Little Miracles, Kept Promises Study Guide

Little Miracles, Kept Promises by Sandra Cisneros

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Little Miracles, Kept Promises Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Detailed Summary & Analysis....7

Characters....10

Themes....12

Style....14

Historical Context....15

Critical Overview....17

Criticism....18

Critical Essay #1....19

Critical Essay #2....23

Critical Essay #3....27

Topics for Further Study....31

What Do I Read Next?....32

Further Study....33

Bibliography....34

Copyright Information....35

Introduction

"Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is a story in Sandra Cisneros's collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York, 1991). The story consists almost entirely of letters left at a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe at a Catholic church in a Mexican-American community in Texas. There are twenty-three notes; each is a petition or request for divine favor. Some letters are only a few lines, others run to nearly a page and the final one covers over four pages. The notes are from a variety of Mexican Americans, including a family breadwinner, a husband, a wife, several young women, a gay man, a student, and a grandparent. They are addressed to various divine or saintly personages, including the Virgin of Guadalupe, a title originating in a vision of the Virgin Mary granted to a humble believer in Mexico in 1531; San Antonio de Padua, and the Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas. The notes are signed and each person gives the Texas town where he or she comes from; some hail from cities like Houston and Austin, but the majority are from small towns.

Cisneros's work is notable because she gives voice to the experiences of people in the Mexican-American community, a group that has until recently been underrepresented in American literature. With its humorous, compassionate, and poetic insight into Mexican-American life and culture, as well as its challenge to some of that culture's traditions and assumptions, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is a typical example of Cisneros's work. Taken in conjunction with the other stories in *Woman Hollering Creek,* as well as her earlier book, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), it helped to establish Cisneros's reputation as an exciting new voice in American literature.

Author Biography

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, in Chicago, Illinois, the daughter of a Mexican father and Mexican-American mother. She was the only daughter in a family of seven. Because her father missed his homeland, the family often moved from Chicago to Mexico City and then back again, leaving Cisneros feeling homeless. She developed a love of reading, and as early as the fifth grade had plans to go to college. During childhood and adolescence, she also developed the habit of writing poems and stories.

Cisneros earned a Bachelor of Arts from Loyola University of Chicago in 1976 and then attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, graduating in 1978 with an Master of Fine Arts degree. It was while studying in Iowa that Cisneros discovered her vocation to write about her experiences as a Latina woman living outside the mainstream of American culture.

Cisneros then taught at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago, and was a college recruiter and counselor for minority students at Loyola University. But her passion was for writing. In 1980, her first book of poems, *Bad Boys,* was published. Then, in 1982, she received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, which enabled her to continue working on *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which took her five years to complete. This collection of poetic stories about the coming-of-age of a Latina woman in Chicago won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation.

Cisneros followed this success with a book of poetry, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). In 1988, she was awarded a fellowship for the second time by the National Endowment for the Arts. Cisneros also taught as a visiting writer at various universities, including California State University, Chico (1987-1988), University of California, Berkeley (1988), University of California, Irvine (1990) and the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque (1991).

In 1994, Cisneros wrote a bilingual juvenile book, *Hairs: Pelitos,* illustrated by Terry Ybanez, and in the same year Knopf published her third collection of poems, *Loose Woman.*

Plot Summary

Letters 1-4

The first note in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is from the Arteaga family, who thank the Virgin for protecting them when the bus they were riding in crashed. Next, a couple writes from San Angelo with thanks for the divine help their son-in-law received after his truck was stolen. This is followed by an appeal from a poor family, who lost their possessions in a fire, for clothes, furniture, shoes and dishes. As a contrast, the next request is from a young San Antonio woman who asks for help in finding an acceptable man to marry. She swears there are none in Texas.

Letters 5-8

A brief note appeals for help in getting a well-paid job; a grandmother begs for intervention on behalf of her young granddaughter who has kidney cancer. Gertrudis Parra from Uvalde asks for peace and prosperity, and also that the demons who are blocking her path might be removed. A one-line note from a woman asks that she may be taught how to love her husband again.

Letters 9-12

Moises Ildefonso Mata of San Antonio addresses the Seven African Powers that surround the savior. He asks them to be good to him and allow his Illinois lottery ticket to win and to protect him from the evil eye of the envious. A man appeals for help in getting his employer to pay him the wages he is owed for two weeks' work. His family in Mexico depends on the money he sends them. Victor A. Lozano of Houston thanks Saint Sebastian for answering his prayers. Rubén Ledesma, a girl from Hebbronville, Texas, leaves a note addressed to "San Lázaro," the man who was raised from the dead by Jesus (a reference to the story in the New Testament). She wants help in preventing pimples from breaking out on her face.

Letters 13-18

Teresa Galindo of Beeville, Texas, reports of a previous visit she made to the shrine with her mother, sister, and two aunts. They prayed for assistance with a variety of problems, but Teresa was the only one who was helped. She was granted her wish for a man who would love only her. But now she asks for the man to be taken away, so she can be as free as she was before, with no one telling her what to do. A grandmother and grandfather appeal to the Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas to make their grandson behave better towards them and stay off drugs. Next follows a letter from a man named Benjamin, who is so ashamed of his love for another man that he has invented a code to conceal it, substituting numbers for some letters (a=1, e=2, i=3, o=4 and u=5). Three

short notes, two in Spanish and one in "Spanglish," in which the words are mostly Spanish but the grammatical structure is English, follow Benjamin's letter.

Letters 19-22

Deborah Abrego asks that she and her boyfriend might stay together forever. A man from Laredo, Texas, asks for intercession on behalf of his wife, who is ill following surgery. Rene y Janie Garza of Hondo, Texas, give thanks that their child is born healthy. A student asks Saint Jude, patron saint of lost causes, to help her pass her course in British Restoration Literature.

Letter 23

The final letter is in two parts. It is written to the Virgin by Rosario (Chayo) De Leon, of Austin, Texas. (Chayo is an abbreviation of Rosario.) In the first part, Rosario pours out the troubles of her soul to the Virgin, but she does not leave this part of the letter at the shrine. She tells the Virgin that she has cut off her long hair and laid a braid of it at the statue. She then describes all the petitions, photos and other objects that have been laid at the shrine, and says she has only the braid of hair to give. The note is then interspersed with the disapproving comments of her mother and other members of the family about what they see as Rosario's unusual behavior. She spends time alone, studies, and does not want to marry or become a mother. Rosario tells of how oppressed she had felt, being expected to conform to what her family expected of her. But, cutting off her hair has been a liberating experience. She thanks the Virgin for believing that what she wants to do is important, and explains that she has only recently been able to accept her. She used to blame the Virgin for everything her mother had had to put up with in the name of God. But she finally understood that the Virgin is j ust another form of the Aztec goddess Tonantzín that she admires. Now she is able to love the Virgin and to love herself too. Then Rosario reveals the contents of the letter that she laid at the shrine with the braid of her hair. It is a short expression of gratitude to the Virgin.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is a short story comprised of a collection of 23 letters of request, praise, thanks and enlightenment that have been left by Mexican-Americans at a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe at a church in Texas.

In the first letter, the Arteaga family gives thanks for being spared in a tragic auto accident, which claimed the life of a mother and her daughter. The only effect of the accident with which the family must now live with is a fear of riding on the bus. The second letter, written by Sidronio Tijerina and addressed to Blessed Santo Nino de Atocha, gives thanks for Sidronio's son-in-laws defeat of alcoholism and his keeping his job when his truck was stolen. Adelfa Vasquez asks for help replacing household items lost in a fire and asks that if Zulema decides to drop out of school in order to help the family in the third letter. The destitute family needs everything.

In the fourth letter, written to San Antonio de Padua, Barbara Yhanez asks for a man who is not "a pain in the nalgas." Barbara writes that all of the educated Hispanic men have moved to California and that none remain in Texas. She is looking for a man who takes pride in his heritage, seeks gainful employment and helps around the house. A man seeking gainful employment writes the fifth letter. He prays for a job with good pay, benefits and a retirement plan. He promises to bring flowers to the saint's tomb if his prayers are answered.

The sixth letter contains two parts. The first part is written on behalf of a 2-½ year-old cancer patient asking that she does not have to go through chemotherapy for the next year of her life. The second part of the letter is from the girl's grandmother, thanking God for sending the doctors and technology needed to save her granddaughter. The writer of the seventh letter requests peace, prosperity and the removal of demons from his or her life.

A woman expresses a desire to love her husband again and requests forgiveness in the eighth letter, which is addressed to the Father Almighty. A person seeking wealth and protection from evil people writes the ninth letter. He wants to win the Illinois lottery and not to be cheated by his cousin who buys the tickets. An immigrant seeking back-wages owed by his employer, who has borrowed all he can, and whose family waits at home for the money writes the tenth letter.

Victor A. Lozano writes the eleventh letter, to Saint Sebastian, praying for a solution to a family problem. His letter is accompanied by a promised donation, which he leaves at the shrine. He now wants all to be even, because his "word like his deeds is solid gold." The twelfth letter is a request by Ruben Ledesma to clear his acne. He was advised to write the letter, light a candle every day for a week and pray.

Teresa Galindo writes the thirteenth letter to Santisima Senora de San Juan de los Lagos Teresa, her mother, her sister and two aunts all prayed at the shrine at the same time, but Teresa's request was the only one granted. She prayed for a man that would love her forever. Now she is asking that the request be reversed. She wants her life back the way it was before. Grandparents who want their grandson to be nicer to them, want him to find a job and to move out of their house write the fourteenth letter. The fifteenth letter is written by a homosexual who is in love with a man overseas. Because he is ashamed of his feelings, he writes his letter in code, using numbers for vowels.

The sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth letters, written in Spanish, are letters of thanks. The seventeenth one, written in a combination of Spanish and English, thanks Milagroso Cristo Negro for a high school graduation. In the nineteenth letter, Deborah Abrego asks Jesus Christ to keep her and her husband together forever.

In the twentieth letter, from Senor Gustavo Corchado to the Blessed Virgin de los Remedios, the writer says his wife suffered complications from surgery and is very ill. He prays for the Virgin to decide if she lives or dies because he cannot make such a decision. Rene and Janie Garzagive thanks for having a healthy baby in the twenty-first letter. The twenty-second letter, written to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, is written by a student asking for help passing his English class.

The final letter is from Rosario (Chayo) De Leon written to the Virgin de Guadalupe. Chayo has cut off her hair, as promised, and has pinned it to the statue. She notes the things that surround the tuft of hair: an employee nametag, several hospital bracelets, business cards, flowers, photos and other things. She begins to tell about her life. Her mother is furious that she cut her hair, because it had never been cut since she was born. Chayo says that cutting her hair lifted the grief that she carried all those years. Her family wanted her to get married, to have children, and to be like all of the other women in the family. Chayo, on the other hand, wanted to go to school, to become an artist and to live her life alone. She blamed the hard times in the lives of her mother, her grandmother and all other women in her life on their faith in God. Since she did not want to be like them, she could not have their faith. She does not understand the events that have lead to her enlightenment, but Chayo has found her own faith. She now realizes that faith helped the women she knew survive their burdens. It is okay to be the person she wants to be. She writes "I could love you, and finally, learn to love me." With this, she leaves her little miracle–a braid of hair and a thank you.

Analysis

Although these letters are left at the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, some of them are written to other saints, including St. Jude and the Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas. The themes of the letters are faith, love and health. Cisneros's use of language and imagery help develop the personality of each writer, allowing the reader to see the writers and feel the emotions they felt as they wrote the letters.

The faith of the writers exemplifies the strong religious beliefs of the Mexican-American culture. While some writers are enduring hard times, they never doubt that their faith will see them through. Whether the letter is asking for help or giving thanks for help that has already been provided, it is obvious that each writer has left his or her fate in the hands of God. This is most evident in phrases like "everlasting faith," "repay you for everything you have done for us," "everybody who sees this letter will take a minute to ask for my health," "teach me to love again" and "I could love you, and, finally, learn to love me."

Obviously, all of the writers are serious about their requests. Inclusion of the city name from which they come when signing, demonstrates that many of these people traveled a long way to make their requests. If they did not truly believe in the need of the request and the possibility of an answer, they would not have traveled so far to come to the shrine.

Some of the stories bring a sense of sadness to the reader, while others, like the woman asking that her prayer for a man be reversed, put are slightly humorous. The content of the letters show the strength of faith, while the language and style give insight into the life and culture of the writers. The man wanting back-wages is only concerned with his survival so he can take care of his family at home. He makes no emotional connection to being in America. While the man asking for a job with benefits and a pension plan and the woman seeking a man of Hispanic heritage who is also successful show their needs for being accepted in the American culture, while maintaining a sense of their own. Two of the letters are written completely in Spanish; one is written in both Spanish and English. This also demonstrates the need for becoming Americanized while still maintaining cultural purity.

Cisneros brings all of the letters together with the final letter from Rosario (Chayo). She is a young woman confused about her heritage and determined to be her own person. Her need for individualism represents the American dream. Her denunciation of the Virgin represents her turmoil regarding her past. After reading the letters left by others at the shrine, Chayo finds her own faith. Although she is not sure how, she does not question it. She accepts her past, but still decides to pursue her own future, guided by a faith in which she can now truly believe and appreciate.

Characters

Chayo

See Rosario De Leon

Arnulfo Contreras

Arnulfo Contreras appeals to the Virgin for help in getting his employer to pay him the wages he is owed for two weeks' work. He worked a total of 146 1/2 hours and earned a mere $253.72. His family depends on him and he does not know how he is going to pay the rent.

Gustavo Corchado B.

Gustavo Corchado B. writes to the Blessed Virgin de los Remedios, asking for her intercession on behalf of his wife of forty-eight years, who is gravely ill following surgery.

Rosario De Leon

Rosario De Leon is a young woman who is determined to live her life the way she wants to live it, rather than the way her family expects her to. She writes to the Virgin describing her turbulent inner life. She wants to be an artist and likes to spend time alone studying, but her family wants her to marry and have children.

Leocadia Dimas

Leocadia Dimas writes to Don Pedrito Jaramillo, healer of Los Olmos, on behalf of her two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter Enriqueta Antonia Sandoval, who suffers from kidney cancer.

César Escandón

César Escandón petitions a saint, Niño Fidencio, to help him get a job with good pay and benefits.

Teresa Galindo

Teresa Galindo writes to Santí Señora de San Juan de los Logos. She reports that on a previous visit, she and her mother, as well as two aunts and sisters, had all made

requests. None of them had been granted except Teresa's request for a man. But now she wants the saint to take the man away again.

Victor A. Lozano

Victor A. Lozano thanks Saint Sebastian for answering his prayers. All the troubles that assailed him and his family are gone.

Moises Ildefonso Mata

Moises Ildefonso Mata appeals to the "Seven African Powers that surround our Savior" to allow his Illinois lottery ticket to win, and to protect him from his enemies.

Gertrudis Parra

Gertrudis Parra writes to the "Mighty Poderosos, Blessed Powerful Ones," asking them to intercede with the Almighty on her behalf. She wants the demons that are the cause of all her troubles to be removed.

Benjamin T.

Benjamin T. writes to the Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas, asking him to watch over his friend Minny Benavides, whom he loves. Because he loves another man, Benjamin is filled with shame. He writes in code to prevent his message from being understood by others.

Sidronio Tijerina

Sidronio Tijerina and his wife write to the Blessed Santo Niño de Atocha, thanking the saint for helping them when their son-in-law's truck was stolen.

Adelfa Vásquez

Adelfa Vásquez petitions San Martín de Porres for clothes, furniture, shoes and dishes, which the family needs after a house fire.

ABarbara Ybañez

Barbara Ybañez writes to San Antonio de Padua, asking him to help her find a suitable man, one who acts like an adult and can at least pronounce his name in Spanish.

Themes

Devotion and Prayer

What shines out from the prayers left by most of the visitors to the shrine is the simplicity of their religious faith. None of the petitioners doubt that the Virgin or other saint has the power to grant them what they cannot achieve through their own efforts. They believe the Virgin can restore to them what life has denied or taken from them. There is no intellectualism in most of the messages. The majority of these simple folk speak the language of the heart, in faith, hope, gratitude and devotion. In presenting them in this way, Cisneros affirms the traditional piety and cultural values of the Mexican-American community. That is not to say that Cisneros does not find some humor in their petitions—oddities or even absurdities that the writers may be unaware of, but it is a gentle humor, more inclined to marvel at their absolute faith than to debunk it.

The notes add up to a timeless story of human suffering relieved by faith in God and God's representatives. When faced with tragedy such as illness or bereavement, or problems of daily life, people turn to the divine. God, the Virgin, and the saints are a last resort and a refuge from the pain of human life.

Assimilation and Acculturation

The people who write the letters are all Mexican Americans, but they show varying degrees of assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture. César Escandón, a man from Pharr, Texas, petitions the Mexican saint Niño Fidencio for help in getting "a job with good pay, benefits, and retirement plan." This suggests that although he is a Mexican American petitioning a Mexican saint (Niño Fidencio lived from 1898 to 1938 and was a *curandero,* or healer), he wants to become part of the American middle class. Also, he makes his promise to go on a pilgrimage to Niño's tomb conditional on the saint granting his request. This suggests an attitude different from the unconditional piety of many of the other petitioners. Escandón's note sounds more like a business proposition in which each person offers something of value to the other and they make a deal.

Other letter writers show an awareness of the need to maintain their Mexican identity alongside their acquired Americanization. This is particularly apparent in the letter from Barbara Ybañez. The combining of cultures is apparent from her name. Barbara is the quintessential American name (as in the famous blond-haired Barbie doll, for example), juxtaposed with the Spanish-sounding last name, Ybañez.

Barbara sprinkles her letter with Spanish words ("Pain in the nalgas," for example; *nalgas* means buttocks), and says she wants a man who is aware of his Chicano heritage. She does not want a man who calls himself Hispanic. She realizes that

Hispanic is a term used by the federal government for the purpose of merging many different Latino identities into one. Barbara identifies herself as Chicano, not Hispanic.

Yet on the other hand, when she frames her request for a man, Barbara uses the language of self-empowerment that is part of the American women's movement: "I've put up with too much too long, and now I'm just too intelligent, too powerful, too beautiful, too sure of who I am finally to deserve anything less." This attitude is foreign to the subordinate role that women play in the traditional Mexican family structure.

Barbara's demanding assertiveness is also apparent in her comment that she will turn the statue of San Antonio de Padua, the saint to whom she writes, upside down until he sends her what she wants. This is certainly not an example of the traditional respect and devotion shown to saints in Mexico.

These examples illustrate the complexities that result when two distinct cultures interact. Attitudes, beliefs and language in the minority culture may all be changed or modified by the influence of the dominant culture.

Style

Structure

The story is unconventional in structure, consisting entirely of letters to the Virgin and other saints. The characters are the writers of the letters. They do not interact with each other to create a plot, as would happen in a traditional short story. Given this unusual structure, each letter might be thought of as a mini-narrative. The small details revealed in the letters suggest the larger stories of the letter-writers' lives. It is as if each letter is a tiny window into an entire life; a glimpse of dilemmas, of suffering, of hope.

However, there is also a plot to the whole story although it does not get revealed until the last character, Rosario de Leon, appears. Then it becomes clear that she is the narrator of the story. It is she who has been standing at the shrine of the Virgin, reading all the letters and petitions. She now becomes the central character, and her spiritual journey from alienation to insight and acceptance forms a more traditional kind of narrative, with its own plot, characters and theme.

Language

The tension between assimilation into the mainstream culture and the desire to preserve an ethnic heritage can be seen in the language. Many of the writers use standard English in a way that is indistinguishable from that of a native English speaker. Even Barbara, the woman who identifies herself as Chicano, is almost literary in her careful avoidance of a split infinitive ("I'm just ... too sure of who I am finally to deserve anything less") even though most English speakers would probably split the infinitive in conversation and in writing.

Other letter-writers, however, use language in a way that is characteristic of Chicano English. The most notable example of Chicano English is contained in the letter from Victor A. Lozano. Lozano refers to his nieces and nephews as "el Junior, la Glorai, and el Skyler," using the definite article that is part of Spanish but not English usage. In the first part of the next sentence, "And now my home sweet home is mine again, and my Dianita bien lovey-dovey," Lozano uses an amalgam of English and Spanish idioms and phrases. The same occurs in the following paragraph. First is the reference to the "little gold milagrato," which is a variation of the Spanish word for miracle, *milagro.* This is followed by the use of a vulgar American idiom, "And it ain' t that cheap gold-plate s— either."

Historical Context

Mexican-American History

Mexican Americans, who form the subject of Cisneros's fiction, are the largest group of Hispanic Americans in the United States. In the 1990 census, approximately 13.5 million people identified themselves as Mexican Americans. In addition, an estimated two to three million illegal Mexican immigrants live in the United States, mostly in the southwest. In 1980, when Cisneros was about to begin her literary career, 74 percent of Mexican Americans lived in Texas or California. Arizona and Illinois accounted for more than a third of the remainder. For the most part, these Mexican Americans were not new immigrants. In 1980, three out of four Mexican Americans had been born in the United States, a far higher figure than that for other Hispanic groups.

The characters in Cisneros's fiction are mostly poor, and poverty has long been a characteristic of Mexican-American life in the U.S., ever since large-scale immigration began in the early twentieth century. Living standards were well below that of the general population, and for the most part Mexican Americans lived outside the cultural mainstream of America, often subject to discrimination.

With the coming of the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican Americans also began to organize to improve their situation. In the 1960s, what became known as the Chicano movement tackled economic and civil rights issues pertaining to Mexican Americans. The movement worked for better housing and jobs, provided legal aid and protested against what they claimed was police brutality.

A significant development began in 1962 when a determined Mexican American named Cesar Chavez organized the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), a farmworkers' union in California, where thousands of Mexican-American agricultural workers struggled to survive on very low wages. In 1965, the NFWA came to the aid of Filipino farm workers who had gone on strike at a vineyard near Delano, California. (This is the strike alluded to in Rosario's letter in the story.) A bitter five-year struggle ensued, which ended in victory for the union, now called the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. For the first time, Mexican Americans and other Hispanics became aware of the power they could wield when they banded together as a group.

Despite these gains, however, Mexican Americans remained low on the socio-economic scale. Much of this was due to low educational attainment. In 1990, about the time Cisneros was writing *Woman Hollering Creek,* the rate of high school completion for Hispanics (62 percent of whom were Mexican American) in the United States was 54.5 percent, compared to 82.5 percent for whites and 77 percent for African Americans. The low graduation rate was in part due to language difficulties; many Mexican Americans, adults as well as children, have only limited proficiency in English. In many Mexican-American homes, Spanish remains the language of choice.

Another issue affecting Mexican Americans was that in the 1970s and 1980s there was a sharp rise in the number of illegal immigrants from Mexico who entered the southwestern United States. This created political tensions between the two countries. A U.S.-Mexico free trade agreement was passed with the aim of creating jobs in Mexico. It was hoped that this would reduce the flow of illegal immigrants since most crossed the border in search of work.

The concern in the United States about illegal immigration produced a backlash against Mexican Americans, and there were calls for tighter restrictions on legal and illegal immigration. Also, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many states passed laws designating English as the sole official language. This was seen by Hispanic groups, especially Mexican Americans, as being aimed at them. The effect was to galvanize the Mexican-American community into action. Mexican-American groups became active in defending affirmative action and bilingual education programs, and in opposing further restrictions on immigration.

Mexican-American Literature

For many decades Mexican-American literature was not part of the mainstream literary culture of America. Before the 1960s, only one work, Josephina Niggli's *Mexican Village* (1945), had reached a general readership. But the Chicano movement that began in the 1960s stimulated Mexican-American writing. Several publishing houses were formed to give Mexican-American writers an opportunity to present their work. As a result of this, Tomás Rivera published his well-known novel *Y No Se Lo Trago la Tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1970). This story about Mexican-American migrant workers broke new ground in its theme of the search for cultural identity. Then in 1972 Rudolfo Anaya published *Bless Me, Ultima,* which has become one of the most widely read of all Mexican-American novels. In 1990 poet Octavio Paz became the first Chicano to win a Nobel Prize for literature.

The 1980s witnessed a further boom in Mexican-American literature, and the movement known as multiculturalism ensured that these works received more attention from mainstream critics and readers than had formerly been the case. Poets such as José Montoya and Gary Soto made their mark nationally, and a group of Mexican-American women writers found their literary voices. Dealing with issues of gender and ethnicity, writers such as Lorna Dee Cervantes and Denise Chavez, as well as Cisneros, created powerful, authentic literature that articulated the desires and experiences of Mexican-American women. These authors challenged the values of the patriarchal societies in which they were raised while at the same time affirming their distinctive Mexican-American heritage.

Critical Overview

With its sharp wit and poetic prose, its use of Spanish words and phrases, its female characters who question their traditional roles, and its focus on Mexican Americans and their impoverished place in society, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is characteristic of the stories in Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek.* The book was hailed by critics as the work of a major new writer. The novelist Barbara Kingsolver commented in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that "[n]early every sentence contains an explosive sensory image." Kingsolver singled out "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" as her favorite story, calling it "a funny, caustic portrait of a society in transition that still pins its hopes on saints." Kingsolver brought attention to the last of the letters in which Rosario finds a way of accepting the Virgin of Guadalupe because of the Virgin's kinship with Aztec goddesses and other representatives of the divine: "It's a fine revelation of a cultural moment in which potent saints can hold a young woman back or send her on her way, depending on which traditions she opts to cherish."

Since its publication, *Woman Hollering Creek* has attracted the attention of literary critics, some of whom have commented on "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." Jean Wyatt, in "On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros's 'Never Marry a Mexican' and 'Woman Hollering Creek' explores the significance of the letter from Rosario. She argues that in this part of the story Cisneros makes it clear that she

considers Mexican icons of femininity to be intimately bound up with individual Chicanas' and Mexican women's self-images and self-esteem; to live with them comfortably—and there is no way to run away from them—each woman has to 'make her peace with them' in her own way.

Cynthia Tompkins, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* also comments on Rosario's reflections on the Virgin of Guadalupe: "Her struggle against traditional mores, class values, and sexism results in a redefinition of and a challenge to the Catholic icon."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, he examines how three female characters in Cisneros's story challenge prevailing ideas of gender roles in their Mexican-American community and decide to live life on their own terms.

In her fiction, Cisneros writes most powerfully about female characters, especially Mexican-American women who are struggling to find their identity. Many of these characters search for a way of living that remains true to their cultural heritage but which also takes account of their standing as Americans. In contrast, Cisneros often presents male characters in an unflattering light. "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is no exception. Although there are many dramas in miniature in these letters, those in which Cisneros's writing is most sharp, poetic, amusing and intellectually stimulating are the letters from three women: Barbara Ybañez from San Antonio, Teresa Galindo from Beeville, and Rosario (Chayo) De Leon from Austin. These are the longest letters in the story, and are all from strong-minded young women who desire to live life on their own terms. In contrast to these powerful women there are several glimpses in the story of the inadequacies of men: the abusive, drug-addicted grandson; the nephew who does nothing but hang around the house and get into trouble; the husband who comes home drunk and blames all his troubles on his wife.

Cisneros uses her three female characters as a vehicle to express her feminist ideas. They are all women who have moved, or are in the process of moving, from the inherited expectations of what their lives should be like to a consciously chosen way of living. In doing this, they subvert the gender roles laid down by the patriarchal society in which they grew up.

Two of the women, Barbara and Teresa, are concerned about their relationships with men. In Barbara's case, she has had no luck finding a suitable man in her hometown of S an Antonio. After complaining that all the educated Chicano men have to go to California to find a job, she writes that according to her sister, if a woman does not acquire a husband while she is at college, she will not find one at all. This is a veiled reference to attitudes toward female education in some Mexican-American families. Cisneros herself reports that her own father thought that a college education was good for a woman for that very reason—finding a husband.

Barbara knows what she wants and what she deserves. Just as she is liberated from traditional ideas about gender roles, she expects a man who is equally emancipated from a narrow view of what it means to be a man. Paradoxically, it is a "man man," according to Barbara, who is not ashamed of doing what are usually regarded as woman's tasks, such as cooking or cleaning. She wants a man who is different from her brothers, who presumably did neither of these things. Her point is that for women to be liberated, men must be also. In her desire to have a relationship in which she does not compromise her feminist views, and her desire to live on her own terms, not someone else's, Barbara foreshadows the impassioned pleas and spiritual journey of Rosario.

Unlike Barbara, Teresa has had the good fortune to find the man she wants, although she attributes that not to the vagaries of fortune but to the intervention of the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, Teresa is not the first person in the history of the world to discover that having gained what she wanted, it was not what she really wanted at all. She wanted a man because she was tired of seeing other girls younger than she sauntering around town with apparently devoted men. Teresa based her desires on what she saw as a societal norm. But when the desire was fulfilled it tasted not sweet but bitter, so bitter in fact that she now implores the Virgin to take back her gift. In Teresa's experience, a man may profess love, but he also expects to be in control, to lay down the law of how his woman should look and how she should behave. No doubt he is merely acting in accordance with his own experience of what his society sanctions or expects (which is why Barbara wants a man who can transcend such conditioned behavior and attitudes).

For Teresa, being restricted in this way amounts to imprisonment and even torture. Her present situation is like a "heavy cross" on her shoulders, an image that suggests the figure of Christ carrying his cross on the way to crucifixion. That image then gives way to images of lightness and freedom. Teresa wants to be once more the way she was, "wind on my neck, my arms swinging free," with no one telling her what to do and how to be. Unlike Barbara, who still seeks a relationship but on a basis of equality, Teresa has discovered that she is happier being alone than being oppressed by another in the name of love. In that hard-won belief, she too foreshadows Rosario.

Finally, there is Rosario, to whom one-third of "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is devoted. Rosario is a semi-autobiographical figure, as Cisneros has stated in interviews. Cisneros also told Martha Satz, in an interview with *Southwest Review:*

I think that growing up Mexican and feminist is almost a contradiction in terms. For a long time—and it's true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture—I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming anglicized, you're becoming the malinche—influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas.

This is at least part of Rosario's story, the character who travels an emotional and spiritual journey to emancipate herself from the restrictions imposed on her by family and culture. Cisneros gives Rosario many poetic images that convey the importance and the difficulty of this journey. Rosario reports that she cut off her hair, which had never been cut before in her entire life. For Rosario this was a symbolic act. The shorn hair is a metaphor for all the inherited beliefs and expectations that she must cast off if she is to discover who she really is. For Rosario, her hair is like a snakeskin, something shed so that new life can grow in its place.

Just as Teresa had employed images of freedom, Rosario uses an image of lightness to convey the same effect of liberation: "my head as light as if I'd raised it from water." The images that follow show how hard it has been for her to break loose: "I'm a snake swallowing its tail," she writes, and she explains that by saying she is a product of all

her ancestors who in a sense still live on inside her and will shape her future in a predetermined fashion unless she does something about it. So Rosario barricades the door to her room, an act that has a symbolic as well as literal meaning. On the literal level it gives her some peace and quiet to read and study, away from her family; symbolically, she is deliberately shutting the door on all those family and cultural influences that would create of her something that she cannot bear to be.

As she writes to the Virgin, Rosario draws attention to the fundamental differences in gender roles and expectations that operate in her family: "Do only girls have to come out and greet the relatives and smile and be nice and *quedar bien?"* she asks. Reproaches to her independent way of thinking and her desire not to marry come thick and fast from her family. When Rosario rejects the sacred icon of Catholic worship, the Virgin, she is accused of being a heretic and an atheist, as well as a traitor to her culture who acts like a *bolilla,* a white girl.

Rosario survives this barrage because she has the determination that comes to those who are driven from within by impulses they cannot resist. She *must* become an artist; this is not so much a desire or an ambition but a manifestation of a vital inner need. As she puts it, being an artist "isn't something you choose. It's something you are." But this realization is not in itself sufficient. Rosario must also redefine what it means to be a woman, and a Latin woman at that. To do this she must find an icon of the feminine that can speak to her new consciousness of herself in a way that the Virgin of Guadalupe does not. As Cisneros said in an 1991 interview (quoted by Tompkins in *Dictionary of Literary Biography):*

in my stories and life I am trying to show that U.S. Latinas have to reinvent, to remythologize, ourselves. A myth believed by almost everyone, even Latina women, is that they are passive, submissive, long-suffering. . . . Yet those of us who are their daughters, mothers, sisters know that some of the fiercest women on this planet are Latina women.

Rosario associates the submissiveness of the women in her family and their capacity to suffer without complaint (much of it at the hands of men) with the passivity and mildness of the Virgin. In her eyes, the patriarchal society in which she grew up uses the icon of the Virgin to validate the oppression of women. But Rosario longs for a different goddess, and she expresses herself in vivid images: "I wanted you bare-breasted, snakes in your hands. I wanted you leaping and somersaulting the backs of bulls. I wanted you swallowing raw hearts and rattling volcanic ash."

Rosario discovers what she wants, a goddess who embodies power rather than humility, in Tonantzín, the Aztec earth goddess and mother goddess. Tonantzín was worshipped by the indigenous Indians of Mexico before the arrival of the colonizing Spanish in the sixteenth century. In 1520, the Spanish, who were Catholics, destroyed the temple of Tonantzín at Tepeyac and built in its place a church honoring the Virgin. The knowledge of this is a great revelation to Rosario, who concludes that the Virgin Mary and Tonantzín are in truth one and the same goddess; they just express different aspects of the divine energy, one mild, the other fierce. Both are necessary.

When she realizes this, she finds that there is power and strength in the patience and ability to endure that her mother and grandmother exhibit, qualities that she had formerly despised. Now she recognizes the many different names under which the Virgin and Tonantzín are known, she is no longer ashamed to be her mother's child, or ashamed of the culture into which she was born. She can also recognize that all the other names of God, whether the Buddha, the Tao, Allah, or many others, are all manifestations of the one God, and she sees all of them in the various names ascribed to Tonantzín and the Virgin. Through discovering more of her own tradition, she can discern the universality of all religions and the validity of all names of God.

Rosario has traveled a remarkable emotional and spiritual journey. To reconcile herself to her own culture, she has had to dig deep down into its Mexican roots, into the Aztec civilization that predates Christianity in the region and still survives in religious myths and symbols. Finally, after all the turbulence and pain, Rosario has found peace. Her personal crisis is over. She can at last accept the Virgin, and herself. The two-line note of gratitude she finally writes, addressed to Mighty Guadalupana Coatlaxopeuth Tonantzín, is perfect in its simplicity; it comes like a final quiet chord of harmony after a long and tempestuous symphony: "What 'little miracle' could I pin here? Braid of hair in its place and know that I thank you."

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Bily teaches literature and writing at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, she discusses "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" as a demonstration of Cisneros's intentions to create a new form of literature to celebrate a new people.

Readers who encounter Sandra Cisneros's "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" for the first time immediately notice several ways in which this story is unlike other, more conventional, short stories. There is no plot in the usual sense—no series of incidents in chronological order. In fact, there is no action in the story, and no central character around whom action might revolve. The only element approaching dialogue is the one-way conversations represented by the two dozen letters left behind by those who have prayed to various saints. The story's setting is only roughly suggested by the reader's understanding that the letters and *milagritos* have been placed in churches in the towns and cities near the Texas-Mexico border named below the signatures. "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" does not offer many of the structural elements readers might expect in a short story, but clearly it is prose fiction, clearly it has been shaped by an intelligence and sensibility. The story *is* a story, but a story in a new form.

For Cisneros, however, the most important new element that her fiction brings to the literary landscape is not the form, though she has often spoken about her enthusiasm for reading and crafting writing that extends beyond the conventional formal boundaries. She is more interested in the characters she brings to life—Latino characters whose stories are generally not told by mainstream American literature. Most of Cisneros's other stories focus on one or two central characters, but in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" she offers a window into an entire community.

Language is an element that both unites and individualizes the characters in the story. Many of the letters, such as those from Teresa Galindo and Arnulfo Contreras, contain elements of both English and Spanish. A few letters are entirely in English, or entirely in Spanish. This free movement back and forth between languages is commonly heard among Spanish-speaking people who live near the border of Mexico and the United States, and Cisneros presents this lively bilingualism with pride—and without translating the Spanish words for her English-speaking readers.

In the introduction to their anthology *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction,* editors Delia Poey and Virgil Suarez assert that in defining the varied group of people known as Latinos,

The central point of our unity is language. While we may speak with different accents and use different expressions, we all share the experience of bilingualism. The ability to communicate in two languages, and more importantly to think and feel in two languages, brings with it the phenomenon of at times being unable to express oneself fully in only one.

In a story without action, the best way to sketch a character is through the language she uses. Through the letters, Cisneros reinforces the obvious point that even though her characters are all Latino, and all are to some extent bilingual, the label and the bilingualism do not erase individual voices. In contrast to old movie Westerns, in which all Native Americans spoke the same simplistic combination of grunts, "native" terms, and the occasional English word, this story presents characters whose language is as individual and unique as a fingerprint. Consider the Tijerinas, whose sentence "We didn't know how we was going to make it" helps establish their social class. Gertrudis Parra, who writes "You who are crowned in heaven and who are so close to our Divine Savior, I implore your intercession before the Almighty on my behalf," clearly learned the proper language for addressing the Saints in a Catholic School or in church. The stiff formality of Señor Gustavo Corchado B., praying for his wife of forty-eight years who "finds herself gravely ill from a complication" contrasts with the informality of Victor A. Lozano, who has left a "little gold milagrito" for Saint Sebastian, "And it ain't that cheap gold-plate s— either." Teresa Galindo underlines several of her sentences to draw added attention to them, while Benjamin T. writes his letter in code to conceal that he is in love with another man.

Sexuality and gender roles form another element that characterizes the story's letter-writers. As in much of Cisneros's fiction, many of the women chafe under a culturally defined position that places them as less powerful than men. Adelfa Vásquez prays that his daughter will stop thinking about finishing school. Teresa Galindo prays to be rid of the boyfriend she prayed to find a year before. Rosario (Chayo) De Leon dreams of being a painter and not a mother, but finds no support from the men or the women of her family. The only woman who has freed herself from worrying about cultural expectations for her gender is Ms. Barbara Ybañez, who is nevertheless unable to find a man worthy of her.

In addition to raising the voices of these often-silenced women, in this story, Cisneros also presents the voice of another marginalized figure, the gay man Benjamin T., whose shame brings him to leave his letter in code. This is not to say that the straight men in the story all enact the stereotype of the oppressive, dominant man although some do (including Chapa, who drinks and frightens his wife and children). Arnulfo Contreras, who avoids temptation when he is away from his wife, prays only for the money that is coming to him, so he can support his family. Gustavo Corchado B. is tender and broken-hearted as he prays for his dying wife. Both men have accepted the male role of protector and provider, but they fulfill that role with decency and humility. Their story, too, is often overlooked.

A third defining force for these characters, of course, is their Roman Catholic religion, but even here there is a variety of practice and belief. The Mexican custom of leaving small offerings, or *milagritos* ("little miracles ") as a token of thanks to the saints for favors granted is the central action of the story; each of the letters has been left in a church at the shrine to a particular saint, sometimes accompanied by another object, such as a graduation gown, a tiny gold figure, a photograph, or a braid of hair.

But Catholicism, along with the Spanish language, was brought to the New World by a conquering nation, and traces of indigenous religion have survived and even thrived among Latino people. Moises Ildefonso Mata, who calls on the "Seven African Powers that surround our Savior," practices a religion known as Santeria, or *Regla de Ocha* ("The Rule of the Orisha"). Santeria, practiced in the United States primarily by Cuban Americans, combines elements of Roman Catholicism with the worship of the Yoruba deities, or Orisha, of West Africa. Rosario (Chayo) De Leon, whose extended reflection makes up half the story, can only accept Catholicism and the Virgin Mary when she comes to see her as one among the Aztec goddesses.

Although Cisneros is known primarily as a teller of women's stories, in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" she presents a catalog of previously uncelebrated people, female and male; straight and gay; young, middle-aged and old; educated and uneducated; poor and wealthy; Spanish-speaking, English-speaking, and bilingual. It is the variety itself that lies at the heart of "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." As Poey and Suarez point out in their introduction to *Iguana Dreams,*

in the eyes of many Anglos, the diverse Latino cultures are interchangeable. ... Although the ties that bind all Latino cultures are strong, there are many significant differences that are at times not obvious to a mainstream American public.

By telling many characters' stories as a series of letters, Cisneros makes each story individual, but equally poignant, equally prominent.

Like poetry and drama, and like painting and music and virtually any art form, the short story has been the object of remarkable experimentation since it was first described and studied academically. The nineteenth-century American poet and fiction writer Edgar Allan Poe is often mentioned as the first to define the short story as a separate form in a 1842 review of a collection of stories by another American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Since that time, scholars have tried to pin down a static definition and description of the short story while writers and readers have continued to produce and be enriched by a form that has continued to evolve and change shape.

Often, as in Cisneros's case, transformations in artistic forms have occurred at times of significant historical transformations when new cultural groups were emerging for the first time, or emerging from under the influences of another dominant culture. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman was among a group of writers trying to create new forms of writing that were truly American. The United States was still a new country, not yet grown into an awareness of its own identity, and American writers looked primarily to Europe for literary forms and themes. Whitman continually experimented with new kinds of verse that did not use the regular meter, rhyme, and stanza forms of the British literature that served as the model for many of Whitman's colleagues. He looked instead for "organic" forms that emerged from the experiences and the consciousness of Americans. The United States, Whitman felt, was too large and magnificent to be expressed adequately in tightly controlled, short, and regular lines. The result was a collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass,* that celebrated the

common citizen of the United States in long irregular unrhymed lines reflecting the grandeur and the energy of the young nation.

In a similar way, twentieth century African writers such as the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka studied European literature in school, and served their apprenticeships as writers by using European forms as their models. In the middle of the twentieth century, as African nations began one by one to win independence from the European nations that had colonized them, writers and other artists sought to reclaim their own cultural identity. Soyinka created plays that included the traditional rituals of mime and dance from his own Yoruba ethnic group. Instead of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter lines, Soyinka's characters spoke in the rhythms of ritual chant. Instead of allusions to Greek and Roman gods or the Christian Bible, Soyinka's characters were influenced by Yoruba deities.

Cisneros does not approach her material as a sociologist or a "professional Latina," offering a lesson in Latino culture and its variety for an Anglo audience. Her characters are delightful to her for all the same reasons that any writer finds delight in her characters: because they are sad and funny and sweet and strong. In an interview with Feroza Jusawalla and Reed Dasenbrock, collected in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World,* she commented,

The readers who are going to like my stories the best and catch all the subtexts and all the subtleties, that even my editor can't catch, are Chicanas. When there are Chicanas in the audience and they laugh, they are laughing at stuff that we talk about among ourselves.... But I am also very conscious when I'm writing that I'm opening doors for people who don't know the culture.

As the daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother, Cisneros has felt throughout her career that it is important to use her writing to give voice to the stories of Latino people, whose stories have not often told in literature. In "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," through the device of the collection of letters, Cisneros stands beside Whitman and Soyinka and other writers around the world in proclaiming that the language of everyday speech is poetic and beautiful, that the culture of our ancestors is to be cherished, and that the common people around us, praying for their little miracles, are valuable and worthy of being celebrated in literature.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Critical Essay on "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Ganz calls "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" "perhaps the most telling representation of the diversity of voices that make up Woman Hollering Creek."

One particular prose piece, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," is perhaps the most telling representation of the diversity of voices that make up *Woman Hollering Creek.* It is introduced by a prelude told in the voice of young, working-class Chicana who, while shopping in a "religious store" for a statue or "holy picture" to give to a friend in the hospital, is told by the "crab ass" store owner, "I can see you're not going to buy anything." When the narrator protests and says that she will, she's just thinking, he replies, "Well, if it's thinking you want, you just go across the street to the church to think — you're just wasting my time and yours thinking here." She does go across the street, and inside the church she reads the little letters of supplication that the churchgoers leave for the Virgin and other saints. A sampling follows of the twenty-three letters covering the church walls that comprise "Little Miracles, Kept Promises":

Miraculous Black Christ of Esquípulas,

Please make our grandson to be nice to us and stay away from drugs. Save him to find a job and move away from us.

Grandma y Grandfather

Harlingen

Saint Jude, patron saint of lost causes,

Help me pass my English 320, British Restoration Literature class and everything to turn out ok.

Eliberto Gonzalez

Dallas

M3r1c5145s B 1lck Chr3st 4f 2sq53p51ls,

3 1sk y45, L4rd,w3th 1ll my h21rt pl2s2 w1tch 4v2r M1nny B2n1v3d2s wh4 3s 4v2rs21s. 3 l4v2 h3m 1nd 3 d4n't kn4w wh1t t4 d4 1bi5t 1ll th3s 14v2 s1dn2ss 1and sh1m2 thlt Gils m2.

B2nj1m3n T.

D21 R34 Tx (122-24)

In the case of the last letter, Benjamin T. is apparently so discomfited by his love for another man that he creates a code (a=1, e=2, i=3, etc.), trusting that his faith will translate both his message and his pain:

[Miraculous Black Christ of Esquípulas,

I ask you Lord, with all my heart please watch over Manny Benavidas who is overseas. I love him and I don't know what to do about all this love sadness and shame that fills me.

Benjamin T. Del Rio TX]

One of the unexpected reasons that Cisneros's stories resonate with such genuineness is that her indispensable source for names and other cultural information is the San Antonio phone book. When she's searching for just the right name for a character, she leafs through the listings for a last name then repeats the process for a first name, thereby coming up with a euphonious or suitable combination without appropriating anybody's *real* name. Cisneros also uses the Yellow Pages and mail-order catalogues in much the same way for the names of businesses and so forth. For inspiration, she reads the *Popul Vuh,* the Maya Bible.

About the experience of writing *Woman Hollering Creek* and giving voice to so many different characters, Cisnero said at the Santa Fe conference, "I felt like a ventriloquist." Her advice to the writers in attendance was to "transcribe voices of the people of a community you know," and confided that she keeps voluminous files of snippets of dialogue or monologue—records of conversations she hears wherever she goes. She emphasized that she'll mix and match to suit her purpose because, as she put it, "real life doesn't have shape. You have to snip and cut."

When Cisneros was at work on *Woman Hollering Creek,* she became so immersed in her characters that they began to penetrate her unconscious; once, while writing "Eyes of Zapata," she awakened in the middle of the night, convinced for the moment that she was Inés, the young bride of the Mexican revolutionary. Her dream conversation with Zapata then became those characters's dialogue in her story. The task of breaking the silence, of articulating the unpronounceable pain of the characters that populate *Woman Hollering Creek,* was a very serious undertaking for Cisneros. She said in a recent interview: "I'm trying to write the stories that haven't been written. I felt like a cartographer; I'm determined to fill a literary void." The pressure intensifies for her because of her bi-culturalism and bilingualism: She charts not only the big city barrio back alleyways, its mean streets and the dusty arroyos of the borderland, but also offers us a window into the experience of the educated, cosmopolitan Chicano/artist, writer and academic. While she revels in her biculturalism, enjoys her life in two worlds, and as a writer she's grateful to have "twice as many words to pick from ... two ways of looking at the world," her wide range of experience is a double-edged sword. In the Sagel interview, she revealed another side of her motivation to tell many peoples's stories in their own voices—the responsibility and the anxiety which that task produces: "One of the most frightening pressures I faced as I wrote this book," she says, "was the

fear that I would blow it ... I kept asking myself, What have I taken on here? That's why I was so obsessed with getting everybody's stories out."

She feels under additional pressure as the first Chicana to enter the mainstream of literary culture. Until Random House published *Woman Hollering Creek* and *The House on Mango Street* was reissued by Vintage Press, the Chicano literature that had crossed over into the mainstream remained a male domain—Gary Soto, Luis Valdez, Richard Rodríguez, Jimmy Santiago Baca and Alberto Rios had all made the transition. Women, however, were unrepresented there until Cisneros's recent successes. On September 19, 1991 she said in a National Public Radio interview broadcast on *Morning Edition:*

I think I can't be happy if I'm the only one that's getting published by Random House when I know there are such magnificent writers—both Latinos and Latinas, both Chicanos and Chicanas—in the U.S. whose books are not published by mainstream presses or whom the mainstream isn't even aware of. And, you know, if my success means that other presses will take a second look at these writers . . . and publish them in larger numbers then our ship will come in.

While it is undeniable that Sandra Cisneros has traversed the boundary dividing the small press market and the mainstream publishing establishment, a controversy continues about her writing among the critics over the issue of genre-crossing. In her review of *Woman Hollering Creek* in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Poetic Fiction With A Tex-Mex Tilt," Barbara Kingsolver writes that "Sandra Cisneros has added length and dialogue and a hint of plot to her poems and published them in a stunning collection called *Woman Hollering Creek."* Later on in the review she elaborates:

It's a practical thing for poets in the United States to turn to fiction. Elsewhere, poets have the cultural status of our rock stars and the income of our romance novelists. Here, a poet is something your mother probably didn't want you to grow up to be... When you read this book, don't be fooled. It's poetry. Just don't tell your mother.

In her review in *The Nation,* Patricia Hart writes, "In her new book, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories,* Cisneros breathes narrative life into her adroit, poetic descriptions, making them mature, fully formed works of fiction."

We might ask then, is *Woman Hollering Creek* poetry or is it prose? Ever since the publication of *The House on Mango Street,* critics have debated the degree to which Cisneros embraces both forms simultaneously. Gary Soto addresses the mirror image of the same issue in his review of her poetry collection, *My Wicked Wicked Ways:*

I use the term "prosaic poetry" not in disapproval, but as a descriptive phrase. Cisneros, as she illustrated in *The House on Mango Street,* is foremost a storyteller. Except for the " Rodrigo Poem s," which meditate on the themes of love and deceit, and perhaps a few of the travel poems, each of the poems in this collection is a little story, distilled to a few stanzas, yet with a beginning, middle, and end.

It is unlikely that critics will ever reach a definitive agreement on the matter of whether Cisneros's writing is poetic prose or prose-like poetry. I predict, however, that this question will persist throughout her literary career, continuing to arise in subsequent criticism of her work. Cisneros herself is entitled to the final word (for the time being, at least) on the subject. At a reading in Albuquerque, New Mexico in October, 1991 she said that when she has the words to express her idea, it's a story. When she doesn't, it's a poem.

Sandra Cisneros is a relatively young writer, both chronologically and in the sense that she is a fresh voice, a new presence in the spectrum of contemporary literature. One is likely to forget her relative inexperience because of the wisdom and understanding that charge and permeate her stories and poems. From time to time I am reminded of it, however, when I come across a passage that verges on the cute—at times, whether in a poem or story, she veers dangerously toward the precious. A reviewer for *Booklist* wrote the following criticism about *The House on Mango Street,* but it could apply to her work in other instances as well:

These vignettes of autobiographical fiction . . . written in a loose and deliberately simple style, halfway between a prose poem and the awkwardness of semiliteracy, convincingly represent the reflections of a young girl. Occasionally the method annoys by its cuteness.

Far more often than it is coy or cloying however, Cisneros's work is affecting, charming and filled with the humor and the rich cultural offerings of Mexican America. Her style is as clear as water, as evinced in her unadorned syntax, her spare and elegant phrasing, and the entirely original Mexican-American inflected diction of her poetry and prose. Yet, as with the clearest water, beneath the surface, Cisneros's work is alive with complexity and depth of meaning. Cisneros's voice is the sound of many voices speaking—over the kitchen table, out on the street, across the borderlands, and through the years.

Source: Robin Ganz, "Border Crossings and Beyond," in *Melus,* Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 25-29.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the history of Mexican immigration to the United States. Why do Mexicans cross the border? Why have they suffered discrimination? Identify some of the positive contributions Mexican Americans have made to U.S. culture and society.

Many Mexican Americans speak Spanish as their primary language. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of this in terms of education, employment, integration with mainstream America, and maintenance of traditional culture. Should there be bilingual programs for Spanish speakers or should everyone be encouraged (or compelled) to speak English?

"Little Miracles, Kept Promises," Rosario rebels against the patriarchal aspects of Mexican-American society, especially as it relates to gender roles. Research the roles played by men and women in Mexican-American culture. Do these differ from those of mainstream America? Are gender roles in Mexican-American families changing, and if so, why?

Should the United States continue to be a "melting pot," in which ethnicity is less important than the fact of being an American, or should it become a "salad bar," in which many diverse cultures flourish? What are the implications of the fact that Hispanics will soon be the largest minority group in the United States? Within a few decades, "minorities" in California will outnumber whites—what changes will this produce in social and political life?

What Do I Read Next?

Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) tells in poetry and prose the inspiring coming-of-age story of Esperanza Cordero, a young girl growing up in the impoverished Hispanic community in Chicago.

The anthology *Pieces of the Heart: New Chicano Fiction* (1993), edited by the Chicano poet Gary Soto, contains fifteen selections from authors such as Cisneros, Alberto Alvaro Rios, Ana Castillo, Victor Martinez, and Helena Maria Viramontes.

Growing Up Chicana/o (1995), edited by Tiffany Ana Lopez, contains twenty autobiographical essays and stories that explore the Mexican-American experience from many angles. One of the essays is by Cisneros, on her memories of growing up in Chicago.

Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States (1999), by Manuel G. Gonzales, surveys more than two centuries of Mexican-American history. Gonzales reappraises the successes and failures of the Chicano movement; his fair-minded approach does justice not only to the radical but also to the conservative elements in the heterogeneous Mexican-American community.

From Out of the Shadows: Mexican-American Women in the Twentieth-Century America, by Vicki L. Ruiz (1999) traces the experiences of Mexican-American women in the United States. Ruiz discusses the effects of race and class and shows how women have helped to shape a distinctive Mexican-American culture through building communities and taking part in political protest.

Further Study

Campbell, Bebe Moore, "Crossing Borders," in *New York*

Times Book Review, May 26, 1991, p. 6.

Campbell provides a review of *Woman Hollering Creek,* which draws attention to Cisneros's vivid images and humor, and also her negative presentation of male characters.

Hart, Patricia, "Babes in Boyland," in *Nation,* Vol. 252, No.17, May 6, 1991, pp. 597-598.

Hart gives a review of *Woman Hollering Creek* that praises Cisneros's "adroit, poetic descriptions" and the broad range of characters she creates.

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, *Sandra Cisneros: Latina Writer and Activist,* Enslow Publishers, 1998.

This text is an enthusiastic survey of Cisneros's life and work that emphasizes her perseverance in overcoming poverty and cultural biases. It also discusses her political activities on behalf of Latino workers. It includes black and white photographs.

Prescott, Peter S., and Karen Springen, Review, in *News-week,* June 3, 1991, p. 60.

Prescott and Springen present a review of *Woman Hollering Creek* that argues that the book, together with Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street,* will establish her reputation as a major author.

Bibliography

Cisneros, Sandra, "Only Daughter," in *Glamour,* November 1990, p. 256.

Jusawalla, Feroza, and Reed Dasenbrock, *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World,* University of Mississippi Press, 1992, p. 291.

Kingsolver, Barbara, "Poetic Fiction With a Tex-Mex Tilt," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* April 28, 1991, pp. 3, 12.

Poey, Delia, and Virgil Suarez, eds., *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction,* HarperPerennial, 1992, pp. xvi, xvii.

Satz, Martha, "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros," in *Southwest Review,* Vol. 82, No. 2, Spring 1997, pp. 166-185.

Tompkins, Cynthia, "Sandra Cisneros," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 152: *American Novelists Since World War II, Fourth Series,* edited by James Giles and Wanda Giles, Gale Research, 1995, pp. 35-41.

Wyatt, Jean, "On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros"Never Marry a Mexican' and 'Woman Hollering Creek,'" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1995, pp. 243-272.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535