hires the company because she's currently staying in her friends' house, which is infested by cockroaches. She has recently moved from northern California to this house, which is in Texas. She notes that a feeling of trouble has followed her from California but that "not even the *I Ching*" could prepare her for what Flavio has in store for her.

Lupita's statement that "not even the I Ching*" could prepare her for Flavio quickly reveals her interest in eastern philosophy and spirituality, since the* I Ching *is an ancient Chinese text that incorporates elements of cosmology, philosophy, and divination. As such, Cisneros implies that Lupita is somebody who searches for meaning in the unknown. While other characters in* Woman Hollering Creek *look to religion to derive answers about their love lives, it seems Lupita ascribes to less conventional beliefs, marking her as both a unique woman and somebody hungry for answers when it comes to love and the future.*

Lupita's friend Beatriz Soliz was beside herself upon learning that Lupita was moving to Texas. "Lupe, are you crazy? They still lynch Meskins down there. Everybody's got chain saws and gun racks and pickups and Confederate flags." In response, Lupita says Beatriz watches too many John Wayne movies. Privately, though, she admits Texas *does* scare her, but she goes anyway because she's been offered a job as an art director at a San Antonio community cultural center. Plus, she's recently broken up with her boyfriend, so the change of pace is welcome. This is the general mindset she's in when, a month later, Flavio appears to exterminate the house she's living in. As he sprays the baseboards with poison, she realizes he might be the perfect model for one of her paintings, a recreation of an old piece depicting an ancient Aztecan prince and princess in front of a volcano.

Hailing from Northern California, Lupita's connection to her Mexican heritage comes mostly from her bloodline, not from firsthand cultural experience. This is why her decision to recreate a traditional piece of Mexican art—which features ancient royalty—using Flavio as a subject bears a certain amount of cultural insensitivity; while it's true that she's Mexican-American, her desire to portray Flavio as an ancient Mexican prince simplifies him into a caricature of Mexican identity. Of course, this is a complicated issue, since it's also the case that she herself has Mexican heritage and that she's an artist who should conceivably be granted ample freedom of expression. Nonetheless, this slightly uncomfortable cultural dynamic is important to remember as Lupita and Flavio's relationship progresses, since the issue of cultural and national identity takes center stage in their partnership.

After Lupita decides that Flavio absolutely *must* pose for her painting, she asks, "Would you like to work for me as a model?" When he doesn't understand, she tries to clarify, saying, "I mean I'm an artist. I need models. Sometimes. To model, you know. For a painting. I thought. You would be good. Because you have such a wonderful. Face." They both laugh at this, and Flavio good-naturedly packs up his equipment, closes the doors to his van, and drives away.

Disregarding the complex implications of Lupita's desire to paint Flavio in the style of an ancient Aztecan priest, the way Lupita asks Flavio to model for her is—simply put—innocent and flirtatious. Any concerns readers might have about cultural appropriation or tokenism in this moment drops away, since Lupita's sheepish attraction to Flavio is apparent when she says, "You would be good. Because you have such a wonderful. Face." Cisneros's use of periods in this passage beautifully evokes the lovable awkwardness of flirting, and the way they each laugh off this statement suggests that this could be a fun and good-natured relationship (if it progresses).

Every Sunday morning, Lupita visits the Laundromat. While her clothes tumble through the machines, she eats lunch across the street at Torres Taco Haven. One day she finds Flavio at this restaurant and sits down at his table, telling him that she was serious about wanting him to model. "I really am a painter," she says. "And in reality I am a poet," he replies. "Unfortunately," he continues, "poetry only nourishes the heart and not the belly, so I work with my uncle as a bug assassin." After some flirtatious conversation, he agrees to pose for her painting.

When Flavio says, "And in reality I am a poet" and then follows this statement by adding that he works as a "bug assassin" because poetry isn't a viable way to earn a living, he subtly insinuates that Lupita's career as an artist is something only a rich person can indulge. In other words, he senses that she comes from a privileged background. This, of course, is a cynical interpretation of their interaction, and it's worth noting that Flavio's statement about poetry also serves to bring him closer to Lupita, since it now becomes clear that they're both artists, something they can use to relate to one another. In this way, their relationship begins with a mixed dynamic that recognizes their differences on the one hand and champions their similarities on the other.

Lupita explains that Flavio comes from a poor family in Mexico, a family whose only hope was that he might one day find a job that "would keep his hands clean." After working as a dishwasher, a shrimper, and a field worker, he took a job at his uncle's extermination company in Texas, and though the post requires him to face all kinds of disgusting creatures, his hands never get dirty. He explains this to Lupita, saying that working as an exterminator is "better than scraping chicken-fried steak and mashed potatoes from plates, better than having to keep your hands all day in soapy water like a woman," but Lupita notes that he doesn't say the word "woman," but rather the word "*vieja*"; "he used the word *vieja*," Lupita writes, "which is worse."

Though the word "vieja" technically means "old woman" or "old lady," it is usually used as slang for "girlfriend" or "wife." There is, however, another interpretation of the word, which bears much more negative connotations: "whore." Given that Lupita says, "He used the word vieja, which is worse [than the word 'woman']," Flavio is most likely using the word in this negative form. In turn, this is perhaps the first hint that he—like almost all of the men in Woman Hollering Creek*—lacks a certain amount of respect for women. And even if he* doesn't *mean to use "vieja" in a pejorative sense, the sentiment of his phrase still implies the sexist mindset that some jobs are for women only.*

Flavio and Lupita meet at her house every other Sunday so she can paint him. During these sessions, they tell stories and bond. One day, Lupita describes the concept of yin and yang. "Ah," Flavio says, "like the *mexicano* word 'sky-earth' for the world." Impressed, Lupita asks if he learned this from a book about mythology. "No," he says. "My grandma Oralia." Later, Lupita talks about the *I Ching*, insisting that people must "let go" of their "present way of life" in order to "search" for their past. Flavio remains quiet for a moment before saying, "You Americans have a strange way of thinking about time." Although Lupita is hurt that he categorizes her as "American," he continues, saying, "You think old ages end, but that's not so. It's ridiculous to think one age has overcome another." He then adds, "But what do I know, right? I'm just an exterminator."

Lupita's surprise at Flavio's intuitive understanding of yin and yang and the fact that she thinks he learned this from a book of mythology says a lot about what she thinks are legitimate or trustworthy sources of information. Obsessed with discovering concepts from other cultures, she doesn't even consider that Flavio might understand this idea simply based on his own upbringing. This arrogance is perhaps why he later delivers the passive aggressive line, "But what do I know, right? I'm just the exterminator." This conversation is the first time Flavio and Lupita sense their differences.

Flavio comes to Lupita's for dinner one night, and the two talk about music. Flavio reveals that he likes "pure tango," and he pulls Lupita to her feet to teach her *la habanera*, *el fandango*, and *la milonga*, explaining all the while how each style has "contributed" to *el tango*. He shows her the dances his grandmother taught him, but the lesson abruptly ends when she annoys him by asking, "Don't you know any indigenous dances?" He merely rolls his eyes. In a later conversation, in which she asks him why he dresses in such an American style, Lupita tells Flavio that he's a "product of American imperialism." In response, Flavio says he doesn't have to "dress in a sarape and sombrero to be Mexican." Lupita reflects, "I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican."

Flavio and Lupita's conversation leaves Lupita feeling out of touch with her Mexican heritage. This is because Flavio has pointed out her tendency to over-accentuate the trappings of a cultural or ethnic identity. By telling her that he doesn't need to dress in traditionally Mexican clothes to feel in touch with his identity as a Mexican, he emphasizes the fact that she seems to want to go out of her way to define who she is. For her, being Mexican means knowing "indigenous dances" and dressing in a non-American fashion. For him, being Mexican is a simple trait to which he doesn't need to pay very much attention.

When Lupita finally makes love to Flavio, she learns that, in addition to the tattoo on his arm—which says *Romelia*—he has a tattoo on his chest. *Elsa*, it reads. Nonetheless, she enjoys having passionate sex with him, noting that she's never "made love in Spanish before." As she does so now, she can feel the language "whirr[ing] like silk," and she holds Flavio tightly, pushing him into "the mouth of [her] heart" and "inside [her] wrists."

The beauty of Lupita's lust and love for Flavio blossoms in this moment, but it is tinged slightly by the discomfiting sense that she has once again exalted his Mexican identity—his otherness—in her mind. Once more, Cisneros presents a complex portrait of a relationship marked both by good intentions and Lupita's tendency to fetishize Flavio as a Mexican man who can connect her to her Latina roots.

One Sunday morning at Taco Haven, Flavio calmly announces to Lupita, "My life, I have to go." He explains that his mother has written to him asking him to return to Mexico, and he tells her that he has "family obligations" to attend to. He offhandedly mentions something about his sons, and Lupita interrupts, surprised to hear he has children. "How many?" she asks. "Four. From my first," he says. "Three from my second." Startled, she asks what he's referring to—"First. Second. What? Marriages?" He casually shrugs this off, saying, "No, only one marriage. The other doesn't count since we weren't married in a church." Suddenly feeling like she's going to vomit, Lupita tells Flavio to leave, and he stands from the booth, saying, "*Es* cool. *Ay te wacho*, I guess."

Flavio's casual attitude in this moment—which for Lupita is deeply emotional and upsetting—exhibits an extreme lack of respect for her feelings; though for him this relationship may not mean very much, it's clear she was beginning to truly fall for him, so his aloofness in this moment is all the more aggravating. Furthermore, he seems to have a history of treating women poorly, given the fact that in this moment he completely denounces a former wife simply because they "weren't married in a church." Even the way he says goodbye is so casual that it belies a deep disrespect for Lupita's feelings, as he stands and merely says "see you later" in Spanish.

After breaking up with Flavio, Lupita desperately searches out her healing crystals at home and puts on tapes of "Amazon flutes, Tibetan gongs, and Aztec ocarinas" while trying to "center" her "seven chakras." Unable to calm herself even after 45 minutes, she still feels like bashing Flavio's head in. In the coming weeks, she burns his letters and poems and stops painting. Instead, she watches TV, tuning into *telenovelas* and becoming obsessed with their storylines. Each night she rushes home from work, picking up tacos instead of making dinner so that she can catch the latest episode.

In the wake of Flavio's absence, Lupita turns her attention to telenovelas as an attempt not only to tune out her own reality—which she doesn't care to participate in at the moment—but also as a way of fulfilling her interest in Mexican culture. Though her affinity for Flavio may have originally borne complicated implications regarding cultural tokenization, it's also the case that she genuinely liked him and was interested in entwining herself in his life in a way that naturally allowed her to better understand his Mexican heritage. No longer able to do this, she finds herself turning to telenovelas.

In Centenao's Mexican Supermarket one day, a cashier says to Lupita, "*Bien* pretty, your shawl. You didn't buy it in San Antonio?" Lupita tells her it's Peruvian but that she bought it in the US. The cashier sees a magazine Lupita's holding, which has a picture of a *telenovela* star on the front cover, and the two women discuss the show, talking about how they never miss an episode. Lupita notes that the cashier is her age but looks much older and more tired, despite the large amounts of makeup on her face.

Having holed up in her house to watch hours of telenovelas as a way of distracting herself while also maintaining a connection to Mexican culture (a connection Flavio previously supplied), suddenly Lupita finds herself interacting with a fellow Latina, talking about their favorite Mexican show and treating one another as equals. This isn't a dynamic Lupita could ever have had with Flavio, who viewed her as an American, not a Mexican-American. As such, this is a pivotal moment in Lupita's recovery from her breakup with Flavio, a moment that helps her understand that she doesn't need to go out of her way to be who she is—she can simply go to the supermarket, be herself, and interact with people who are like her and who accept her cultural identity for what it is.

In the coming days, Lupita returns to her painting of Flavio, in which he is an Aztecan prince crouching over a sleeping princess in the foreground of two volcanoes. Setting herself to the task, she reverses the positions of the subjects so that now the princess is the one watching over the prince. Meanwhile, life goes on—she drifts through the grey weeks of January, observing sunsets and birds flying through the sky. "And every bird in the universe chittering, jabbering, clucking, chirruping, squaking, gurgling, going crazy because God-bless-it another day has ended, as if it never had yesterday and never will again tomorrow," she writes. "Just because it's today, today. With no thought of the future or past. Today. Hurray. Hurray!"

Lupita's reversal of the prince and princess reflects a newfound sense of power and agency, which she now possesses after having realized that she doesn't need to be Flavio's girlfriend in order to define herself as Mexican-American. This is perhaps also why she admires the birds who have "no thought of the future or past," since she herself no longer feels as if she needs to obsess about the history of her bloodline nor what kind of cultural identity she'll assume in the future. Free of these hang-ups, she can focus on the present, celebrating life just because "another day has ended."

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