The Curing Woman Study Guide

The Curing Woman by Alejandro Morales

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Introduction

Alejandro Morales's short story "The Curing Woman" was first published in 1986 in *The Americas Review*. It was reprinted in the anthology *Short Fiction by Hispanic Writers of the United States* (Houston, 1993). "The Curing Woman" draws on the traditional Mexican folktale, but it also possesses elements of social realism and magical realism. Set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Spain, Mexico, and California, it describes the life of Doña Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm. Marcelina is a young woman who leaves her home at the age of thirteen to be reunited with her mother. Her mother, who is a traditional healer or *curandera*, trains Marcelina in the healing arts. Marcelina then travels to Mexico, where she apprentices herself to two more master healers. She then makes her way to Simons, California, where she becomes widely known for her practice of the art of *curanderismo*. The story centers on one cure in particular, that of a boy named Delfino, who suffers from a malady that cannot be explained or cured by other doctors.

Author Biography

Alejandro Dennis Morales was born October 14, 1944, in Montebello, California. His parents, Delfino Morales Martínez and Juana Contreras Ramíriz, had immigrated to California from Guanajuato, Mexico. Morales grew up in East Los Angeles, where he attended elementary and secondary schools. Morales married H. Rohde Teaze on December 16, 1967.

Morales earned a bachelor of arts from California State University in Los Angeles and a master of arts and Ph.D. in Spanish in 1971 and 1975, respectively, from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Morales is known primarily as a novelist who records and interprets the Mexican American experience. His first novel, *Caras viejas y vino Nuevo*, was written in Spanish and published in 1975 in Mexico City. It examines the conflict between generations in a Mexican American community. It was revised and edited before being translated as *Old Faces and New Wine* (1981). *La verdad sin voz* (Mexico City, 1979) was translated as *Death of an Anglo* (1988). It continues the theme of the earlier novel, drawing on actual accounts of conflict between Chicanos and Anglos in the town of Mathis, Texas.

Reto en el paraíso (Challenge in Paradise) was published in a bilingual edition in 1982. It was based on a hundred years of Mexican American history and myth.

In 1986, Morales published two short stories, "Cara de caballo" and "The Curing Woman," followed within a few years by two novels in English. *The Brick People* (1988) examines the lives of two families—one family owns a brick factory and the other family includes an immigrant laborer who works at the factory. The story begins in the nineteenth century and is based on real events. *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) consists of three selfcontained but thematically related stories about outbreaks of disease in different time periods in Mexican and Mexican American history. The first story takes place in colonial Mexico, the second in present-day Mexico and southern California, and the third is set in the mid-twenty-first century in the high-tech society of Lames.

Morales is a professor in the Spanish and Portuguese Department at the University of California, Irvine, where he has taught since 1975.

Plot Summary

"The Curing Woman" tells the story of Doña Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm. Marcelina is born into a rich, aristocratic family in Spain. Her mother is one of the family's servants. When her mother is forced to leave the service of the family at the end of her ten-year term, Mrs. Trujillo Benidorm, the wife of Marcelina's father, refuses to let her take nine-year-old Marcelina with her.

Marcelina is heartbroken. When she looks at her mother's face as her mother is leaving, she realizes it is like looking into a mirror; it is as if her mother had given birth to her own twin.

For four years Marcelina is well cared for and receives a good education. Then one morning a servant brings her a piece of paper, and the information contained on it leads Marcelina to travel to a place called Alhambra. In one of the caves in the hills that overlook the town, she meets her mother again, whom she has not seen or heard from for four years.

Marcelina spends seven years with her mother, learning the art of healing. When her mother realizes Marcelina has learned everything she has to offer, she sends her away. Marcelina, now age twenty, travels on a ship to Veracruz on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. In Veracruz she is met by a man called "El Gran Echbo," who is a teacher and a healer. Marcelina is apprenticed to him for several years. Near the end of that period, she meets María Sabina, a saintly woman renowned for her healing abilities. María Sabina teaches Marcelina everything she knows, and then the two of them travel to Mexico City by an ancient route known only to a few.

The journey is hard on Marcelina, and she falls into a trance-like state. She awakens in María Sabina's shack in the poorest section of Mexico City. María Sabina tells her that the city is dangerous and that in four days' time Marcelina must leave and journey north. Then María Sabina disappears.

Marcelina travels north through a country ravaged by the violence of political revolution. She treats the sick and wounded. She finally crosses the border into the United States, and travels by train for three months until she reached Simons, California.

Some time elapses. Concepción Martínez and her eldest son Delfino walk toward Marcelina's home. She is now known as Doña Marcelina, the *curandera*. The two women have been friends for years, and Concepción is taking her son to Marcelina for treatment. Delfino has a strange illness. He is losing weight and is weak and delirious, but the doctors can find nothing physically wrong with him. The illness may be the result of a fire that consumed the family home. Delfino thought his family had perished, and the shock may be causing the malady. But no one really knows.

When Marcelina greets them at her house, Delfino for a moment sees her as both an old woman and a beautiful young girl. Marcelina guides Delfino into a small room, and

his mother waits behind. Delfino notices a painting on the wall of a man sitting on a wheelbarrow with a woman sitting on a block in front of him. Under the painting is a wheelbarrow with a black block in front of it. Marcelina asks Delfino to sit in the wheelbarrow. Then she sits on the black block in front of him. She prepares potions and sings a litany of prayers and incantations. Concepción watches from the doorway as Marcelina struggles to defeat the spirit that is eating away at Delfino's body. Delfino's physical appearance changes until he looks like Marcelina. After a while a grotesque form appears on Marcelina's lower back. It becomes like an octopus and wraps its tentacles around her waist. Marcelina eventually makes it disappear. Delfino reappears in his own body, and feels refreshed and free again. He recalls nothing of what has happened. He is surprised to find that he is wearing Marcelina's jacket. He takes it off and places it in the wheelbarrow. Later Marcelina gives Concepción some potions which Delfino is to take for the next nine days. Delfino waits while the two women talk. He looks back into the room where he was treated. He notices that the painting on the wall has changed. The man has disappeared. He turns around to tell his mother, but finds himself in front of his own home waiting for his mother to open the door.

Summary

"The Curing Woman" is the short story of a Spanish woman named Dona Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm who learns the ancient art of curing from her mother and two other healers and eventually settles in California where she successfully heals the son of a friend. The story begins by establishing the aristocratic heritage of the protagonist, Dona Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm, who is born into a wealthy and highly respected family in Spain. The girl's parents were generous with charities but never associated with people less fortunate than they. Marcelina is the only daughter in this family of four children and was conceived by her father and one of the servant girls working in the home.

Marcelina's birth mother is forced to leave the home at the end of her ten-year service and begs to take the now nine-year-old Marcelina with her but Mrs. Benidorm, Marcelina's father's wife, will not allow it. Mrs. Benidorm has grown to love the girl and she also wants Marcelina to stay in the house to remind her husband of his sinful infidelity. Marcelina is devastated and feels as if she is looking into a mirror as she watches the departing face of her mother on that sad day. Marcelina continues to live in the house for four more years and receives a good education and love from the family. Marcelina never hears a word from her real mother until one day she receives a piece of paper from a servant containing travel information to a town called Alhambra. The next morning Marcelina makes the journey to this place and finds her real mother. Marcelina feels a surge of energy at the sight of her mother and they speak wordlessly when their hands touch after all this time.

For the next seven years Marcelina lives with her mother and her mother's husband and learns the healing arts as well as the practices of all religions and spiritual teachings. The day arrives when Marcelina's mother realizes that her daughter has learned everything she can in the mountains and sends Marcelina out into the world. Marcelina is now twenty-years-old and leaves for Cadiz where she boards a ship going to Mexico. Sad to leave her mother Marcelina is also fearless with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and looks forward to her new life.

When she reaches Mexico, a healer called El Gran Echbo, who teaches her the spiritual ways of the Caribbean people for several more years, hosts Marcelina. Marcelina's next instructor is a woman named Maria Sabina known for communicating with the cosmos through her knowledge of animals and plants. One day Marcelina and Maria Sabina begin the journey to Mexico City on a secret path through jungles, mountains and swamps.

Marcelina succumbs to the powers of the sun and her own mind energy and awakens only when she is in Maria Sabina's shack in a town called Tepito. This part of the city is very dangerous and Maria tells Marcelina that they must leave soon but that they must part company. The older woman tells Marcelina to leave within four days and to head north and with that, Maria Sabina is gone.

Marcelina is overwhelmed with sadness but the sounds of the guns from the Mexican revolution propel her onward. Along her journey Marcelina hears of a town called Simons, which is in California where Mexican people live and work in peace and happiness. Marcelina sets her sights on this mecca and is undeterred traveling for three months by train until she reaches Simons from which she will never leave.

Many years pass and a woman named Concepcion Martinez reflects on the friendship she has shared with Marcelina and how she has never taken advantage of Marcelina's healing powers. On this day though, Concepcion needs the help of her friend for the sake of her son Delfino who has an illness, which the doctors cannot heal. Delfino loses weight while eating quite healthily and has periods of delirium that are thought to be brought on by the memory of a fire that destroyed the family home.

Delfino is not sure he wants to visit Marcelina but realizes that she is his last hope. As mother and son approach Marcelina's home a breeze tickles the back of Concepcion's neck and ruffles her hair and Delfino feels as if he is walking into a photograph. When Delfino sees Marcelina for the first time he thinks Marcelina looks like an old woman and a young girl all at the same time.

Marcelina escorts Delfino into a pristine white room where Delfino sees a painting of a man in a wheelbarrow which has a block in front of it upon which a woman sits. Both people in the painting are praying amid a stormy background. Directly below the painting sits a wheelbarrow and a block mimicking the scenario in the painting. Marcelina takes a seat on the block and asks Delfino to sit in the wheelbarrow and then the woman begins her prayers and incantations and creates some potions in the process.

Watching quietly from the doorway, Concepcion sees her friend struggle with the demons which possess the body of her son until at one point Delfino takes on the appearance of Marcelina. After much physical and spiritual struggle an ugly creature emerges from Marcelina's back ultimately taking the form of an octopus wrapping itself around Marcelina's waist. Fortunately Marcelina knows how to destroy evil and the creature is soon gone and Delfino returns to his own body feeling renewed and vitalized. Now fully awake, Delfino learns that it has been several hours since he entered the white room and is amused to find that he is wearing Marcelina's jacket.

Marcelina provides some potions for Delfino to take for nine days. As Delfino waits for his mother to say goodbye to Marcelina he looks back into the curing room and notices that the man in the wheelbarrow is now missing from the painting. As Delfino turns around to tell his mother of the change he realizes that he is standing in front of his home waiting for his mother to open the front door.

Analysis

The main theme of the story is healing through spirituality and nature, which is often prevalent in Hispanic literature. Marcelina has her first experience with this spiritual

realm when she sees her mother's departing face and also sees herself as if she is looking into a mirror. A few years later Marcelina is presented with a piece of paper containing only a few words of travel instruction and makes the journey guided only by her instincts and no formal word from her mother.

There is much hard work involved in the process of becoming a curing woman and Marcelina learns the religions prevalent in Spain and then journeys to Mexico to learn the spiritual practices of that culture. Marcelina's physical travels symbolize the spiritual and emotional journey she is also taking and when she arrives in California she knows she will always stay there as her inner being tells her that she is ready to teach and cure and there is no need for more travel.

The author shares little events that indicate that the spiritual world is at work all the time in spite of human awareness. The mention of the breeze ruffling Concepcion's hair as she approaches Marcelina's home is a little bit of foreshadowing and anticipation that higher more powerful forces are about to come into play for Concepcion and Delfino. There is little fact presented in the story with the exception of the mention of the Mexican Revolution and the details of Marcelina's healing room in California. The author provides these touchpoints of reality for readers unfamiliar with the mystical storytelling well accepted by Spanish and Mexican cultures.

The Hispanic culture has a proclivity toward spiritual literature and the situation where Marcelina actually inhabits Delfino's body is one that is readily understood and accepted. When Delfino realizes that the composition of the painting has changed and he immediately finds himself on the sidewalk in front of his home it is not clear if these events actually occurred or if the author is asking the reader to make the leap that all things are possible and that the spiritual world has as much, if not more, power than the physical world in which people normally dwell.

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Characters

Doña Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm

Doña Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm is the protagonist of the story. She is born into an aristocratic, Catholic, Spanish home, the daughter of Trujillo Benidorm and a female servant of the family. Her servant mother is sent away from the family home when Marcelina is nine years old, but Marcelina has to stay behind. Four years later Marcelina goes in search of her mother and finds her near the town of Alhambra. Marcelina then begins a long apprenticeship to become a *curandera*, or traditional healer. She has three teachers: her mother; a man named El Gran Echbo, whom she meets in Veracruz, Mexico; and María Sabina, a woman who is known for her healing abilities. When her apprenticeship is over, Marcelina travels with María Sabina to Mexico City, and then quickly travels north. As she goes north she treats the wounded from the civil war ravaging the country. Continuing to travel north, she crosses the border into the United States and reaches Simons, California, where she sets up a practice as a *curandera*. She earns a reputation amongst the townspeople as a mysterious woman, and the local children avoid her. One of the patients she successfully treats is Delfino. Marcelina remains in Simons for the rest of her life.

Mrs. Trujillo Benidorm

Mrs. Trujillo Benidorm is the wife of Marcelina's father. She has three sons of her own, but she is not Marcelina's mother. She and her husband are well respected in their society, and they are known for their charitable works. But they are also snobbish and keep company with only a few select aristocratic families.

El Gran Echbo

El Gran Echbo is a wise man and healer who takes in Marcelina as an apprentice upon her arrival in Veracruz, Mexico. He teaches her everything about the spirit of the New World, adding to the knowledge she learned from her mother.

Concepción Martínez

Concepción Martínez is a friend of Marcelina's in Simons, California. Concepción is in awe of her friend's knowledge and abilities, and she takes her son Delfino to her for treatment.

Delfino Martínez

Delfino Martínez is the eldest son of Concepción Martínez. He suffers from a malady that doctors cannot cure. The illness may have been caused by the shock of the fire that consumed his home, in which he believed at first that all his family had been killed. Delfino's mother takes him to see Marcelina. It is their last hope, and it is rewarded. Marcelina cures him.

María Sabina

María Sabina is a woman with saintly qualities. She is also a renowned healer with a deep knowledge of plants and animals. Marcelina meets her in Veracruz, and María Sabina becomes Marcelina's final teacher, instructing her in all the ancient wisdom she knows. María Sabina takes Marcelina with her to Mexico City, where she leaves her, giving her instructions to travel north.

Yerma

Yerma is Marcelina's mother. She is a servant in an aristocratic house but is asked to leave when her ten-year term expires. She then marries and trains to become a healer, a *curandera*. She bears no other children. When Marcelina finds her in Alhambra, Marcelina stays with her for seven years, learning everything her mother knows about the healing arts. After Marcelina leaves Yerma for Veracruz, the two never meet again.

Themes

Spiritual Healing, Magic, and Cosmology

"The Curing Woman" is about the power of a great traditional healer to cure physical illness by working on the spiritual level. The work of Doña Marcelina rests on a dualistic theory of the universe in which there are good and evil powers. There is also a fluid interchange between spiritual and physical worlds. What this means in practice is that a person's illness may have causes other than merely physical ones. Since natural and supernatural worlds interact, evil spirits can take over a person's body and cause illness. But a skilled healer who understands how the cosmic forces operate can overcome these evil spirits.

The traditional (as opposed to modern medical) knowledge Marcelina learns from her mother in Spain is very eclectic, drawn from Moslem, Jewish, and Christian sources. All these religions have strong roots in Spain. Within the Christian tradition, there was a system of healing known as "white magic," which used the occult (hidden) properties of natural things, such as herbs, plants, and minerals, to effect cures through "sympathies" and "antipathies" that were believed to exist between those natural things and elements within the human body. White magicians would also use other esoteric methods, including chants and incantations (as Yerma does in the story), and formulas that would take into account astrological influences. The tradition of white magic in Europe was undermined by the rise of science, but it lived on in practitioners such as Yerma.

When Marcelina arrives in Mexico she learns something new: the wisdom and cosmology of the Aztecs, the civilization that flourished in Mexico until the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in the early sixteenth century. The clue to the fact that Marcelina learns Aztec wisdom is in the language that María Sabina speaks and which she teaches Marcelina. It is Natuatl, which was the language of the Aztecs (still spoken in parts of Mexico today). Aztec cosmology, like the religious traditions Marcelina absorbed from her mother, is dualistic. One of the forms that dualism takes is between male and female forces. Marcelina mentions Ometechuhtli-Omecihuatl, which are the primordial deities in Aztec cosmology. They are known respectively as "Lord of duality" and "Lady of duality." Additionally, the "four suns of the mandala" that Marcelina contemplates may be a reference to the sequence of four world ages in Aztec cosmology, known as Jaguar Sun, Wind Sun, Rain Sun, and Water Sun, each age ruled by a different god.

It is only by immersing herself in this knowledge that Marcelina is able to effect the cures she does. Because she understands how all the cosmic forces work within her own person and is able to magically transform the patient's body so that it resembles her own, she is able to locate the nature and form of the invasive spirit. The healing process incorporates strong elements of Christianity. These include the prayers Marcelina says before she begins her work and the signs of the cross she makes as she prepares another potion. The pulling out of the evil spirit seems to resemble a

Christian exorcism. Thus her work as a *curandera* seems to fuse elements of Christianity with indigenous Mexican folk healing.

The story also suggests that although this kind of traditional healing may be a gift, it also requires long training. Doña Marcelina has to go through many years of training to acquire her knowledge of how to heal others, which involves learning from people who are themselves masters of their art. It is a wisdom that cannot be learned from books.

The Mystery of Identity and the Self

The story has several mysterious elements that cannot be rationally explained. For example, when she is nine years old, Marcelina has a realization that she is not only her mother's daughter but also her twin. She looks in a mirror and sees that she looks exactly like her mother. Perhaps the explanation for this is that for a moment, the spiritual dimension of life shines through. Just as in the future, her mother will study and become a *curandera*, so will Marcelina; their roles in life become identical. As a young girl, Marcelina has a foretaste of this spiritual level of their relationship.

Another mysterious moment which also involves the breakdown of the apparently solid walls of the individual self is when Delfino, in the course of his treatment, takes on the actual physical appearance of Marcelina. This is startling for Concepción, who gazes at her son in the form of her friend. This mysterious transference suggests there is more to life than the accepted, common sense belief that individuals are completely separate and different from one another. There is no rational explanation why Delfino finds himself wearing Marcelina's jacket, other than the fact that it serves as a symbol for what happens in the process of healing. Within the tradition of *curanderismo* it appears that it is possible for two individuals to temporarily merge into one.

This mystery of psychic and even physical transference extends further, into the realm of art. Just as the separation between natural and spiritual worlds, and the boundaries between individual selves, are not fixed and absolute, nor is the division between life and art. The details of the painting that Delfino sees at the end of his treatment are different from the way they were before. The man, who surely represented the sick Delfino, has been removed from the painting. Perhaps this suggests that the way art is viewed is entirely dependent on the perceiver, who will see it differently according to his own state of mind. Another possible meaning is that art can imitate or reflect life in ways that cannot be rationally explained.

Metaphor of the Journey

After she leaves her home when she is thirteen years old, Marcelina undertakes many journeys. She travels to find her mother in another part of Spain, and then after seven years goes south to the port city of Cadiz, where she sails for Veracruz, Mexico. After some time, she travels again, this time to Mexico City. Then she undertakes the longest journey of all, to Simons in California. The many journeys she takes, although they are

literal journeys, are also metaphors for her inner journeys, her mental and spiritual preparation for the calling she is to pursue, that of a healer.

The symbolic nature of the journey is strongly suggested by the description of the route that Marcelina and María Sabina take on their way to Mexico City. It is a "an ancient secret path known only to a chosen few," which is also a perfect description of the extensive training Marcelina has undergone in order to become a *curandera*. The spiritual nature of this inner journey is emphasized when, on the way along this "secret path" to Mexico City, Marcelina gains insight into the divine principles that operate in the cosmos. The final stage of both the outer and the inner journey (which she must make alone) is to Simons, California, which is the fulfillment of the journey. Marcelina spends the rest of her life putting into practice the wisdom she has attained.

Style

The story combines elements of the folktale with social realism and the style known as magical realism. The opening sentence, "This is the story that Doña Marcelina Trujillo Benidorm told her friend Concepción Martínez when they met in Simons, California," makes the story sound as if it is part of a tradition of oral storytelling. The folktale elements include the brevity of the story, its wide time span, the dignified, noble emotions ("infinite sadness," "immense sorrow") and the simplicity of many of the descriptions: the rich aristocratic family, the "beautiful" servant, the "beautiful" daughter, the "lovely" mother, the "saintly" healer. In literary fiction, as opposed to folktales, adjectives such as "beautiful" are used very sparingly and are usually amplified with more specific details.

Countering the timeless folktale elements is the social realism of the setting, which is especially noticeable when Marcelina travels through Mexico. The realistic setting allows the time period of the story to be pinpointed. Marcelina's journey through Mexico takes place during the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and continued for much of the following decade. In the second part of the story, the realism increases, which can be seen in the detailed descriptions of Doña Marcelina's house, for example.

Finally, the magical realism can be seen in the unexpectedness and sheer impossibility, from a rational viewpoint, of Doña Marcelina's cure, which is nonetheless embedded within the realistic framework of the story. The final line also, in which Delfino finds himself suddenly in front of his own home, as if he has been magically whisked there, gives another nonrational twist to the story. It is almost as if Delfino has dreamed the whole incident, or imagined it.

Historical Context

Curanderismo is the Mexican American system of folk healing. The word comes from the Spanish word *curar*, which means "to heal." *Curanderismo* has a long history, and it is still practiced in the twenty-first century in Mexican American communities, as an alternative system of healthcare to mainstream Western medicine.

Historically *curanderismo* has evolved through many influences. It incorporates practices that go back to Arabic medicine introduced in medieval Spain. (The Spanish connection is emphasized in "The Curing Woman," since it is in Spain that Marcelina's mother accumulates her knowledge of healing.) The Arabic practices were brought to Central America by the Spanish conquerors in the sixteenth century. The Spanish also brought Christianity with them, which is another major influence on *curanderismo*. The *curandera* (female healer) or *curandero* (male healer) may utilize symbols and rituals drawn from Christianity (for example, Doña Marcelina prays and makes the sign of the cross as she prepares to heal). The Bible has plenty of information about the healing properties of plants, and Christianity rests on a dualistic universe of good and evil that also underlies the beliefs central to *curanderismo*.

The Spanish conquerors also assimilated from Native Americans and the Aztecs in Mexico further knowledge of the medicinal properties of herbs and plants. Another influence on *curanderismo* was European witchcraft. According to Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira, witchcraft involved the belief that "supernatural forces can be controlled by man himself, rather than their having undisputed control over him." Supernatural power can be tapped into by those "who possess the correct incantations, prayers, and rituals."

Curanderismo makes a distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" illnesses. As one researcher of *curanderismo* writes (quoted in Trotter and Chavira), "A harmonious relationship between the natural and the supernatural is considered essential to human health and welfare, while disharmony precipitates illness and misfortune." For those who believe in *curanderismo*, supernatural illnesses cannot be treated by Western medicine. Thus in "The Curing Woman," Delfino cannot be cured by the psychiatrist that his mother takes him to see. Such supernatural illnesses may be caused by a *brujo* (witch or sorcerer) or *espiritus malos* (evil spirits).

Curanderos therefore conduct healing on the spiritual as well as the physical level. They usually believe that they are doing the work of God, and that their healing powers are a gift from God; healing is only done through God's mercy. However, in spite of this religiosity on the part of the healers, they are sometimes regarded as being agents of Satan, which makes some people wary of seeking their help. In the modern world, the hostility to *curanderos* often comes from evangelical Christian churches. Other, nonreligious people may oppose *curanderismo* because they believe it is only a collection of old superstitions that should be disregarded.

Although many of the illnesses treated by *curanderos* are recognized by Western medicine, there are also some that are known as "folk diseases" and appear to be exclusive to *curanderismo*. Four diseases in particular are frequently diagnosed: *mal de ojo* (evil eye), *envidia* (extreme jealousy), *mal puesto* (hexing), and *susto* (extreme fright or fear). In *mal de ojo*, a look, glance, or stare from an enemy or stranger can be interpreted as an attempt to give this illness to someone. *Mal de ojo* results in headaches, irritability, and other symptoms. *Envidia* may produce symptoms similar to those found in a variety of anxiety disorders. *Mal puesto* may be inflicted by someone who knows witchcraft; symptoms include paranoia and gastrointestinal problems, among others. Finally, *susto* produces symptoms that are like post-traumatic stress disorder: fatigue, restlessness, withdrawal, depression, and change in appetite. It is *susto* that Delfino suffers from in "The Curing Woman," although in the story *susto* is used also to describe the evil spirit that is causing the condition.

Another aspect of *curanderismo* apparent in "The Curing Woman" is that the healer always works from his or her home and shares the same cultural background as the people he or she treats. As Martin Harris points out in his paper "*Curanderismo* and the DSM-IV": "In addition to sharing their clients' geographic location, the curers share patients' social/economic, [sic] class, background, language, and religion, as well as a system of disease classification." So in the story, Doña Marcelina and Concepción Martínez are friends. They share the same beliefs, as does the patient, who is Concepción's son. The fact that the patient shares the worldview of the *curanderismo*, especially regarding the supernatural element in disease, is an important factor that allows healing to take place.

There have been a number of famous *curanderos*. Don Pedrito Jaramillo (?-1907), who lived in Falfurrias, Texas, was famous for his cures that often made use of water. A shrine to Don Pedrito was built around his tomb, and pilgrims continue to visit this shrine, seeking cures. "El Nino" Fidencio Constantino (1898-1938) of Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, was a self-taught *curandero* whose healing powers, which he believed came from God, were apparent very early in his life. El Nino would perform surgeries using only shards of glass and sewing needles, while the patient remained fully conscious. Thousands flocked to see him, and chapels to him have been set up in Mexico and in the United States, as far north as the state of Washington.

Critical Overview

Morales has chosen to concentrate principally on the novel rather than the short story. His novels such as *The Brick People* (1988) and *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) examine and interpret the experience of Mexican Americans in a variety of contexts. His critical reputation as one of the most important of contemporary Mexican American writers rests with his novels. Morales's short-story output, which consists only of "Cara de caballo" and "The Curing Woman," is too small to attract critical attention. However, it is clear from "Cara de caballo" and *The Rag Doll Plagues* that Morales has more than a passing interest in *curanderismo*. Like "The Curing Woman," the plot of "Cara de caballo" includes magic potions and mysterious transformations. There is an emphasis on events that cannot be rationally explained. *The Rag Doll Plagues* is notable for the magical realism also found in "The Curing Woman," and it presents an aspect of *curanderismo* that has not received much attention from historians: the persecution of the *curanderos* by the Spanish after their conquest of Mexico.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses magical realism and shows how other fiction by Morales reveals his interest in curanderismo *and sheds further light on "The Curing Woman."*

Morales is known as a writer who explores the Mexican American cultural heritage and often uses the techniques of magical realism to do so. Magical realism deals with the "transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal," writes Angel Flores in the essay "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." This describes exactly what happens in "The Curing Woman," and it is not surprising that a magical realist writer should be fascinated by the topic of *curanderismo*. Morales's interest in the topic is apparent not only in "The Curing Woman" but also in the only other short story he has published, "Cara de caballo." *Curanderismo* also plays a part in his novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992).

All *curanderos* are magical realists who can transform reality and blur the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. This is their job, their calling. In "The Curing Woman," not only is Doña Marcelina able to heal through a strange process whereby the body of her patient, Delfino, takes on her own physical characteristics, she is the means whereby Delfino's universe (and therefore the reader's too) suddenly becomes magical. It no longer obeys the rules Delfino has come to expect. A painting magically changes its composition, and he is inexplicably transported to a different location in time and space. This event takes place within an utterly realistic framework, as can be seen by the matter-of-fact, detailed way in which Doña Marcelina's house is described. Doña Marcelina can therefore be seen as the catalyst that makes life full of magical possibilities. Her art of *curanderismo*, like magical realism, breaks the mold of rational expectation.

As Zamora and Faris write in their introduction to *Magical Realism:*

Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts.

In addition to strange magical transformations, "The Curing Woman" hints at an abundance of ancient, esoteric lore that over the years was incorporated into the practice of *curanderismo*. It is no accident, for example, that Marcelina spends "seven happy years" learning the healing arts from her mother. Seven is a sacred number in many religious traditions, including Judeo-Christian tradition. It often symbolizes completion, or the whole of something. Examples include the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine in Egypt (Genesis 41: 53-54), and the seven churches, seven golden candlesticks, seven angels, seven thunders, and seven heads, to name just a few examples from the Revelations of St. John the Divine, in the New Testament. The

number seven often occurs in folktales and myth, and it also has a symbolic value in magic and witchcraft.

Similarly, the number nine was sacred to the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, as well as later European magicians, because nine is a multiple of the number three, which was considered to be the perfect number. As Trotter and Chavira point out in their book *Curanderismo*, the number nine figures prominently in *curanderismo*. It may designate the length of a cure or the number of times a ritual must be performed. So it is not surprising that the potion Doña Marcelina gives Delfino to complete his cure must be taken for nine successive days.

The exact purpose of this potion in "The Curing Woman" is not stated, but potions given not by a *curandera* but a *brujo* (witch) figure prominently in Morales's short story, "Cara de caballo" ("Horse face"). Like "The Curing Woman," this story taps into traditional folk beliefs, and features a surprise magical transformation that shatters the everyday realism that normally governs life.

"Cara de caballo" is a brief story, covering only four pages. It tells of the marriage between the beautiful Doña Arcadia Bandini and a wealthy, much older man named Abel Stearns. Both were from prominent families in southern California in the nineteenth century. Stearns had a reputation as one of the ugliest men in California; his face was disfigured, and he was called *cara de caballo*. The couple had no children; this was deliberate on Arcadia's part because she did not want to risk passing on her husband's ugliness. To ensure her infertility, she consulted local *curanderos*, who prescribed a regimen of special baths, herbs, and potions. She outlived her husband by many years and remarried. At the turn of the century, at the age of about seventy, she remained as beautiful as she had been when she was twenty. Legend had it that she was consulting a *brujo*, who gave her a potion made up of ground-up brown insects. She had to take the potion every day to conserve her beauty and her youth. One day she failed to drink the potion and her face was transformed into a *cara de caballo*. The few servants who witnessed the transformation lived only long enough to tell the tale.

"Cara de caballo" refers to both the *curandera* and the brujo. Their function in the story is different, but in Mexican American culture, *curanderos* were sometimes regarded as *brujos*. Although *brujos* would often use magic in service of harmful ends, they also had the capacity to heal the sick. In such cases, when both *brujos* and *curanderos* were able to heal, there remained, in theory, a vital difference: *brujos* were thought to use dark, Satanic forces to achieve effects that would not otherwise be possible, whereas *curanderos* worked only with holy powers. However, in practice this distinction was not always easy to perceive.

In "The Curing Woman" there is a small clue that *curanderos* and *brujos* were sometimes linked together in the minds of the people—when Delfino confesses he is somewhat frightened by the prospect of visiting Doña Marcelina's house: "Doña Marcelina had always been a mystery to the townspeople, someone the children stayed away from." It appears that the parents in Simons, California, were unsure of exactly what powers the *curandera* called upon to effect her cures. (In fact, the presence in

Doña Marcelina's house of pictures of the Passion of Christ, and her making the sign of the cross as she prepares her potions, demonstrates that she is, so to speak, on the side of the angels, but not all the locals appear to be aware of this.)

Historically, attitudes of hostility and suspicion towards *curanderos* go back to the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century. The Spanish persecuted the *curanderos*. A glimpse of what this must have been like is described in another work by Morales, his novel *The Rag Doll Plagues*. In the first of the three books that comprise the novel, Don Gregorio Revueltas, a physician and surgeon to the king of Spain, has been sent to Mexico City, where a plague is ravaging the people. The year is 1788. Don Gregorio is extremely prejudiced against the local Indian population. In particular, he dislikes the *curanderos:*

These [Spanish-speaking] *curanderos* were dangerous and had caused the deaths of thousands. Worst of all were the Indian *curanderos* who practiced witchcraft in their native tongue. They had to be prevented from practicing their evil craft.

The native tongue Don Gregorio complains of is possibly Nahuatl, the language Marcelina learns from María Sabina in "The Curing Woman."

But *The Rag Doll Plagues* also shows that some of the Spanish rulers had a more enlightened attitude to *curanderismo*. Don Gregorio meets a Catholic priest, Father Jude, who after being badly wounded by pirates was taken in by a *curandero* who cared for him. Father Jude lived with the man and his family for five years. The *curandero* taught him everything he knew, and for the last year of his stay Father Jude became the principal practitioner of *curanderismo* in the village.

Later, Father Jude takes Don Gregorio to see Father Antonio, a distinguished and highly respected Spanish Catholic doctor. When Don Gregorio asks him what he would do to improve medical conditions in the country they call "New Spain," Father Antonio replies:

The Holy Office must stop persecuting the *curanderos*, for they are an asset to us. Many are truly learned *texoxotla ticitl*, doctors and surgeons. It is not important that they speak Latin. They save more lives with their vulgar language than we do with our sanctified words.

Thanks to the wisdom of those such as the fictional Father Antonio, the Spanish colonizers' persecution of the *curanderos* gradually disappeared. Over the centuries there was a twofold cultural interchange. More of the Spanish learned the art of *curanderismo*, and, as Christianity spread, more and more *curanderos* incorporated aspects of Christian theology and devotional practice into their work, as "The Curing Woman" shows.

In the modern Mexican American community, hostility to *curanderos* has not entirely disappeared. Those who embrace Western medicine believe *curanderos* are purveyors of ignorant superstitions. Others continue to link the *curanderos* with witchcraft. On the other hand, among those who respect *curanderos*, there is a feeling that these healers are set apart from others, that they are different from ordinary people because of their

special gifts. Either way, the practitioners of *curanderismo* are special figures in their communities. And from the way Morales presents his *curandera*, the fictional character Doña Marcelina, it is clear that the *curanderos* are the ones who can challenge and confound our own beliefs about what is possible and what is not.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The Curing Woman," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Trotter and Clavira provide background on curanderismo, or Mexican American folk healing.

At least six major historical influences have shaped the beliefs and practices of *curanderismo* by Mexican Americans in the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices (combined with Greek humoral medicine, revived during the Spanish Renaissance); medieval and later European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; modern beliefs about spiritualism and psychic phenomena; and scientific medicine. None of these influences dominates *curanderismo*, but each has had some impact on its historical development.

Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices provide the basic framework for *curanderismo*, just as for most Western cultural systems. The Bible and the teachings of the Church have been combined with folk wisdom to produce a foundation for the theories of both illness and healing that make up much of the structure of *curanderismo.*

The Bible has greatly influenced *curanderismo* through references made to the specific healing properties of animal parts, plants, oil, and wine (for example, see Luke 10:34). Humans are clearly instructed to use the resources, beginning with the general principle set forth in Genesis 1:29-31 that all the plants and animals were created for man's use and reinforced with the specific, statement, "The Lord has created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not disparage them."

The pharmacological information in the Bible is fairly extensive for that time, but it is less important in its influence on *curanderismo* than are the basic concepts of healing embodied in the Bible. The principal concept found there can be termed "God's power over man." There are two aspects to this concept: first, the belief that God can and does heal directly; and second, the idea that people with a special gift from God can heal in his name.

The first method, healing through divine intervention, is common in the Bible. It is often used as a sign of God's presence among the masses. Such signs include the examples of Jesus' healing found in the New Testament:

Wherever he went, to farmsteads, villages, or towns, they laid out the sick in the market places and begged him to let them simply touch the edge of his cloak; and all who touched him were cured.

The second biblical foundation for folk healing, the healing power of faith, originates in the Apostles' instructions to the Church after Jesus' death. In these instructions, healing was directly linked to faith in God and in prayer:

Is one of you ill? He should send for the elders of the congregation to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man, the Lord will raise him from his bed, and any sins he may have committed will be forgiven.

Similar passages provide the rationalization for the existence of Mexican American folk healers as individuals, not as a part of the organization of the Church itself. Several *curanderos* referred to the following passage in the Bible to justify and explain their activities:

In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose. One man, through the Spirit, has the gift of wise speech, while another, by the power of the same Spirit, can put the deepest knowledge into words. Another, by the same Spirit, is granted faith; another, by the one Spirit, gifts of healing, and another miraculous powers; another has the gift of prophecy, and another ability to distinguish true spirits from false; yet another has the gift of ecstatic utterance of different kinds, and another the ability to interpret it. But all these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit, distributing them separately to each individual at will.

Today these biblical principles are found in the healing beliefs and practices of many (but not all) modern *curanderos*. These healers explain that their healing abilities are a gift (*don*) from God, and that they heal through his power and through the patient's belief in God.

The concept of the soul, which is central to the teachings of Christianity, also contributes to the *curandero's* theories of healing, in particular those cures performed by *curanderos* working as spiritualists (*espiritistas* and *espiritualistas*). Belief in the soul affirms the existence of saints and devils, as well as the immortal soul of ordinary human beings. The belief that souls or spirits (*espiritos*) can either aid or hinder the healer promotes the desire or need for *curanderos* to contact them and petition them to use their powers for good or evil ends. While the idea of the soul has a strong biblical base, it was greatly expanded during medieval and modern times and has become a part of the shamanism and sorcery found in modern *curanderismo.*

Finally, the constant biblical theme of the dual worlds of light and darkness, good and evil, health and illness, life and death runs throughout the practice of *curanderismo*. This symbolic system links all of the areas of *curanderismo* together. To heal may be a sign from God, since health is linked to light and goodness. To harm someone is to work in the absence of light (*un trabajo obscuro o negro*). Such an act promotes evil and illness. This dichotomy between good and evil is expressed on each of the levels of power recognized by both the Bible and by *curanderismo*: on the human level the *curandero* heals and the *brujo* (witch or sorcerer) harms; on the spiritual level benevolent souls and saints can bring luck, health, and contentment, while malevolent souls and demons bring misfortune, illness, and misery; on the highest level of existence God (the light and giver of health) opposes Satan and his evil works. Within *curanderismo* this duality presents a constant theme of oppositions integral to understanding it.

Preconquest Spain had the best-regarded system of medicine available in the Western world. The Spanish healing system combined earlier Greek and Roman practices of Hippocratic medicine with the highly successful Arabic medical practices introduced in Spain by the Moors. The Spanish medical theories and practices were brought to the New World at the time of the conquest and were eventually influenced by Native American healing practices.

Anthropologist George Foster (1953) notes the major theoretical components of the Hippocratic base of Spanish medical beliefs.

The Hippocratian doctrine of the four "humors"— blood, phlegm, black bile ("melancholy"), and yellow bile ("choler")—formed the basis of medical theory. Each humor had its "complexion": blood, hot and wet; phlegm, cold and wet; black bile, cold and dry; yellow bile, hot and dry. . . . Natural history classification was rooted in the concept that people and even illness, medications, foods, and most natural objects had complexions. Thus, medical practice consisted largely of understanding the natural complexion of the patient, in determining the complexion of the illness or its cause, and in restoring the fundamental harmony which had been disturbed.

During the introduction of these medical beliefs into the New World, the duality of wet and dry was for all practical purposes lost. The continuing importance of the hot-cold syndrome has been emphasized repeatedly in the literature about Latin American folk medical beliefs. However, the importance of the hot-cold dichotomies varies from area to area and is especially weak in south Texas. Even though one can find in Mexican American communities in south Texas residual folk sayings and household beliefs that reflect this hot-cold dichotomy, it does not play a central part in the theoretical structure of *curanderismo*. This absence is noted by Madsen:

Hippocratic medicine was introduced into Mexico in the 16th century and is still a basic part of Mexican folk medicine but is of little significance in Mexican American folk medicine of South Texas. Minor stomach upsets are believed to be caused by eating too many hot or cold foods in most communities, but the hot-cold complex is completely lacking in some localities.

Similar results were obtained from our own research, although a continuing emphasis was placed on both the hot-cold (and even with one *curandera*, the wet-dry dichotomies) by people knowledgeable about herbal remedies (*yerberos*).

The Hispano-Arabic medical system contributed two important theories to Mexican American folk medicine. First, it contributed the idea that health consists of a balanced condition. The lack of harmony with the environment (social and spiritual as welt as physical) produces illness, and the readjustment or removal of this imbalance becomes the primary function of the healer. Thus the basic tenets of *curanderismo* are to produce and protect a holistic relationship between the individual and his total environment. Second, Spanish medical theory contributed the idea that medicinal remedies can be discovered in plants and animals, an idea that is reinforced by the teachings of the Bible. This emphasis on herbal medicines caused many individuals to search out and

experiment with new sources of medicine in both the Old World and the New. These two themes, the restoration of health through the restoration of balance to the patient and the experimentation with and use of herbal remedies, have had an enduring influence on the practice of *curanderismo.*

The major symbols used in the rituals of *curanderos* (numbers, words, and objects), the structure of those rituals, and the theoretical explanations given for success in healing substantiate the importance of Old World historical influences on Mexican American folk medicine. The symbols used in healing rituals are overwhelmingly part of the Western cultural tradition. The numbers most frequently used to designate the length of cures, number of times rituals are performed, and other magical sequences of activities are all within the Judeo-Christian system of symbolic numbers (primarily 3, 7, 9, and 11; occasionally 13 for certain negative magical rites). Many of the objects used to promote healing are of Old World origin: olive oil, lemons, garlic, chickens, camomile, votive candles, and the crucifix, to name a few. Finally, the structure and theory of the *curandero*'s healing arts come primarily from more recent European and New World sources of the theory and practice of witchcraft, spiritualism, psychic phenomena, and modern medicine, such as the *Grimoire* and the writings of Allen Cardec.

The ideas embodied in medieval and later European witchcraft have contributed heavily to the theoretical base of *curanderismo*. These ideas were constantly reinforced in the popular mind throughout the period of intensive witchhunting that lasted from the early fifteenth century, through its peak around 1600, and into its decline and final disappearance in the early nineteenth century. This coincides with the discovery, conquest, and colonization of the New World, and it can be assumed that these popular concepts accompanied the conquerors. Fortunately, the more ferocious and disgusting practices of the witch burners seem to have been left at home, with the brief exception of the Salem witch trials.

The basic theoretical premise of witchcraft and sorcery is the belief that supernatural forces can be controlled by man himself, rather than their having undisputed control over him. This belief, combined with the teachings of Christianity, creates a dual philosophical system within *curanderismo*. This duality is symbolized by the differences between a religious orientation and a magical orientation. That duality is aptly described by E. A. Hoebel:

That which distinguishes religion from magic is neither the goodness of one nor the evil of the other, but the state of mind of the believer and his consequent modes of behavior. . . . In the religious state of mind, man acknowledges the superiority of the supernatural powers upon whose action his wellbeing depends. His attitudes are preponderantly those of submission and reverence. . . . The magician, on the other hand, believes that he *controls* supernatural power under certain conditions. He feels confirmed in his belief that if he possesses a tested formula and if he executes it perfectly, barring outside interference, he will get the results which that formula is specified to give. The supernatural power has no volition or choice of its own. It must respond. The magician works with a confidence similar to that of a student in the laboratory who knows that if he follows the manual instructions correctly, he will obtain a predictable result. The

religious attitude and behavior are devout; the magician works with a kind of arrogance —or, at least, selfassurance.

These philosophies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can be and have been combined into a single belief system, where that theoretical system has many flexible facets and is not yet totally integrated into a single theoretical framework. This condition exists in modern scientific medicine, with its official acknowledgement of the physical, psychological, and spiritual components of human health and illness, and its unofficial acknowledgement of the "miracle" of faith. And *curanderismo* shares this theoretical flexibility, although the emphasis placed on the importance of each of these components of the system is somewhat different.

Two closely related concepts from European witchcraft continue to influence modern *curanderismo*. The first is a belief in the existence of a source of supernatural power that can be tapped by human beings who possess the correct incantations, prayers, and rituals. The ingredients used in the spells and the words or even the languages used for the spells may have changed somewhat through time, but many of the rituals used by both *curanderos* (to heal) and *brujos* (to harm) follow the structure of formulas from the Middle Ages and later.

The second is a belief in the ability of some *curanderos* to control or influence spirit beings. Control of spirit beings is exercised through the knowledge of various incantations, prayers, and rituals that can bring about direct human control over spirits. The structure of the spirit-controlling rites is similar to the structure of those designed to tap supernatural power.

One final influence on *curanderismo*, traced to medieval European beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery, has resulted in confusion within the Mexican American community over the ultimate source of the healing power demonstrated by folk healers. One group maintains that the power to heal comes from God; the other group, primarily members of fundamentalist religions, insists that the healing *curandero*'s performance is inspired through the power of Satan. This is a traditional dichotomy in Western tradition, as is pointed out by Givry:

We find the theologians in opposition to the demonists. If cures have taken place at Lourdes or any other sanctuary consecrated by the Church, they are the undeniable work of the Deity. But, similar cures have so taken place in circumstances where the disapproval of the Church has been clearly shown; these cures according to the Church, are the work of the Devil. Hence, the Devil holds in his hands curative powers equal to those of God.

The possibility that the *curandero* may be working through the Devil causes some of the confusion over the moral rightness of seeking help from a proven healer in Mexican American communities. Powerful *curanderos* are restrained from practicing sorcery (antisocial magic) only by their own moral conscience. Each *curandero* has the option of working through good or evil sources, and many people fear them even when seeking

their help. There is always the possibility that some spiritual harm may come to the patient even while he is being cured of his malady.

The belief that *curanderos* may be the devil's agents on earth is most pronounced among fundamentalist groups and pentecostal churches. These churches are growing rapidly in Mexican American communities, and their members seem to feel that all works of the folk healers are inspired by the Devil (with or without the knowledge of the healer). They quote appropriate passages from the Bible that demonstrate that the Devil is loose in the world and that these works (the healings) are the kind the Devil uses to subvert mankind by performing miracles. This attitude, combined with a fear of the unknown, and perhaps unknowable, source of the *curandero*'s power produces confusion about the morality of using the *curandero*'s services. The more powerful *curanderos* publicly admit that both good and evil sources of power are available to them, a fact that increases their reputations but does nothing to allay doubts about the morality of their calling.

Some of the most recent influences on *curanderismo* arise from the writings of the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century European spiritualists and psychic researchers. The growing importance of the scientific method during the last few centuries, and the end of persecution for witchcraft, touched off intensive and wide-ranging investigations of the validity of ghosts, spirits, mediums, fortune tellers, telekinesis, and a hundred other psychic phenomena. Most of this research was anecdotal, with occasional exceptions such as the work done at the Rhine Institute at Duke University. Most researchers have been content to pile one report, one case, one anecdote on top of another in the hope that others will be convinced of the validity of psychic phenomena. Other writers have ignored the necessity for proof altogether by assuming these phenomena exist and have devoted their energies to sharing their knowledge with the other adepts through the reporting of ancient sources of knowledge or through writing of their own experiences and knowledge gained from direct experimentation. The publication of such works has created an enormous volume of information, misinformation, and speculation that is currently available to the general public and to believers. One result has been the spread of both spiritualist and psychic healers from Europe to the United States and Mexico.

The most influential spiritualist writer is Allen Kardec, who is directly responsible for the recent rapid growth of "spiritual temples" in Mexican American communities. Kardec has produced a series of works that explain the structure, maintenance, and function of spiritual healing centers and provide careful descriptions of the rituals, prayers, and incantations necessary to the temple ceremonies.

Another important spiritualist movement is based on the life, teachings, and spirit of a famous young folk healer (now dead) from northern Mexico, el Niño Fidencio. The *Fidencitas* have built large temples in several Mexican cities, with smaller ones scattered around Mexico and the United States (including Chicago). These *centros* are staffed by trance mediums who, often in flower-decked rooms, don purple robes, go into trance, and (in their words) let the spirit of el Niño descend on them, their bodies forming a link between the material and spiritual realms of existence. Through this

linkage, the immortal spirit of el Niño performs cures, does consultations, even predicts the outcome of future events for the members of his cult.

Spiritualist healing is now taught in *centros espiritistas* in Mexico and by traveling adepts from these *centros*, as well as by local adepts. Many professional *curanderos* state that today many imporant parts of their healing knowledge come through spiritual training (*desarrollo*) and subsequent contact with the spiritual realm. They claim some of their cures are done through the use of spiritual knowledge that simply comes into their minds or comes from spiritual voices (*las voces*), while other cures are carried out directly through the agency of spirits themselves. These spirits are those who have agreed to aid the *curandero* in his or her work.

The phenomenon of psychic healing is also becoming more common among *curanderos*. It is said to be performed by the *curandero* directing psychic energies (*corrientes mentales*) directly at the afflicted organ—a form of mind over matter. The importance of psychic healing to the theories held by *curanderos* is rapidly growing, especially in urban areas.

The effects of the medical knowledge, beliefs, and practices of American Indian groups on *curanderismo* have varied significantly from area to area. The most important influence in all areas was the impact that the incredibly rich and extensive knowledge of medicinal herbs existing in Native American groups has had on European pharmacology. One of the first tasks undertaken by individuals in expeditions to the New World was to discover and classify new plants and animals, making careful note of their medicinal properties. The lack of sufficient doctors and medical facilities in the New World caused books about these newly discovered medicinal herbs, along with their Old World counterparts, to be disseminated throughout Mexico, especially in the frontier regions. The direct descendants of these books are still widely used by both Mexican and Mexican American housewives.

The most important of the early botanical books and medical compendiums, according to anthropologist Margaritta Kay, was the *Florilegio Medicinal*, a three-volume set encompassing medicine, surgery, and pharmacology. Written by a Jesuit lay brother, Juan de Esteyneffer, this work had a lasting effect on the practices of folk medicine along the northern frontier areas of New Spain.

The work of the 16th century natural historians of Mexico had already been incorporated into the knowledge of the European apothecary. These included Hernandez (via Ximinez 1615) who had been sent by Philip II of Spain to report on the *materia medico* available in New Spain, and Nicolas Monardes, the Spanish physician, who wrote knowledgeably about these herbs without ever leaving Spain. Sahagun's data were not available until 1829, but his influence was felt through Martin de la Cruz and Juan Badianus, who produced the beautiful Badianus manuscript of 1595 in which indigenous herbs are given humoral classification. For Esteyneffer, the most important writer of this kind was Farfan.

Farfan, mentioned in the above quote, had written a book in 1592, *Tractado Breve de Medicina* to aid the poor and people in rural areas by providing them with remedies and cures from both New and Old World medicinal herbs. This book may have inspired Esteyneffer to produce his own larger treatise on the same subject.

The *Florilegio Medicinal*, through Esteyneffer's teaching efforts among the Jesuits in the missions of northwestern Mexico, is at least partly responsible for the blending of Old and New World cures for many of the folk diseases and other illnesses recognized by Mexican Americans throughout the southwestern United States. It is also responsible for similar beliefs and practices among such different American Indian groups as the Papago, Pima, Yaqui, PaiPai, Tarahumara, and Tepehuan, among whom the Jesuits also had missions.

Nentuig spoke of the "old Spanish women who have either set themselves up or have become in the natural course of the events the College of Physicians of Sonora." I think they used the *Florilegio Medicinal*, which compiled the herbal lore of various Indians of the Southwest, combined it with the *materia medica* of Europe, attached them to disease conditions that were scientifically recognized in the eighteenth century and diffused this knowledge throughout the Northwest of Mexico and the Southwest United States. For *pasmo, alferecia, empacho, mollera caida, tirisia* and *pujos*, which have first been explained by Esteyneffer and are still diagnosed today, are cured by the same herbs.

Other bits of information were added to the immense herbal knowledge of *curanderismo* through direct contact with various American Indian groups, and through individual experimentation on the part of the Spanish settlers in the northern frontier areas. The fact that access to modern medical services is still limited by poverty, isolation, and discrimination in south Texas has encouraged the use of this herbal knowledge up to the present.

The other influences that Native American folk medicine has had on *curanderismo* are more difficult to isolate. In many of the border areas, such as the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, the environment supported only scattered groups of hunters and gatherers before the influx of the Spanish. Thus, the amount of contact between settlers and Indian groups was far less than between the conquerors and the larger agriculturally based Indian populations in Mexico and parts of South America. In the Southwestern Pueblo Indian complex, where greater contact might have been possible, these exchanges were limited by suppression of Native American beliefs and activities and secrecy on the part of the Indians. Further Native American influences may be revealed to be a part of *curanderismo* as more research is done in this area, but as of now Mexican American folk medicine seems to have primarily a European historical and theoretical base.

Until the development of extensive irrigation works in the early 1900s, most of the southwestern United States was best suited for ranching and very small scale farming. People lived on scattered homesteads, isolated from the medical resources of the cities. Very few health-care professionals were attracted to the area because of the lack of

facilities, small population, and the immense distances. Herbs, prayers, and faith in the *curandero*'s healing ability were often the only medical resources these people had to combat either illness or accident.

Urban centers grew as irrigation works were developed. These towns and cities were progressively linked by roads, telegraph, railroads, and other communication systems tying the Southwest more directly into the political and economic centers of the United States. Previously the region had been isolated or had been more directly linked to northern Mexican towns than to centers in the United States. New concentrations of people in the Southwest, and the wealth associated with the agricultural and mineral industries being developed, have attracted growing numbers of doctors, nurses, and medical services to the area. Thus modern medical practices began to influence the practice of *curanderos* in areas like the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Yet even after modern medicine became established in the area, poverty, discrimination, prejudice, and cultural barriers to communication and understanding combined to deny many Mexican Americans access to the new medical system. For these excluded people the *curanderos* continued to provide the best available care.

Today *curanderos* in urbanized areas like south Texas recognize and accept the diagnosis of many, if not most, diseases defined by Western medicine. Some even use modern drugs, anatomical charts, and clinical facilities that closely resemble a doctor's office in their own practices. More commonly they simply recognize conventional categories of disease and refer patients to doctors for those diseases which modern medicine has proven highly successful in healing. In addition, they recognize certain diseases that mimic, for instance, tuberculosis, asthma, and cancer, but are thought to be caused by magical works placed on the patient by *brujos.*

Since the return of World War II veterans, more and more Mexican Americans have gained entrance into the mainstream of American society, including its medical system. However, too many people are still very poor, even though there is a growing middle and upper class made up mainly of businessmen and professionals. The result of this change is that some Mexican American patients now make use of both *curanderismo* and modern medicine. We shall now consider why people prefer one system to the other or, more commonly, use both simultaneously.

Source: Robert Trotter II and Juan Antonio Clavira, "The History of *Curanderismo*," in "*Curanderismo": Mexican American Folk Healing*, University of Georgia Press, 1981, pp. 25-40.

Topics for Further Study

Are traditional methods of healing, such as *curanderismo*, a valuable complement to modern medicine, or are they made up mostly of outdated superstitions? Explain your answer based on your research.

Research the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s that is mentioned in "The Curing Woman." Why did the revolution take place, and what was the outcome?

What role, if any, do faith and belief have in healing? Should a cure work regardless of whether the patient believes it will?

Provide a definition for "magical realism" along with some examples of other writers who have used this element in their stories. Does magical realism take the reader closer to the truth about all aspects of life in a way that simple realism cannot? If so, in what sense?

Research and discuss some aspects of traditional Mexican culture and belief. Is it important for Mexican Americans to preserve their cultural heritage? What are the advantages and/or disadvantages for any immigrant group in preserving their cultural heritage?

What Do I Read Next?

Morales's first English novel *The Brick People* (1989) makes use of magical realism as well as historical facts to tell the story of Mexican Americans in California from 1892 to the 1940s. The focus of the novel is on the brick factory owned by wealthy white Americans and the Mexican immigrants who work there.

Cuentos Chicanos (1984), a revised edition edited by Rudolfo A. Anaya and Antonio Márquez, contains twenty-one stories that cover the full range of Chicano literature including stories derived from oral tradition and complex narratives. The anthology includes established writers, such as Anaya and Sergio Elizondo, as well as emerging new writers.

Mexican Americans, American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos (1993) by Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Ribera covers Mexican American history from the time of the Spanish conquest to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and recent immigration laws. The book includes maps and a glossary.

Rudolfo A. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) is not only one of the most popular Chicano novels ever written, it also provides a wealth of insight and information about *curanderismo*. The novel centers on Antonio Marez, who is six years old when Ultima, a *curandera*, comes to stay with his family in New Mexico. Through Ultima's knowledge and wisdom, Antonio discovers the richness of his cultural heritage.

Further Study

Griego, José, Maestas Anaya, and Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Cuentos: Tales from the Hispanic Southwest*, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1981.

The twenty-three tales collected in this volume feature elements of magic and witchcraft that are also prominent in the work of Morales. The tales draw on the traditions of the early Spanish settlers and their descendants in New Mexico and southern Colorado.

Toor, Frances, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways*, Crown, 1947.

Toor provides a wealth of information about the customs, myths, and folklore of Mexico, as well as its dances, fiestas, and songs. She also recounts her experiences of being treated on several occasions by *curanderos*, although her account is affected by her cultural bias, since she plainly does not believe that *curanderos* have much value to offer.

Torrey, E. F., *Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists*, Harper and Row, 1986.

Originally published in 1972 as *The Mind Game*, this book offers an overview of the psychiatric profession, which also compares the effectiveness of modern psychiatry and psychotherapy with the work of traditional healers such as the Zar priests in Ethiopia, the Menang healers of Sarawak in Indonesia, and the *curanderos* of Mexico. Torrey concludes that traditional healers get results just as effectively as psychiatrists and psychotherapists.

West, John O., *Mexican-American Folklore*, August House, 1988.

This is a reference book of Mexican American culture, its customs and traditions. It contains some useful information on *curanderismo.*

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Flores, Angel, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by L. P. Zamora and W. B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 114.

Garza, Mary Jane, "Healing Spirits: The Growing Acceptance of Alternative Medicine Enhances the Popularity of *Curanderismo*," in *Hispanic*, June 1998, pp. 36-38.

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Morales, Alejandro, "Cara de caballo," in *Short Fiction by Hispanic Writers of the United States*, edited by Nicolas Kanellos, 1993, pp. 151-54.

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Trotter, Robert T., II, and Juan Antonio Chavira, "*Curanderismo": Mexican American Folk Healing*, University of Georgia Press, 1981, pp. 14, 31-32.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 6.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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