

Kissing the Virgin's Mouth Study Guide

Kissing the Virgin's Mouth by Donna M. Gershten

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Plot Summary

Guadalupe Magdalena Molina Vásquez, or “Magda,” has resettled in her hometown after several turbulent years. While her eyesight may be beginning to fail her, the wisdom she has gleaned from the various phases her life has transitioned through is apparent. Despite being in her fifties, Magda has recently adopted a second daughter, Isabel, who she will raise on her own. It is her most fervent wish to pass her strength, wisdom, and experience on to her new daughter, especially since she feels that she has failed to do so with her first daughter, who is strongly influenced by both her mixed Mexican-American upbringing and her ex-husband.

To start, Magda first revisits the lessons and experience she has gained from both her mother, María, and her aunt, Chucha. She tells these stories as an omniscient narrator. Both were raised in abject poverty and squalor, in a world where women are at the mercy of men and their environment. The life that Magda is born into is little different, however, a chance encounter with a prisoner named Cochilco “the crazy pig” gives Magda the encouragement to take a stand against tradition and to make her own way in the world. When her deadbeat father routinely fails to sell any “tejuino” (a corn-based beverage), she begins to push the cart and sell the beverage herself to support the family. One day she is invited into the theatre to watch Pedro Infante films with Gordo Chuy Beltrán, who says he will buy her entire cart’s worth of tejuino if she sits in the theatre with him.

When his wife discovers their activities, Magda is driven out of town by the repercussions. Magda leaves her family and her home behind to become a dancer in Tijuana, where she meets her first husband, the wealthy and well-educated Miguel Angel Aguilar Llosa. They elope and he moves her to his family home in Monterrey. There, Magda is dismayed to discover that her new husband is thoroughly under the influence of his mother, Socorro Llosa de Aquilar. Magda recognizes Socorro as both a fierce rival and as a mentor. While Socorro teaches Magda ladylike sophistication and subtlety, she also works to have her son’s marriage to Magda annulled. During a visit to her family, Magda discovers that Socorro has succeeded. Without any other direction and looking for both a new beginning and rest, Magda moves to Guadalajara.

While in Guadalajara, Magda poses as a formal student, but instead undertakes an informal study of the city and the history of Mexico. After eavesdropping on guided tours, she pursues working as a guide herself, and it is during one of her tours that she meets her “American husband,” Robert. Robert quickly falls in love with Magda, and proposes marriage and a life in the United States. Magda moves to Moscow, Idaho with her new husband and, while there, gives birth to her biological daughter, Martina. There, Magda has a life of comparative affluence and ease; however the marriage fails due to “cultural differences,” and Magda eventually returns to Teatlán.

After returning to Teatlán, Magda starts a successful juice business called “Lupa’s Juices.” She begins to develop diabetes, or the “sugar disease” that afflicted her

Abuelito, which affects her eyes and vision. As she prepares for eventual blindness, she begins to pass on her business to Martina.



Section 1: I thank the dark Virgin, morena like me; I thank the blindness of my mother; From the quietest beginnings, from the quietest place within; I thank the plátano that saved my life, the prisoner who set me free...

Summary

The novel starts with birth of the narrator, Guadalupe Magdalena Molína Vásquez or “Magda” into the arms of her tía Chucha. Thirteen years prior to the beginning of her narration, she returned to her hometown, or “pueblo,” Teatlán, following the failure of her second marriage. As she sits in what was her Tiá’s favorite chair, which Magda has moved and mounted on her roof, she looks back on both her early childhood and her family history, as well as her relationship with the dark virgin, who she calls “Lupa.” Magda’s daughter Martina comes to visit, Martina quickly frustrates Magda with her attitude and behavior. Madga feels that Martina “had things so easy that she has to make them hard,” and that has made Martina abrasive and harsh. The tension between the women escalates and then hits its breaking point when Martina begins to rant about men how they are the “Contiminadores del Universo!” (10). Magda laments that her daughter is so serious and so like her father. Magda had hoped to pass on all of her hard-earned wisdom, knowledge, and experience on to her child, but she does not feel she was successful, but she hopes that will change.

Magda then begins to tell the story of her mother’s generation, using past tense, starting with “Women’s lives fall like saints and devils onto the backs of their daughters” (15). She begins with telling the story of her mother, María, and how at the age of 17, during a trip to Teatlán, she acquired her first pair of glasses to improve her terrible vision. Her poor vision had limited how she interacted with the world, and she spent her youth “mostly unnoticed, blurred to others as they are to her. The family thinks her- of when they think of her-slow, stupid, clumsy, but with a good heart” (17). She was particularly close with her older sister Chucha, who acted as a mother to María, and in turn María was a comforting presence to Chucha who was kidnapped and traumatized by the Federales. Being able to clearly see the world and its inhabitants is a deeply shocking experience to María. The finite details - the “black hairs curling up from the knuckles” (19) on the doctor’s hands and “the large oily pores” on her father’s nose (21) - was an overwhelming experience and more than she could handle. Magda transitions to the present time to conclude that despite progressively stronger glasses, her mother never really saw the world clearly.



The next memory that Magda relates is the two traumatic events that shaped her Tía Chucha. The first is when “los Federales robbed her right from the land of her father” (23). The men grabbed her by her trenza (braid in Spanish) and skirt, pulled her onto the back of a horse, and then brutally raped her in a barn nearby. When her father finds her, she is “bleeding and ruined,” and he can only lament that “she had lost her bones” (23). Chucha would go on to marry a man named ‘Pelón’ and move to Teatlán, but she would be further traumatized later when her trenza (braid) became tangled in Ferris wheel machinery and her family was unable to help her.

Magda reveals in the present that, despite being almost 50 years old, she is about to undertake care for Chucha’s only grandchild, Isabel, after the deaths of both of her parents. Magda revisits her childhood, starting with the time that she choked while eating fish and her mother and aunt forced her to eat a banana to clear her throat. From this experience, she learned that she could get extra food by faking choking, and she felt guilty for this, but her “hunger was bigger than [her] shame” (32).

As a young child, Magda bent her morals further when a prisoner offered her candy in exchange for first companionship and then eventually for his freedom. Her pueblo was so small that the prison was in the same building as her school, and on a day when she lingered behind her classmates, el ‘Cochiloco’ (the crazy pig), called to her and offered her candy. After minimal introspection, she decided to ignore the warnings her family had given her about strangers and especially men and took the candy. El Cochiloco gave her the soft encouragement that she needed to not only steal the keys for him and set him free, but to also make her own decisions and follow her own convictions. By freeing El Cochiloco, she in turn freed herself.

Analysis

By returning to her hometown of Teatlán, Magda has come full circle. The names she has added and subtracted represent aspects that she has gained and lost, until now, in her middle age, she has finally embraced the legacy of her mother and aunt. This legacy is symbolized by her aunt Chucha's chair, which she has painstakingly removed from their old neighborhood or “barrio” to her new one. Magda is about to undertake raising a second daughter, Isabel, who represents a second chance for Madga to pass down her strength, wisdom, and experience onto the next generation. The tension between Magda and her first daughter is palpable: Martina was raised in affluence in the United States, and because so much of her life was easy, she makes things more challenging than they need to be. As Madga notes “Injustice to her is a word in a schoolbook” (10).

The childhoods of Magda's aunt Chucha and her mother, called Mami or María, represent the historic ways women have suffered under traditional “macho” Mexican culture. Women, even as children, were at the mercy of men. The long braid or “trenza” that makes Chucha so beautiful is also used against her, first to help the Federales capture her and then when it is caught in Ferris wheel machinery and almost kills her. The first event symbolizes how men use women's assets against them; the second



symbolizes how even the environment is treacherous towards women. Mami, who has terrible vision, is treated like a child, even as an adult. She represents the classic woman trope of being essentially helpless and almost entirely dependent on men.

Magda's early childhood starts much the same way, until she has her throat cleared literally and symbolically by the plátano, which allows her to start advocating for herself. Her progress towards becoming an independent woman is further catalyzed by her experience with El Cochiloco. By freeing him from prison, she also gains the confidence to 'free' herself. This event teaches her that rather than limit herself by the words and experience of others, she should make her own decisions - as she says: "I chose the stories I believed" (37).

To create the atmosphere of Magda's pueblo, el barrio Rincón, and her mother's and aunt's pueblo, Villa Unión, Gershten heavily uses sensory details. This includes descriptions of the smells of bustling, crowded, dirty neighborhood - sweat and urine predominately - as well as the sights and sounds. "The stink in el barrio alleys, I can still smell. Still, every day I wash my hair and scrub my scalp hard with my fingernails until I hear the squeak of clean. I am crazy for clean" (30). The filth and grime that coat the city streets can be felt underfoot, and the sounds of couples making love in too tight of quarters can be heard. All of these details create a vibrant, pungent world that comes to life.

Within this first section, almost all of the themes and motifs are introduced, including hunger, relationships between men and women, identity, and the legacy a woman receives from the previous generation of women. Magda contrasts the legacy of pain and suffering she received from her mother and aunt with the legacy she wishes to pass onto her daughter, and begins to explore how that legacy shaped her own identity. She also begins to explore how her childhood hunger, which symbolizes the poverty she hopes to escape from, motivates her character development.

Discussion Question 1

Martina blames Magda for "perpetuating the powerlessness of women." Do you think Magda would make a similar complaint about her mother and aunt?

Discussion Question 2

How has Magda's mother and aunt's experiences influenced her childhood and upbringing?

Discussion Question 3

What sensory details has Gershten added to make el barrio Rincón come to life?

Vocabulary

milagritos, bichos, quaint, tripe, barrio, perpetuated, potent, spasm, speculation



Section 2: I light many candles to the power of sex

Summary

Despite knowing about sex as a small child, Magda began to develop a greater understanding of what it entails and the complex nature of sexual attraction and interactions during the events described in this chapter. Her first ideas about sex were that it was how men and women fight against each other, which she admits in hindsight is simple but accurate. Her first experiences involved watching her father leave her mother to go spend time with his girlfriends. With the cramped living conditions of her pueblo, she heard this happen all around her in the barrio. During her retrospective narration, she remarks “Sex was as common as piss and food; its musk blended with stale manteca and sweat and urine to form the aroma of our small house” (39), and then contrasts that with what sex was like in Moscow, Idaho with her husband. Sex in Idaho was closed off, sterile, and passionless despite there being “a lot of sex in the television and in the movies and even on the billboards” (39). Beyond the physical act of sex, Magda also explores relationships between men and women, including the relationship between her Abuelito and Chucha. Chucha is Abuelito’s favorite child, however he is incredibly demanding and even demeaning at times when he yells at her for food, water, and attention.

At the age of seven, Magda witnessed her first sexual act. She was carrying her baby sister through the city streets and when she needed to pee badly, so she made her way to an alley. While she was relieving herself, she heard voices, and when she looked up, she saw a couple in the act. The couple caught her staring, and the man began to toy with Magda as he continued to have sex. This experience made Magda feel very negatively about sex, to the point that even the topic was enough to make her fight other children who brought it up. As she matured, she discovered the tender nature of sex, and admits that it is her great weakness. She tried to get her younger sister to tenderly rub her back as they lay in bed next to each other, but the results were disappointing.

At the age of 13, Magda went to visit the Niñito Jesús with Chucha and Mami in the golden zone of Teatlán. The journey to the shrine was a long one, involving an extensive walk through the barrio followed by a bus ride. Magda was too fixated on food to really pray earnestly, in addition to being excited by the new surroundings, but her mother and aunt began to think of the prayers they would make. For the final stage, they boarded a full bus. A group of American tourists, who did not speak Spanish, boarded the bus mistakenly, and their behavior horrified Mami. As they approached the shrine on their knees, Magda realized that she lacked the faith required to pray to the baby Jesus and expect results. “I looked down again at Jesus, and I knew that he would not heal my mother’s eyes. He would not play with the toys or eat the candy. He was nothing to me” (68).



Analysis

Within this section, Magda begins to explore the relationship between spirituality and sex, as well as deepen her exploration of the themes of the relationships between women and identity. As a child, Magda quickly makes the connection between sex and violence, and while her understanding is rudimentary- that sex involves "all the don't-gos and please-stays, the go-to-the-f**ker-places and never-returns" (39) - it is not until Magda reaches maturity that she understands that Catholic dogma and societal pressures make sex for women a source of weakness and a shameful act. By comparing sex in el barrio Rincón and Moscow, Idaho, Magda is able to demonstrate that while the environments are very different, her husband Robert's admonishment that she not teach their daughter about sex or her "cosita" shows that the shamefulness of sex is universal.

The shame of sex does not fall evenly on men and women, and this is manifested by difference in how both genders act in public and private. Magda's mother is so ashamed of anything sexual that she even showers in her underwear. This contrasts with Abuelito, who publicly catcalls women in the streets, even Magda when she becomes a teenager. Magda further highlights the difference between men and women's attitude towards the shamefulness of sex in her description of seeing a couple having sex in an alleyway. The woman becomes fearful of the news going public, however the man uses the sexual act to taunt Magda, demonstrating that while they were both apart of the act, the shame will fall predominately on the woman.

During the pilgrimage to the golden zone, while her mother and aunt are full with thoughts of the niño Jesús, Magda is instead consumed by her ever-present hunger. She describes the sights and smells of food, and also implies that piety will never fill her empty belly. By pointing out that despite their gifts of food and toys the niño Jesus will not fix her mothers eyes, Magda makes the final conclusion that the church will always be a let down to women.

Discussion Question 1

How does Section 2 establish the contrast between public and private life? When does that distinction seem to get blurred?

Discussion Question 2

How does shame play a role in Section 2?

Discussion Question 3

What is implied about progression of the pilgrimage from el barrio Rincón to the golden zone?

Vocabulary

caress, benediction, imperceptible



Section 3: I even thank my cabrón of a father; I light a candle to the puras tonterías of sex; I thank the generosity of the guilty, the meanness of the moral

Summary

During Magda's childhood, her father sold the corn beverage 'tejuino' to make a living, and as Magda tells it, he was a horrible salesman. Instead of trying to sell it to the gringos who have money, he instead pushed his cart up and down the boardwalk while he flirted with his girlfriends and gave them his product for free. At a young age, Magda became involved with various stages of tejuino production, until eventually she became the one mixing the ground corn, water, and sugar. At the age of 14, when her father disappeared from the family for a few days, Magda made the bold decision to sell tejuino herself. This horrified her grandfather, and caused Chucha to plead with her not to push the cart, but Magda was fed up with watching her family starve, and she was determined to make a difference.

During the first days of tejuino selling, Magda experimented with her sales strategies and took notes of when “a sway of hip, a wink, a mock-harsh word” (76) garnered her success. She brought home more money than her father and brothers brought home in the typical week. Triumphant, she poured the money into Mami's lap, who was proud of her but still instructed her to apologize to her scandalized grandfather. When Magda refused, her mother first threatened her with a beating, and then when Magda continued to be defiant, Mami slapped her. Her family shunned her as she continued to push the tejuino cart. Eventually, Magda caved into the pressure and apologized, though she continued to push the cart. To avoid upsetting her father and brothers' sensitivities regarding how much more money she made selling tejuino, Magda was secretive about her earnings, which in turn allowed her to hide some of her hard-earned money for her eventual escape from Teatlán.

One day, out of curiosity, Magda went into the Cine Maravilla. Inside, she discovered Gordo Chuy Beltrán, who was “crazy for Pedro Infante” (85), and was watching films that starred the actor by himself while he mouthed along with the words. Gordo Chuy offered to buy all of Magda's tejuino if she stayed in the theater and watched the film with him. She accepted his offer, and then shortly after he pulled a napkin from his lap to reveal his penis or 'trick.' He began to pleasure himself, and when Magda sensed that he was not going to make her do anything, she became curious both in his activity and in the half-eaten food that was nearby. She finished the movie with him, even speaking the responses to Pedro Infante's lines, and afterwards, Gordo Chuy fulfilled his promise of paying for all of her tejuino.



Magda then jumps ahead in her tale to when she takes Mami and Chucha to their first movie in the same theater. She remarks that it was the first time she entered the theater with a ticket, and that the ritual with Gordo Chuy continued for two years before it was discovered by his wife. During a particularly passionate scene in a movie, Señora Beltrán emerge from behind the curtain and accused her husband of adultery and Magda of being a whore. Señora Beltrán refused to listen to their explanations, and instead enlisted the help of other wives as well as the League of Decency, who charged Magda with “public indecency, indecent dress, public profanity, and lewd public behavior” (107). Both Magda and her family were publicly harassed, and her cart was vandalized repeatedly. Gordo Chuy, who faced no public backlash, eventually had a secret meeting with Magda, during which he refused to stop his wife’s backlash. Instead, he offered Magda a large sum of money, which she used to leave Teatlán.

Analysis

In this section, Magda begins to make bold strides towards becoming an independent, self-sustaining woman, despite facing harsh opposition from all members of her family. Unlike Mami and Chucha, who serve as foils to Magda regarding how they handle their mistreatment by men, Magda decides to take an active stand and improve her own life and the lives of her family. Similar to Magda's experience with El Cochiloco, hunger proves to be a powerful motivator. “We feel hunger while the lazy putos we call father and brothers and sons...stand on corners and waiting for customers to come to them, for coins to jump into their pockets” (77).

After learning about sex in Section 2, in Section 3, Magda begins to realize how, akin to hunger, it can be a powerful motivator of behavior. By flirting with her customers and flaunting her assets, Magda learns that being suggestive can help her be more successful. Abuelito represents the traditional, conservative Catholic view, and predictably he is horrified: “She will corrupt the angels with the naked flesh of her thighs!” (76). Magda is made to apologize to the men in her family for her success, and but her success marks the beginning of her journey towards becoming independent.

The films Magda watches with Gordo Chuy represent a highly idealized version of relationships between men and women. Pedro Infante is a bold stereotype of Mexican masculinity, and as such, he attracts the praise and idolization of men. To Gordo Chuy, Magda represents the unobtainable leading lady, defined by youth and beauty. As is discovered later, he is thoroughly under his wife's rule, so actual infidelity is out of the question, but Magda serves as his “leading lady who asked no questions” (96).

This section is the first to portray another facet of the relations between men and women: weak-willed men who are dominated by a woman in their life. This is explored further in Section 4, but in this section the focus is on men who are dominated by their romantic partner. Señora Beltrán and Gordo Chuy represent a man-woman relationship where the woman bends the man to her will, which is portrayed as just as toxic as the man dominates the relationship. The treatment of woman by the Catholic church and Mexican culture, first seen in Section 2, is further developed here, with the added facet



of looking at how women police each other. It is noteworthy that the women who do the policing are almost exclusively wealthy, and the women who are policed are unmarried and poor.

Discussion Question 1

How does Mami and Chucha's relationships with their husbands shape how Magda views marriage?

Discussion Question 2

How does hunger motivate Magda's actions in Section 3?

Discussion Question 3

How would you compare the women of the League of Decency with Mami or Chucha? Are there any parallels?

Vocabulary

mimicry, ronca, silhouette, torta, lewd



Section 4: I thank these long legs and even my small breasts

Summary

Magda left from Teatlán for Tijuana, taking with her the lucky coins she received from El Cochiloco and some money from both the tejuino cart and Gordo Chuy. When she arrived in Tijuana, she had the good fortune to meet a nice couple who rented her a room and helped her find a “relatively safe job” (116) as a dancer at the Club Leona. In hindsight, Magda feels it a true miracle that she survived such a dangerous city, full of strip clubs and worse. As she danced, she thought of the pain she caused her mother and family, and felt an acute sense of shame not for the borderline explicit nature of the work but for the nature of her departure from Teatlán.

While she danced in Tijuana, she attracted the attention of a well-educated man from the North named Miguel Angel. Every night he sent her a dozen long-stemmed roses. When he learned she was a virgin, he became obsessed. Miguel Angel began to take her on trips to the United States, where Magda marveled at seemingly ordinary things like a Sears and Roebuck store, which Miguel assured her is a “cheap store” (120), so instead he took her to a fancy boutique. In the boutique, she felt the judgment and disdain from the owner. She eventually lost her virginity to Miguel Angel, which enflamed his desire for her, and soon after, they eloped.

After the elopement, the young couple headed to his family’s ranch in Monterrey. Miguel Angel introduced Magda to his mother, who immediately began to teach Magda etiquette, as well as the “cool dignity of Monterrey. Quiet power” (124). Señora de Aguilar waited for the early days of heat and passion to subside, and then began to exert a subtle but powerful influence on her son and his marriage with Magda. Instead of sending money to Magda’s family, Señora de Aguilar instructed Miguel Angel to send luxurious but impractical gifts. Señora de Aguilar treated Magda with masterful passive-aggression, going so far as to pray loudly next to Magda about Jesus opening Miguel Angel’s “eyes to the deceit of the woman he calls wife” (126) while they were in her private chapel.

In retribution, Magda later went back to the private chapel to confess to the priest that her relationship with Señora de Aguilar had become sexual. Describing their sexual relationship “stirred me crazy in my heart,” (129) but it gave Magda no satisfaction. Magda’s confession was revealed to Señora de Aguilar, who in turn began to take a more vested interest in Magda’s refinement and education. From la señora, Magda “felt all that I would and would not have, I felt the price of my choices. I saw a woman I could become” (134).

When Magda returned to Teatlán, she discovered that Abuelito had died of a heart attack. The fine clothes that she and her husband wore during the visit highlighted the



poverty and squalor around her, and while the clothing drew curious touches, it also drove away people who might have approached her otherwise. Magda felt isolated from her family, and despite her husband's request that she not return to Teatlán for additional visits, she began to invent reasons to return, usually ones that focused on the needs of her family. During one of these trips, she met Julio, who served as "a safe diversion for my soul" (140), and was admittedly no man to become seriously involved with. Her infidelity was discovered, and she was served a letter written unmistakably by Miguel Angel's mother informing her that her marriage was being annulled, and that in time Miguel Angel would marry a "proper" girl in the church. Her belongings were shipped to her and Magda began to recover her "coastal soul" (141) as she struggled to work through the aftermath of her marriage. She continued for a time to see Julio, however eventually she realized that she needed more to feel fulfilled. Magda made the decision to again leave Teatlán, and this time to travel to Guadalajara.

Analysis

In Section 4, Magda begins to have her own experiences with men, and despite feeling street-savvy and independent in the small town, when she arrives in Tijuana, she is overwhelmed. As a dancer and 'wild woman,' her contradictory status as a virgin makes her "every man's desire" (118). During her first experience with sex, her soon-to be husband asks her mid-coitus if she is Catholic, once again linking the sex with religion. Mexico's history as a Spanish colony is mentioned throughout the novel, often in the context of Cortés and his actions against the indigenous tribes, but here the Gershten further develops this idea by portraying women as the conquered land, and the men as the conquistadors. This intentionally echoes the sentiments that Martina expresses earlier in the novel, but in the future, when she is about the same age as Magda during the events in this section. Magda turns the tables on Miguel Angel, and refuses to be conquered in any other sense but physically.

When Magda travels to Monterrey with Miguel Angel after their elopement, Gershten continues to develop the themes of the relationships between men and women, but again adds another version, and that is the man dominated by a non-romantic interest. In this case, it is Señora de Aguilar's domination of her son, Miguel Angel. Once Magda and Miguel are removed from the heat and danger of Tijuana, their relationship cools, which matches the cooler climate in Monterrey. Fundamentally, Miguel Angel and Magda come from vastly different cultures, marked by the tremendous difference in their economic backgrounds. The women of Miguel Angel's family shop at expensive boutique shops, while Magda is in awe of the more modest Sears and Roebuck. Coupled with the added strain that Señora de Aguilar puts on the relationship, the end of their relationship is just a matter of time. The lack of passion in their relationship is highlighted by how aroused Magda gets by creating a fictional sexual encounter between Magda and Señora de Aguilar. It seems her eventual infidelity with Julio is inevitable.

Señora de Aguilar is similar to the women of the League of Decency. The characterization of both shows that hypocrisy of being a devout and pious Catholic but



not a benevolent, charitable person. Magda characterizes this as the "Face of the pious, claws of a cat" (127), meaning that while these women appear to be virtuous, they are, in fact, duplicitous and untrustworthy.

Julio, the man Magda has an affair with, is intentionally very similar to her father and brothers: "The cabrón would walk his lovers on the boardwalk in front of his wife, just as my father had" (140). Julio represents that the nature of men is unchanging from generation to generation. Magda remarks that "there was something to gain from him," and it is implied that after spending time in the cool, dignified but passionless North, she needed someone to "feed the Teatleca in me" (140). In doing so, Julio helps Magda discover both more about herself and what she is looking for in a relationship.

Discussion Question 1

What foreshadowing is present to suggest that the relationship between Miguel Angel and Magda will not last?

Discussion Question 2

Señora de Aguilar bares many similarities to the women in the League of Decency. How does Gershsten create these parallels?

Discussion Question 3

Contrast Julio and with Miguel Angel. Why do you think that Magda found Julio so appealing after her relationship with Miguel Angel?

Vocabulary

haughty, pious, novena, serene, marijuanero



Section 5: I thank my own clever mind, my own rare suerte, I thank las promesas, From the quietest moment within...

Summary

Upon arriving in Guadalajara, Magda was taken to a boarding house run by Doña Mercedes, who promptly labelled Magda “señorita,” thus giving her a fresh start after the end of her marriage. Doña Mercedes also labelled Magda a student, despite Magda not being formally enrolled in the University of Guadalajara. Magda decided to undertake independent study of the murals of José Clemente Orozco and the history of Mexico. She studied the habits and mannerisms of the actual college students and followed tour guides to learn both English and the history of Guadalajara, with an eye to undertake similar work himself.

Magda bought a clay statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe, and after she took the statue to Doña Mercedes' house, they “become friends” (153). Magda practiced her English and her tours, read poems to, and confessed her secrets to the statue. Magda worked up the courage to go the Palacio de Gobierno and requested to be a tour guide. She tried to impress the manager, but despite her passion and enthusiasm for the material, she was turned down for an official tour guide position. Instead he encouraged her to pursue the work independently.

Initially she was unsuccessful, and in frustration she focused her efforts on a particular American who was particularly disinterested despite all her efforts. The stranger, named Robert, returned the next day however, and at the conclusion of their tour, he asked her for to go out to dinner with him. Weeks later, Robert asked Magda for her hand in marriage while they were at a shrine dedicated to Santa Felicitas. While in the shrine, Robert told Magda that she could and should trust him. She did trust him, however she intentionally told him so in rapid Spanish that she knew he would not understand.

As a narrator, Magda admits that she does not say much about her marriage to Robert. They were married for 11 years, however, due to cultural differences extending beyond the differences in American and Mexican cultures they were not destined for happiness. Robert had never experienced the poverty and hunger that Magda had, and how this shaped their different expectations for their relationship became unavoidable during their marriage therapy with Doctor Johnson. Robert decided to leave Magda, and advocated for a joint custody of Martina that would see Martina spending the school year with Robert and school breaks with her mother.



Heartbroken and at her absolute lowest ebb, Magda returned again to Teatlán. Her brother and his wife teased her about how Magda will have to sell tejuino and work as a prostitute to support herself. During this time of inner turmoil, Magda had the realization that she had thought herself smarter than all the women from the previous generation who would beg and plead with their husbands to not leave them, that instead she would draw on the dignity of la Señora de Aguilar and not be dependent on men, but “young Magda had no idea how difficult an act that would be” (181). She had a renewed sense of self, but she also realized that post-Robert she had aged considerably. At almost 40 years old, she struggled to attract more than passing interest from men, but thanks to her habit of collecting money over the years, she had more than enough money to start her own business. Prior to leaving Idaho, Magda went through the mental list of everything she was willing to do, and realized that Martina needed to stay in the United States, and despite the distance and time apart, she did not abandon her daughter, but instead made a choice that was in her daughter’s best interests.

Analysis

This section represents Magda's final period of development and experience outside of Teatlán. In Guadalajara, she is called señorita, and her decision to embrace that reset back to her original identity. She refuses to allow her first serious relationship to define how she interacts with men. Once again, Magda creates her own identity, and with how much she has to learn, she is truly a student, despite not formally enrolling in the university. She finds inspiration in the Mexican revolutionaries, in part because she considers herself to be a revolutionary fighting against the male conquistadors. The development of Magda's relationship with the Virgin Guadalupe is symbolic of how Magda is coming to understand and value both her own feminine strength and identity. Within this section, Magda experiences her highest point of happiness - her marriage to Robert and motherhood, living with a full belly in the United States - and her lowest point of despair when she returns for the final time to Teatlán. To emphasize the importance of particular periods, the timeline of events does not flow evenly. The years that Magda spent in Idaho are condensed into the span of a few pages, and the critical growth periods of when Magda first arrives in Guadalajara and the immediate events following her return to Teatlán, another time of growth, for Magda are given the same coverage.

Magda's relationship with Robert provides new insights into the relationships between men and women. Robert represents that despite cultural differences, relationships with men are fraught with unforeseen challenges. Their relationship shows that once sex is removed from the picture, friendship and camaraderie is possible with men. While Robert is sometimes almost portrayed as an interfering influence on Magda's ability to pass everything onto her daughter, it is also true that Martina represents the very best of both of her parents: "...Martina with the conqueror's blue eyes and tousled honey brown curls of her father...with the dark skin of her mother, the woman, and of Guadalupe, the saint" (164). Robert and Magda are united in their desire to provide the best for their daughter, despite having very different approaches and philosophies to what that



entails. Both parents, however, recognize the contribution they made when Martina graduates from college, pointing out that Martina is something they created together.

This section touches on themes of hunger and identity, and finally connects that the experiences that define someone's identity also define how they experience hunger. In therapy and later in conversation with Chucha, Magda defines "honesty, trust, intimacy" (174) as the hungers of the rich. Magda may not feel the same physical hunger of her youth, but it guides and motivates her actions still. Magda feels she has risen above her origin and the mistakes of her mother's generation, but her similar fate shows that she has not. After reconnecting with her aunt and mother, she begins to shape the lessons of strength and resilience she wishes to pass onto her daughters.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Magda wants to embrace being both a señorita again as well as a student?

Discussion Question 2

How do the characteristics that helped Magda break out of poverty turn against her in the end?

Discussion Question 3

How would you compare Magda's relationship with Robert to her relationship with Miguel Angel?

Vocabulary

cajoled, mimicry, coraje, repulsed, convulse, sobacos



Section 6: I thank my own coming blindness, I thank mí hija, I kiss the Virgin's mouth...

Summary

In this final section, told mostly in present and future tense, Magda begins to develop diabetes and is developing eye problems as a result. She compares the blood vessels that have begun to cloud her vision to vines that cover the front of her house.

Eventually, one of these vessels bursts, and temporarily blinds Magda. She begins to travel to Doctor Lancaster in the United States to repair the damaged vessels. Magda also returns to Idaho to see her daughter graduate from college, and is filled with a strong need to hold her daughter as tightly and fiercely as she did when Martina was just a little girl.

After the graduation, Magda offers Martina half-ownership of Lupa's juices. Martina is initially reluctant to accept the offer, saying that she wants to join Peace Corps and travel to Rwanda. Martina does eventually accept her mother's offer, and during a long drive from Houston to Teatlán, she starts to develop her own ideas for how to develop the business, including a Vegan line which Magda thinks is pure "tonterías."

Magda has been in Houston for additional treatment for her eyes, and this creates significant problems when mother and daughter are stopped at a roadblock manned by corrupt officials. Both women are at a significant disadvantage in the scenario, with Martina's Spanish not at native-level fluency and Magda being essentially blind. They dismiss Martina as "una pocha" (213), meaning that her birth and life in United States has ruined her. This is intentionally reminiscent of what Abuelito calls Chucha following her trauma at the hands of the Federales. Magda and Martina are humiliated and taunted by the officials, thanks in part to Martina telling them that they are the wife and daughter of the "new Vice Consul Robert Jones at the American consulate-in charge of the American tourists and American visas" (217). The experience profoundly changes Martina's attitude towards Magda and her teachings. It hurts Magda deeply to see her experience such suffering, but she also feels a pride that Martina has at last learned the truth of her mother's wisdom.

The novel concludes with Magda living in her own house in the golden zone, with both of her daughters. With glasses, she is able to see, and insulin injections help manage her diabetes. In her fine house, "la Lupa doesn't hide in a powder room as she did in Idaho. Here she stand in full color..." (220). Magda is already teaching Isabel to flaunt her assets, to the amusement of Martina. The novel ends with Magda reflecting on the routine of it all: her daughters will grow and learn, and she is teaching Isabel the same lessons she taught Martina. By passing these lessons on-no matter how ridiculous-Magda is preparing them for success on their own terms.



Analysis

In this final section, Magda faces the inescapable legacy of her family as the cycle becomes complete. That Magda is losing her sight, similar to her mother, represents that all women will come to the same point where they need to let their daughters take up the fight to progress women's issues. Magda is passing literally everything onto her daughters, as is symbolized by her passing her business on to her daughter Martina, who begins to build on the work her mother has done to continue the progress on women's issues. When blood obscures Magda's vision, it represents the blinding nature of family relationships. She is literally and figuratively blinded by blood.

The experience that Magda and Martina have with the officials at the roadblock contrasts with Chucha's kidnapping by the Federales to show that while women are still at a disadvantage and still need to fight, things are improving, and that it is highly dependent of the action of the rising generation, in this case, Martina. It hurts Magda deeply to see her daughter experience such suffering, but she also feels a pride that Martina has at last learned the truth of her mother's wisdom. The event confirms to Magda that she has had a strong influence on her daughter's character. That Magda is teaching the same lessons to Isabel as she taught Martina suggests that Magda has narrowed in on her message and will not change it significantly. She proudly displays the Virgen de Guadalupe in her house as a tribute to the feminine wisdom and strength Magda has learned from her experiences. Based on the listed similarities between Isabel and Magda, and Magda's characterization as being such a trailblazer, it can be inferred that Magda's success with Isabel is not guaranteed.

Discussion Question 1

How does Magda's coming blindness compare to her mother's?

Discussion Question 2

How is Martina building on her mother's work at Lupa's Juices? How has the torch been passed from mother to daughter?

Discussion Question 3

How does Gershten establish parallels between Martina and Isabel?

Vocabulary

perverse, cauterized, periphery, aphorisms, mongrel, hemorrhage, lechuga, contraband



Characters

Guadalupe Magdalena "Magda" Molina Vásquez

Magda is a Mexican woman and the first person narrator. She is born into an impoverished family in Teatlán, and the stories she inherits from her mother and aunt. She is a deceptively simple character who defies easy categorization. She is independent and determined to break conventions; however, she is also deeply tied to tradition and respectful of the history. She is the biological mother of Martina and the adopted mother of Isabel.

Martina

Martina is Magda's biological daughter who is primarily raised in the United States. She "walks with her head held proud and an argument in her throat. She argues with the ways of the world" (8). Magda has tried to impart the strength and knowledge she has gained from her experiences to Martina; however, because growing up in affluence in the United States has been comparatively so easy for Martina, trying to teach Martina has been a struggle for Magda. Martina is a foil to Isabel, Magda's second, adopted daughter.

Isabel

Isabel is Magda's adopted daughter. She was left parentless after her mother was killed by a bus driver and her father, Magda's cousin, killed the same bus driver for revenge. Like Magda, she is completely Mexican (unlike Martina who is half-Mexican and half-American), and she seems to be the intended audience for the narrative of the novel.

Chucha

Chucha is Magda's aunt. As a teenager, she is kidnapped by the Federales and brutally raped. Afterwards, her father ("Abuelito") calls her 'Pocha,' meaning ruined. She suffers additional trauma when her braid is caught in the machinery of a Ferris Wheel.

María Candeleria Vásquez Ramos "Mami"

María, or Mami, is Magda's mother and Chucha's younger sister. She has horrible vision and is thought to be incredibly simple, but kind.



José María Vásquez Amado "Abuelito"

Abuelito (an endearing form of grandfather) is the father of Chucha and María, and grandfather of Magda. He suffers from diabetes, which causes him to have open, rotting sores. These sores eventually make it necessary for both of his legs to be amputated. Abuelito, along with Magda's unnamed father, represents traditional masculinity.

Cochiloco

Cochiloco, or "the crazy pig" is a prisoner who befriends Magda and bribes her with candies to set him free. Afterwards, Magda learns that he is a rumored serial murderer.

Robert

Robert is Magda's "American" husband and the father of Martina. They meet while she is working in Guadalajara as a tour guide, and he moves her to Moscow, Idaho. The couple eventually splits because of "cultural differences"; however these differences are more than the differences between Mexican and American cultures, but also the differences between his logic-driven outlook and Magda's outlook which is more free-spirited and emotion-based.

Gordo Chuy Beltrán

Gordo Chuy Beltrán is the cinema owner in Magda's pueblo. One day, he offers to buy her entire cart's worth of tejuino if she watches a film with him. During the film, he begins to pleasure himself while reciting the lines with the actors. This becomes a regular event until Señora Beltrán discovers what is happening, at which point she begins to retaliate against Magda and her family. Gordo Chuy offers Magda a large envelope of money as support rather than standing up to his wife.

Miguel Angel Aquilar Llosa

Miguel Angel is Magda's first husband. They elope, and he moves her to his family home in Monterrey. He is dominated by his mother, who runs the family with a firm hand. Eventually, their marriage is annulled.

Socorro Llosa de Aquilar

Socorro Llosa de Aquilar, or Señora Aguilar, is Miguel Angel's mother. She is both a rival for Miguel Angel's affection and a mentor to Magda in how to be sophisticated and subtly manipulative.

Julio

Julio is "a safe diversion" while Magda returns to Teatlán, however during one of her visits, their affair is discovered and used for grounds to annul her marriage to Miguel Angel.

Dr. Johnson

Dr. Johnson is the therapist Magda and her husband visit when their marriage begins to unravel.

Doctor Lancaster

Doctor Lancaster is the eye doctor who fixes Magda's eyes when she begins to develop complications from her diabetes.



Symbols and Symbolism

Chucha's Chair

Magda has her aunt's chair removed from the old house and moved to her new one in the golden zone. This action represents how despite experiencing affluence and success, Magda finds way to incorporate her family history into her new life.

Chucha's trenza (braid)

Chucha's braid represents Chucha's beauty and how it can be used against a woman. She is grabbed by her braid by the Federales and later it gets caught in a Ferris Wheel. The first event causes Chucha great sorrow and grief; the second could easily have been fatal.

The plátano

Chucha and Mami use the plátano to dislodge a fish bone from Magda's throat. In doing so, they also remove her inhibitions from acting and speaking up on her own behalf.

El Cochiloco

El Cochiloco represents everything that Magda hears about men and the world beyond her pueblo. By investigating things herself, she learns a lesson in independence and making up her own mind.

Tejuino

The making and selling of tejuino represents all the traditional male roles that women began to fill, despite opposition from their families and tradition.

The clothing Miguel Angel buys for Magda

When Miguel Angel takes Magda shopping before meeting his mother, he is trying to make her fit in to the wealthy Monterrey culture. Despite his efforts to make Magda appear like a wealthy and sophisticated lady, the clothing will not change who Magda is.

Mami's Poor Sight

Mami's poor eyesight is a significant obstacle to how she interacts in the world and it represents the ways that society keeps a woman helpless and limited in potential.



Isabel

Isabel represents a second chance for Magda to impart her wisdom, strength, and experience onto a daughter without any obstacles or competing influences

Moscow, Idaho/The United States

Magda's time in Moscow, Idaho represents the eventual disappointment of what life in the United States is in reality. Growing up in Mexico, Magda dreamed of the glamor of life in the United States, but after moving there and discovering that it is not everything that she hoped, she is let down. The lack of passion and vibrancy eventually entices her to move back to her pueblo.

The Virgin de Guadalupe or "The Dark Virgin"

The Dark Virgin represents all aspects of the female experience. To Magda, she represent feminine strength, wisdom, and mystery, but based on how familiar and informal her relationship with the Virgin is, it is implied that every woman has her own unique relationship with the Virgin and that should be celebrated.



Settings

Teatlán, Mexico

Magda's 'pueblo' or hometown, Teatlán is fictionalized version of real-life coastal city Mazatlán. She spends her childhood there, and it is where she returns to after her second marriage.

Tijuana, Mexico

After her mild but scandalous relationship with Gordo Chuy Betrán is discovered, Magda goes to Tijuana to work as a dancer. While in Tijuana, she meets her first husband Miguel Angel Aguilar Llosa.

Monterrey, Mexico

Magda moves to Monterrey after her marriage.

Guadalajara, Mexico

After her marriage to Miguel Angel Aguilar Llosa is annulled, Magda moves to Guadalajara where she works as a courtesan and tour guide.

Moscow, Idaho

Magda moves to Moscow, Idaho after marrying Robert, her second husband. She lives there during their marriage.

Villa Unión

Villa Union is the pueblo where Chucha and María grow up.



Themes and Motifs

Hunger

Hunger is present throughout the novel as a symbol of poverty and a potent influence of behavior. As a child, Magda says her "hunger is bigger than my shame" (32) when she figures out that faking choking can garner a few extra bites of food, and later the offer of food by a prisoner is enough to encourage Magda to release him from cell. As a teenager, hunger and the offer of food is enough to entice Magda to participate in Gordo Chuy's vaguely sexual ritual involving watching a film with him while he masturbates and mouths along with the actors' lines, which eventually leads to her being driven from her pueblo. It is an ever-present sensation for Magda, as evidenced by her fixation with food during the pilgrimage she makes with her mother and Chucha to the golden zone. While her mother and aunt are focused on the solemnity of their endeavor, Magda lusts after the food she can smell being prepared.

As Magda discovers when she lives in the United States and in Monterrey, there are additional types of hunger that are more difficult to satisfy. Even as an adult, well fed and living in relative affluence, Magda never sheds the memory of hunger. Hunger is part of the legacy of Magda's impoverished childhood, and as adult, it remains very much her highest priority. During couple counseling with her husband, Dr. Johnson and Robert talk about the "hungers of the rich" (174), and in this passage it is implied these needs - honesty, trust, intimacy - are additional luxuries for people who have full stomachs. As Magda remarks "I could eat none of them" (174). That even the affluent have hungers shows that hunger is an inescapable aspect of being human, and fundamental differences in how each individual experiences hunger can tear apart or damage relationships.

A Mother's Legacy

The central premise of the novel is that Magda wishes to impart her strength and wisdom onto both her biological and adopted daughters. As she defines it, "If I could pass everything to her, she could begin with what I had endured long to learn. She could begin with strength. I became crazy obsessed with the idea that her salvation depended on this miracle: the transmission of my soul's knowledge to her" (13). After a traumatic event where she tried to pass it on in one intense session of physical contact, Magda realizes that she has to "set myself to the work of spooning knowledge to my hija as she was able to digest it" (14). Magda feels so strongly about imparting this legacy onto her daughters because her mother and aunt's legacies were ones of sorrow and suffering, often at the hands of men.

The novel as a whole functions as a memoir, and the intended audience is her two daughters. As she recounts the events of her life, she includes the insights she has gained in hindsight, especially when she feels that the decision she made was foolish.



"Then I did not know just how grateful to be. I did not know enough to fear" (117). Often, these insight highlight some of the essential lessons Magda feels her daughters should learn. These lessons primarily deal with how to handle interactions with men, how to flaunt their assets, and how to survive in the face of challenges.

After the incident at the roadblock, Magda realizes that Martina has absorbed many of the lessons that Magda has sought to teach her, and not only that, but that Martina has begun to build on the lessons her mother has taught her to progress the women's issues even further. Martina has ideas about where to take Lupa's Juices so that through promotion of women's issues, it can become a "business of conscience" (221).

The nature of relationships between men and women

Throughout the novel it is suggested that the relationship between men and women is a battle, and by default, full of tension. Despite this, men and women need each other to create the next generation, and that requires both sides to be vulnerable enough to allow a positive relationship to develop. The novel suggests that even under the best of circumstances, these relationships are not long-term, and that women will always come out on the losing end.

Despite telling herself that she would not become like the women she saw in the barrio Rincón - the ones who begged and pleaded with their husbands not to leave them - Magda finds herself abandoned by the men in her life. Even her husband Robert, who has such passion for her in the beginning of their relationship, and is American, eventually grows tired of her and leaves.

The novel also deals with how men and women treat each other when they are part of a family. Abuelito is demanding and harsh with Chucha, and while he is alive she tolerates his behavior, but she confesses to Magda after his death that she hated him for it. While the eventual outcome of Miguel Angel's relationship with his mother is unknown, there are suggested parallels between their relationship and the relationship between Chucha and Abuelito. Given how Gershten has characterized the other men in the novel, it is unlikely that Miguel Angel will ever "grow huevos" and stand up to his mother. As for the rest of the men in Magda's family, they are characterized as thoroughly contemptible. Her father and brothers are lazy, unfaithful, and too engrossed in trying to be "macho" to be worthy of respect.

Identity

Throughout various times in the novel, Magda returns to Teatlán, often to recharge and reevaluate as a sort of transitional period in her life. Through each of these experiences, Magda grows and changes, and learns things about herself, the world, and her place in it. Her endeavors and failures cause Magda to fine tune her understanding of herself and her identity. She may spend time in other locations or assuming other names and titles, but fundamentally she remains the same person. Each of Magda's returns to



Teatlán serves as sort of check-in with her coastal roots and identity, and then consequently as a springboard into her next adventure.

Magda's story starts and ends where it began, but in the process she has "added two names and subtracted two from my own," but has now returned "...to my own name" (1). This shows that despite everything she has seen and experienced in her life, Magda is still the same person.

Magda's final, and longest, excursion from Teatlán to Guadalajara and eventually the United States, leads to her hitting her lowest point, and afterwards it is strongly implied that she will not leave again. During the pain and depression following her divorce, Magda's brother and his wife taunt her for leaving her husband and for being old and unattractive to men. These comments represent what the larger society thinks of her, but Magda realizes they do not constitute the truth as she sees it. In having this realization, Magda makes the final determinations of what her identity is, and that the ultimate truth is that while she can not change somethings about herself, she plays the most critical role in defining her own identity.

Women's Roles and Progress

Each new generation of women builds on the progress of the previous generation. It is slow, and often painful, but progress is being made. The novel focuses on the generations that have made progress - that Chucha and Mami's mother, Magda's grandmother, is not mentioned at all shows that the cycle towards equality between men and women started with Chucha and Mami. In the case of Chucha, she is brutally traumatized by men, and in the case of Mami, she is ignored and taken for granted, but the strength, resilience, and patience they show are powerful lessons for Magda to observe. It is with Magda that real progress begins to take shape, but that she ends up in the same position as her mother and aunt shows that each generation can only push against the factors that are keeping them down for so long before that generation needs to step aside and let their daughters take up the fight.

The greatest evidence for progress is seen with Martina. Rather than suffer the same fate as Chucha during an incident with corrupt officials, the women are humiliated and tormented, but not brutally traumatized. This is in part due to Martina's quick thinking and willingness to defend both herself and her mother, despite it being painful. Additionally, Martina is building on her mother's business so that rather than merely benefiting their own family, Lupa's Juices advances women's causes more broadly. "What Martina talks about is change...Pay profit sharing, counsel the women about sexual politics, make a vegetarian menu. She wants to take down the picture of Orozco's naked Cortés and Malinche to replace it with what she calls an old-fashioned feminist poster, Rosie the Riveter" (221). This quote also highlights a key difference between Magda and Martina: Magda's greatest moments of growth have been when she's in a relationship with a man, but in Martina's case, her insistence on having solely a woman on their logo shows that she thinks a woman is strong enough to stand on her own.



Conquest/Conquistadors

In Magda's first sexual relationship, Miguel Angel is described as a conquistador, suggesting that Magda's body is unconquered land. The men are dauntless explorers, and like the conquistadors, are determined to conquer the land and bend it to their own will. The women in this metaphor are passive recipients of their treatment by the conquistadors or men. The description also defines the power differential between men and women in relationships. Magda's relationship with Miguel Angel turns the tables slightly: "I gave Migel Angel Aguilar Llosa my virginity, but I would not be conquered. One taste, and his appetite exploded. For one night, he was el conquistador, but for every day after, I made him question his victory" (123).

This motif is also seen in the first section, when Magda tries to reason with Martina about the nature of both men and conquistadors. Martina is determined to classify all men as "Contaminadores del universo!" (10), and harbors special animosity towards Cortés, "that murdering conquistador" (12). Magda points out diplomatically that Cortés was "just a man...like any other man. And his Indian whore, Malinche, that everyone loves to hate? She was a woman. Like any other woman. Trying to survive" (12). Malinche and her relationship with Cortés are explored further during Magda's time in Guadalajara. She is the focus of some of the murals of José Clemente Orozco, alongside many of the Mexican revolutionaries that fought for Mexican independence. Magda describes her treatment at the hands of Cortés in some detail, noting that she bore him a child and then was passed down to a lieutenant when he grew tired of her. Magda's focus on this suggests that she sees parallels in Malinche's treatment and the treatment of women in her time by men.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is written from Magda's point of view and is told through first person narration. In the sections that precede her birth, she is present as an omniscient narrator, describing everything with the complete clarity of hindsight. Descriptions start with "The man who would be abuelito" (15), or "...when the young woman who would be my tía" (23), indicating that she is narrating historic events and specifically relating events that happened to the previous generation that had a strong influence on how she was raised by her mother and her aunt. This contrasts with the sections in which she is an active participant, and these same characters are simply referred to by their name or title.

Language and Meaning

Throughout the novel, Magda switches often between Spanish and English. Often it is just a single word in Spanish, and typically it is slang, insults, or proper nouns. For instance, Chucha is never referred to as her aunt, but as her tía. The fluid switching between Spanish and English adds to the conversational nature of the novel, and demonstrates how time spent in both countries has been influential in Magda's character development.

Structure

While the novel starts in the present time and then jumps back in time to a point before Magda's birth, it is primarily written chronologically, starting with the teenage years of Magda's mother and moving forward to the present time. The novel functions as Magda's memoir, in which she recounts the pivotal experiences and memories which she finds essential for her newly adopted daughter, Isabel, to absorb in order to be successful.

The memoir is not broken into proper chapters, but is instead broken into sections, each starting with a prayer. The first section begins with "I thank the dark virgin, morena like me..."(1) and the subsequent sections have similar headings.



Quotes

Do not honor that murdering conquistador, Mami. Words have power. Words are political statements.

-- Martina (I thank the Virgin, morena like me... paragraph 1)

Importance: Martina and Magda have very different ideas of what is acceptable behavior from men, and it is a source of tension in their relationship. Martina has not had yet learned the truth behind the adage "that you get more flies with honey than with vinegar" as Magda has, and as such, she is considerably less patient with men than her mother. What Martina has absorbed from her mother however, is an understanding of the value of being specific with word choice and language usage, as is highlighted here.

If I could pass everything to her, she could begin with what I had endured long to learn. She could begin with strength.

-- Magda (I thank the Virgin, morena like me... paragraph 3)

Importance: Like most parents, Magda wants a better life for her children than she had, but more than that, she specifically wants her daughters to learn from the mistakes she made and the struggles she has endured.

Chucha said she thought, I will die by condenada braid one way or the other. It will be my death.

-- Magda/Narrator (From the beginnings, from the quiet place within... paragraph 3)

Importance: Chucha's braid symbolizes her great beauty, and it was used against her by the Federales. Losing her braid is very traumatic and dehumazing to Chuhca, yet it is only after the braid is brutally ripped off that Chucha is able to become the source of wisdom she is for Magda during Magda's childhood and beyond.

Face of the pious, claws of the cat.

-- Magda (I thank these long legs.... paragraph 2)

Importance: Señora de Aguilar was only in Magda's life for a short time, but her influence on Magda cannot be overstated. From la Señora, Magda learns valuable lessons in subtlety and sophistication, and this compliments the lessons Magda learns from both her Mami and Chucha to be more successful than the previous generation. It is part of the legacy of the previous generation, a theme of the novel.

I chose the stories I believed. In my life, when I have needed the calm intent and efficiency I first knew that day, it is my prisoner's soft encouragement that I hear. 'Good girl. That's right.

-- Magda (I thank the plátano that saved my life, the prisoner who set me free... paragraph 2)

Importance: By helping El Cochiloco, Magda establishes both her willingness to



discover things for herself beyond taking the advice of her mother and aunt, and her capacity for breaking rules. By developing both of these characteristics, Magda will excel beyond what the previous generation of women thought possible.

Those who cannot look you in the eye will judge you by your feet. I always told Martina that. I will tell Isabel. Keep your shoes well maintained and clean.

-- Magda (I light many candles to the power of sex. paragraph 3)

Importance: The state and condition of a person's shoes represents where they have been and the lasting effect it has had on that person. There is a running motif of eyes throughout the novel, and it here it suggests both that eyes are the windows to the soul, but also that few are willing to look that deeply into the psyche of another, so instead they focus on what is superficial. The feet are, in contrast, what is readily observable and superficial.

The cabrón would walk his lovers on the boardwalk in front of his wife just as my father had, but there was something to gain from him: he knew how to feed the Teatleca in me like the coll norteño husband never could.

-- Magda (I thank these long legs... paragraph 3)

Importance: Just as the women from the her mother's generation forgave their men for their disloyalty and imperfections, so too does Magda. This shows that while she has progressed beyond what her mother and aunt achieved, she also makes some of the same mistakes. It also implies that male behavior is slow to change, if it even can be said to change at all.

In Guadalajara, I would again be a señorita.

-- Magda (I thank my own rare mind, my own rare suerte... paragraph 3)

Importance: After the end of her marriage and number of unfortunate mistakes, Magda decides to make both her own decisions and a fresh start. Guadalajara will be a place of rest, recovery, and an opportunity to re-create herself.

Once your belly is full, you discover that there are many kinds of hunger. Each more complicated than the one before it.

-- Magda (From the quietest place within... paragraph 2)

Importance: A motif in the novel is hunger, and as Magda implies to Chucha here, that feeling of hunger is universal, and even the wealthy feel a sort of hunger.

Without the simple story I told myself, there would be no hija, no Martina with the conqueror's blue eyes and tousled honey brown curls of her father, no Martina with the dark skin of her mother, the woman, and of Guadalupe, the saint.

-- Magda (I thank las promesas... paragraph 1)

Importance: Here Magda begins to introduce the idea that she is able to decide how she wishes to frame events from her life. Throughout the novel, Magda is a consistently



reliable narrator, and in this passage, she establishes that any events that are not completely accurately represented are events which she is not completely honest with herself about.

How different than I imagined, this sight, when as a child I put my mother's thick glasses before my clear eyes. Then, all was blurred to beauty; bare lightbulbs stretched to twinkling stars. Now my pools of darkness portion and separate my sight. Pedacitos of debris dance across my vision like floating black ash of burned paper. Ragged pieces of life. My friends I call them. My sins.

-- Magda (I thank my own coming blindness paragraph 3)

Importance: Similar what happened to her mother, Magda is losing her sight with her aging, although for a different reason. Unlike her mother, who had poor vision for her entire life, Magda has enjoyed clear vision her whole life, and now that she is losing her sight, elements of her past haunt her as she starts to lose that. It also implies that despite their differences, all mothers will face a similar fate.

Though Martina resists me, she has learned my lessons. I celebrate. I grieve. My heart opens with pride only to feel salt thrown into it. This is something I know well- what gives pride also gives shame; what brings happiness, sadness-but concerning my hija, philosophy does not soothe me. I cannot tolerate to watch her suffer.

-- Magda (I kiss the Virgin's mouth... paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, Magda illuminates that like herself, motherhood is a mix of contradictions. She is fiercely protective of her daughters and wishes to pass down her strength, wisdom, and experience, however, there are lessons that her daughters need to learn for themselves, though it hurts to admit this.