Woman Hollering Creek Study Guide

Woman Hollering Creek by Sandra Cisneros

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Introduction

"Woman Hollering Creek" was first published in Sandra Cisneros's 1991 collection of short stones, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* Like her novel, *The House on Mango Street,* published in 1983, which describes the lives of Mexican immigrants in a Chicago neighborhood, "Woman Hollering Creek" describes the lives of Mexicans who have crossed the border to live on *"el otro lado"*- the other side-in the American Southwest. Critically acclaimed as a major voice in Chicana and feminist literature, Cisneros has won numerous awards and has established herself as an important voice in the American literary mainstream as well. Cisneros's work is widely anthologized, and her novel, short stories, and poetry are part of many high school and college literature classes,

In "Woman Hollering Creek" Cisneros writes of a woman, Cleofilas, who is trapped' in a constricting, culturally assigned gender role due to her linguistic isolation, violent marriage, and poverty. Weaving in allusions to women of Mexican history and folklore, making it clear that women across the centuries have suffered the same alienation and victimization, Cisneros presents a woman who struggles to prevail over romantic notions of domestic bliss by leaving her husband, thus awakening the power within her.

Author Biography

Born in Chicago in 1954, Sandra Cisneros grew up with her Mexican father, Mexican-American mother, and six brothers Her family moved back and forth between Chicago and Mexico City, never staying long enough for her to find the friends she hoped would make up for her lack of a sister. As a child, her defense against loneliness was reading books and writing poetry. In high school, she continued writing, trying to distinguish her own voice from the voices of the literary giants she studied. It was not until a creative writing class in college in 1974, described in "Ghost Voices: Writing from Obsession," that she began to realize that she had not only a unique voice but also a new story to tell that had not been told in American literature. It is the story of immigrant families living on the borders between countries, neighborhoods, social classes, linguistic groups, and races.

In order to reclaim her father's Spanish, Cisneros tells Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla that she "made a conscious choice to move to Texas" Looking back at *The House on Mango Street,* which is written in English, she realizes that "the syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects-that's not a child's voice as is sometimes said. That's Spanish!" Living in San Antonio gives Cisneros the Spanish culture she seeks to enrich her English. "Everywhere I go I get ideas, something in the people's expressions, something in the rhythm of their saying something in Spanish. "

Writing primarily in English, but English infused with Spanish, Cisneros has published three volumes of poetry: *Bad Boys* (1980), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994), in addition to her novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and her short story collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). She is currently working on a new novel, *Caramelo.*

Plot Summary

Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez believes she will live happily ever after when her father consents to her marriage to Juan Pedro. She leaves her father and six brothers in Mexico and drives to *"el otro lado"-the* other side-with Juan Pedro to start a new life as his wife in a ramshackle house in a dusty little Texas town. Across a stream called Woman Hollering Creek, Cleofilas soon finds that she has left the boring yet peaceful life she shared with her father and six brothers for the tumultuous, lonely, desperate life of a woman with an abusive husband. Her new life, which was supposed to have been full of the passion she had seen on television soap operas, grows "sadder and sadder with each episode," even though she believes that "when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, [one] does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost." She is trapped with her infant son and widowed neighbors, Dolores and Soledad, along the banks of the creek with the name no one can explain. Cleofilas wonders if it is pain or anger that caused the woman of Woman Hollering Creek to holler. No one can answer; no one remembers.

Pregnant with her second child and promising to hide her most recent bruises, Cleofilas begs her husband to take her to the clinic for a checkup. The physician at the clinic, Graciela, realizes that Cleofilas is an abused woman who speaks no English, is completely cut off from her family, and desperately needs help to escape from her husband. Graciela calls her friend, Felice, who agrees to drive Cleofilas and her baby, Juan Pedrito, to San Antonio where they can get a bus to take them back to her father, Don Serafin, in Mexico. Cleofilas is amazed to learn that Felice drives her own pickup truck and does not have a husband, and she is shocked when, as they cross the bridge over Woman Hollering Creek, Felice opens her mouth and yells "like Tarzan."

Summary

Woman Hollering Creek, by Sandra Cisneros, begins with Don Serafin giving Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez permission to marry his only daughter, Cleofilas. Juan Pedro plans to take Cleofilas to live in the United States. However, Don already knows that the day will come when his daughter will look south and wish she were at home with her family. As Cleofilas is getting ready to leave, Don reminds his daughter that he is her father and he will never abandon her. He then hugs her, but she is too busy looking for her maid of honor to pay attention to him. It is not until Cleofilas is a parent herself that she remembers her father's words. She thinks about how love between a man and a woman is not always constant, but a parent's love for a child lasts forever. Cleofilas thinks about this especially on nights when Juan Pedro doesn't come home.

The story now reverts to an earlier time through a flashback. The town were Cleofilas grew up does not have much excitement. She spends her time visiting her aunts and godmothers and playing cards. She also loves watching the latest telenovela episodes. Mostly she waits for the love of her life to appear. The heroine of her favorite novella, *You or No One*, has experienced all types of hardships, but believes that staying kind and loving no matter what happens is the most important thing in life. Cleofilas agrees with her. She thinks that suffering for love is good and that the pain is sweet.

The flashback then jumps forward to when Cleofilas starts dating Juan Pedro. He tells her about a town in Texas called Seguin. She thinks about the lovely house she will have and that her outfits will look like the women on television shows. Juan Pedro says they will go all the way to Loredo to get her wedding dress. He wants to get married right away. Cleofilas believes he has a good job and plenty of money to fill their home with new furniture.

The story moves ahead again to sometime after their wedding. Cleofilas and Juan Pedro are living in Texas. A creek runs behind their house called, Woman Hollering Creek, but no one seems to know the origin of the name. Cleofilas is fascinated by the name. When Cleofilas asks the laundromat attendant, Trini, about the creek, she is rude to her and doesn't answer. Cleofilas thinks that maybe she will ask her neighbors, but she decides that they probably won't know. One woman, Soledad, says she is a widow, but Cleofilas doesn't know what really happened to her husband. A woman named Dolores lives in the house on the other side of the newlyweds. She is very kind and sweet, but spends all of her time mourning two sons lost in a war and her husband who died a short time later. Her house always smells of the incense she burns in their memory.

At some point later, Cleofilas reflects on the first time Juan Pedro hit her. They had only been married a short time. She had always vowed to strike back if a man ever attacked her, but she does nothing. He hits her over and over until her lip is bleeding. She doesn't cry, yell, or fight back. She just stands there, feeling stunned and numb. Cleofilas then touches the blood with her hand and looks at it as if she doesn't understand where it

has come from. After the beating, Juan Pedro cries, feeling remorse for his actions. She still says nothing. Instead, she silently strokes his hair while he weeps.

Sometimes Cleofilas looks at Juan Pedro after they have made love or when he is eating and thinks that he is the man for whom she waited her whole life. However, there are many times when she has to remind herself why she loves him. There are instances when he kicks the refrigerator, yelling at her about the state of their modest house, and then goes out without telling her where he going. When she asks for help repairing things in the house, he tells her that he pays for the food in her stomach and the roof over her head so she should leave him alone. Cleofilas thinks that he does not look like the men in the telenovelas. He isn't tall, he has scars from acne, and his stomach is fat from all of the beer he drinks. He also demands that she serve his dinner the minute he gets home, with every course on a separate plate.

At this point the narrative flashes back to when Cleofilas has just returned home from the hospital after giving birth to the couple's first child. She notices small things have been disturbed in the house. For instance, her lipstick and hairbrush are not in the same place. There is a crushed cigarette in a glass and a smudged fingerprint on the door. She does not ask him about her suspicions. The story then returns to the present. Cleofilas thinks of her father's house. She doesn't believe she can go back with one small child and pregnant with a second. The neighbors would talk about her disgrace. Her hometown is full of gossips, dust, and despair. Despite her hopes for a better life, now she knows that she just lives in another town full of gossips, dust, and despair. The Texas town she lives in with Juan Pedro bores her. There is nothing she can walk to. Cleofilas thinks that the town was built so women would have to depend on husbands. The newspapers are full of stories about women being killed by boyfriends, lovers, and husbands. Thinking about those stories makes her shiver as she is doing the dishes.

One day, Juan Pedro throws one of her books at her from across the room. It leaves a welt on her cheek, but it is not the injury that bothers her. She is angrier that he threw her favorite love story. Her novels are important to her, especially now that she does not have a television set. Sometimes, when Juan Pedro is not home, she will go to Dolores's house to watch an episode of her favorite shows. One of telenovelas is about a poor girl from Argentina who falls in the love with the handsome son of the rich family she works for. Their love is doomed because of their class differences. Cleofilas thought that her life was going to be like one of the telenovelas. However, unlike the television shows, her life keeps getting more and more sad, with no commercials for comic relief. All of the characters on the shows have names that sound like jewels. She thinks maybe she should change her name because a woman with a name like Cleofilas is destined to end up being hit in the face.

Pregnant with her second child, Cleofilas pleads with Juan Pedro to take her to the doctor to make sure the baby growing inside of her is all right. She tells him that the doctor has made an appointment for her and says she has to go. Cleofilas promises him that she will not tell the doctor where her bruises have come from. Instead, she will say she fell down the front steps. They fight over money and he becomes angry at her suggestion to ask her father for financial help. Juan Pedro asks why she is so anxious.

She replies that she wants to make sure the baby is in the right position, not like her first son, who required her to undergo a cesarean section. Cleofilas promises to have their son, Juan Pedrito, dressed and ready to go next Tuesday after Juan Pedro gets off of work.

The narration switches to a first person account of Graciela, a woman who works at Cleofilas' doctor's office. She is talking to her friend, Felice, on the phone. She says she was giving a woman a sonogram and the woman started to cry. Graciela says the woman, who the reader can assume is Cleofilas, has bruises all over her body. She continues that the patient doesn't speak English and has not been allowed to call home or even write. Graciela asks Felice to take Cleofilas to the Greyhound station in San Antonio. She says she would take Cleofilas herself, but she has to work and Cleofilas has to be out of the house before Juan Pedro gets home from work. They agree that Felice will meet Cleofilas at the Cash 'N Carry store at noon on Thursday. Graciela tells Felice that their lives are like soap operas.

Cleofilas is waiting at the store, scared that Juan Pedro will show up. Instead, Felice pulls up in a pickup truck. Cleofilas does not have time to think. She simply puts her bags in the back and climbs into the truck. When they drive across the creek, or arroyo, Felice opens her mouth and screams. Cleofilas and Juan Pedrito are startled. Felice apologizes for scaring them. She explains that every time she crosses the bridge, she lets out a yell because of its name, Woman Hollering. Felice amazes Cleofilas. She asked Felice about the pickup truck and is surprised to learn that she bought it herself. Felice says she doesn't have a husband. Cleofilas will later tell her father and brothers about how this strange woman yelled when they crossed the arroyo. Sitting in the truck, Cleofilas suddenly begins to laugh.

Analysis

This short story starts with immediate foreshadowing. Cleofilas's father, Don Serafin, knows that her marriage will not bring her happiness. Although she is anxious to start what she thinks will be a happy, prosperous life, her father is far more realistic about his daughter's husband. He knows Cleofilas will someday want to return home to her family, even if it means dealing with her six brothers and endless chores. He tells Cleofilas that he is her father and that he will never abandon her. This is his way of reminding her she will always be able to return home. Although Cleofilas is too busy with her wedding to really listen to her father, she later remembers his words.

Cleofilas's hometown offers little excitement, so she looks to the popular telenovelas for drama and intrigue. The glamorous women in the television shows live sad lives, constantly suffering because of love. Only after they have experienced pain, can they find happiness. Cleofilas wants to be like the characters in the shows. When waiting to marry Juan Pedro, she dreams that he will be able to afford to buy her expensive clothing and a nice home. Unfortunately, her views on relationships are also shaped by what she sees on television. She associates love with pain, thinking that one cannot exist without the other. It is this desire for love that allows her to endure the hardships

that come with being married to Juan Pedro. Not only does he beat her, he constantly degrades her by insulting her and demanding that she serve him in countless, humiliating ways. Still, she tries to convince herself that she loves her husband. After all, if she does not love him, her suffering will be in vain.

The title of this short story, *Woman Hollering Creek*, comes from the name of the creek that runs behind Cleofilas's house. The name plays a pivotal role in the story because it symbolizes the transformation of Cleofilas from a dependent, abused wife to a woman who takes control of her own life. When she first moves to Texas, she loves the beautiful creek, but wonders what its strange name means. No one can tell her. Unlike the mysterious hollering woman the creek was named after, Cleofilas is often silent. The first time Juan Pedro hits her she does not fight back or even cry. She doesn't make a sound. Cisneros writes:

When it happened the first time, when they were barely man and wife, she had been so stunned, it left her speechless, motionless, numb. She had done nothing but reach up to the heat on her mouth and stare at the blood on her had as if even then she didn't understand.

Later, Cleofilas does not speak when she goes with her husband to the icehouse. As the men socialize, she sits mutely at her husband's side. Meanwhile, Juan Pedro continues to physically and mentally abuse her. Even though she suspects he is not only violent, but also unfaithful, she does not try to leave him. She simply retreats further into a silent life of denial.

Eventually Cleofilas comes to realize she cannot expect her life to follow the plot of a telenovela. Putting up with abuse will not lead to a happy ending. She thinks about how the characters all have names that sound like jewels, like Cristal or Topazio. She says to herself, "What happened to a Cleofilas? Nothing. But a crack in the face." This realization that her life with Juan Pedro will not end joyfully like the stories she has seen on television allows her to finally break her silence at the doctor's office. Cleofilas admits to the woman giving her a sonogram that she is being abused. The woman arranges for her friend, Felice, to drive Cleofilas and her young son to a bus station where she will escape Texas and return to her father.

Although Cleofilas has already taken the initiative to leave her husband, meeting Felice reinforces her decision. She has never met a woman like Felice before. Not only does she drive a pickup, but she also pays for it herself. This independent lifestyle is in stark contrast to the completely dependent existence Cleofilas has lived. The full meaning of the name Hollering Woman Creek becomes apparent when Felice yells as they cross the bridge. Without Juan Pedro, Cleofilas realizes she does not have to exist in silent suffering. She now has the power to scream. However, instead of screaming, she laughs. This is the first time Cleofilas is shown expressing joy. Cisneros writes, "It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water." The reference to water ties directly back to the symbolism behind the name Hollering Woman Creek. Cleofilas is no longer numb. She is free to express her rage and scream, and that empowerment makes her finally happy enough to laugh.

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Characters

Dolores

Dolores, whose name means "sorrow," is Cleofilas' neighbor on the right. She is a widow who lives in a house full of incense and candles, mourning her husband and two dead sons. She grows immense sunflowers and sad-smelling roses to decorate their small graves in the nearby cemetery. She worries about Cleofilas and her baby getting sick if they are ever out in the night air where the ghostly La Llorona might find them.

Felice

Felice is an independent, spirited woman who owns her own truck and who is willing to help other women in distress. Along with the clinic physician, Graciela, she conspires to help Cleofilas escape from her abusive husband. Felice is a woman who rejects traditional sex roles and fiercely and fearlessly defends women who arc trapped in restricted, traditional lives. She transforms the holler of Woman Hollering Creek from a cry of pain or rage to a shout of laughter and liberation.

Graciela

Graciela, whose name means "grace," is the clinic physician who, like Felice, has rejected traditional sex roles. She takes the initiative to get Cleofilas away from her husband by calling Felice to drive the battered woman to the bus depot in San Antonio.

Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez

Cleofilas is a young, innocent Mexican woman with much curiosity and a head full of dreams of a life of love and passion derived from her beloved books, song lyrics, and soap operas. When her father offers her in marriage to a man from' *'el otro lado"-the* other side of the border, she hastily makes her bridal gown, gathers flowers for her makeshift bouquet, and goes off with the "man she has waited her whole life for" to find "passion in its purest crystalline essence," even the passion women often pay for with "sweet pain."

After her husband, Juan Pedro, begins to abuse her, she stays quiet even though she shudders at the thought of all the dead women she reads about in the newspapers. She realizes how dangerous her situation is, but pride prevents her from returning to her father in Mexico. "Where's your husband?" she knows they would ask. Cleofilas eventually musters enough courage to leave, though she obtains help from Graciela and Felice. Relying on the strength of these women, whom Cleofilas finds fascinating, she leaves Juan Pedro behind and returns to her former life.

Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez

Juan Pedro is Cleofilas's abusive, alcoholic husband who only wants to marry his young Mexican bride quickly and take her back to his life of poverty in Seguin, Texas. There he can resume his habit of drinking and carousing with his foulmouthed friends at the local ice house. Soon after their marriage, he reveals himself to be faithless, violent, and quick to cry tears of remorse and shame, which are predictably followed by renewed episodes of physical abuse.

Juan Pedro is a man who disdains the romance that feeds his wife's fantasies, and hates the music and soap operas she adores. He is short, husky, scarred from acne, and overweight from all of the beer he drinks. Consistent with the gender-role socialization of his youth, he demands that his wife provide dinners like his mother prepared. He also demands that Cleofilas take care of all his needs and those of his children without complaint.

Don Serafin

Don Serafin is Cleofilas' father, who told her as she left his house with her new husband, "1 am your father, I will never abandon you." Still, he sends her off to *"el otro lado"-the* other side-with a man neither he nor his daughter really knows. Even as she leaves, he wonders if she will someday dream of returning to her hard life of chores with him and her six brothers. Don Serafin teaches Cleofilas that the love between parent and child is different and stronger than the love between a man and a woman, a lesson she remembers as she looks at her infant son. After his daughter's disastrous, violent marriage, to which he initially consented, he is there to welcome her and her children home.

Soledad

Soledad, whose name means "alone," is Cleofilas's neighbor on the left in Seguin, Texas. Soledad says she is a widow, but rarely talks about her husband. Local gossip claims he either died, ran off with another woman, or went out one day and never came back. Soledad is one of the few people Cleofilas can visit, but she does not offer any hope for relief from the abuse Cleofilas suffers. She frustrates Cleofilas because she cannot explain the name of Woman Hollering Creek, and she is full of warnings about the dangers of walking alone at night

Themes

Love and Passion

Cleofilas longs for "passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the books and songs and *telenovelas* describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever cost." Because, she believes, "to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow." Unhappily, the passive acceptance of suffering for love that Cleofilas learns as she grows up makes her especially vulnerable to her abusive husband. She had always believed that "she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her." Instead, when Juan Pedro first hits her, "she had been so stunned, it left her speechless, motionless, numb." Unbelieving and forgiving when the abuse begins, Cleofilas wonders why her pain goes beyond the sweet pain of her soap opera heroines. Where is the love that is supposed to go along with the pain?

Cleofilas learns that the only love that endures in her life is the love of a parent for a child. When she leaves her father's house in Mexico, he tells her, "I am your father, I will never abandon you." Although he gives her in marriage to a man whose violence is unknown to them, he welcomes her home after she escapes her life of domestic abuse.

Sex Roles

Women, in Cleofilas' culture, are assigned to carefully circumscribed roles, as they are in most cultures. For example, she is given to Juan Pedro by her father, moves from her father's house into her husband's house, does not drive or have access to a car, and is isolated with her child to the small house where she must cook, clean, and care for her family without even the companionship of a television. She is shocked to meet Felice, a woman who drives a pickup truck that is her own, not her husband's, since she does not even have a husband. It is a truck she chose and that she pays for herself. Felice's life is full of freedom that Cleofilas never even imagines. When Felice lets out a loud yell as they cross Woman Hollering Creek, Cleofilas and her baby are both startled by the outburst. Felice explains that the only woman who is revered, or for whom any place is named around their town, is the Virgin, and in fact "you're only famous if you are a virgin."

Men, too, are constrained by the sex roles assigned to them by culture. Nothing in Juan Pedro's world encourages him to be other than he is. His icehouse friends condone violence against women, and even the women near his home who must know his violent ways, do nothing to correct him. His wife forgives him and promises to remain silent about his beatings and even to lie outright if asked about her many bruises by her doctor. She will say "she fell down the front steps or slipped when she was out in the backyard, slipped out back, she could tell him that."

Victimization

Cleofilas is a classic victim of domestic abuse, according to Jean Wyatt in her essay "On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros's 'Never Marry and Mexican' and 'Woman Hollering Creek'" *(Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* Vol. 14, Fall, 1995) After being battered by her husband, Cleofilas "could think of nothing to say, said nothing. Just stroked the dark curls of the man who wept and would weep like a child, his tears of repentance and shame, this time and each." The cycle of abuse followed by guilt and remorse continues. Like other victims of violence at the hands of men, Cleofilas is Isolated, poor, has one child and is pregnant with another, and lives in a climate where violence against women is ignored-even condoned. Her husband and his friends at the ice house joke about Maximiliano "who is said to have killed his wife in an ice house brawl when she came at him with a mop. I had to shoot, he had said-she was armed." Like many women, Cleofilas believes that she must remain with her husband; the *telenovelas* have taught her that "to suffer for love is good. The pain is all sweet somehow." In calmer moments, the drama of passion continues to flair within her: "this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master," she tells herself, "this husband till kingdom come."

Cleofilas is finally able to "slip outback," with help from the women of the clinic, and to escape being victimized by her husband. As Cisneros tells Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World,* "There's a lot of victimization but we [Mexican women] are also fierce. Our mothers had been fierce. Our women may be victimized but they are still very, very fierce and very strong"

Style

Point of View and Narration

The majority of "Woman Hollering Creek" is narrated in the third-person omniscient voice. The narrative voice that describes Cleofilas's life in Mexico, her father and brothers, the women friends With whom she gossiped in her town, speaks in longer more lyrical sentences than the narrative voice that describes her life and thoughts in Seguin, Texas. The opening sentence reads: "The day Don Serafin gave Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez permission to take Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez as his bride, across her father's threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado-on* the other side-already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to the chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints."

In contrast to her present life, her, past life in Mexico does seem more and more lyrical, almost idyllic, as her life in Texas spirals downward into more and more abuse, loneliness, and chaos. The short, choppy, incomplete sentences of the Texas sections reach their crescendo as she sits out on the grass with her baby, by Woman Hollering Creek, listening to a voice she interprets as la Llorona, the mythical Weeping Woman who is alleged to have drowned her children. "La Llorona calling to her. She is sure of it. Cleofilas sets the baby's Donald Duck blanket on the grass. Listens. The day sky turning to night. The baby pulling up fistfuls of grass and laughing. La Llorona. Wonders if something as quiet as this drives a woman to the darkness under the trees."

An abrupt change from the third person narrative voice occurs when Graciela, the clinic physician, speaks in the first person on the telephone to Felice. Suddenly there is action; something happens Cleofilas' silent life of abuse is now given voice by a woman who will help Cleofilas to escape the cycle of abuse and gain some control over her life for the first time.

Setting

The river named Woman Hollering Creek forms the center of the borderland in which the story unfolds. It marks the crossings of culture, language, gender, marriage, enslavement, and freedom that take place in the story. Cleofilas's Mexican "town of gossips. . . of dust and despair" on the one side, is not so different from Seguin, Texas, another town of "gossips. .. dust and despair" on the other side, except that in her father's town she is safe from physical harm.

The Texas side of the creek proves to be a dangerous place for Cleofilas Her immediate environment, her house and the houses of her neighbors, Dolores and Soledad, is a predominately female setting. But it is a dangerous one since Juan Pedro often stays

away at night, and because when he is there he is often violent. The ice house, a predominately male setting, is another dangerous place that makes her feel mute and vulnerable. After all, Maximiliano killed his wife there. Even at the clinic Cleofilas cannot feel safe because her husband is in the waiting room. Only in Felice's truck, in the competent hands of this fierce, independent woman, can Cleofilas allow a ripple of laughter to escape from her throat. She is safe in Felice's care.

Structure

"Woman Hollering Creek," like the *telenovelas* Cleofilas watches, is episodic. It does not follow a linear story line with smooth transitions from one setting or topic to another. "Cleofilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *telenovela,* only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief." Although the story moves back and forth in time, and from setting to setting as Cleofilas thinks back to her life in Mexico, each episode, like soap operas, takes place in one time and one place.

The episodic nature of "Woman Hollering Creek" and Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* is a stylistic choice that links the author to the Chicano writers who preceded her, like Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas Rivera, and Rolando Hinojosa. As Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla write in the introduction to their interview with Cisneros (in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World,* 1992), "There are some strong continuities between the two generations and groups of writers: both use a mosaic of discontinuous forms in place of a continuous, linear narrative." Cisneros takes her craft very seriously, as she tells Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, and she believes a writer needs to be a meticulous carpenter of small rooms, small stories, before she can take on building a house.

Symbols and Images

Cisneros employs much symbolism in the names she chooses for her characters. Notably, Cleofilas' neighbors on either side are widowed women named Dolores and Soledad, which mean "sorrow" and "alone," respectively. The two women who come to her aid are Graciela, which is a Hispanic version of the name Grace, and Felice, which means "happiness." Cleofilas' s name is clarified by Graciela, who tries to explain it to Felice over the phone: "One of those Mexican saints, I guess. A martyr or something." This point is underscored by Jean Wyatt who notes that Mexican culture reveres women who suffer, as Cleofilas admires the tortured souls on the *telenovelas.*

The borderlands formed by Woman Hollering Creek are important images in Cisneros's story just as they are in the writing of many of her Chicana colleagues, such as Gloria Anzaldua. For people who live on the edges of cultures and languages different from their own, the concept of borders and borderlands is important because it symbolizes places where life is hard and losses are monumental. Yet they are also places where the fluidity of cultures allows new formulations and transformations to occur. For

example, Cleofilas did not imagine the changes that would take place in her life on the banks of Woman Hollering Creek when she was a teenager watching *telenovelas* in Mexico. Only by moving across the border through marriage, to the edges of a linguistic community in which she is truly silenced by her inability to speak English, does she find herself in the care and company of two women like Graciela, her doctor, and Felice, her driver to safety. Only through her contact with these women, who have found the space in the fluidity of the borderlands to recreate themselves outside of their assigned sex roles, can Cleofilas imagine a new life where suffering for love is not the central motive.

La Llorona, another important image in "Woman Hollering Creek," is the model for the woman who suffers endlessly for love. La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, has been a well-known character of Mexican folklore for so many centuries that her precise origins are themselves the subject of myth. Most often she is described as a woman who drowned her children and who wanders forever in the night crying. One myth says she killed her children because their father was from a higher social class and abandoned her. The same fate awaits modern-day Maria, the star of the *telenovela* "Maria de Nadie. " In other legends, La Llorona merges into La Malinche, the mistress of the conqueror Heman Cortes, who is alleged to have killed the son she had by Cortes when Cortes threatened to take him back to Spain. In "Woman Hollering Creek," La Llorona, a figure known to Cleofilas since her childhood, appears as a voice calling her as she sits by the bank of the creek with her baby.

La Gritona, which means "woman hollering," may be the new image of La Llorona. Cleofilas wonders why the woman is hollering-is it from anger or pain? Why does such a pretty creek "full of happily ever after" have such a strange name, and why can no one explain its meaning? In the story, Cleofilas begins to think of the image of La Gritona, the Hollering Woman, as La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, and begins to hear the holler as a cry of pain with which she identifies very strongly. Yet in the end, here in the borderlands, the cry of La Gritona is transformed in the throat of Felice, who always laughs and yells "like Tarzan," symbol of great physical power, as she drives her pickup truck over the creek.

Historical Context

Mexico: The Early Years

From the beginning of the fourteenth through the end of the fifteenth century, the Aztec people built an empire in what is now Mexico by conquering other tribes. Under Montezuma II, from 1502 until 1520, the empire reached its peak in the days before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Led by Heman Cortes, the Spaniards took the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan on August 13, 1521. Subsequently, Cortes took as his interpreter and mistress the Aztec woman La Malinche.

Post-Colonial Times

After three hundred years of colonial rule, Mexico, which at that time comprised much of what is now the southwest of the United States, won her independence from Spain, in 1821. In the 1848 treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American war, Mexico ceded all territory north of the Rio Grande and the Gila River to the United States. Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana sold land south of the Gila River to the United States in the Gadsden Purchase of 1853.

Changing Borders

Looking at Mexican history, particularly regarding the changing geographical borders between the United States and Mexico, It is clear why Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldua, and other Chicana writers find the metaphor of borders and borderlands such fertile ground for both fiction and nonfiction writing. Borders, like the U.S.-Mexican border, can be changed overnight by government treaty or reprisals of war, and contested areas can become part of a different country in a moment. But people do not change so readily; their culture, language, folklore, and community history cannot be changed by legal treaties. Consequently, people find themselves strangers in their own land, disenfranchised, often powerless residents of a borderland country not their own. Like the Mexicans who lived in Texas or Arizona before those regions were annexed by the United States, they have no "old country" to return to since other states in Mexico were never their homes, and they are not really a part of the new country linguistically, culturally, or historically. They come to inhabit the edges of communities where the contact of divergent cultures produces hybrid races, languages, and cultures.

Critical Overview

Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* received much attention when it was published in 1991. It was explicated in several literary Journals, including *Tulsa Studies* in *Women's Literature, Frontiers,* and *Heresies,* and won acclaim in the mainstream press. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review,* Bebe Moore Campbell gave the collection a favorable review, noting that in all the stones-and particularly the title story- "she uses the behavior of men as a catalyst that propels her women into a search deep within themselves for the love that men have failed to give them." *Newsweek* listed *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* as the first of its seven books recommended for summer reading. Peter S. Prescott and Karen Springen summarized the collection in *Newsweek:* "Noisily, wittily, always compassionately, Cisneros surveys woman's condition-a condition that is both precisely Latina and general to women everywhere.

Jean Wyatt, in an essay for *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* said that in "Woman Hollering Creek," "Cisneros Juxtaposes the heroines of contemporary Mexican *telenovelas* with the traditional figure La Llorona to Imply that then, now, and always the ideals of femininity that Mexican popular culture presents to its women are models of pain and suffering." Jacqueline Doyle, in an essay titled "Haunting the Borderlands: La Llorona in Sandra Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek' ," concentrated on the mythical figure of the Weeping Woman in the story. "Immersed in romance novels and the telenovelas, Cleofilas is initiated into a culture of weeping women, the tale of 'La Llorona' retold in countless ways around her. . . . Cleofilas's own life begins to resemble La Llorona' s, as she decodes and erases evidence of her husband's infidelities."

Harryette Mullen, in her essay "'A Silence Between Us Like a Language': The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek'," concentrates on the author's portrayal of Mexican culture in the story. "Cisneros employs throughout the entire text of Woman Hollering Creek a network of epigraphs taken, not from the literary traditions of the United States or Europe or Latin America, but instead from Mexican ballads and romantic popular songs that circulate throughout, and Indeed help constitute, Spanish-speaking communities.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hicks has a Master's Degree in English literature, and has written extensively for academic journals, and is CEO of Words Work, a freelance writing firm that provides Web site content. Smith has Master's Degrees in both bilingual studies and humanistic and behavioral studies. She has designed and facilitated several multicultural workshops for educators. In the following essay, they discuss multicultural aspects of "Woman Hollering Creek. "

In her short story "Woman Hollering Creek," Sandra Cisneros demonstrates in her writing the same linguistic and cultural transformations she describes in her narrative. Writing about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans like Cleofilas and her husband Juan Pedro who inhabit the border between the United States and Mexico, Cisneros explores the terrible losses and limitations that exist for people who live in the edges of divergent languages and cultures. These borderlands, as Glona Anzaldua describes them In her book, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* "are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other. . . . It's not comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. . .. However, there are compensations and certain joys . . . . Dormant areas of consciousness are . . . activated, awakened. . . . There, at the junc ture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized." Borderlands are a place where "The new mestiza (a Chicana like Felice) reinterprets history and using new symbols, she shapes new myths."

Along the border language becomes more fluid, and new meanings can be derived as one language infuses another with its vocabulary and syntax. Cisneros talks of the influence of her father's Spanish on her written English. As she tells Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, incorporating Spanish "changes the rhythm of my writing. . . [and] allows me to create new expressions in English-to say things in English that have never been said before. . . All of a sudden something happens to the English, something really new is happening, a new spice is added to the English language." For example, in "Woman Hollering Creek," all of the characters have Spanish names that are familiar enough in English, but their true resonance derives from their Spanish meanings. In her Texas town, Cleofilas lives between "Dolores" and "Soledad," that is, between "sorrow" and "loneliness". In the end of the story, she is saved by "Graciela" and "Felice," or "grace" and "happiness." The term "compadre" is also familiar in English, but the term" comadre" may not be. Graciela, the physician who identifies Cleofilas' abuse, calls her friend Felice" compare," but Cisneros does not translate this. Literally, "comadres" are a mother and a godmother to a child, and the cultural expectation is that they will be like co-mothers to that child. In "Woman Hollering Creek," Graciela and Felice are the co-mothers that bring Cleofilas to her new birth, her new understanding of her culture's myths, and her release from her role as passive victim of violence.

Just as language can take on new meaning and new formulations in the borderlands, cultural myths, too, can be transformed. The three principal women of Mexican myth that play roles in Cleofilas' life as described by Glona Anzaldua are: "The Virgen de

Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, La Chingada/La Malinche, the raped (taken by Heman Cortes the Spanish conqueror) mother whom we have abandoned, and La Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the two." The Virgin of Guadalupe, who suffers the loss of her son, Jesus, remains the virgin who is available to her children throughout the centuries in prayer. La Malinche, on the other hand, is traditionally believed to have betrayed her people when she became the mistress of Heman Cortes. Finally, La Llorona suffers the grief of the loss of her children and her lover for all time. These roles, all passive and long-suffering, are the mythic roles the Mexican culture teaches its daughters.

In spite of these legends, Cisneros hastens to add in her conversation with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla that "the traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman" to have survived at all. In fact, the legends can be reclaimed and reframed to emphasize this fierce instinct for survival. For example, it has long been accepted that the subjugation of a native woman, La Malinche, by Cortes is a cause of great shame to the Mexican people. According to Octavio Paz, author of *Labyrinth of Solitude,* all Mexicans are "sons of La Malinche"; that is, they are illegitimate. And yet in the borderlands, La Malinche can be seen in a new light, not as the passive victim of male violence, but as the Indian mother of the mestizos who survived to create the new race. As Anzaldua writes, "La cultura chicana identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish).

In the case of La Llorona, the mythical figure is transformed linguistically and culturally. Renamed La Gritona, and reincarnated as a woman who yells rather than weeps, La Llorona becomes a symbol of power and rebellion, not submission. Jussawalla comments to Cisneros, "[Y]ou've revised the myth in 'Woman Hollering Creek.' La Llorona doesn't kill . . . the children as she does in the stories told here along the border, she gives laughter." Cisneros adds, "This Chicana woman (Felice) could understand the myth in a new way. She could see it as a grito (a yell), not a llanto (a sob). And all of a sudden, [Cleofilas] who came with all her Mexican assumptions learned something. The Chicana woman (Felice) showed her a new way of looking at a Mexican myth. And it took someone from a little bit outside of the culture to see the myth in a new way."

For readers outside of both Mexican and Chicana culture and for readers who do not know Spanish, the subtle connotations of the myths and of Cisneros' language choices might be lost were it not for her ability to both tell and demonstrate the transformations that take place in the story. Cisneros acknowledges in her talk with Dasenbrock and Jussawalla that "the readers who are going to like my stories the best and catch all the subtexts and all the subtitles. . . are the Chicanas. . . . But I also realize I am opening doors for people who don't know the culture." Because it is so well constructed, "Woman Hollering Creek" is a story that can be read in different ways by different audiences. Readers familiar with the Southwestern and Mexican myths and legends of La Llorona, La Malinche, and the Virgin of Guadalupe may see the cultural transformation of women's roles Cisneros describes, while readers unfamiliar with these legends may focus on the particular transformation of the vividly drawn lead character, Cleofilas, the classic battered woman.

Source: Jennifer Hicks and Barbara Smith, Overview of "Woman Hollering Creek," for *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Rouster has a Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric and has published a number of pieces in different composition journals and on ERIC. In the following essay, he discusses patriarchy in "Woman Hollering Creek. "

"Woman Hollering Creek" by Sandra Cisneros was published in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* in 1991. This story deals with the pain and suffering of women in a patriarchal, or male dominated, society. Patriarchy, as defined by Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey in *More Power Than We Want,* refers to "the systematic domination of women by men through unequal opportunities, rewards, punishments, and the internalization of unequal expectations through sex role differentiation."

Patriarchy is evident in a number of ways in the women's world of "Woman Hollering Creek." The women tend to have mundane low-paying jobs, like Trini, the laundromat attendant, or no jobs outside of the house, like Dolores and Cleofilas. The men make all of the decisions and do all of the talking when men and women are present in this story. Further, the men are able to mistreat the women with impunity.

Patriarchy is also seen in the preoccupation these women, particularly Cleofilas, have with finding a man to love, an obsession which seems to dominate their lives. Cleofilas has been anticipating finding the man of her dreams since she can remember:

But what Cleofilas has been waiting for.. is passion. . in its crystalline essence The kind the book and songs and *telenovelas* describe When one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost.

As her idol, Cleofilas takes Lucia Mendez, heroine of the popular *telenovela You or No One,* who lives on her show the kind of life described above: "The beautiful Lucia Mendez having to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because that is the important thing."

The image of the woman who will keep loving her abusive betraying man no matter what is critical to the maintenance of the patriarchal society. If women can be socialized to believe that "to suffer for love is good," then the men can basically do as they please and women will put up with it because they believe "the pain [will] all [be] sweet somehow. In the end." Thus, the men can be unfaithful and beat their wives with no fear of recrimination. Furthermore, if women put men on pedestals and make their main goal in life loving them no matter what, then the men are automatically given the predominant position in society.

Unfortunately for Cleofilas, who, it is suggested, was named for a Mexican martyred saint, her married life does not contain many of the positive elements of the *telenovelas,* just the negative ones. She envisions herself as being married, living in a nice house, having plenty of money, and buying the kinds of clothes that Lucia Mendez gets to wear. In reality, she ends up having very little money, and the house she moves into is a

shabby little place located on Woman Hollering Creek in the desolate town of Seguin, Texas.

None of the women with whom Cleofilas is acquainted knows where the creek got its name: "a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood. . . . Who knows, the townspeople shrugged, because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name."

A critical element for keeping a practice in place is that the people do not question it and that it seems as if life has always been that way. The fact that no one questions the name of the creek, but just accepts it as is, represents how they accept patriarchy without question. Just as the creek was always named that and always would be, so men have always been in power and always would be and women would always be hollering. Who cares why women are hollering anyway? Since they have no power, their reasons for hollering are unimportant. Cleofilas, however, wants to find out the story behind the meaning of the creek's name and she wants to know why the women were hollering. Her experience on Woman Hollering Creek leads her to believe that the woman's holler was one of pain and rage.

This belief is reinforced by the two widows who live next door to Cleofilas, one on each side. To the left lives Soledad, who calls herself a widow, but who will not say how she lost her husband. Cleofilas suspects that he may have simply left her. Dolores, living to the right, keeps altars topped with burning incense and candles for the two sons killed in the war and the husband who died of grief soon after. Every Sunday she leaves fresh flowers on their graves. Across the street lives a man who shot his wife when she attacked him with a mop during a fight at the ice house. The women on Woman Hollering Creek suffer much from their dealings with the men in their lives.

The women in Seguin have no real power, the town was not built to empower women: "the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you're rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car." Even if they have cars, the women may not be allowed to drive them. This powerlessness extends to social gatherings at the ice house, the center of the Seguin social world, where the women come and Sit in silence next to their men, as the men tried to solve the problems of the world. This is as it should be in patriarchy: the men attempt to take care of the world's difficulties while the women sit in silence, admiring them.

Probably more than in any other place, the reader gets to see the havoc patriarchy can wreak on women. Cleofilas' s situation is much like that of Nora's in Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll House:* both go from their father's house to their husband's house and have very little real power in either place. Unlike Nora, though, Cleofilas experiences some of the more overtly physically and emotionally painful aspects of patriarchy. Her husband, Juan Pedro, takes advantage of the power inherent in a man's position in such a society by beating her, and she Just takes it: "When the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away." She is beaten so often and so severely that by the time she decides to leave him, the lady at the health clinic notes

in astonishment that "This poor lady's got black-and-blue marks all over." In a moment full of symbolism, her husband even hits her in the face with a romance novel, leaving a welt on one cheek. The critical element here is that her husband feels free to beat Cleofilas at will, with little or no fear of punishment. In a patriarchal society such as this, men often beat their wives with total impunity because the women are relatively powerless. Many women, such as Cleofilas, have no income apart from their husbands, so where will they go if they leave?

In addition, Cleofilas has no power in the household. She has no transportation of her own and likely cannot drive anyway. She is not allowed to have any contact with her family in Mexico. Furthermore, she has to beg her husband to take her to the doctor in order to ensure that her pregnancy will go well and that she will not be injured in childbirth. She does not even have the power to defend herself when he beats her. When she asks him to fix something, he abuses her emotionally, kicking the refrigerator and shouting:

He hates this shitty house and is going out where he won't be bothered with the baby's howling and her suspicious questions, and her requests to fix this and this and this because if she had any brains in her head she'd realize he's been up before the rooster earning his living to pay for the food in her belly and the roof over her head.

This man is all too aware of the power he has in the household as the breadwinner. She refers to him as "this keeper, this lord, this master." When she decides to leave him she has to sneak out, in fear that he will catch her, like a dog trying to sneak out of the yard, and beat her again and prevent her from leaving.

It is in leaving Juan Pedro that she learns a new meaning for Woman Hollering Creek other than the rage and anger she has experienced. The woman who picks her up to drive her to the bus station in San Antonio, Felice, whose name means "happy," drives a truck-her own truck-is unmarried, and swears just like a man. She is not controlled by patriarchy, at least not directly. As they are crossing the creek she yells like Tarzan, a victory yell, one of strength. She says she yells like that every time she crosses the bridge because nothing in the area is named after women, except virgins and that one creek, and it makes her want to holler. Passing over the creek with Felice, Cleofilas glimpses a world where a woman can take care of herself and gain control over her life. She is going back to her father's house in Mexico, but she is returning with a new awareness. In telling her father and brothers about Felice's yell, "Felice began to laugh again, but it wasn't Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water. "

Source: William Rouster, for *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

Mullen is an educator at Cornell University. In the following essay, she discusses the implications of language in "Woman Hollering Creek" in an effort to highlight the unique culture Cisneros writes about, one which is not easily understood within the confines of the English language.

In jests, dreams, magic, poetry, and poetic prose, Sandra Cisneros finds abundant examples of the "everyday verbal mythology" of Mexican-American culture. Language and literacy as sites of cultural and class conflict, or what Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo describe as the "antagonistic" yet potentially "positive" relationship of minority to dominant linguistic and cultural codes, are critical matters in *Woman Hollering Creek.* The text includes frequent references to the specificity and difference coded into any and all languages; to the violence of inadequacy of translation and interpretation; to the translator's and, by extension, the writer's unfaithful role as betrayer of the culture's inside secrets, and to the existence of encoded messages, which are more accessible to readers familiar with various insider codes and cryptographic devices deployed in the text.

These attributes Cisneros's text shares with texts by other Chicano, Latino, and minority writers, who implicitly or explicitly refer to their own ambiguous relationships to both dominant and subordinated cultures in their roles as translators and interpreters of minority experience...

Woman Hollering Creek offers stories of a variety of women trying various means of escape, through resistance to traditional female socialization, through sexual and economic independence, self-fashioning, and feminist activism, as well as through fantasy, prayer, magic, and art. Cisneros's most complex characters are those who, like adult Esperanzas, have left and returned to the barrio as artists. For them, art is a powerfully seductive way of "Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?..."

In addition to her portraits of the artist as a Chicana, Cisneros is concerned with representing the silenced and marginalized, including children, homosexuals, and working class and Immigrant Chicanos and Mexicanos, whose stories have been untold or untranslated. Her particular focus on the silencing of women is signaled in the title story, "Woman Hollering Creek." The creek called "La Gritona" is reminiscent of popular folktales about "La Llorona," a nameless tragic woman who drowned herself and her children. The creek, the border, and the *telenovelas* define the mythic spaces given to Cleofilas in her fantasies of escape from a battering husband. The cultural scripts associated with each space offer her different escape fantasies: homicide and/or suicide, like La Llorona; dramatic border crossings, like the escape of an outlaw desperado from the u.s. into Mexico, or the crossings of *mojados* and smuggler *coyotes;* or *telenovelas,* soap operas that provide the escape of entertainment. Cisneros creates a new destiny in a story that revises all three of these cultural scripts, allowing Cleofilas a realistic escape with the help of Chicana feminist activists. Translating from

"La Llorona" (weeping woman) to "La Gritona" (shouting woman) to the English "Woman Hollering Creek" allows a greater set of possibilities for interpreting the cry of the restless spirit. with its haunting sound of wind and water, the creek speaks with an enigmatic voice-crying, weeping, wailing, shouting, hollering "like Tarzan," perhaps even laughing-a voice too often denied in traditional representations of Latinas. Paradoxically, "La Llorona, " a woman silenced in life, wails her grief in death. Cleofilas learns to decode a feminist message of survival in the haunted voice of the creek that hollers with the rage of a silenced woman. Much as Chicana feminists have revised folklore, legend, and myth to open up possibilities for new representations of women, the activism of Felice and her *companeras* helps Cleofilas to reinterpret the message of La Gritona, translating her voice from a wail, to a holler, to a shout, to laughter; from an *arroyo* associated with a tragic legend to "a creek. . . full of happily ever after."

Searching for and validating folk and popular articulations often excluded from "the literary," Cisneros employs throughout the entire text of *Woman Hollering Creek* a network of epigraphs taken, not from the literary traditions of the United States or Europe or Latin America, but instead from Mexican ballads and romantic popular songs that circulate throughout, and indeed help to constitute, Spanish-speaking communities through dissemination of recordings, through jukeboxes located in restaurants and nightclubs located (along with *tortillerias, mercados, cines,* and *botanicas)* in Latino neighborhoods, and through Spanish-language radio stations broadcasting to cities or geographic regions with large Spanish-speaking populations. Cisneros privileges such commercial/cultural sites in which commodities and services are aimed at a culturally specific clientele, such as the cinemas devoted to the showing of films from Mexico or *telenovelas,* soap operas, produced for Mexican television and syndicated in the U.S.

The church functions similarly, as a cultural as well as religious site: specifically as a site of origin for insider discourses specific to Mexican-American and other Latino cultures, through the exchange of prayers and religious services for offerings made and thanks given by devout Catholics whose religion synchronically embraces folk beliefs. Cisneros recognizes and acknowledges the prayers of ordinary people addressing the Christian God, Catholic saints fused with Aztec goddesses, and even African deities, as a folk discourse worthy of inclusion in a literary text of an emergent minority literature. As Rosario offers her braid to the Virgin in thanks for the opportunity to become an artist rather than a mother, Cisneros offers her book (with its elaborate list of acknowledgments to family, friends, colleagues, *la Divina Providencia,* and *Virgen de Guadalupe Tonantzin)* as a kind of literary ex voto devoted to Chicano culture. Her text associates this folk genre with the religious articles and folk healing paraphernalia referred to in "Anguiano Religious Articles," "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" and *"Bien* Pretty." These religious or quasi-religious cultural sites, like such fixtures of U.S. commercial culture as Kwik Wash laundromats, K-Mart, Woolworth's, Cash N Carry, Luby's Cafeteria, and flea markets where fire-damaged Barbie doll Dream Houses can be purchased by families who could not afford to buy them even at K-Mart, are markers of class and gender, as well as sites for the reproduction of the dominant culture and the production of a resistant ethnic minority culture, which is neither entirely of the U.S. nor Mexico. . . .

Cisneros's text registers tensions implicit in a community where the border between the U.S. and Mexico is reproduced within the psyche of the individual, and where the "Mericans" are also the "Mexicans." The computer spell checker suggests "Mexican" as a substitute for "Merican," Cisneros's paragrammatic truncation of "American." The alteration, like translation, makes distinct signifiers equivalent. The words are equal in length if not identical in meaning. After all, Mexicans are Americans and, as the North American Free Trade Agreement reminds those who needed reminding, Mexico is part of North America. The spell checker also suggests "Moroccan" as a possible replacement for the unrecognized word, but that is another story.

Source: Harryette Mullen, "'A Silence Between Us Like a Language': The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek,"* in *MELUS,* Vol. 21, No 2, Summer, 1996, pp 3-20.

Topics for Further Study

Research the folklore surrounding the mythical woman, La Llorona. How have Chicana writers redefined her as a role model for modern women?

Compare Glona Anzaldua's account of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards to the account in an encyclopedia or a world history textbook. What defines her point of view? How and why is it distinct?

Compare the works of Chicano writers (Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa) to Chicana writers (Gloria Anzaldua, Denise Chavez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros). What characteristics do these works share? How are they different?

Compare and Contrast

Texas: According to 1995-96 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, 17 percent of all people living in the state subsist beneath the poverty threshold, which is defined as $16,036 for a family of four.

New Hampshire: According to the same statistics, 5.9 percent of all residents in this state live beneath the poverty line.

Texas: According to 1996 statistics, 2.5 million state residents speak Spanish, and 714,958 are defined as "linguistically isolated," meaning that they know little English.

Maine: According to the same statistics, 4,527 people in this state speak Spanish as their primary language.

Texas: The U.S. Census Bureau states that, according to 1996 statistics, nearly 25 percent of the state's residents speak Spanish.

California: The Census Bureau states that 30 percent of the state's residents speak Spanish-a total of 4 million people; 2 million of whom are identified as "linguistically isolated."

What Do I Read Next?

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987) by Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana writer. This largely nonfiction volume also includes poetry. In it Anzaldua analyzes the experiences of Mexicans/Chicanos in the United States.

Latina, Women's Voices from the Borderlands (1995) is edited by Lillian Castillo-Speed. This collection of writings from 31 Latina writers includes short stories, excerpts from novels, and essays that describe lives on the borders of languages, races, and communities.

Cuentos: Stories by Latinas (1983) is edited by Alma Gomez, Cherrie Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona. These stories describe the lives of Latina women in their struggle to overcome the challenges of living in complex cultural contexts.

Chicana Creativity & Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature (1996) is edited by Mana Herrara-Sobek and Helena Maria Viramontes.

This collection of poetry, prose, criticism and visual art includes literature by and about Chicanas.

The Woman Warrior (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston. Cisneros has cited this book about the family history, myth, and the memories of an Asian-American woman as an inspiration for writing *The House on Mango Street.*

The House on Mango Street (1983) by Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros describes her first novel as a string of little pearls. Each little pearl, each story, can be read and understood on its own, or the whole collection can be seen as a necklace, to be read as a whole.

Storyteller (1981) by Leslie Marmon Silko. A collection of stones by a Native American writer who explores her Pueblo heritage and weaves myths, autobiography, and the history of her community into her tales that highlight the importance of stories as a form of knowledge.

Further Study

Chavez, Lorenzo. "Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories," In *Hispanic,* April, 1991, p. 52.

Offers a brief overview of *Woman Hollering Creek,* praising the collection's language, humor, and realistic depiction of barrio life.

Ponce, Merrihelen. "A Semblance of Order to Lives and Loves," in *Belles Lettres' A Review of Books by Women,* Vol. 7, No.2, Winter, 1991-92, pp. 40, 44.

Laudatory overview of *Woman Hollering Creek,* claiming that, unlike Cisneros's earlier fiction, tins collection "resonates With voices of wiser Mexicanas/ Chicanas."

"Sandra Cisneros," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Volume 69, edited by Roger Matuz, Gale, 1992, pp. 143-56.

Reprinted criticism on Cisneros's early works. Included are excerpted essays by Julian Olivares, Barbara Kingsolver, and Bebe Moore Campbell, among others.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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