“In Our Sleep We Ran After Them”:

Daughters Defining Families and the Act of Storytelling in Sandra Cisneros

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Chapter One – Introduction: Sandra Cisneros and Family

"Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it.
Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us
together by bone and muscle, and divides us
by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning
and repulsion; and ties us by our heart-strings to
the beings that jar us at every movement."
- George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

While Eliot's words are a strong indication of the power of familial influence, she has not been the only writer to address the theme of family in her literature as authors have always considered the topic of family, from Louis May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Within the last forty years, U. S. Latino Literature has been inspired by the issue of family. Judith Ortiz Cofer, Abraham Rodriguez, Jr., Julia Alvarez, Helena Maria Viramontes, and Lorna Dee Cervantes are all U. S. Latino authors that have, in some form or another, written works that have the theme of family at the center. Cervantes, for instance, wrote the poem "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" (1981) which is about a three generation family of women and how they interact and react to one another. Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) may be set during a political rebellion in the Dominican Republic, but she reveals the story through the members of one specific family. Authors like Rodriquez situate their plots within the confines of one solitary family in order to acknowledge the influence of family members on the characters that is always present no matter the shape the plot takes, much like Faulkner. By creating a family setting for their stories, they are able to create very realistic stories that resonate with their audiences.

Although U.S. Latino literature has provided some of the richest literary works in the last century, it is still a relatively new field; consequently, it lacks criticism in many areas of study.

The U. S. Latino Family is one such area.[1] While the topic of family often appears as a cause or effect of more popular topics, such as feminism, immigration, and even patriarchal violence, the number of critiques based solely on the family as a traditional unit is minuscule. However, such research is necessary due to the number of Latino and U.S. Latino works that depict the family as a living, interacting unit. The trend of centering Latino literary works on the family began during the Latin American literary "Boom,"[2] when authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende published their family saga novels, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *The House of the Spirits* (1982), respectively. While Hispanic people groups have been writing stories from the time of exploration (Foster 649), the tradition of writing about the family stayed with U.S. Latinos when their works became more popular and prolific in the United States during the "mini boom."[3] Following the trends set by previous Latin-American writers seems to have some connection to the idea that this time period is one in which American society began to celebrate the individual more than ever. In celebrating the individual, people began to be more comfortable in claiming their heritage instead of trying to blend in. For U. S. Latino writers, this often meant going back to their Hispanic roots, which are deeply tied to their family members. These roots have, at least partially, stayed with those of Latino descent living in the United

[1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "family" as "[t]he primary social group, comprising parents, their offspring, and in some societies other relatives sharing the same household (the extended family)" (def. 1a). This study will examine the family as the traditional, extended family, as this is the type of family included in the works of Cisneros; however, in this study, as opposed to the *OED* definition, the extended family may not always share the same household, as the great-grandmother in *Mango Street* is deceased at the time of the novel.

[2] In their book *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature*, John S. Christie and Jose B. Gonzalez define this literary time period as follows: "The explosion of South American literary works in the 1970s and 1980s – a period referred to as the 'Latin-American Literary Boom'" (xiv).

[3] "The 'mini boom' of U.S. Latino writing that began shortly after Gabriel Garcia Marquez was awarded the 1982 Nobel Prize for literature and continued with the success of writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Oscar Hijeulos later that decade is in full swing" (Christie and Gonzalez xiv).

States: “Familialism within Latino families has been characterized as a collective flexible support network that provides social, emotional, and financial support within the family. The support network comprises nuclear, extended, and fictive kin members. The family serves as the cornerstone of the Latino . . . immigrant community” (Kawamoto and Anguiano 210). As most Latin-American cultures traditionally hold the idea of family higher than almost anything else, U.S. Latino writers have kept with the idea that family does not merely consist of just those living under one roof, but all extended family as well.

U.S. Latino authors, in particular, deserve to be studied in respect to their treatment of the family. Cisneros joins other authors, such as Rudolfo Anaya and Cristina Garcia, in recognizing a culture that is caught between the Latin American focus on the family and the American focus on the individual removed from the family. Immigrant U. S. Latino family members often “experience a familial and cultural gap when they migrate to a foreign country such as the United States. This gap can be quite stressful for the immigrant family, which is faced with the understanding and adapting to a mainstream culture that emphasizes individualism and emancipation from the family” (Kawamoto and Anguiano 211). This gap is constantly presented by writers through their stories. U. S. Latino writers attempt to bring the two cultures together by looking at the individual in relation to the family. While these works study the family as a whole unit, or what is left of the unit, they also present individual family members and their specific roles within the family. Contemporary critical scholarship, however, often studies the individual’s role outside of the family and not as a part of it. One example of this type of study is Jacqueline Doyle’s article “More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street.*” While an interesting and important critique, the article does lack connection to familial

relationships. This lack of importance that critics place on the traditional family in U.S. Latino literature should be of particular concern to scholars in this field.

Focusing on just one author for such a study proves difficult, considering the wealth of Latino literature produced in the United States that both celebrates and condemns the family unit in its current state. It quickly becomes clear, however, that if criticism of the family theme in U.S. Latino literature is to be made more important, then one must begin with an author who is both a staple of U. S. Latino literature and well-known for producing family-themed work. The writer chosen ought to also be considered as canonical in order to reveal the importance that the theme of family has in this genre. Sandra Cisneros is one such writer. Cisneros can be recognized as part of the American literary canon due to her critical and mass appeal, as well as the influence that she has had on recent U.S. Latino writers. Each of Cisneros's works has received strong acclamation from her peers, winning the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1985 for *The House on Mango Street* and the PEN Center West Award for Best Fiction of l99l for her collection of short stories titled *Woman Hollering Creek*. She is also the holder of two honorary doctorates, cementing her critical success.

Mass appeal may not always be the deciding factor by which authors continue to be studied long after they have died, but those that both obtain a place in the canon and garner mass adoration can reveal historical relevance. Peter Prescott of *Newsweek* recognizes the reason behind Cisneros's popularity: "Cisneros's [survey of] woman's condition [as] a condition that is both precisely Latina and general to women everywhere" is part of her appeal (qtd. in Telgen and Kamp 99). Cisneros' popularity is the result of the author's ability to write specifically to U. S. Latino women, yet still appeal to women of all backgrounds. In "Familial Faces," Ilan Stavens writes, "Over the past decade, since Vintage reprinted her coming-of-age novella *The House on*

Mango Street, Cisneros has become the favorite Latina author of her generation. Her life, her color preferences and her Frida Kahlo manners are the subject of legends, and also of heated debates" (30). At thirty years into her literary career, she has already become a voice for a generation and a much discussed author in the literary realm.

Cisneros's critical appeal in connection to her mass appeal provide insight to her place in the literary canon, despite the fact that she is not quite as well known in classrooms as authors whose writings have been around for a longer period of time. While Cisneros's first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, may not have been an overnight success, it quickly became a reputable work among critics, demonstrated through the inclusion of her works in anthologies.[4] In *Notable Hispanic American Women*, Andres Chavez comments that "Sandra Cisneros is a new voice in mainstream American literature" (99). The context that Chavez creates is vital, as he places Cisneros within the category of "American" literature and not simply "Latino" literature. While she first received publishing from Mango Press, a small Latino publishing company, her book helped her to do something that had not occurred before in the literary field: Cisneros became one of the most prominent authors in Latino literature due to being the first Mexican-American woman to obtain a contract with a widely recognized publishing company: Random House (Chavez 99). Perhaps the principle reason for Cisneros's place in the American canon is due to her role as one of the first Latino women to emerge as an accepted writer of American literature. Thomas F. O'Malley confirms this idea in "A Ride Down Mango Street": "*The House on Mango Street* slips right into the mainstream of the American experience, the dream to own a house . . . Esperanza's dream is part of the long tradition that inspired Thoreau's house at Walden, or

[4] *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature; The Art of the Short Story*; *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature; The Prentice Hall Anthology of Latino Literature*.

George and Lennie's living off the fat of the land[5]" (36). As O'Malley does in his critique, critics in general were recognizing Cisneros as both a Latino writer and an American writer, both of which allowed her to find critical success and recognition that many of her fellow Latino writers were unable to at the time. Cisneros has managed to keep her appeal through two novels, a collection of short stories, and two books of poetry. *SandraCisneros.com*, a website directly run by Cisneros and her agent, reviews the critical acclaim that *Caramelo*, her second novel, received following its original publishing in 2002: "*Caramelo* was selected as notable book of the year by several journals including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Seattle Times*. In 2005 *Caramelo* was awarded the Premio Napoli and was short-listed for the Dublin International IMPAC Award. It was also nominated for the Orange Prize in England" ("About Sandra Cisneros"). Cisneros may be part of the American canon, but her nominations reveal that outside of America she is accepted as well, which is the true test of lasting authors.

While critical and mass appeal are both pertinent in deciding which authors are part of the American canon, perhaps the most important test of an author's literary importance is the influence that the author has on other notable authors. Once U. S. Latinos had no literary voice, with only the works of Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, Julio Cortazar, and Jorge Luis Borges to rely on to represent them. Furthermore, the more popular writers were men, causing the women to have no voice. When Cisneros gained both mass and critical success she opened the door for other U. S. Latina writers, such as Julia Alvarez, Denise Chavez, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. In Silvio Sirias' book, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*, Sandra Cisneros is counted as one of Alvarez's favorite authors that also influenced her writing (6). Cisneros'

[5] *Of Mice and Men*

influence can be seen even further, through the content within the works of these women. Cofer and Alvarez follow the narration style of Cisneros, in creating coming-of-age tales narrated by female adolescents.

Female adolescent narrators are important in the works of many Latina authors, but are perfected in Cisneros' two novels, *The House on Mango Street* [6](1984) and *Caramelo* (2002). Each of these works is centered on its narrator, Esperanza and Celaya respectively, who tells stories of her childhood. Esperanza describes brief stories of moments that occurred and people that lived on Mango Street. Her family and neighbors become the center of her stories as she explains unhealthy marriages, embarrassing moments, and her own rape. Celaya's stories are slightly different as she focuses solely on her family and how her grandmother held a great deal of influence on how the family interacts with one another. *Caramelo* is separated into three parts, chronicling the Reyes' family's summers in Mexico, the history of Celaya's grandparents, and the death and haunting of her grandmother. Despite the differences, both narrators choose to accept the role of scribe in their respective families. The way that the girls narrate the stories becomes vital to how the families in these stories are depicted.

Although Cisneros's works are not autobiographical, the stories do contain reflections of her life. The integrating of her life with fiction is something that Cisneros has in common with many writers. In fact, "very few writers would demand that autobiographical truth should be verifiable – this would, after all, undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than 'fact' (Marcus 3). Indeed, in *The House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo* Cisneros integrates the right amount of fact and fiction to create some of the most honest contemporary works to come about in the last thirty years. As Cisneros uses her life as the skeleton for her fiction, her

[6] From this point on, *The House on Mango Street* will be abbreviated as *Mango Street.*

work can, at times, be considered what French critics call "autofiction," a subcategory of autobiography. Although the critic who coined the term, Serge Doubrovsky, originally intended for the definition to encompass more fact than fiction, the term has evolved to mean "a first-person narrative . . . that blend[s] fiction and reality" (Mortimer 383).[7] Although several aspects of the novels are mirror images of Cisneros' life, such as Celaya having six brothers, many of the events and characters are only loosely related to her own life. In using this method, Cisneros has written two novels that are very real to readers on a wide scale, but also specifically to Chicanas that can relate to Cisneros' tales. Recognizing the importance of autofiction in these works is necessary as Cisneros's connection to culture, both Latino and popular, influences the stories she writes. Both ethnic culture and popular culture form the way that the family members, especially the narrators, relate to one another. As Cisneros comes from a Latino family, she and her narrators come from and are defined by the aspect of the individual being a representation of their entire family as well as being represented by their entire family.

Although Cisneros has claimed that her writings are not works of autobiography, one cannot study these works without stumbling upon aspects of her life that consistently pervade her writings. In *Caramelo*, Celaya mentions that her father tells the priest in charge of her school that he has "seven sons" (*Caramelo* 319). This comment by Inocenio is an important connection between Celaya and Cisneros. In an essay titled "Only Daughter," Cisneros remembers when her own father used to tell people that he had "seven sons" (120). She explains that it always bothered her that he never mentioned her as a "daughter" instead. The fact that she is "the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons," according to Cisneros, should "explain everything"

[7] Doubrovsky defined "Autofiction" as "[a] fiction, of strictly real events and facts; as it were, autofiction, from having confided the language of an adventure to the adventure of language" (Back Cover).

("Only Daughter" 119). Again the parallels between Cisneros and her characters are noticeable as Cisneros discusses in an interview the poems based on her life. One of them reveals that she and her cousins have decided not to get married because they have seen how it affected the other women in their family (Aranda 74). This more modern view of marriage is something that *Mango Street*'s Esperanza has to reconcile as she also watches marriages that seem awful throughout her childhood. By understanding the background of Cisneros, one is able to understand some of the reasoning and emotions behind the stories.

In 1954, Cisneros was born in Chicago to a Mexican-American mother and a Mexican father. After growing up with parents from two different cultures, Cisneros has created stories that portray dueling cultures and the effect on the children. The inspiration for her writing arrived in the 1970s when she attended the creative writing program at the University of Iowa. Since she graduated from the University of Iowa, Cisneros has gone on to work as a teacher, professor, and college recruiter. These jobs, however, were only taken on as a way to pay the bills, as Cisneros claims her real work is writing. Because Cisneros's stories often reflect her life, her novels thrive in the world of Latino immigrants.

An important distinction that is necessary to note is that while Cisneros' writings may appeal to Latinos in general, many traits of her writings relate specifically to Chicanos.[8] Some of the references in both *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* are related specifically to Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.[9] This factor becomes even more important as *Caramelo* deals with the controversy of the border. The Reyes family spends every summer traveling from their home in the United States to the grandparents' home in Mexico. As this border crossing affects both the

[8] Chicano/a is "[o]riginally a term of disparagement for working-class Mexican-Americans, [but] Chicano was adopted as a collective identity marker in the 1960s by the Chicano Movement" (Allatson, "Chicano" 61).
[9] Cisernos' mother is Mexican-American and her father is Mexican.

content of the story and the narrative style, recognizing the part it plays will inevitably affect the analysis of the story. The separation between Mexican culture and Mexican-American culture plays a pivotal role within the dynamics of the families. The tension between cultures also affects the style of narration.

Although both novels are written in first person and each novel employs a different writing tactic, the novels differ in that *Mango Street* contains vignettes,[10] and *Caramelo* contains a chapter featuring Magical Realism.[11] Both of these are writing elements that, if not used carefully, can remove a story from the real and the physical, but Cisneros grounds her stories in the time period in which they exist, allowing for the techniques used only to enhance and not distract her works. Often, literature becomes a vehicle for protesting historical events or analyzing popular culture. Some of the best literature, in fact, arrive in these forms. Yet other works of literature merely allow the time period to enhance the works and not control the stories. Sandra Cisneros deals with the social climate that surrounded the main narrative in *Caramelo* in an entirely different manner than most novels, by neither questioning nor resisting its effect but, instead, simply letting it become a natural part of the characters' lives.

Cisneros does not allow historical events or popular culture to dominate her story because she never uses them as more than a reflection of the time period the story exists within and a reflection of the characters. Her focus instead is on the characters and the aspect of family. Without the historical and cultural references, the family would seem less real; however, if she

[10] The vignettes in *Mango Street* work as brief sketches of either a certain characters or certain events. The vignettes do not work to form one specific plot, but work together to tell the story of an entire neighborhood.

[11] Magical Realism can be defined as "marked by a range of recurring narrative and plot devices: the collapse of time; the normative integration of supernatural events and figures into daily existence; transformative shape changing; miraculous coincidences; false appearances and their unmasking" (Allatson, "Magical Realism").

were to take them any farther, they would overwhelm the purpose of the novel. Cisneros is different from many authors because she allows historical and cultural events to simply exist within her work, rather than questioning them. Culture becomes very important to this study because of the influence that it has on both Esperanza and Celaya and the way that they understand the world around them. Celaya, for example, describes her father as having a Clark Gable mustache, as well as recognizing that her grandmother cannot connect to the grandchildren because she does not understand their American expressions. Esperanza also mentions that she would like to rename herself as "Zeze the X," a title that could be seen as an allusion to Malcolm X, who also renamed himself. As culture encompasses a wide variety of concepts, E. B. Taylor's definition of culture seems to be the most precise without narrowing the concept beyond recognition: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (qtd. in Sardar and Loon 4).[12] Throughout both novels, Cisneros creates intricately woven stories that are rich with culture, including politics, ethics, familial structure, popular culture, and historical events. Cisneros has repeatedly, in interviews, spoken of the cultural separation between her and her father because of the way he could not view her as anything other than a Mexican daughter who was supposed to find a man to marry. Her characters find themselves in this same predicament as they step away from their families and culture, for just a moment, in order to become the scribe of their families and bring emotional healing to the family. Perhaps this is the reason Cisneros sets her stories, for the most part, during her childhood.

[12] Interestingly, Clifford Geertz claimed that "culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (qtd. in Sardar and Loon 5). It seems that in light of Cisneros' comments on storytelling that appear in *Caramelo*, this definition is just as true as Taylor's even if vague in nature.

As Cisneros grew up during the same time as her protagonist in *Caramelo*, many events directly affect both of them. Cisneros's grandfather took part in the Mexican Revolution. Despite this war taking place before she was born, she still gives Lala a grandfather of the Revolution and mentions that the father of the story has a Zapata mustache. The Mexican Revolution is not the only war that influenced her life. Some of the first poems that Cisneros wrote contain her thoughts on the Vietnam War that took place during her childhood. Many of the authors who had books published throughout her youth, such as Juan Rulfo and Mercè Rodoreda (Elliot and Cisneros 95), also influenced her works and how she approached life.

The narrative that unfolds in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* is not one that takes place during the time it was published (2002), but during the 1960s. The novel is rich in popular culture of the decade; it exists within as well as the surrounding decades. Technology pushed popular culture in a certain direction. While technology consumed the latter decades of the 20th century, the 1960s mark the point at which it became mainstream and a part of the everyday culture. Televisions became more affordable, and television shows and films were no longer made in black and white but in color. Movie stars and cartoon characters rose in fame, their names and slogans became part of household conversations. The transistor radio, created in 1954, was still popular. Because of the technology that pervaded the era, the characters in *Caramelo* constantly make popular culture references to cartoon characters and music. In fact, Cisneros often begins chapters with lyrics to either Mexican or American songs. This attachment to music that did not seem to exist before this era was exemplified during Woodstock in 1969 and Mexican Woodstock[13] in 1971.

[13] This three-day event occurred near the city of Toluca and, as was the original Woodstock, a response to the counterculture of the 1960s.

This time period was one of distrust between the people and the government in the United States, and war caused hostilities around the globe. The Vietnam War brought about the loss of millions of lives. Protests against the war grew rapidly and led to the Kent State shootings in 1970. South of the United States the Cuban Revolution had just ended, and the dust was still settling on the Mexican Revolution, despite having ended in 1920. Although the war was over, there were still attempts to overthrow the government and minor battles that were fought during the 1920s. John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were all assassinated within a five year period. The Chicago Riot and the killing of the students at a demonstration in Mexico City during the Olympics were two more events that led to an era of unease. Despite the many devastating occurrences that filled the time period during which *Caramelo* is set, positive changes did transpire. Because of the growing number of homes that contained television sets, the presidential debates were televised for the first time (although some would argue this is not always beneficial for political campaigns). Also, the National Organization for Women was formed as a result of the protesting for women's rights. Latin-Americans also gained position in the States from the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. As the U.S. Hispanic population nearly tripled during the 60s, Latino culture became interwoven into the mainstream. This became more and more apparent as Mexicans not only traveled over the border to move to the United States, but often traveled back over multiple times in order to visit family that had not made the move to the states.

Caramelo tells the story of a family that travels between Chicago and Mexico each year, which is important in shaping the ideas and roles within the family. Because the Reyes family is still so closely connected to its Mexican roots, the members of the family must learn to balance the beliefs and notions that are derived from both cultures in which they exist. The attempt to

find this balance often fails, causing the members to work within strained relationships as a result. The references made to the time period and culture and the events that affect them reflect the two cultures that shape their family and speak volumes of the time period that defines them. Technology influences the conversations that take place and the way that the characters think. War silently encroaches on the family's life almost invisibly. The constant traveling between Chicago and Mexico reflects not only the large amount of Latinos in the United States, but the sense of unrest that underlined the era.

Although *Caramelo* is filled with popular and historical events far more than *Mango Street*, Cisneros's first novel does indeed contain the popular culture that Cisneros grew up in. When Esperanza tells the story of a woman who has just moved to the United States and is upset because she does not know how to become used to the harsh sounds of English instead of the smooth ones of Spanish, it is her young son repeating the words of a Coca-Cola commercial that sends her into hysterics. Just as Celaya constantly describes her family members according to which celebrity they favor in appearance, so Esperanza describes her Aunt Lupe as wearing a "Joan Crawford" dress (*Mango Street*). She also mentions Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles, and Wonder Woman, all celebrities and characters that made their way into pop culture history during Cisneros's childhood.

Reading her novels and short stories makes it is clear that Cisneros, like many of her generation, was deeply influenced by the novel technology of her time, such as the radio and the television. Her knowledge of television and film references, as well as constant use of both Hispanic and American music, reveals the large part that these items played in her childhood. As Latino culture entered into U. S. culture, Cisneros would still have had ample opportunities to participate in her Latino heritage even if her family had not made many trips between the United

States and Mexico. As she spent a good portion of her childhood in the Latino barrio, the tripling of the Latin-American population in America clearly had an effect on her as it helped form the neighborhoods in which she grew up. Her childhood is greatly reflected in the fact that her characters tell the stories of their childhood. This reflection is vital as the way that the narrators see themselves and their family members builds the foundation for the act of storytelling, which connects back to the healing of the family.

In both novels, Cisneros uses a female adolescent as her narrator. This is most important as it creates a very specific understanding of the family and emotional healing. The narrators' perspectives are the only perspectives that are ever provided, so it is through Esperanza and Celaya that the stories are both told and understood. Structurally, the narration[14] controls how the story and characters are defined and explained. Gerard Genette's ideas of "order,"[15] "mood,"[16] and "voice"[17] are crucial in understanding the narratives' structural importance. For example, order becomes important as Esperanza and Celaya do not always tell their stories

[14] *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* claims that "Narratology rests upon certain basic distinctions between what is narrated (e.g. events, characters, and settings of a story) and how it is narrated (e.g. by what kind of narrator, in what order, at what time)" ("Narratology" def. 2b.). In my study, I will, for the most part, be basing my concepts of narration on Genette's concept of Narratology found in his pinnacle work *Narratology Discourse: An Essay in Method*.

[15] Under the idea of "order," Genette examines the "connections between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative . . ." (35).

[16] Genette spends an entire chapter on this term, explaining the purpose of it: "[O]ne can tell more or tell less what one tells, and can tell it according to one point of view or another; and this capacity, and the modalities of its use, are precisely what our category of narrative mood aims at" (162).

[17] The term "voice" examines the person telling of events and his or her distance in relation to the events.

chronologically, but instead tell the stories in the order that is important to them. The narration also provides an emotional link[18] to the stories:

> [T]he only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative – to externalize ourselves as if talking to someone else, and for the purpose of self-representation; but also that we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters. (Currie 17)

As Cisneros' narrators describe not only their own stories, but the stories of their siblings, parents and grandparents, they begin to realize they are forming their own individuality. This individuality becomes a blending of popular American culture and their Mexican heritage. Narrators who have a personal interest in the story they are revealing will make "declarations or statements about the narrator's more personal identity [and] behavior" (Bortolussi and Dixon 65). The identities of the narrators are interwoven into the very fabric of the narration, making the structure of the storytelling just as important as the actual story.

In 1984 Cisneros introduced her audience to the voice of Esperanza, an adolescent on the verge of womanhood, who chose to become a storyteller to bring healing to those around her. In 2002 Esperanza was joined by Celaya, a fellow adolescent storyteller, attempting to find peace for her family. Cisneros' two main characters are, at times, mirror images of each other and, at other times, vastly different in their approaches to life. Despite the differences in their personalities and their families, Esperanza and Celaya are the ones who recognize the importance of understanding their families' pasts in order to create a better future. While Cisneros writes of

[18] Both Mark Currie's *Postmodern Narrative* and Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon's *Psychonarratology* agree on the emotional connection between characters and narration.

families that are considered functional but still have considerable familial problems, her works reveal how the individuals are products of the influence of the whole family. As they grow up, Esperanza and Celaya attempt to define their family members and, in return, define themselves, eventually defining themselves as scribes in an attempt to bring emotional healing.

Chapter Two: The Wicked and the Forgotten: Female Myths Redefined

Cisneros, like many other Chicana writers, places her focus more often on the women in a family as opposed to the men. The women that Celaya and Esperanza choose to become or not become are, partially, a result of the women around them that they watched and imitated as children. At times, even the other female children in the family have an effect on the narrators. Sisters, aunts, mothers, and grandmothers often become the heart of the stories that the two girls are telling. As the stories of these women unfold, Cisneros subtly hints that through one family member's remembering of the stories, the family unit can be restored to a functional whole. The restoration becomes necessary as we watch the characters live with regret, anger, and pain, all of which causes unhealthy relationships among the family members. In understanding just one story of one family member, understanding of the other members' actions naturally evolves. By obtaining this understanding, future members of the family can attempt to avoid repeating the same stories that previously damaged the family.

The way in which the narrators define the women in their families requires an explanation of the three mythical[19] women that have become the driving force behind the view of women in Mexican culture. This view has pervaded U.S. Mexican culture as well, and often makes appearances in Chicano literature. This image of women is very black and white, represented by the figures of La Virgin de Guadalupe, La Llorona, and La Milanche. La Virgin

[19] When I speak of "mythical" I mean it in the traditional sense. Myths are stories that have been passed down in particular cultures in order to explain traditions or beliefs in that culture and, at times, are considered to be based off of a true story (though the myth is long removed). Edith Hamilton, in her seminal work *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, claims that "[a]ccording to the most modern idea, a real myth has nothing to do with religion. It is an explanation of something in nature (19). Still, others who study myth oppose Hamilton's claim and believe myths to be "religious stories" that "are at the very least metaphorically and psychically true" (Leeming and Page 3). I agree with Hamilton that myths are used to explain nature, but the very basis of the Mexican view of la Virgin de Guadalupe stems from the concept of the Virgin Mary, a figure that is tied tightly to religious ideas and beliefs.

de Guadalupe is "often presented as a one-dimensional figure. She is pure and free from sin. Her central role was as mother. . . . Thus for Chicano literature, the Virgin de Guadalupe represents characteristics considered positive for women: unselfish giving, intercession between earth and spirit, and the ideal qualities of motherhood" (Rebolledo 52-53).[20] The only way a Mexican woman can be considered "good," then, is to follow La Virgin's example. Opposing La Virgin de Guadalupe are the mythical figures of La Llorona and La Milanche, often forming one singular idea, which represents the evil woman. La Milanche is seen as the whore and La Llorona the bad mother who drowned her children (Rebolledo 62-64). However, many Chicana writers have begun attempting to change the view of these figures.[21] Leslie Petty makes it clear that these "archetypes" create the generalizations of Mexican women within their culture. These stereotypes contain sexual, social, and political connotations that affect the women (120). These archetypes are the ones that many Mexican women feel they have to become, but they are also the archetypes that writers like Cisneros are trying to present in a different manner than they have been presented in the past, which is partly an influence of their Americanization. For writers, such as Cisneros, "[La Virgin de Guadalupe] is presented in a problematic manner . . ., and at times even – ironically – as a symbol of failure. On the negative side, the Virgin is often seen as not active enough and somewhat passive figure created by the patriarchy" (Rebolledo

[20] Rebolledo also points out that "[t]he virgin is the patron saint of the Chicanos and the visual image of contemporary popular culture" (53).

[21] Through Esperanza Cisneros is able to keep the myths of her culture but use them in a way that does not restrict the women: "By recasting these mythical stories from the female perspective, Cisneros shows how artificial and confining these cultural stereotypes are, and through her creation of Esperanza, imagines a protagonist who can embody both the violation associated with La Milanche and the nurturing associated with la Virgen de Guadalupe, all the while rejecting the feminine passivity that is promoted by both role models" (Petty 123).

53).[22] The writers are trying to find some place in between, where the women can be both good mothers and independent from the restrictive traditions that are placed upon them.

As Cisneros describes in *Mango Street*, "females, like the snow, are not seen in Latino culture as unique individuals but are labeled as either 'good' women or 'bad' women, as 'clean' or 'dirty,' as 'virgins' or 'malanches'" (Petty 119). In her works, Cisneros attempts to create women who are neither wholly good nor wholly bad but, instead, are trying to create new myths and boundaries for themselves. Despite these figures not being portrayed within the novels, they become important to Esperanza and Celaya as they have to watch as the women in their family survive within the roles that society dictates.[23] Although the purpose of this study is to focus on the family and not on the Mexican cultural view of women, the impact that this view of women has on the family and the interaction of the family members is vast.[24] Studies could be done on each of the women that appears in both *Mango Street* and *Caramelo*, but in order for one to understand the inner workings of the families presented, it is necessary to study the women as they relate to both men and other women, while also examining how the narrators react to these women in a way that reconstructs the myths.

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[22] In addition, Rebolledo believes that "[c]losely identified with La Milanche in her traditionally defined aspect of traitor is Chicana feminism" (71). The figures are being used as literary devices and their legends rewritten by Chicana writers who are attempting to break free from the mold that Mexican tradition has placed them within.

[23] The figures do, however, appear in her short stories. Her work "Woman Hollering Creek" is famous for restructuring the myth of La Llorona.

[24] The differences between the cultural view of women also needs to be compared to the cultural view of men and how the two work together to form a complete cultural view of the family: "Marianismo, based on the Catholic ideal of the Virgin Mary, emphasizes the woman's role as mother and celebrates the mother's self-sacrifice and suffering for her children. Machismo, on the other hand, stresses the man's role not as father but as head of the household. Taken together and exaggerated to the point of caricature, these Latino values have been used to paint a portrait of the "ideal" Latino family type as that of the self-sacrificing mother and the dominant, tyrannical man. (Contreras, Kerns, and Neal-Barnett 14).

Influenced by the way the women in their families interact with men, Celaya and Esperanza build a negative view of male-female relationships. Celaya's first glimpse of a troubled marriage comes in the form of her own parents' marriage. Her mother, Zoila, is a woman unhappy in her marriage but does not know how to fix the issues that corrupt the relationship between her husband, Inocenio, and herself. As Cisneros has created many female characters that are trapped in lives they do not want, she "remains well aware of the oppression that married life posits for women" (Bode 289). Zoila is one of these women, and it is through her daughter's act of storytelling that we receive one of the more in-depth depictions of a woman unhappy in marriage and motherhood that Cisneros provides in her collection of works.

Many years into her marriage, Zoila finds out that Inocenio and his mother, Soledad, have been keeping a secret from her and the rest of the family. When Soledad tells Zoila, during one of the two women's many fights, that Inocenio committed adultery and a child came from that relationship, Zoila attempts, physically, to get away from the family. As they are parked on the side of the road, en route to their vacation, Zoila literally has nowhere she can go at the moment. However, Celaya acknowledges that, even more so than Zoila's literal inability to go anywhere at the moment, she also will have nowhere to go even after the family has returned home: "But where can Mother go? She doesn't have any money. All she's got is her husband and kids and now she doesn't even want us" (83). Not only does this passage explain Zoila's position in her marriage, but it also reveals how Celaya believes her mother places her marital problems before the children.

Another issue that causes trouble in Zoila and Inocenio's relationship is the cultural issues that exist. Zoila, though of Mexican descent, has lived her entire life in the United States, whereas Inocenio's family is from Mexico. In the American culture, women are more

independent and have more say in their homes, at least, generally more so than in Mexican homes. Because of her connection to American culture, the expectations that Inocenio's family has on her are suffocating. Zoila was not brought up to spend her entire day waiting and cooking for Inocenio nor was she taught to make celebrations the lavish events that Inocenio's family does. In her short story "Never Marry a Mexican," Cisneros further evaluates the ramifications of a Mexican marrying a Mexican-American. The narrator of the short story, Clemencia, explains the influence that her mother has had on her: "Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U.S., and he was born there, and it's *not* the same, you know. I'll never marry. Not any man" (68). This passage specifically cites these "mixed" marriages as the cause of the mother and father's dysfunctional relationship.

Much like Clemencia's parents, Zoila and Inocenio have a difficult time communicating because they do not have the same cultural upbringing. Their views on how Zoila should act and behave are very different. Because of the American culture's sense of individuality, "Latino . . . immigrant families typically experience feelings of social and cultural isolation and struggle to function as family systems, especially when considering gender issues [and] intergenerational factors" (Ingoldsby and Smith 211). The struggle to function is even truer for Celaya's family because instead of both of her parents growing up in Mexico and then having to learn to adapt to American culture, they are from two different cultures attempting to survive in the other's culture at different times.

A fight between her parents in Acapulco is the main one that Celaya remembers and tells the story of; perhaps, this story is retold so often because it is the most important of all their fights. She does mention that fights are a constant in the Reyes household: "There were lots of

fights, big and little. The big ones have to do with money, the Mexicans from this side compared to the Mexicans from that side, or that trip to Alcapulca" (*Caremlo* 235). At a first glance, the Reyes' marriage does not seem to be dysfunctional, but then Celaya makes a comment, such as, "there were lots of fights, big and little," and it becomes clear that the marriage is not a stable one. Again, Celaya mentions the fighting when she says, "For a long time I thought the Eagle and the Serpent on the Mexican flag were the United States and Mexico fighting. And then, for an even longer time afterward, I thought of the Eagle and the Serpent as the story of Mother and Father" (*Caramelo* 235). This is the marriage that Celaya and her brothers are constantly watching take place.

Zoila does voice her complaints from time to time, but Inocenio does not seem to hear her, furthering the destruction of their marriage. Zoila, as a result, cannot find sympathy from her husband's family or her children, who do not yet understand the cultural differences. Celaya's view of Zoila in these situations will be necessary to explore in order to understand Celaya's own behavior. An example of Celaya's understanding of her mother appears in a section of the novel titled "Cinderella." This section reveals a great deal about Zoila and her place within the Reyes family, as "Cinderella" is the role that Zoila takes on. After Zoila and Celaya have returned from a trip into the city, during their vacation in Mexico, Celaya tells the entire family that the two women have been to a restaurant and out on their own that day. When the rest of the family looks down on Zoila for going into town on her own, she becomes angry and throws her shoe. Celaya chooses to describe first the real scene and then the scene as she chooses to remember[25]: "A Mexico city twilight full of stars like the broken down glass on top of the garden walls and a jaguar moon looking down upon me, and my mother's glass shoe flying flying flying across the

[25] For Celaya, retelling the story as it appears in her mind often shows the emotions that lie beneath the surface of the actions taking place.

broken glass sky" (*Caramelo* 66). The fact that Zoila throws the shoe across a "broken glass sky" reveals that nobody is going to be there to pick up her shoe and return it, as in the classic Cinderella tale that Celaya is referencing. In this case, Celaya has not linked her mother to a fairytale woman not of the Mexican myths, but Cisneros has twisted the American version of the fairytale to fit her Mexican-American family. By linking her mother to the story of Cinderella, Celaya has shown that while her mother may be Cinderella, her father is certainly not Prince Charming. Zoila's glass slipper breaks, but Inocenio never realizes that it is broken; he never seems to realize that she is unhappy.

The image of the glass shoe representing an American image of the ideal woman is one that is repeated in Mango Street. As Esperanza, her sister, Nenny, and their friends, Lucy and Rachel, parade around town in high heels that are not age-appropriate, they quickly learn that the shoes earn them only a twisted version of the attention they wanted. These shoes "are not [the] magical glass slippers of the popularized Cinderella story, promising the heroine's pathway to a handsome prince and marriage" (Wissman 163).The twisting of the American romantic ideal is something that often occurs in the literature of Cisneros. Cisneros, in her short story "Barbie-Q," again iterates the damage caused by an American ideal. In this story she takes the concept of a Barbie doll and shows the U. S. Latina's inability to reach the American standard of a woman. The Barbie Doll, like the story of Cinderella, is an object of American culture that Cisneros has tied to her Mexican culture.

While the case of Zoila is slightly different from "Barbie-Q," Cisneros still uses the classic story of Cinderella to explain Zoila's position in the family. She often does a good deal of the household work for the entire family when they are in Mexico, and she has to deal with her wicked mother-in-law. Celaya makes the connections between her mother's life to the life of

Cinderella and then rearranges the story and narrates the end of the story in the form of Cinderella's tale in order to find her own understanding of what occurred. Because Celaya was a child at the time, it is natural that she would see her mother as Cinderella. By telling the story this way, she has reminded us that this story reflects her emotional attachment to the story even more so than her mother's. As the narrator Celaya "can rearrange and select the events to be described at will and can decide whether to use a thorough or brief description of the events" (Bortolussi and Dixon 109). Celaya, as a child raised in the United States, sees the connections between Cinderella and her mother even if she does not understand the implications of those connections.

One of the implications of the Cinderella story is that Zoila not only seems unable to communicate with her husband but also is unsatisfied with her position as just a wife and mother. In her naiveté, Celaya reveals another scene in which her mother finds an outlet for her desire of a different life. Because she is discussing her mother simply as a woman and not as a mother, Celaya uses her mother's name. Celaya says, "Zoila, who studies the magazines – *Mirror*, *Hollywood*. She can tell you anything. Who Linda Darnell was married to before she got famous. How Gene Tierney paints her eyebrows in a perfect arch. The secret to Rita Hayworth's shiny hair" (*Caramelo* 223). Zoila attempts to connect to the lives of these female celebrity figures because they are recognized as individuals outside of their husbands.[26] When Zoila's older sons go off to college, Celaya notices that her mother becomes uninterested in everything. However, when her sons bring their textbooks home, she attempts to fill the void in her life by reading the books, which are written by authors such as Pablo Nerudo and Octavio Paz (*Caramelo* 248).

[26] In fact, Hayworth, Tierney, and Darnell all married more than once (with Hayworth at five separate marriages), and all suffered from mental problems despite being reputable actresses. These actresses are also reflections of Aunty Light-Skin who has an independent life apart from a man but still does not seem happy.

Zoila becomes fascinated with actresses and authors who are famous for doing the art that they love, while Zoila rarely has the opportunity to do something that is for her alone.

The time period in which Zoila reacts to the actresses that she sees on the television, as well as the Latino authors, must be considered in studying the family. Despite the fact that media does not always portray real life accurately, it still has a trong influence on those who engage in it. Media, such as television, provides Zoila with a glimpse of fictional women, and the actresses who play them, who did not choose the same life she did – the Mexican life, and the American mainstream culture begins to conflict with the Mexican traditions. Berger notes that "[s]tudying the media and the texts the media transmit has become an important topic, as the media, and particularly television, are playing an ever increasing role in our lives" (157). Not only does television play an important role in Zoila's life, but in the life of her daughter as well. Celaya and Esperanza have a different opinion on the options that they have for their lives than their mothers did as children or even as adults. Zoila is influenced by the same media that influences her daughter: "Of course, the starlet is meant to symbolize the typist in such a way that the splendid evening dresses seem meant for the actress as distinct from the real girl. The girls in the audience not only feel that they could be on the screen, but realize time and the great gulf separating them from it" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1233). As Celaya recognizes in her mother, the media is part of the reason women, like Zoila, are no longer happy with just marriage and motherhood. Showbiz clearly influences the women within the families and begin to affect the Mexican traditions of the families, for as Celaya's and Esperanza's choices reveal, "[c]ulture . . . has consequences" (Berger 38). These consequences are sometimes positive and sometimes negative, but either way they always affect the family and how the members relate to one another. Although the media has this influence on all cultures that exist within the U.S., it seems

that the U.S. Latino family has the most to lose within the family unit, because they are one of the few cultures who still celebrate the family.

Although Esperanza, unlike Celaya, does not uncover any hidden secrets or ill treating of one another within her parents' marriage, Esperanza does acknowledge that her mother is not completely content in her own relationship and with playing only the role of mother and wife. Esperanza's mother tells Esperanza that she "could've been somebody" (*Mango Street* 90). In reaction to her mother's comment, Esperanza explains how her mother used to draw and now sings along to opera records she obtains at the library (*Mango Street* 90). Esperanza's mother can only imitate others in what little free time she has, such as singing along to opera records. The comment to her daughter insinuates that she is unfulfilled in her familial duties, giving Esperanza the idea that marriage often leaves the woman unable to continue doing the things that she loves.

Although Esperanza spends more time commenting on her neighbors than on her parents, she does reference them in several chapters. The only time Esperanza mentions her mother in a state of contentment is the time the family attends a neighborhood dance. Her mother is laughing and dancing, but then Esperanza mentions that her mother is also drinking. While drinking is not necessarily a sign of unhappiness, the fact that this is the only time Esperanza describes her mother as being blissful leads to some unfortunate conclusions. When Esperanza and her family look at houses in a neighborhood they could never afford to live in, her mother mentions that she wants to win the lottery. Again, Esperanza is reminded of her mother's constant state of discontent, both monetary and marital, which leads to Esperanza making choices that reflect the actions of her mother. For instance, Esperanza makes it very clear that she will live in a house that belongs solely to her when she is older. This choice to live free of husband and children is a

reaction to the women she grew up around; the women she believed lacked the freedom a home of her own would bring her.

Although the mothers of the narrators are influential in the lives of their children and families, the grandmother, quite possibly, has an even greater influence. This influence becomes important to Esperanza and Celaya. John S. Christie explains the impact of Latino grandparents on their families: "Latino fiction explores the traditions of past generations as protagonists emotionally united with abuelas [grandmothers]and abuelos [grandfathers] or, venturing one step further, wander among dead ancestors in search of meaning in their own lives" (n. pag.). In a family of Latino heritage, the grandmother becomes even more central than in other cultures. Rebolledo acknowledges that "[i]n the close knit family structure stretching out over several generations, abuelitas play an important part" (148). Understanding the roles that grandmothers play in Cisneros's work is imperative, because her portraits of the grandmother figure become far removed from those in other literary works, even other U. S. Latino works where "[f]or the most part abuelitas form a complex of female figures who are nurturing, comforting, and stable" (Rebolledo 148). Rebolledo is not the only critic to recognize that Latino literature generally qualifies the grandmother figure as a non-threatening character. Christie also mentions "the general tendenc[ies] of Latino fiction to portray the grandmother figure in a positive light" (n. pag.). Interestingly enough, Cisneros goes against this pattern by portraying, in *Caramelo*, a grandmother figure that is neither nurturing nor comforting.

Although Soledad constantly behaves as the (over) nurturing mother to Inocenio, to the rest of her children and grandchildren, she shows no maternal instincts. Several times throughout the novel, Celaya provides hints that the Grandmother is not the good mother that she seems to be when Inocenio is in the room. From the moment Celaya begins telling the story of

her family, she reveals that her grandmother is not particularly nurturing. She explains that in the family picture "[t]he Awful Grandmother [is] holding [the grandchildren] even though she never held them in real life" (*Caramelo* 3). Her response to her own children seems to be much the same. When Soledad is living with her children in the United States and she becomes ill, Celaya explains why Inocenio's siblings will not visit Soledad: "When the Grandmother becomes sick, her kids forget she's their mother, and how can you blame them, since she always forgot they were her kids" (*Caramelo* 341). Soledad's ignoring of her children appears towards the beginning of the novel, when she constantly ignores her other sons and her daughter in favor of Inocenio.

The way Soledad treats her children and grandchildren cause much of the dysfunction within the family. As she carries so much weight in the behavior of the family, Soledad quickly becomes the focus of Celaya's storytelling, which allows Soledad to become more than just "Celaya's Awful Grandmother" or "Inocenio's Mother." She also becomes a human being separate from the family. Because the other family members often only view Soledad as Inocenio's mother, the family does not see the emotions that are driving her actions, which causes damage to the harmony within the family unit. Cisneros reveals through Celaya the problem with Mexican mothers focusing so much attention on their sons: "It's amazing how blind Mexican sons are to their mothers' shortcomings. A meddlesome, quarrelsome, difficult, possessive mother is seen only as a mother who loves her child too much, instead of the thing she is – an unhappy, lonely person" (*Caramelo* 165).

Soledad, like so many other Mexican mothers, becomes just a mother and not an individual apart from her family, which is why it is important that Cisneros allows Soledad's story to be told in the second section of the novel. Celaya introduces the story of her

grandparents by saying, “The woman Soledad is my Awful Grandmother. The man is Narciso, my Little Grandfather. But as we begin this story they are simply themselves” (*Caramelo* 91). This is an interesting predicament in that the narrator considers the family members apart from the family in order to tell her own story, which will ultimately bring emotional healing, uniting the whole family further. As a result of Celaya’s telling of the story, “Celaya’s narration of her grandmother’s story . . . serves to overturn that simplistic rendering by giving her grandmother . . . subjectivity and a valid, non-marginalized role within the family. Can the act of narrating a maternal story humanize and reclaim the mother’s role in her family and simultaneously offer opportunity for Celaya to engage in self-formation?” (Rebolledo 185). As Celaya tells Soledad’s story, we begin to understand why Soledad has a difficult time loving those around her. In the beginning of her Grandmother’s story, Celaya comments, “Poor Soledad. Her childhood without a childhood” (*Caramelo* 95). With her mother dead and her step-mother kicking her out of her own home, Soledad had no women to turn to as a child, which causes her to, in turn, treat other women poorly.

Soledad seems to attempt more connections with the men in her family than with women. After her mother died, her father was the only one in her life even if he was not a very good one. She is constantly seeking to be needed. After Soledad and Narciso first meet and Narciso makes to leave the house of Soledad’s aunt and uncle, Soledad begins to cry. Narciso does not know what to do with a crying woman, and so he kisses her on the eyelid: “Had the kiss been more lust driven, Soledad would have been frightened by this sudden intimacy and fled, but since it arrived clumsily, it gave a suggestion of tenderness and immediate familiarity, of paternal protection. Soledad could not help but feel safe. A feeling of wellbeing, as if God was in the room. How long had it been since she had felt like that?” (*Caramelo* 107).

Many of the feelings that Soledad has toward Narciso begin as a need for someone to show her compassion. As her father has left her to be raised by her aunt and uncle who have too many children to notice her, except for her uncle's sexual advances, she has nobody to pay attention to her or want of her around. Soledad explains that she began to cry when Narciso was leaving because "it was as if [her] own father were abandoning [her]" (*Caramelo* 107). This trend is continued years down the road as Soledad moves her focus from Narciso to her favorite son, Inocenio. She believes that Inocenio needs her and thrives on it. In fact, she goes as far as to believe that her son does not need anyone but her. She uses this belief as a weapon against both Celaya and Zoila. Celaya believes that when her Father first took her to Mexico to meet her grandmother, Soledad realized that Celaya has replaced Soledad as Inocenio's "Queen." Soledad is also the cause of many problems between Zoila and Inocenio. When Zoila and Inocenio begin to argue with each other and Zoila walks away, Soledad tells her son that he does not need his wife: "You're better off without her kind. Wives come and go, but mothers, you only have one" (*Caramelo* 85). Soledad's sole focus on her relationships with the men in her life causes those very relationships to be damaged, as well as causing problems within her relationships with other women.

Esperanza's great-grandmother, like Soledad, has an effect on her granddaughter even though the two never meet. The story of the great-grandmother's marriage and how she spent her whole life sitting with her "elbow on the windowsill" (*Mango Street* 26) becomes the story of how Esperanza does not want her life to turn out. The image of the women leaning out the window, trying to escape their domestic lives, haunts Esperanza and causes her to choose a certain path for her life. The mother of Esperanza also influences her decision to avoid marrying when she is older. She explains to Esperanza that she used to be a "smart cookie" (*Mango Street*

90) before she married Esperanza's father. Celaya's mother, Zoila, displays the same unhappiness that the women in Esperanza's family do. She is a woman who is caught in a marriage and family that do not make her happy, and that unhappiness affects the happiness of Celaya.

Unlike Celaya, who keeps her observations within her own family, Esperanza tells the stories of the women in her neighborhood as well. In this manner, Esperanza's study of families outside of her own family helps her define the way she views the family unit. The marriages that she sees are actually more devastating than her parents' marriage. Esperanza notices that her neighbor, Rafaela, is trapped in a marriage that keeps her from interacting with the outside world: "On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (*Mango Street* 79). The image of Rafaela leaning out of the window is a repeated image of Esperanza's great-grandmother leaning out of the window. Again, the idea of women giving up their dreams and being prisoners of the home occurs when Esperanza's friend, Sally, who is the eighth grade, marries a man who does not like for her to leave the house.

Another aspect of male-female relationships that Esperanza is influenced by is the concept of waiting. Esperanza and the other girls her age are constantly confronted with a culture that tells them stories of Prince Charming that can rescue them from Mango Street. One neighbor, Marin, dances in the light of street lamps, waiting "for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (*Mango Street* 26). As Wissman recognizes, "For many of the women in *The House on Mango Street*, fairytale promises of romance and happiness hover, swirl, and linger over their lives" (159). The images of the women imprisoned by their marriage

become engrained into Esperanza's mind, but so do the images of the women who spend their lives waiting for men. Both images hold equal sway in the woman that Esperanza becomes.

While Cisneros does give blame to the men for their failures in relation to the family unit, her works show that the females are also to blame for the dysfunctional family. These women need to be examined not only in relation to the men but also as they affect one another. The women aid in the fracturing of the family unit by being unjust and cruel to one another. Throughout the entirety of *Caramelo*, Celaya and her mother, Zoila, have a strenuous relationship. From Celaya's stories of her childhood to her teenage years, she and her mother are "symbolically slowly killing each other with words and actions" (Herrera 192). When Celaya and Zoila go into town and visit a restaurant, Celaya is happy to spend time with her mother, which does not occur very often in the novel. However, the day is ruined for both of them when Celaya tells the rest of her family what the two females did. Bode comments that "Cisneros's focus is on issues of transmission that connect a daughter's future with a mother's past, through communication and understanding rather than rejection" (290). When the trip to town occurs in Celaya's childhood, she does not realize that this event, more than likely, is preceded by other events in which her mother felt like she had not control over her own life. Zoila's reaction to this particular event is a reflection of her past, which is, in turn, affecting Celaya's future as she cannot forget this occurrence. However, it is only when Celays is older and no longer rejects her mother's past actions that she understands the connection between her future and Soledad's past.

While Cisneros does focus on this connection, rejection does, in fact, occur as seen in this particular story. When Celaya reveals where she and her mother have been, the family is upset with Zoila. Because she cannot take her frustration out on the other adults, she turns her anger on Celaya, but Celaya does not understand the cultural differences and therefore does not

understand why her mother is upset. Celaya explains, "[L]ater Mother scolds me and says, - Big-mouth, why did you have to tell? But if I wasn't supposed to tell, why wasn't I supposed to? . . . And now why is everyone angry just because we ate in a restaurant? I don't know anything except I know this. I am the reason why Mother is screaming" (*Caramelo* 66). Although Celaya recognizes the tension between her mother and her father's family, she is unable to grasp the full reality of the situation. Due to this inability, the relationship between Celaya and Zoila becomes strained.

Throughout the entire storytelling process, Celaya never suggests that she and her mother are able to create a stable relationship between them. At one point, Celaya recognizes that she is experiencing guilt because she cannot summon good thoughts of her mother as she is telling these stories:

> You're supposed to love your mother. You're supposed to think good thoughts, hold her memory, call out to her when you're in danger, bid her come bless you. But I never think of Mother without dodging to get out of her way, the whoosh of her hand quicker than the enemy's machete, the pinch of her thumb and index finger meaner than a carnival guacamaya. (*Caramelo* 361)

Celaya has a difficult time coming to the conclusion that she and Zoila have far more in common than Celaya would like there to be. When Inocenio tells her that she is just like her mother, Celaya replies, "I'm nothing at all like Mother!" (*Caramelo* 238). The two females react badly to one another because they are both living in situations that cause them to be unhappy a good deal of the time. As Celaya views her Mother as one of the reasons for Celaya's troubles and not her Father, Celaya often depicts Zoila as being unfair.

Still, even Celaya cannot color the story of her own relationship with Zoila to where she cannot see the reasons behind Zoila's actions. Zoila is a woman that is too proud to take the criticisms of Inocenio's family, but will also not let the family see how much they hurt her with their critiques of her. Celaya details her mother's reaction to an uncomfortable situation that arises in the home: "It's the closest Mother's ever come to breaking down and crying except Mother's too proud to cry" (*Caramelo* 378). Unfortunately, Celaya also never gets to see her mother cry, which causes her, as a child, to believe her mother has no emotion but anger. Because Celaya never understands her mother's anger and sadness, she is unable to connect with her mother and to understand why Zoila is so unhappy.

The relationship between Zoila and Celaya becomes mirrored by the other female relationships in the family, mainly that of Soledad with her daughter and daughter-in-law. Aunt Light-Skin and Soledad have an odd relationship with little communication or love between them, yet Soledad still does things, such as laundry, for her daughter. Because of the rift between Soledad and Aunty Light Skin, Celaya's aunt feels unloved by her own mother. After all, the "Aunty had only wanted what the Grandmother had wanted. Love. Is that too much to ask one's mother?" (263). Soledad did not have the chance to have the love of her own mother, who died when Soledad was a child, and, as a result, she does not know how to love her own daughter. Her sons are easier to love, because she can take care of them the same way she does Narciso, but a daughter is different.

The idea that the daughter is different from the sons is also a cultural norm and one that heavily influences the works of Cisneros. Cisneros has mentioned in an interview her place as a daughter: "I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons" ("Only Daughter" 92). The treatment of daughters, then, is vastly different from that of the men. When Soledad mentions her

sons and Celaya asks about her Aunty Light-Skin, Soledad becomes angry with Celaya for mentioning the aunt. While Soledad's reaction seems to go deeper than just cultural influence, the cultural significance in Soledad's treatment of her daughter also cannot be ignored. Ingoldsby and Smith explain that "daughters and sons are often socialized in different manners that could lead to different outcomes. Latino families are more restrictive with their daughters than with their sons" (212).[27] Although the difference in socialization for males and females is, often, a universal occurrence, the restrictions are greater in U.S. Latino families than in some of the other U.S. cultural groups. This restriction influences the way Latinas behave in their culture. When Aunty-Light Skin asks Soledad, "How do you know what's happened to me" (263), Celaya provides the reason this question is important. She tells us, "It's true, the Grandmother hasn't a clue. All those years living with someone, and she never noticed her daughter except to say, - Pass me the plate. She's been too busy with Narciso, with Inocenio. Well, how could she help it? They needed her, and her daughter is independent, can always be counted to take care of herself" (262). Celaya's aunt goes relatively ignored by her own mother, simply because Soledad wants the men in her family to depend upon her, something she does not think her daughter would be willing to do.

Soledad very well may have had a difficult time trusting and relating to her daughter as Soledad's mother passed away when Soledad was but a child and her father sent her away to live with family. As Celaya tells the story of Soledad's life, it becomes apparent that Soledad wants

[27] Gonzales also mentions this aspect of this culture in reference to another U.S. Latina work titled "Delia's Song." The critic notes that "[t]he fundamental anger at a culture that values its male children above its female ones and its manifestation when a mother loves her sons more than her daughters is revealed in [the] stream-of-consciousness monologue by the narrator" (162). The same event takes place multiple times in the works of Cisneros as both Celaya and Esperanza begin, as they grow older, to recognize how their culture fundamentally treats them differently from their brothers.

to be needed because she felt unwanted as a child. Because Narciso and Inocenio permit her to cater to their needs, her daughter becomes unnecessary to her. The grandmother's love, in this case, is selfish. Her husband and son's love are important to her because she needs to feel she has a purpose in life. As Soledad places her own needs above her daughter's needs, the daughter does not receive the proper attention that a daughter needs from her mother. If a daughter does not receive any "acknowledgement" from her mother, then the daughter is "probably unable to develop a strong sense of self" (Gonzalez 159). This is the case with Aunty Light-Skin. Celaya tells us that "Aunty Light-Skin sleeps like a drowned lady, so far away from the living. A tiny speck in the horizon. Her limbs heavy and soaked with salt water" (*Caramelo* 31). Soledad's daughter works for an older gentleman who buys her nice things, leading the other women in the family to whisper about her. Still, she never seems to notice, and only rarely does she ever show signs of coming out of her "drowned" state of mind that Celaya describes.

Along with being selfish, Soledad is also resentful of her daughter. When the two women have a screaming fight, the Grandmother says, "You've always done what you wanted with your life, always, always, always. I hate you!" (263). Soledad married the first person who really paid any attention to her, and then she never had a chance to be anything else but a wife and mother. She resents her daughter because she believes that her daughter has had a freedom that Soledad never had a chance to have. Gonzalez points out that the older generation of Latinas often want their daughters to have what they could not, but do not know how to relate to them as a result: "The inability to relate to each other because they occupy two very different worlds is part of the conflict between mother and daughter. It does not take away from the actual love. It just makes it clear that the women do not understand each other" (167). Soledad cannot relate to her daughter because she does not understand the differences in their lives.

Soledad also treats her daughter-in-law with ill-contempt. Cisneros writes, “No Mexican man would choose his wife over his own mother” (*Caramelo* 235). This statement reveals the very reason the two women will never be able to get along. If Inocenio sides with his mother on a particular disagreement, which she expects and he usually does, then Zoila becomes angry and irritated with Soledad. If he chooses his wife over his mother, which he does once during the Acapulco trip, then Soledad becomes furious and never lets anyone forget that one time. That Mexican mothers are the most important women in their sons’ lives is a Mexican standard, but bringing in a wife from the United States who did not grow up with that rule causes problems within the family.

Although Zoila is treated with disdain by her mother-in-law and has the influence of the mainstream American culture, Zoila still treats her own daughter differently than she treats her sons. Herrera explains that “[c]entral to the novel is Celaya’s budding awareness of Mexican cultural influences that perpetuate her Mother Zoila’s favoritism towards her sons, resulting in Celaya’s often resentful attitude toward her mother” (Herrera 187). While Celaya may not always be clearly aware of the differences between daughters and sons, she consistently reveals it to her audience through her storytelling as it is unconsciously in her mind. One place this occurs is when Celaya explains how her Grandmother was unhappy with her daughter for not asking her to live with her when the Little Grandfather died, but she also makes it clear that she would not have lived with her anyway. In the end she chooses to move to the United States to be near her sons because, as Soledad says, “But my sons, after all, are sons” (*Caramelo* 251). Soledad makes this statement as if her sons are of a better breed than her daughter simply *because* they are sons. Although Celaya does not always take the time to directly point to the assumptions that are made about sons and daughters, she reveals enough comments such as the

one that Soledad made that she clearly has an understanding that the higher expectations of sons over daughters occurs within her family's culture.

Considering the importance the culture places on the familial influence on the individual, Latino and U.S. Latino fiction is filled with protagonists who explore the experiences of their grandparents and dead ancestors in order to define themselves. This fascination appears in both *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* as Celaya and Esperanza attempt to understand their grandmothers[28] and how their lives reflect and depart from the lives of these women that came before them. Their focus on their grandmothers even more than their mothers is not uncommon because in Latino literature the grandmother appears repeatedly as an important figure in the family; however, she seems to be the one that the narrators have the more difficult time defining. In *Caramelo*, the Awful Grandmother, as the narrator calls her, causes friction in the family, but when the narrator learns more about her grandmother she recognizes that she has a great deal in common with the "awful" woman.

The beginning of *Caramelo* opens with the grandmother not only as an outsider, but in the role of the villain. The Reyes children find their grandmother, Soledad Reyes, insufferable, while her daughter-in-law expresses only hatred towards Soledad. The relationship between her and her husband, Narciso, is damaged beyond repair, and her son, Inocenio, cannot identify her outside of her role as his mother. Because Soledad does not receive enough emotional support from her husband, she focuses all of her attention on her son, Inocenio. Her attachment to her son causes her relationship with the women in the family to be strained. Bode mentions that "[c]ut off from her mother, Soledad becomes similarly cut off, too, from her daughter and her daughter's generation. She alienates both her own daughter and her daughter-in-law" (296). This

[28] Esperanza actually focuses on her deceased great-grandmother.

emotional distance is not the only element that places the Awful Grandmother, as her grandchildren call her, as an outsider of the family unit.

Cultural distance also causes Soledad to be separated from her family, as her son's family lives in Chicago most of the year. The American culture has become saturated in her grandchildren's lives, making it difficult for Soledad to relate to or understand her grandchildren. When they reference American songs and celebrities and speak in English, the lack of understanding brings emotional pain to the Awful Grandmother, creating a grandmother who is cruel and malicious towards her family. Celaya notes, "The Awful Grandmother is like the witch in that story Hansel and Gretel. She likes to eat boys and girls. She'll swallow us whole, if you let her" (*Caramelo* 23). Celaya recognizes her grandmother as the one causing rifts within the family. As she narrates from a time long after the story of her childhood interactions with the Awful Grandmother are over, she connects her childhood emotions to the popular culture that also influenced her, which is why the grandmother becomes the witch from Hansel and Gretel with the title of "Awful Grandmother," and Celaya struggles to move past that identity. It is interesting that Celaya relates her Grandmother to the evil witch, because the grandmother is one figure in Latino and U.S. Latino literature that usually can be classified as a "good" character and not a protagonist. But in this case, Cisneros makes the Grandmother the one female who is the most closely related to La Llorona. Because she is going against the norm, Cisneros is, in a way, still re-creating the myths in her own way.

Esperanza does not show the relationships between women in quite the same light as Celaya does, but there are moments when the women of Mango Street fail one another. In a story titled "Red Clowns," Esperanza opens the story with an accusation of a fellow female: "Sally, you lied" (*Mango Street* 99). When Esperanza attends a carnival with her friend Sally, Sally

chooses to leave Esperanza by herself, despite telling Esperanza that she will return shortly. While waiting for Sally, Esperanza is raped by a group of white boys. Yet it is not the boys that Esperanza blames but Sally, who doesn't hear when Esperanza calls to her for help. At other moments in the novel, Esperanza also mentions that her "friends," Alicia and Cathy, are not true friends and only seem to be friends when it suits them (*Mango Street* 12-13). Although these incidents do not occur inside of a family unit, Esperanza still reaps the consequences of women hurting other women. Again this occurs when Esperanza's mother does not seem to understand why Esperanza needs new shoes (*Mango Street* 46). Esperanza is not understood by the women she encounters any more than by the men. The effects of these failures can be seen when Esperanza chooses to move into her own house that, while the main appeal may be that it is "not a daddy's" (*Mango Street* 108) house, is also not one that houses other women. The women of Cisneros's stories may be unhappy in their lives partially because of the men, but they are also unhappy because of the way that they treat each other.

As they watch their mothers and other women conform or reject these traditional boundaries, the narrators begin to define themselves and sexual relationships as a result. As they are both in the adolescent stage throughout the majority of their novels, Celaya and Esperanza are easily impacted and influenced by the relationships between their parents. The first way that the relationships of the parents impact the narrators is the manner in which Celaya and Esperanza treat sexual relationships between men and women. While Cisneros never attempts to write her autobiography, she does reveal her own reactions to the relationships that she has seen around her. In one interview Cisneros says, "I've never seen a model of a happy marriage, or I've never seen a marriage that is as happy as my living alone. I've never seen it" (Aranda 71). The fear of

marriage and the belief that it will imitate the marriage of one's parents is a constant within Cisneros's works.

Through the choices that the narrators make, Cisneros creates characters that go against the standard image of the mythical figures of La Llorona, La Virgin de Guadalupe, and La Milanche. Maria Gonzalez makes a note about "Never Marry a Mexican" that can also be applied to Cisneros's novels: "The image of the mother in [Never Marry a Mexican] is of a woman who teaches her child not to trust men because of her own poisoned relationship with her husband. She is the La Llorona mother who is capable of destroying everything" (164). In Cisneros' short story, "Never Marry a Mexican," the daughter rebelling against the mother's broken relationship reflects Esperanza and Celaya's reactions to their own mothers.[29] As Esperanza has watched her mother, along with the other women on her street, give up dreams in order to marry and have children, Esperanza decides she will react against this tradition and live a different way:

> on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own she will not give it away. I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am the one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (89)

Esperanza defines her mother as a woman who forces herself to fit the La Virgin de Guadalupe mold. Because this is the image that Esperanza has of her mother, she decides that wants the

[29] "When one deals with family issues, in many instances, it is necessary to analyze not just an individual and his/her problem or experience, but rather one must view each member of the family that participates in the family dynamic and find out what this dynamic reflects or hides" (Cooper 13). We cannot simply look at Esperanza and Clemencia and condemn them for their choices without first understanding the reasons behind their choices. Studying their families is necessary because the family dynamic absolutely plays a part in the women that they become.

exact opposite for her life. She wants a life where she does not have to give up so much, for what she presumes to be so little. In reaction to that image of her mother, “Esperanza rejects the archetype of a beautiful, passive princess; however, by doing so, she uses as her role model a woman who manipulates men and does not therefore refigure more egalitarian relationships with them” (Wissman 170). In seeing the sadness that it has brought to her mother, Esperanza thinks she will move in the complete opposite direction, which is not necessarily any better.

Although moving away from their mothers’ trapped lives seems highly beneficial for the women that Esperanza represents, it is also possible that they may not be able to find the balance between La Virgin and La Milanche if not careful. Cristina Herrera says that “while applauding Esperanza's refusal to be passive, the reader senses that if Esperanza relies on being ‘beautiful and cruel’ to achieve her independence, she will follow a self-destructive path that will inscribe her on the ‘bad’ side of Chicana femininity” (Petty 129). In this case, while it is Celaya and Clemencia that have a cheating parent in common, it is Esperanza that will become like Clemencia. Esperanza is unable to find a way to form traditional relationships with men without falling into the same tragic pattern of the women before her.

Maria Gonzalez discusses the issue of the newer generation of Chicanas, which would be Cisneros’s generation, attempting to reclaim the myths as their own: “This is the new myth of La Llorona: the nondestructive mother who leaves her husband, takes her children, escapes, and begins the process of becoming a self-reliant, responsible human-being. In this new story, the traditional mother figure must begin the process of being less dependent on others as well as begin to develop a new sense of consciousness of self” (169). Unfortunately, while creating a new version of La Llorona is most certainly necessary, as the male-female relationships are unhealthy in their current state, Gonzales re-defines the family to exclude the father. Instead of

finding a solution to the issue of the male-female relationship, the blame seems to lie solely on the males, and lifting them out of the family equation becomes the answer. However, this solution can be damaging as Cisneros reveals in her works that it is not just the men but the women as well that cause rifts within the family unit. Cisneros's characters attempt to become something other than La Virgin or La Milanche, and they do, but that "other" is still being defined and has the chance of becoming something worse than La Virgin and La Milanche if the women are not careful.

Chapter Three – Clark Gable and the Little Grandfather: Machismo in America

Although most critics do not focus on family in their critiques of Cisneros's work, the ones who do tend to look at the family discuss the relationships between the females; however, *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* both provide clear depictions of female narrators who are also heavily influenced by the men in their families. In the same manner that the narrators' understanding of their mothers and grandmothers has an effect on their own actions, so do their understanding of their fathers and grandfathers. Cisneros provides two very different depictions of men within her two novels, and recognizing those differences is not something that many critics have taken the time to consider. Alfredo Mirande says, "If there is a persistent theme in social science depictions of the Mexican and the Mexican-American, it is the thesis that male dominance is ingrained as a cultural trait" (473). The Mexican male, much like the Caucasian and African-American male, has come under great scrutiny in the last fifty years, especially in the works of Chicana writers. Critics, however, often recognize only the flaws of the male characters, which is an interesting trend considering the writers themselves are often far less biased than the critics. The idea of the Mexican male, like the myths of La Virgin de Guadalupe and La Llorona, has followed Mexican culture into the United States. The stereotype of the Mexican male arrives in the form of "Machismo":

> The construct of Machismo has been viewed in various ways, depending on both the time and the perspective of the observer. From a feminist perspective, machismo has been defined as "exaggerated masculinity, physical prowess, and male chauvinism" (Baca Zinn, 1994, p. 74). But others have noted that historically machismo "represented an appropriate mechanism to insure the

> continuation of Mexican family pride and respect" (Sanchez, 1999, p.129).
>
> (Contreras, Kerns, and Neal-Barnett 14)

These stereotypes, as have the female stereotypes, have haunted Chicano culture and families for decades. Cisneros's characters may not always fit the stereotypes that her culture has created, but they are always aware of them.

Cisneros gives two very different views in *Mango Street* and *Caramelo*, as *Mango Street*'s male characters often fit the stereotypes and the characters are only one-dimensional, while Caramelo's male figures are fully realized human beings that both fit the stereotype and move away from it. Mirande believes that the stereotypical view of machismo and the Mexican male is not always true: "[T]he traditional view of the Chicano family as patriarchal and authoritarian is erroneous and based on unsupported myths and stereotypes held both by social scientists and the public at large" (477). If one considers Esperanza's and Celaya's fathers, then Mirande's belief that there is more to the Mexican/Chicano male than the show of male-dominance that sociologists and literary critics alike tend to focus on has credibility.

In his integral work on redefining the Latino male, David T. Abalos considers "[t]he family [to be] the context within which Latinas and Latinos can struggle against the destructive aspects of their cultural past and often hostile society" (155). The family, then, becomes the only way through which cultural traditions can be re-evaluated, allowing both the Latino culture and the individual family to once again begin working as a functional whole. While the women are certainly struggling against the Latino traditional view of the family, the women are often the only ones recognized as struggling against these cultural norms when the men are indeed struggling as well: "They are struggling with archetypal relationships and dramas, especially patriarchy, possessive love, uncritical loyalty, and the disappointed male" (Abalos 155). These

ideas can be seen through how the men interact with women and their children. For example, both Esperanza's father and Inocenio deal with disappointment when the houses that they buy for their families are met with dissatisfaction. Possessive love also appears within both stories, but in different forms. Interestingly, it is the women in *Caramelo* that demonstrate possessive love, while in *Mango Street* the men are the ones who attempt to keep their women all to themselves.

The most consistent problem that seems to appear within the damaged relationships in Mango Street and Caramelo is the difference in how the men and women view and partake in love.[30] In the short story, "The Eyes of Zapata," Cisneros writes about women "who love as strong as they hate," and in *Carmelo* explains that "men love in a different way. They don't understand. They don't set out a glass of water for their lover when they themselves are thirsty. They don't hold a spoon so close to the lover's mouth, and say, - Taste! – so close you can't see what's in it. They don't" (100, 189). Much of the conflict in the intimate relationships between men and women in Cisneros's writings arises from the differences both in the way that they love and the way that they understand love.

In her stories, Esperanza comes across many neighborhood women who marry to escape their home lives and do not marry out of love, but Celaya interacts with women who marry for what they think to be love. The men in Caramelo, however, seem to be unsure of what they want. Narciso, Inocenio, and Celaya's Ernie, change their minds and hearts multiple times about what they want out of life and love and the connection that exists between those two ideas. Cisneros writes, "You don't know your own heart, men. Even when you are speaking with it in your hand" ("Eyes of Zapata" 94). At times, the wives and narrators can see what their husbands and fathers desire, even when it is unclear to the men. Narciso, for instance, does not know how to

[30] This problem is actually one that applies to most cultures.

love unselfishly. After growing up in a military school and with a mother who pandered to his every whim, Narciso does not know how to think outside of his own needs and does not understand the women around him. When he encounters Soledad for the first time, she begins to cry because she has recently been orphaned: “Because he hadn’t been raised with women, Narciso didn’t know what to do with women’ tears. They confused him, upset him, made him angry because they stirred up his own emotions and left them in disarray” (Carmelo 107). This passage reveals the inability to respond to emotions in both himself and others that will haunt him the rest of his life. In telling the story of her grandparents Celaya notes, “[E]ach time Narciso returned to Oaxaca, he found Soledad suffering from a sadness without a name. Which is why he dreaded returning and avoided her when he did” (Caramelo 188). Narciso chooses to stay away from the home that his wife has attempted to build, because he does not know how to deal with the love and emotions that automatically come with a home. After all, he was never around his own parents long enough to understand how their marriage worked, and, even when he was around, his mother paid more attention to him than to his father.

Despite his inability to fully understand emotions, Narciso still has the capability to love. Once he and Soledad are married, Narciso proceeds to have affairs with at least two other women, one of which rejects the love that Narciso has for her. Celaya says, “And then he fell in love with her . . . It was like a great relief to not have to be Narciso Reyes, to let go the world’s demands and expectations. And like the tropical plants that grow in excess here without anything stopping them, a lushness, an overabundance, a luxury, he allowed his passion to grow as well, unkempt and untamed, and he knew for the first time joy” (*Caramelo* 174). Narciso’s love for a woman named Exaltacion arrives in a different form than Soledad’s love for Narciso. Whereas Soledad’s love manifested out of Narciso giving her the home she desired, Narciso’s love

blooms out of Exaltacion's ability to give him freedom from reality. Narciso spends his nights escaping from his marriage to Soledad and visiting Exaltacion. While Narciso is often cruel in response to Soledad's love for him, he shows a naivety in his love for Exaltacion. Narciso is just one of the many examples[31] Cisneros gives in *Carmelo* of the way the men love causing problems in the family.

Another problem between husbands and wives is the influence of the Mexican mother on her son. It seems that "[f]or many Latino men, cruel responses to women may be a kind of revenge against their own mothers who disabled them . . . invoking sin, shame, and guilt so that they would not leave their mothers. As adults, these men desert women, ignore them, are unfaithful to them, and use them" (Abalos 91-92). Both Inocenio and Narciso Reyes are unfaithful to their wives, fulfilling this stereotype. Inocenio constantly finds himself making decisions based upon the guilt that his mother places upon him. Inocenio, in fact, suffers due to his mother's love, which is a result of his father, Narciso's, actions. Because Soledad is not fulfilled in her marriage to Narciso, she turns all of her focus on Inocenio. It is also quite possible that much of the blame for Narciso's treatment of Soledad can be blamed on Narciso's mother who treats Soledad as though she is less than the Reyes family. Narciso's mother, Regina, makes Soledad sleep on a cot away from the family and treats her cruelly (*Caramelo* 114-115). The mothers play a part just in wrecking the marriages of their sons, but in the very way the sons view marriage.

Although Latino writers create stories that allow the women to break free from cultural restraints, few of them consider the outcome for the male figures in these families. Few writers reflect on what roles the male is supposed to adhere to as the women are attempting to re-

[31] Inocenio and Ernie are also examples.

construct their own: "What has not been explored, however, is the new role designated to the men in these women's lives. The female characters these writers create are anything but subservient; in fact, they are the matriarchs of the household, and through them the family's existence is maintained. What, then, of the matriarch's husband?" (Del Rio 116). Cisneros does not provide an answer to this question, but she does allow her narrators, Esperanza and Celaya, to tell the stories of their male kind, even if the stories are not quite as in depth as the stories belonging to the females. Inocenio Reyes, Celaya's father, becomes a fully-developed character in *Caramelo*. And although Inocenio does do injustice to his female counterparts, such as committing adultery with the housekeeper and never acknowledging his first child, a daughter born to the housekeeper, he is allowed his positive traits.

Inocenio, who Celaya describes as resembling Pedro Infante and Clark Gable,[32] is a handsome man who tries to be the proper and strong man that Mexican men are required to be. He is also a man who loves his daughter, Celaya, very much, and he is also a man who believes in the good of other people. Details are shared about him that are not revealed about the men in *Mango Street*, such as the fact that he believes in hard work and high-quality carpentry. He strives to provide for his family and wants better for them. Although Esperanza, unlike Celaya, provides very few details about her father,[33] leaving out even his name, she still reveals that he is much more than just a stereotypical male following the tradition of Machismo. Through the eyes of Esperanza, her father becomes a man who, like Inocenio Reyes, wants a better house and life

[32] Infante and Gable, despite differing ethnicities, look strikingly similar, especially when sporting their delightful mustaches. In referencing both actors, Celaya is, once again, combining her cultures and using pop culture to define a person in her life.

[33] *Mango Street* is more closely written from the view point of the narrator as a child, even though the story is told when the Esperana is older, more so than *Caramelo*. Because everything in the novel is described from a child's point of view, it is no surprise that Esperanza never gives the names of her parents. She did not think of them by their names, so she does not give their names in telling the story.

for his family. Both narrators also make their male siblings human, providing moments when the brothers are troubled by cultural influences as much as the females.

Interestingly enough, the roles of the men and women seem to change as the married couples grow older. Gary L. Villereal and Alonzo Cavazos, Jr. claim,

> As Mexican-American couples age, the assertive influence of the wife becomes more apparent, and with retirement the male becomes less important interpersonally. . . . Older Mexican-American males struggle with feelings of worthlessness and being useless to the family. With the loss of a direct contribution, monetarily, to the family come the loss of identity and a search for a new family role. (39)

Although Celaya's grandfather, Narciso, is Mexican and not Mexican-American, he still has this same style of relationship with his children who have moved to the United States. The title which Celaya gives him is "the Little Grandfather," which suggests that Narciso is small both in stature and nature. This Little Grandfather seems to be a completely different person from the Narciso that appears in the stories from before Celaya was born. In those stories, Narciso is a strong, good-looking man whom Soledad seems to set upon a pedestal. The actions of this Narciso affect his wife and children a great deal. Yet the Narciso that Celaya knows carries no weight in his home. The entire family now revolves around Soledad and not him. When Celaya's family is visiting the grandparents in their Mexican home, Celaya mentions an interaction between her grandparents. Soledad asks Narciso a question, and Celaya explains how he responds: "Why ask me, I'm already dead, the Little Grandfather says, retreating to his bedroom with his newspapers and cigar. – You'll do what you want to do, same as always" (*Caramelo* 7). Narciso no longer has any power within his family, and, in fact, the family very rarely notices he is even there. At

the very least, Celaya barely notices he is there as she is too busy focusing on her hatred for her Grandmother.

Although the women in *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* interact with other women almost more than they do with men, Cisneros does not show the men interacting with each other anywhere near as much. In order to understand the men as fully developed characters then, it is important to understand their interaction with their children and communities. According to Mirande, there are attributes of Machismo that are not necessarily a negative influence on the men: "The concept of honor is integral to machismo. The Latin man places great emphasis on maintaining his honor and integrity not only in the community but within the family" (Mirande 474).

Both Inocenio Reyes and Esperanza's father are examples of men who hold to this sense of honor. Inocenio, for instance, is frustrated when the American police do not believe him when he says he fought in the war for the United States. He is ashamed that the police would not believe him simply because he is Mexican. Esperanza's father also claims this sense of honor by working to provide his family with a better living situation than what they have. Esperanza explains that her family's house on Mango Street is the one that "Papa talked about when he held up a lottery ticket" (*Mango Street* 4). He holds to the honor of wanting to provide for his family. Authors Gary Villereal and Alonzo Cavazos, Jr. are in agreement with Mirande that the Mexican concept of Machismo does, at times, become more stereotype than fact: "For most Mexican/American males, machismo elements are certainly present, but not to the stereotypical degree that is initially attributed to Mexican/American males" (Villereal and Cavazos 38). The honor, at times, seems to be the same sense of honor that men in most cultures have. When Narciso goes to war, we find out that "he had always wanted to be a hero": however, it is his

mother, Regina, who becomes angry when Narciso returns home from the battle but has not brought her any food. In this case, it is the female who has twisted honor to a distortion that Narciso cannot possibly obtain.

Honor is not the only beneficial element of Machismo that the men claim, as dignity is also something that they attempt to achieve. Rudolfo Gonzalez says, "To the Mexican man Machismo means to have the manly traits of honor and dignity. To have courage to fight. To keep his word and protect his name" (qtd. in Rodriguez 44). Dignity is a term that has different meanings depending on the situation. In this case, according to Reies Lopez Tijerina, "The heart of human dignity is the family. The family is the source of values, virtues, and the love that nurtures harmony and fraternity" (165).

Despite creating male figures that often seek emotional and sexual comfort outside of the home and men who use physical violence inside the home, Cisneros also writes about men who attempt to nurture and protect their families. In a study compiling data on Mexican born fathers raising American born children in the United States, Andrew O. Behnke, Brent A. Taylor, José Rubén Parra-Cardona discovered that these "[f]athers were frequently found to report that the most important fathering characteristic was being 'hard workers.' Less commonly, fathers indicated being 'responsible', being 'friends' with their children, 'loving [their] children', being 'example[s] or role model[s]', and being both 'protector[s] and a provider[s]'" (193). This particular study revealed that fathers had to switch from fully dedicating themselves to hard work in order to provide to spending more time with the children. The authors noted that this was because the fathers had to deal with their children encountering more negative influence in the United States than in Mexico (Behnke, Taylor, and Parra-Cardona 194). This situation certainly becomes applicable to Cisneros's works, as we see Celaya's father become more invested in his

children's behavior and academic lives when they are in the States as opposed to when they are in Mexico visiting the grandparents.

Although Esperanza's father appears only a few times throughout her stories, we can assume that he has the same trouble as Celaya's father due to the obstacles that Esperanza and her sister come into conflict with in the novel. The fathers that took part in Behnke, Taylor, and Parra-Cardona's study noted that the way they treated their children did not change too much from Mexico to the United States, but that they did "[feel] that immigration had not necessarily *changed their fathering role;* they also stated that they felt *they had to adapt* to new challenges in their new environment" (Behnke, Taylor, and Parra-Cardona 194). The blending of cultures causes confusion for fathers of Mexican heritage in the United States and causes them to cling even tighter to the basic foundations of Machismo. We see this occur in a positive way Inocenio has a difficult time transitioning from his usual work ethic of creating well-crafted sofas to his brothers' style of creating cheap sofas. He is clinging to the integrity and honor, two of the positive elements of Machismo, despite the fact that the ever-changing American culture is requiring otherwise.

In the same manner that the father figures are treated in a different manner from the women in their families, so they treat their male and children differently. Behnke, Taylor, and Parra-Cardona believe that "while fathers report treating daughters and sons equally, the data demonstrates that their relationships may not be equally strong. For example, some fathers expressed their limitations in relating to their daughters directly, and others reported that they could identify more with sons but treated all children equally" (196). While the father figures did seem to be limited in how they related to their daughters, they actually dealt emotionally with their daughters but did not seem to be able to emotionally connect to their sons. In *Mango Street*,

it is Esperanza who her father turns to when his father dies. He emotionally leans on her and asks her to tell the other children that their grandfather has died. Although Esperanza claims it is because she is the oldest, the novel insinuates that the children are all relatively close in age, so it would not have been difficult for the father to share the news first with one of his two sons.

As Esperanza seems to be the one her father invests his emotions in, so Celaya also becomes the one that Inocenio is the most emotionally invested in. When she reveals that she, in fact, is her father's favorite, one could assume that this notion might be different if one of her brothers were telling the story; however, multiple situations show her claim to be true. Celaya is the one that Inocenio parades around to meet all of his friends at his birthday party, and it is Celaya, not one of her older brothers, that Inocenio takes with him to the Little Grandfather's funeral in Mexico. Although one would suspect that, due to the machismo tradition, fathers would be more emotionally tied to their sons, it seems to have the opposite effect. Because the fathers require their sons to be strong, they disconnect from the sons emotionally. After all, Celaya is the one that Inocenio takes to Mexico to show her off to his family, but it is Rafa that he leaves in Mexico for military training in order to make him into a man. Kimberly A. Updegraff, Melissa Y. Delgado, and Lorey A. Wheeler note that "[g]ender is an organizing feature of family responsibilities in Mexican culture and may have implications for the potentially different roles of mothers and fathers and the different experiences of girls versus boys" (568).

This aspect of culture is true in regards to Inocenio and, assumingly, Esperanza's father, but it is also being passed down from them to their American born children. In the same way that Inocenio and Narciso went to military school, so the Awful Grandmother talks Inocenio into leaving Rafa in Mexico when the family returns home from their visit in order for him to attend

military school as well. Celaya explains that when Rafa returned, he was no longer like his siblings, and the way she described it lends to the idea that he was left there for an entire year to become more Mexican than American. Celaya says, "Later when he feels like it and can talk about it, he'll explain what it's like to be abandoned by your parents and left in a country where you don't have the words to speak the things inside of you" (*Caramelo* 23). Because Rafa is the oldest male in the family, his father and grandmother do not bother to give him any forewarning and simply leave him in a country not his own. Because Raga is a son, he is expected to grow up in the American culture but with the qualities that the Mexico requires of its men.

When Celaya tells the story of her grandfather, Narciso, returning from war to his home in Mexico, his ailing father passes judgment on him for not being the grown man that was expected. Narciso's father sees him as a "baby-faced dandy, a mama's boy, a frightened spoiled brat, a snot-nosed kid disguised as a man" (Caramelo 148). These men must conform to the standard that Mexican tradition dictates. Multiple times throughout the novel, the concept of males of Mexican descent needing to be "feo, fuerto, y formal"[34] appears and causes the men to either be viewed by others as assuming that persona or failing to assume it.

In *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* Cisneros humanizes the men by showing their negative actions and reactions as well as their valuable responses and choices. Pamela Radar believes that "[w]hile Cisneros is recognized for her reclaimed and empowered female characters, she has also put forth readings that humanize and expand bicultural definitions of maleness" (131). Cisneros makes the female characters strong because her culture forgot that the women had the capability of being strong, but she often shows the men at their weakest, emotionally or physically, which is not something that neither the Chicano nor Mexican culture allows. By showing the male

[34] "ugly, strong, and proper"

characters as weak, she actually does them a justice that others do not by making them humanized characters. Although the narrators reveal the men at their very worst – Inocenio and Narciso cheating on their wives – they also reveal the way in which the men care for the people around them.

In referencing a concept that Octavio Paz wrote of in his consideration of the Latino male that he saw in the United States during the 1950s, Pamela Radar reveals the same identity struggles that Cisneros's males often deal with: "Losing his inheritance of tongue, traditions, and way of life, vulnerable yet protected by disguise, he is a victim of colonialism's legacy and its enduring cultural imperialism" (132). Although the men attempt to assimilate into the American culture, it is impossible for them to fully adapt. Celaya's father does not move to the United States until his early twenties, causing him to already be molded by Mexican thought and unable to grasp the English language with the same fluency of Spanish. As a result, Celaya's inclusion of Inocenio in her stories shows that in his own home he is respected by the family as is, for the most part, his spoken tongue, Mexican traditions, and style of living; however, when he leaves the home, he becomes vulnerable. Inocenio is far surer of himself when he walks the streets of Mexico than when he walks the streets of Chicago.

Narciso, as Celaya tells the stories, did not have a good relationship at all with his children. Narciso "[h]ardly knew they were alive. . . . He hardly knew his family and they hardly knew him. He was shy and awkward with these strangers. He would've liked to have been warmer with them, but he didn't know how. . . It had been a long time since he played with his children. He no longer knew how to play" (*Caramelo* 206). Between working a job that keeps him away from home a good deal of the time and having grown up in a military school and not at home with his family, Narciso did not know how to "play" or interact with his family, especially

the children. The only attention that he seems to provide his children with is one of expectations. These expectations cause his sons to run away to Chicago, where Celaya will end up spending her childhood. The first son to run away is Fat-Face: "You're nothing but a burro, Narciso had too often said to Fat-Face, and because the power of words spoken by those we love is so strong, they stung Fat-Face's heart. If he was never going to be anything, why bother trying right?" (*Caramelo* 206-207). The effects of the need to produce strong and proper sons, at least in *Caramelo*, leads to the sons' obtaining the same emotional wall of their fathers'. The pain of the expectation is handed down from father to son.

The idea of becoming a true man also came with stipulations of providing for the family. Within the idea of Machismo, "[e]specially important is the belief that a man should be honored and respected by his family. He is viewed as a strict disciplinarian who demands complete respect, deference, and obedience from his wife as much as from his children" (Mirande 475). Soledad tells Celaya that Narciso used to be incredibly proud that he did not know what the inside of the kitchen looked like, and Celaya replies, "Which is to say he was a real man" (*Caramelo* 121). Their positions in life as husbands, heads of the household, and fathers are dictated to them, allowing them little choice to figure other roles without being an outsider to their culture.

Esperanza's and Celaya's responses to relationships become even clearer once their understanding of the men around them is incomplete. Although Esperanza's father does not seem be the bad influence that the men in Celaya's family are, she is influenced so heavily by the other marriages that she watches destruct within her neighborhood, leaving her with the belief that to wed is to give up a freedom that she wishes to keep. She becomes what she despises so much in the men around her, but believes it will be different because she will not keep anyone from

seeking out their own dreams. While we are never told how Esperanza deals with romantic relationships when she is older, we do see the possibility of Esperanza's wish[35] to be "beautiful and cruel" coming to fruition in "Never Marry a Mexican." The narrator of the short story, Clemencia, tells her audience why she will never marry: "I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, and I've helped them to it. Un-zipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I've been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I'm guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I'm vindictive and cruel, and I'm capable of anything" ("Never Marry a Mexican" 68). Clemencia does not believe that relationships can be beneficial and, in return, has no qualms about ruining other relationships. Although it is Esperanza who expresses the desire to be the type of woman that Clemencia actually is, it is Celaya who shares the commonality of having a parent who committed adultery with Clemencia, not Esperanza. Despite Clemencia being angry with her mother for cheating on her father when he was sick, she still aids men in committing adultery. When Celaya is older, Zoila tells her that Inocenio committed adultery and had a bastard child. Neither Clemencia nor Celaya receives a depiction of an honest marriage.

Although Esperanza and Celaya choose to react differently to their parents' marriages, neither of them can escape the influence. While Esperanza chooses to avoid men almost altogether, Celaya chooses a different path. In the last section of the novel, she tells the story of a boy that she dated. Celaya explains the way that she fell in love with Ernie: "Honest to God, at first I didn't notice you. Who would notice you? And then the next thing you know, you're very beautiful. Or very ugly. Depending. But isn't it always like that with love?" (*Caramelo* 366).

[35] This is not to say that the marriages around Esperanza are the only reason that she wants to avoid marrying. Esperanza is also raped by a boy later in the novel, which certainly affects her decisions.

This passage seems to repeat the same emotions surrounding the story of how Inocenio and Zoila fell in love and Narciso and Soledad before that. These stories present the same problem within a relationship: one person in the relationship does not show as much interest as the other person, and then the feelings change. Despite her dislike of her mother's and grandmother's relationships, Celaya seems to imitate them just the same. Considering that Celaya is also closer to her father than to her mother because for so long she could not understand her mother's anger, it is not a surprise that Celaya feels the need to "protect" Ernie in the same way that she thought she had to protect her father from her mother and the Awful Grandmother.

Celaya also opposes Esperanza in that she still believes in the idea of the "romantic." She reveals her hope for a fairytale version of a relationship when she tells Ernie she is going to call him Ernesto instead of Ernie, because Ernesto is a far more romantic name. Celaya constantly makes cultural references. By trying to make her relationship with Ernie more ideal, it seems that she is trying to avoid her parents' marriage by making her own more like the relationships that she sees in the movies and on television. This is not a far stretch as "both men and women who watch movies and T.V. programs will, unconsciously, . . .[the movies and T.V. shows will] have an effect on the male-female relationship" (Berger 10). Because Ernie is different from the other boys that Celaya knows, she believes him to be an outsider in the same way that she believes she is an outsider. This belief leads her to wanting to protect him from other people: "You're not like anybody I've ever met. Except for me . . . And I think to myself, I promise I'll never make you cry again. And I won't let anyone else make you cry either" (*Caramelo* 367). Attempting to create the ideal relationship and placing her persona onto Ernie is a result of wanting a relationship far different from the ones of her family. When Ernie and Celaya run away, stay in a hotel, and consummate their relationship, Ernie decides that he cannot continue their relationship

because of his religion and his mother. Celaya becomes furious with Ernie that he chooses his mother over her, a reflection of Zoila becoming angry with Inocenio for constantly choosing Soledad over her.

Although both Celaya and Esperanza attempt to find a way not to become a prisoner in marriage, much like they believe their parents to be, the girls do not find the complete answer.[36] Whether the narrators look to the women or to the men, nobody in their families seems to have found the answer to forming a stable marriage. The concept of marriage is not the only element of the family unit that they are unable to find the answers to as the narrators also watch as the men, following in the same pattern as the women, treat members of their own gender cruelly. After all, the fathers cannot teach their sons to be emotionally stable adults if the fathers never fully learned themselves.

[36] However, it does seem that Cisneros believes Esperanza to have found the answer in living alone and unattached to a man.

Chapter Four – "Tell me a story, even if it's a lie"[37]:

The Art of Storytelling and the Beginning of Healing

The art of storytelling has found a place, throughout history, in every culture. Literature, film, music, and art are shaping and creating culture constantly through the stories that they tell. Before the invention of records, cameras, and even the printing press, storytelling was important, if not more so, than it is now. Oral storytelling was a steadfast tradition as families passed on the histories of their families from generation to generation and bards sang of epic battles and the mythologies of different people groups. Storytelling is human, possibly more than anything else. Author Rudolfo Anaya said, in an interview, that "[t]he collective memory is shared by all of us. We are connected to our ancestors because of a common link . . . the stories we told a million years ago, whether they were just sounds or scratched on the cave walls. . . They speak to something deep within ourselves that help us to understand ourselves and to connect us" (19). The act of storytelling, then, connects human beings to one another and allows for a collective memory of humanity to continue to exist. In studying the act of storytelling and how it relates to the content of the novels, it is important to understand the way in which the elements of the narrative structure work. Gennette's concepts of the elements of narrative are beneficial to use in this study because "[w]here other studies were focused largely on devising formal models on the 'story' level, *Narrative Discourse* turned toward the signifying level, "discourse"[38] (Piere 8). Cisneros's works demonstrate the way in which writing is a discourse. Cisneros tells the stories of her culture, but she tells them in her own voice and through the experiences of those around her.

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[37] Quote from Preface of *Caramelo*.

[38] Discourse, in this case, concerns communication. For instance, when I say that the novel works as a discourse, in a way, I am saying that it works as a conversation.

Reflective of Cisneros and her writing, her characters also represent Chicanos and, at times, Mexicans, in general, but also reveal the identities of their families and themselves. Through the act of storytelling, human beings can learn to understand one another and learn from history. Currie notes that "[i]n more academic contexts, there has been a recognition that narrative is central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation or in collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, race, and gender" (2). The narrative as representation of collective identity is an ancient tradition, and one that still has roots in the United States in Chicano literature.

Although traditional oral storytelling has more or less given way to different media, some cultures have kept the tradition alive, such as Mexican culture. The belief in the importance of storytelling followed Mexican immigrants to the United States. Cisneros's writing often draws upon the tradition of oral storytelling, as the narrators do not simply tell a story but seem to converse with their audiences. *Caramelo* and *Mango Street* both contain homo-diagetic[39] narrators.[40] Her choice in narrators causes her audience to become more emotionally attached to the story than if the narrator were removed from the story.

Because they are homo-diagetic narrators, Celaya and Esperanza are emotionally involved in the stories they are telling, which causes them to change the stories in relation to how the story affects them. In a sense, the narrators become unreliable. Bortolussi and Dixon believe that "unreliable narrators" consist of young narrators (82). Yet, it is not simply their age that causes Celaya and Esperanza to be unreliable narrators, as the narrators tell their stories years

[39] The narrator is also a character within the narrative; 1st person point of view.
[40] There are times, however, when Celaya becomes removed from the story, such as when she tells the story of her grandparents before even her parents were alive. Still, even then Celaya is constantly interacting with her grandmother which, in a way, causes her to become a part of the story and the way that she tells it.

after the events have happened. The distance between the time the events took place and the actual telling of the story leaves room for the narrators to forget the way events occurred. They are also unreliable in the sense that both narrators are subjective in their telling of the events. Despite the unrealibility of their narrations, the narrators actually have an uncannty ability to understand what needs to be told of the story. Cisneros makes no attempt to hide the fact that her narrators do not always tell the truth as multiple times she hints that her narrators are changing the stories as they tell them. At one point in *Caramelo,* Celaya claims that she remembers an event that took place before she was born to which her mother replies, "You mean you remember the stories somebody has told you" (*Caramelo* 19). Although many of the stories that the two girls tell did happen to them, they are also stories that they have been told by other people. As a result, the narrators are passing on the "voices" of family members who came before them.

The narrators' and other characters' voices are deeply connected, which is why free-indirect speech[41] is used (Bortolussi and Dixon 207). In using this strategy, the dialogue and actions become part of the narrators' memories. Yet the stories change, and the girls focus on the parts of the stories that matter the most to them and have, eventually, had an effect on their own lives. In the first passage in *Caramelo,* Celaya claims that the family forgets to tell her to come take the picture with them. At the end of the novel, however, Celaya's brother says to her, "What are you talking about? You weren't making sand castles, Lala. You want the truth? You were mad, and that's why when we called you over, you wouldn't come. That's the real reason you're not in the picture" (*Caramelo* 422). His response reveals to the audience that Celaya is unreliable in the sense that she cannot disconnect her emotional attachment to the characters or events in

[41] Free-indirect speech can be defined as the "narrative technique [in which] the narrator's voice is used to convey the actual vocabulary and sentence structure of a character's speech without attribution tags, quotations marks, or other typographical cues" (Bortolussi and Dixon 205).

her story and those attachments and emotions may cause her to alter the true nature of the events that have occurred in her life. Cisneros is not the first to portray a narrative and narrator in this manner: "Contemporary approaches to narrative generally insist on the idea that narrative constructs a version of events rather than describing them in their true state, that it is performative rather than constative, or inventive not descriptive" (Currie 118). The contemporary concept, then, holds that the narrators construct the narrative in a manner that causes it to perform a certain function.

Celaya changes the way things originally happened in her stories to show certain troubling attributes of her family that have been ignored by other family members, while Esperanza chooses to tell only stories that had a deep impact on her. By revealing tragic events and family secrets, the narrators seem to be showing all the reasons why moving away from the family is beneficial; however, the family unit would still be broken if they did not tell the stories and, through finding a connection to the stories of their family members, the narrators are actually able to become more self-realized individuals and heal the family. The stories the narrators tell perform the function of revealing how the events that take place affect them. Just because the narrators do not always tell the true story does not mean that they are not telling a story with truth. McCracken, speaking of Cisneros' contemporary, Judith Ortiz Cofer and her novel, *The Line of the Sun*, says, "The text subverts itself . . . openly declaring its own simulation. Now the entire novel is foregrounded as a representation, an arbitrary, selective, an imagined rendering of the past that lies because it only partially reveals the truth" (76). Yet while Cisneros's novels may acknowledge that they are only imitations of the real stories, as the

narrators are not to be trusted to tell the real story, the narrators can be trusted to tell the truth[42] that needs to be known. This manner of telling the truth as they know it is important because to the narrators the truth becomes how they understood the situation.

In a unique manner, Cisneros so much as tells us this in the *Caramelo*. As Celaya and Soledad fight over whether too much of the story is being changed, Soledad says, "It depends on whose truth you're talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it" (*Caramelo* 156). This is the second time that Cisneros has made it clear that sometimes, in the act of storytelling, the truth comes in the form of a lie. At least, a lie is the word that is often used throughout the novel by both characters and Cisneros. These lies, however, are actually the reality as the narrators understand the events that take place. The first time she does this, Cisneros does not use one of her characters as the mouthpiece for this idea, as she recognizes this conundrum in the preface of *Caramelo*: "If, in the course of my invention, I have stumbled upon the truth, perdoname" (1). Although Cisneros does not write autobiography, her stories are often based on a story she has experienced or heard, so there is always truth that comes through her writing even if she has changed the story from its original script. Esperanza explains the stories as she understood them as a child, and Celaya describes the stories by changing them to reveal the pain and heartache that the family has tried to keep secret for so long.

Their stories should still be heard despite the occasional inaccuracy because, if anything, it shows how affected they are by their families and the events that take place, which is, after all, the purpose of the stories: to show the power of influence that the family members have on one

[42] This references the truth the characters are refusing to acknowledge, which is made up of the emotions that drive the actions of the characters. In a sense, it is a transcended truth that goes deeper than just the events that took place in the past.

another. In an interview, Cisneros reveals that her own act of storytelling in her works is in the same manner that her narrators tell the stories: "They don't understand I'm not writing a biography. What I'm doing is writing true stories. They're all stories I've lived, or witnessed, or heard, stories that were told to me. I collected these stories and I arranged them in an order so they would be clear and cohesive. Because in real life, there's no order" (Aranda 64). Cisneros tells stories that are true, but changes them to find the real truth that is hidden by life's chaos. She seeks to find the truth that has caused the people in her life pain that they cannot speak about on their own. Telling stories allows her to give her culture a voice in the same manner that Celaya and Esperanza tell stories to give a voice to their family members.

The narrators become the vessels for these stories, but because they are the vessels, the stories also become a reflection of them. In fact, the homo-diegetic narrators that appear have an effect on the audience of the novels. The narrator's "mediation" of story will "affect the reader's responses to the fictional world" (Bortolussi and Dixon 60). So when Celaya changes the stories of her family to become what she believes they should be or when Esperanza explains the stories of those around her from her point of view as a child, the audience is consuming these stories only after they have been filtered through Esperanza and Celaya, the narrators. Bordolussi and Dixon say that conversational narrators, which Celaya and Esperanza both are, cause the "readers [to] process the narrator as if they were communicating with such an individual in conversation" (30). As Esperanza and Celaya reference storytelling, causing these works to become meta-fiction[43] at times, the narration carries a conversational tone. This conversational tone reflects the tradition of oral storytelling.

[43] Fiction becomes Metafiction when the text references itself as fiction. *Caramelo*, however, is far more meta-narrative than *Mango Street*.

The characters may tell the stories of their families and their nation, but they complete the act by adding themselves into the ever-growing narrative. Many of Gennette's basic conceptions of narrative are deeply connected to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of discourse that appears in his influential work *Discourse in the Novel*. Bakhtin claims that "[t]he novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically arranged" (262). This concept distinguishes that it is not just language or dialogue that becomes a discourse, but an entire novel can be viewed as one as well. In Cisneros's novels, every word or idea that Esperanza and Celaya put forth contains connotations to their backgrounds. Celaya and Esperanza, for example, describes their family members in terms of the Hollywood actors and actresses that are popular during her childhood. Despite telling the stories of relatives that are of a different generation, the narrators cannot escape their own connections to culture in telling the stories.

In the same manner that Cisneros uses particular words that will hold meaning to her audience, so Celaya uses particular words and ideas that have connections to her family. Bakhtin also considers that "the prose writer witnesses . . . the unfolding of social herteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (278). This Tower-of-Babel concept appears in Esperanza's story titled "My Name." For Esperanza, the word "name" contains connections to events and emotions that have occurred in her life. To her family, the social community of which she is a part, her name is connected to her great-grandmother for whom she is named. Her neighbors, however, do not consider this connection when speaking with Esperanza. The name also causes grief in Esperanza because it reminds her of the fact that her English sounds differently than that of those who do not have to switch

between English and Spanish. Who is using the name, then, will change the meaning behind the name. It is in this way that the novels become discourses, leading narrative and narrating process to also fall into the category of a discourse. These two novels become discourses because the narrators are not only telling a story; they are manipulating the narration and story in order to fulfill their purposes.

By studying elements of narrative in literature, the emotions and purpose of the plot become more clearly understandable. Suzanne Keen comments that "[n]arrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques – such as the use of first person and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional status – as devices supporting character identification, contributing to emphatic experiences. . . changing attitudes" (213). The way both the character and the audience understand the story being told, then, depends upon how the story is told and the narrative presented. Through *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* we see that as the three steps of the narrating process, the acceptance of the role of storyteller, the act of storytelling, and the effects of the act, occur in the narrators' lives, storytelling becomes therapeutic on three different levels: the culture/nation, the family, and the individual.

Because Esperanza and Celaya both tell their stories in an order meaningful to them, the moment of acceptance is not revealed until the end of the novels; however, both of the narrators have a spiritual encounter in which their roles as narrators are invoked and they both choose to accept their responsibility. The three sections that Cisneros separates her novel into are not in chronological order[44]. Genette's concept of "order" is essential in recognizing the importance of how and why the stories are told. Genette mentions that "[t]o study the temporal order of a

[44] In the narrative area of "order," Genette differentiates between "erzahlte Zeit (story time) and Erzahlzeit (narrative time)" (33).

narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story, to the extent that story order is explicitly indicated by the narrative itself or inferable from one or another indirect clue" (35). Both *Mango Street* and *Caramelo* provide clues that the stories do not arrive in the same order in which they happened. The very fact that at the end of both novels the narrators explain that they are *telling* the stories to us and not that we are simply there as the story is occurring, reveals that the narrators are telling the stories from a time after the stories occurred. Also, some of the stories are repeated, which allows for the notion that the narrators are not necessarily explaining the stories in a chronological order, but in an order that makes sense to the narrators emotionally.

The order in which events occur especially plays a role in understanding Cisneros's narratives when examining the narrators' acceptance of their roles as storytellers. *Caramelo* is a work that is very much out of chronological order. The first section shows Celaya's childhood, which is important because it affects the way that she tells the stories of her family. The second section is the Awful Grandmother's story, which should actually be either the first or third chapter depending whether one considers the correct chronology to be that of Celaya or Soledad's life.

The third section, however, is the one in which Celaya accepts her role as the scribe of her family and, as a result, the one who must tell their stories. The ghost of the Grandmother, leaning over Inocenio's hospital bed, explains that she is unable to move on to the next world or to be visible to anyone in this world but Celaya. The Grandmother tries to make Celaya understand why she must tell Soledad's story: "I need everyone I hurt to forgive me. You'll tell them, won't you, Celaya?" (*Caramelo* 407). Celaya, in turn, agrees to act as the scribe of

Soledad's story, accepting the role of narrator. She accepts the role, according to her narration of the hospital meeting between Soledad and her, so that the Grandmother will allow Celaya's father, Inocenio, to live a few more years. Storytelling, then, literally becomes life-saving, both figuratively and literally, and the role of storyteller is not one that is easily accepted as it comes with great responsibility. Although it is never directly stated, the implications of the novel lead to Celaya recognizing that just telling Soledad's story is not enough, but that she must become the narrator of her story as well as the stories of the other members of her family. In one of the footnotes[45] of the novel, Celaya indicates that "[b]ecause a life contains a multitude of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the whole of who one is," all of the stories that make up a person must be told in some form (*Caramelo* 115). This notion becomes true as Celaya not only tells Soledad's story but also her own story and how it is connected to the many strands belonging to her mother, father, and siblings.

While Celaya's spiritual call comes in the form of Soledad's ghost, Esperanza receives hers from "the three sisters" that attend a funeral at which Esperanza is also in attendance. These three sisters present the image of the three fates as they hand down Esperanza's purpose in life. Although they do not directly mention storytelling as Soledad does to Celaya, but they present her with the purpose behind her storytelling: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (*Mango Street* 105). The need for Esperanza to tell the stories of her family and neighbors that live on Mango Street has been issued, but it is not until the end of the story that she actually accepts the position of

[45] Unlike other novels, Cisneros includes footnotes in *Carmelo*. Some of the notes seem to be written by Cisneros, explaining real places and events that appear in the novel; however, other notes appear to be the work of Celaya, providing smaller anecdotes that do not necessarily have a direct affect on the story she is telling at the time.

storyteller. In the last chapter of the novel Esperanza explains that she has accepted her position as storyteller: "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango Street. . . . They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (*Mango Street* 110). The repetition of the same words the three sisters used reveals Esperanza's now clear understanding of her purpose, which she did not understand before she began to tell the story of Mango Street. Of course, though the final chapter is written where it would appear chronologically, it arrives after she has told the story of Mango Street, meaning that even the final chapter has already happened in the past. The stories the audience receives from Esperanza are ones that she and those around her have already experienced. But through the telling of the story, she begins to understand why she needs to tell it.

Once the girls have accepted their employment as storytellers, they engage in the act of storytelling / narrating[46]. Cisneros does not simply create characters in order to tell a story; she also constructs characters and a narrative in order to show the *act* of storytelling and its importance in the human life. In fact, the art of telling stories is discussed multiple times throughout both *Caramelo* and *Mango Street*. According to Celaya, stories become more interesting and important when they contain heartache. After all, the greatest stories are usually tragedies and the best storytellers have often led tragic lives. Throughout the novel, telenovelas[47] are consistently referenced, and the Grandmother and Celaya even attempt to create a story that reflects a telenova. Celaya says, "Only societies that have undergone the tragedy of a revolution

[46] Although Genette makes a distinction between story and narration, I am using narrating and storytelling interchangeable. I do this because, in the context of Cisneros's novels, the narrators are "telling stories" by narrating them.

[47] Telenovelas have been compared to American soap operas, but instead have a definite ending and, at times, incorporate social messages into the shows. These have been made and popularized in Spanish countries.

and a near century of inept political leadership could love with such passion the telenova, storytelling at its very best since it has the power of a true Scheherazade – it keeps you coming back for more" (*Carmelo* 409). Tragic and dramatic tales, then, become the motivation behind storytelling, possibly because it is the tragedies in life that people remember the best and are the most affected by.

Through the conversations between Celaya and Soledad, it also becomes clear that the stories that Celaya will tell are the stories of shame that others are too afraid to tell. When Soledad becomes angry at how Celaya changes the story and accuses her of having no shame, Celaya replies, "I do too have shame. That's how I know where the stories are" (*Caramelo* 205). The stories that leave their mark are the ones that cause the characters disgrace, which is why Celaya tells their stories, because she becomes brave when the rest cannot. In the same way that Inocenio does not have the courage to tell Celaya or Zoila about his affair and the daughter that came from it, so Soledad does not have the courage to tell anyone that her love was a jealous one because she feared being alone. Ramón J. Guerra mentions that Cisneros's "interests are driven by what people are all too willing to keep secret" (147). Her narrators listen to these secrets and repeat them when others cannot. Celaya tells the stories for her Grandmother and Father, and even finds the courage to tell her own shameful story of running away with Ernie.

At times, Celaya will hear the voice of her Grandmother in her mind as she is telling stories. When her mother attempts to tell her the painful story of Inocenio's affair, Celaya does not want to hear the story. But when she tries to ignore it, she finds that she is unable to do so: "A pain flutters through my chest like a fish darting through a current of cold water, and I hear a voice inside my head say, Pay attention! Listen. Even if it hurts. Especially if it hurts" (*Caramelo* 403). The act of storytelling becomes a response to human emotion, a way to express it and

relive it in order to better understand it. Esperanza engages in the act of storytelling for the very same reason. When she sits on the front stoop of her neighbor's house with her friend Alicia, Esperanza makes it clear to Alicia that she does not wish to be a member of the Mango Street community. Esperanza claims that she will not come back to the street until "somebody makes it better." Alicia replies to Esperanza by saying, "Who's going to do it? The mayor?" (*Mango Street* 107). Alicia's response is a foreshadowing, much like that of the three sisters, of Esperanza's role as the only one who can save Mango Street through her writing. Esperanza's job is to make Mango Street better through giving its inhabitants the voice they did not have before she came along.

The narrative mode, in the case of *Mango Street* and *Caramelo,* is very much controlled by the narrators. As each of the narrators is a homo-diagetic narrator, both are deeply connected to the stories they are communicating. Genette makes the distinction between homodiegetic narrators who are the "heroes" of their stories and those who play secondary characters (245). Celaya and Esperanza actually move in and out of both of these roles as they, at times, focus on themselves and, at other times, focus on their observations of stories that occurred to others. In fact, at times, they retreat to the role of a heterodiegetic narrator. This retreat occurs when they tell stories of others that they were not actually around to be a part of. Celaya, after all, tells the stories of her grandparents that occurred when she "was still dirt" (*Caramelo* 89). Because Celaya is interacting with her grandmother who tells her the stories first and because she is so deeply affected by the stories, she is never a completely heterodiegetic narrator but moves into different roles[48] throughout the novel, which most narrators usually do not do. Because the narrators are so deeply connected to the stories they are telling, their manipulation of the stories

[48] Sometime Esperanza and Celaya are simply storytellers, retelling a story they have been told. Other times they are observers, while others they are the protagonist.

is always present. Although "manipulation" often carried negative connotations, the narrators' manipulation of their stories is actually beneficial in fulfilling their purpose behind the storytelling: emotional healing.

The act of storytelling results in emotional healing and understanding for the nation, family, and narrator. Yet the act of storytelling goes even further according to the characters in Cisneros' novels. The act of telling the stories of the Reyes family are not simply about explaining the tragedies of the family, but it is also about making sure that those tragedies are not repeated by descendents of the family. When Celaya asks the ghost of Soledad why it must be her that is haunted, Soledad says, "It's you, Celaya, who's haunting me. I can't bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did?" (*Caramelo* 406). Soledad cannot move on from her place between life and death until she knows that she is forgiven, but also that Celaya will not make the same mistake she did of loving in a jealous manner and marrying the first man that she believes herself to be in love with.

Only through an understanding of Soledad's story and pain, as well as the stories and pain of the other family members, can Celaya begin to heal. In "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros' main character says, "[T]here was power in my mother's patience, strength in my grandmother's endurance. Because those who suffer have special power, don't they? The power of understanding someone else's pain. And understanding is the beginning of healing" (128). Celaya suffers, and because of the suffering, she can recognize the suffering in those around her. It is the understanding that she has of both her life and the lives of others that permits her to heal and to bring healing to others. Rudolfo Anaya echoes the sentiment of listening closely for the stories that need to be told by saying, "[L]isten to that character who wants a story told. We are the medium of those flashes of insight, images, or words that come to us and suddenly illuminate

another person's life" (21). Through illuminating someone else's life, Celaya is able to see hers more clearly.

Cisneros, like many U.S. Latino authors, writes to bring healing to her culture that had been lost in the midst of mainstream American culture and did not have stories being told before the mini-boom as other sub-cultures in America did. Lea Ramsdell acknowledges the way the image of a family can be representative of something bigger than just the family unit: "Drawing comparison of a nation to a family is a rhetorical device that has been used to drum up popular support for politicians and regimes of force throughout history if the modern nation-state" (103). While Cisneros does not have a nationalistic agenda in her writing, she does, at times, link her fictional families to the idea of a nation. In this concept, the act of narration gives a voice to Chicanos. Ramsdell continues by saying that "[a]s a constituent of the larger sociocultural organism, the fictional family both bears the brunt of the dysfunctional nation and becomes a site of activity for opening the closed system" (124). The narrative of a fictional family allows healing for the nation that it represents.

Another aspect of the healing is that despite both of these novels containing a single main narrator, multiple voices are heard through the dialogue of the story. The stories still change according to the depth of understanding that the female adolescent narrators have of the situation they are describing, but Esperanza and Celaya also take on the role of a limited omniscient narrator. John S. Christie explains that "Latino writers incorporate a technically advanced storytelling mode, one that allows (even demands) multi perspective, polyphonic understanding on the part of the writer and the reader" (n. pag.). While the scene may have happened to an adult, Esperanza explains the story as she, an adolescent, would have understood and described the scene. For instance, Esperanza describes scenes in the homes of her friends which she would

not have been a part of, yet she can reveal what those scenes meant to the character they did happen to. Still, the influence of the voices of her family, ancestors, and neighbors can be heard throughout her narration.

These novels aid in bringing therapeutic healing to the Chicano nation through the narrators remembering what others have forgotten. Wolfgang Muller-Funk attempts to make a connection between narratives and memory, which have an important place in all of Cisneros's works:

> It argues that all forms of memory are explicitly or implicitly based on retrospective narratives that seek to cross the unbridge-able gap between the time of narrating and the time of the events that will be narrated. If memory and reminding are key issues for understanding the concept of the self, every identity produces the impossible: bridging the gap between the act of reminding and the reminded events, feelings and impression. (207)

Narratives which take into consideration of events of the past are able to make the connections between the act of narrating and the things being remembered. Esperanza and Celaya both form narratives in their storytelling that do this. The emotions and events that took place to those around them in the past are allowed a remembered place in the narrative. This remembering becomes the driving purpose behind the narrating. The memories can exist only if they remain known through narration, but the girls narrate to remember. This concept acknowledges the cyclical pattern of the novels. The connection must also be made that "[e]very culture is based on acts of common remembrance and forgetting" (Muller-Funk 215). In remembering and retelling the stories of their families, Esperanza and Celaya are bringing healing to their Chicano nation. Certain aspects of the stories, such as assimilation into a new country and balancing traditions of

two cultures, become commemorated in the stories, giving the nation a voice. It is simply the act of being heard that can lead to healing for the nation.

However, since Chicano literature went unrecognized for so long, critics often will only critique the stories as representations of the Chicano nation and forget that her characters also represent very real families. When the narrative does become therapeutic for the nation, it also brings healing to the fictional family as well as the audience's concept of the family unit: "The act of telling stories helps situate a larger narrative such as an individual's life or the life of a family. In this case [*Caramelo*], Cisneros also focuses on the connective action that it creates: recognition on the part of these two characters [Celaya and Soledad] as a part of a larger connected story through learning of the other's hidden stories" (Guerra 148). Cisneros does not write just for her fellow Chicanos, but for her own family. The book *Caramelo* is dedicated to her father. Her narrators are reflective of her as they, too, engage in the act of narrating or storytelling in order to bring emotional healing to their own families. It is undeniable that Cisneros is also seeking her own emotional healing and healing for her family through her writing, which is reflected in the novels through Esperanza and Celaya who seek out the act of storytelling in order to seek for their families and for themselves. Cisneros said that she tells stories to find order to them that she could not find in real life, which is exactly what we see Esperanza and Celaya doing. Esperanza attempts to make sense of the suffering that those around her have gone through, trying to find the common link that causes the suffering.

While Esperanza focuses on both her neighbors and her family, Celaya focuses only on her family and ventures in telling not only the events in her childhood that made her into the person she became, but also the events that shaped and molded her family members into the people that she knows. Although Celaya and Esperanza do tell the stories from their own

perspectives, they also narrate with the people whose stories they are telling in mind. At the close of the novel, Esperanza repeats her introduction by saying, "I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong. We didn't always live on Mango Street" (*Mango Street* 109). In the first line, she claims this will be a story about her, a single girl, yet in the next sentence she uses the pronoun "we." Esperanza's story is the story of her family, and their story is hers.

Cisneros said, "I used to think writing was a way to exorcise those ghosts that inhabit the house that is ourselves" (Aranda 66).[49] Cisneros and, in turn, her narrators, recognize that the emotional ghosts that cause their family pain can only begin to find healing if their stories are told. Esperanza echoes the words of her creator as she explains the reason she writes: "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much" (*Mango Street* 110). To keep the ghosts silent would be to keep the family from being whole. Celaya alludes to the way that her family keeps secrets: "You're not supposed to ask about such things. There are stories no one is willing to tell you. And there are stories you're not willing to tell. . . We're so Mexican. So much left unsaid" (*Caramelo* 428). The Reyes family is unable to heal because they do not mention the tragedies that cause conflict and unresolved anger in the family. But the narrators become the ones who have the capability of bringing peace to their families. Celaya says, "Maybe it's my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can't say them, and make it all right in the end. This is what I'm thinking" (*Caramelo* 428). The

[49] In an interview, Isabel Allende made a comment very similar to Cisneros's comment on stories being like ghosts: "[M]any things are hidden in the secret compartments of my heart and my mind. Sometimes, I don't even know that they are there, but I have the pain – I can feel the pain; I can feel the load of stories that I am carrying around. And then one day I write a story and realize . . .that a demon has come out and has been exorcised" (7).

narrators, then, become the ones who must understand the stories of their families in order to give a voice to those who could not tell their own stories.

Celaya uses storytelling to weave back together the pieces of her family that have broken apart. Heather Alumbaugh notes that "like a coyote, [50] Lala smuggles her grandmother's story and her own family history from the past to the present, from Mexico to the US, from the dead to the living, and from one person to another" (54). In connecting the idea of telling other people's stories to the concept of a coyote, Alumbaugh has turned Celaya into the one who must retrieve her families' stories from over the "borders" that they have created over the last three generations.

In accepting the role of storyteller, or narrator, Celaya has also accepted both the gift and burden of being able to learn and understand the emotional tragedies of her family and view them as a whole. It then becomes her responsibility to tell those stories so that others do not have to cross the borders. It also becomes Lala's responsibility to be honest in her storytelling, which is interesting as both she and Cisneros explain that they are not always telling the way the story actually happened. Yet throughout Celaya's story it becomes clear that she is honest in her inaccuracies. At times, when she changes the story, she reveals the emotions of the characters that may have been hidden in the way the story actually took place. Celaya also learns to be honest with herself, although this does not necessarily occur until part three of the novel. In the last section of *Caramelo*, Celaya begins connecting her story to Soledad's story. Alumbaugh considers why Celaya becomes the storyteller:

> Lala's storytelling ability emerges out of the tension between consumption

[50] Mexican smuggler

> and production: she consumes her grandmother's story as a means to tell her own. Lala's ability to "hear everyone else's" thoughts in conjunction with her own is a crucial characteristic of her role as a narrative coyote. Her ability to tell her story accordingly depends upon her ultimate understanding that it exists in a dialogical relationship to others' stories. (59)

Lala's story cannot be disconnected from the stories of the rest of her family. While her story is individually important, it is also important that she understand how all of their stories, their voices, are even more important when they are brought together. It is only when Celaya, and Cisneros's audience, realizes that only through changing the stories can they be brought together that Celaya steps out from the role of an unreliable narrator and, in fact, becomes the only reliable narrator, within her family, that is possible.

In *Caramelo*, Celaya tries to tell her own story but finds she must also tell the stories of her family members in order to understand how her story came to be. As many Mexican families are, the Reyes family members are close to one another and depend on one another. Celaya's father and uncles follow one after the other to the United States and find jobs together. As the Reyes family could not afford to rent places with enough room for their entire family, the children often shared rooms or, in Celaya's case, slept in the living room where the voices and breathing of other family members could always be heard. After Celaya runs away with Ernesto and becomes homesick, she explains why it feels unnatural for her to be away from the rest of the family: "I could never draw myself without drawing the others. Lala, Memo, Lolo, Toto, Tikis, Rafa, Mama, Papa. . . I'd never been alone in my life before first grade. I'd never been in a room where I couldn't see one of my brothers or mother or father. Not even for a borrowed night. My family followed me like a kite, and I followed them" (*Caramelo* 393). If Celaya tells

her own story without acknowledging not only her family's influence on it but the stories of those family members, then her story will be incomplete, and she will have removed herself from the family unit in order to define herself.

From the very first chapter of the novel, Celaya chooses to take up the mantle of storyteller and scribe within her family. The novel opens with a scene on the beach in Acapulco, a vacation that will become the one memory constantly referenced throughout the entire novel. Celaya explains why she is not in the family portrait and describes the first time that the family realizes she is missing from it: "Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It's as if I'm the photographer walking along the beach . . . asking – Un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory? (*Caramelo* 4). Celaya connects herself to the photographer who, by taking the picture of the family, creates a lasting memory of them. The stories that Celaya will tell act in the same manner. "When Lala aligns herself with the photographer, she explicitly defines herself as one who documents and preserves "*recuerdos*." In this introductory moment, Cisneros illuminates Lala's ability to cross temporal boundaries in order to tell her family's buried memories; as a narrator" (Alumbaugh 62). Since she often tries to remove herself from both the stories and the family in order to narrate, it is not coincidental that Celaya is missing from the picture; however, as the novel progresses, Celaya finds that she is unable to distance herself from the stories and her family. Because of Celaya's intimate relationship with the stories that she tells, we must be aware of how she narrates.

She does not tell the stories in chronological order, but instead she begins with the story of Acapulco, which is the defining moment when Celaya first realized something secretive and troublesome was occurring in her family. After she mentions the portrait taken on the beach, she switches to telling the stories in the order that she knew them. For instance, although the stories

of how her grandparents and parents met each other came long before Celaya's childhood trips to Mexico, she did not know the stories until she was older and her family told them to her. As the audience, we receive the stories in the order that Celaya understands them. As she tells the stories in her choice order, she begins to understand the reasons and emotions behind events and conversations that have taken place in the past. By knowing the secrets that the family members tried to keep to themselves, she gives the family healing through her voicing of the stories.

In reading both *Mango Street* and *Caramelo*, it becomes apparent that one cannot study the narrators, who are the main characters in the novels, without also studying all of the other characters within the novels. The healing arrives for both the nation and the family before the individual because, unlike in many American novels, the individual cannot be separated from the community in which he or she resides. Gutierrez-Jones recognizes that "[a]s a narrator, Esperanza creates and chronicles her developing identity not through self-absorbed introspection, but by noting, recording, and responding to the lives around her . . . which situates Esperanza not as a loner but as she comes to perceive herself: a product and member of a particular community" (67). Esperanza becomes both a recorder of the lives taking place around her and a responder. Through the stories that she tells it becomes clear that "Esperanza's emergence as a young woman writer is connected to her clear-sighted observations of the lives of the women and girls around her" (Wissman 171). Although Celaya is far more introspective than Esperanza, she still follows this same basic pattern of recording and responding to the lives around her, defining herself along the way. Her observations also lead her to becoming the storyteller that we, the audience, know her to be.

The individual is a result of the community, and the community, in this case the family, can be changed by the individual. As the two are so closely interconnected, "neither self nor

community can sustain itself independently; each requires the other" (Gutierrez-Jones 68). Esperanza, for instance, does not simply explain what the name "Esperanza" means, but she also defines the name in relation to her great-grandmother of the same name. Her great-grandmother was wild until a man "threw a sack over her head and carried her off" (*Mango Street* 11). Esperanza fears that she will become like the great-grandmother for whom she is named if she is not careful. In the same manner, Celaya often references the fact that she is the only daughter in a family with six sons. She defines who she is by often comparing herself to those brothers whom she was surrounded by her entire childhood.

Another important factor is that she tells only the stories that had the most impact on her own life and that resonate in her memory:

> [T]he only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative – to externalize ourselves as if talking of someone else and for the purposes of self-representation; but also that we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters. (Currie 17)

Certainly, if another member of the family took her place as narrator, then different stories would be told. Celaya tells the stories of her family to understand herself but also to try t answer the questions she has about her family and the way it functions. In beginning to understand who they are as both members of their families and as individuals, the narrators are able create a stronger definition of them and comprehend their place within the family. Matchie, in reference to Salinger's Holden Caulfield, believes that, after Holden has told his story, he seems to come back to normal, so that "[the] very telling has the effect of giving him strength" (63). By the end

of the novels, the same has occurred to Esperanza and Celaya. Each of the girls has developed a fuller sense of self, family, and community. They have a more comprehensive view of who they are and what they will do with their lives. In *Mango Street*, Esperanza does not just complete the act of storytelling, but chooses to make writing her life's career. In the end, Cisneros shows us that it is the writing that makes Esperanza strong (Matchie 62). In telling the stories of the people around them, as well as their own stories, the narrators can understand what shaped and molded them as children into the women that they become when the storytelling process is complete.

As she begins telling stories, Celaya learns that she cannot escape the connections that she has with her family. Celaya may have harsh words for her mother, but it is the Awful Grandmother that Celaya cannot find it within herself to love. In Celaya's telling of the story of Soledad, we begin to realize that the reason Celaya cannot love her grandmother is that she does not understand Soledad and, even more importantly, does not always want to understand her. Keen believes that emotion "comes into play in our reactions to narrative, for we are also story-sharing creatures. The oral storyteller not only takes advantage of our tendency to share feeling socially by doing the voices and facial expressions of characters . . ." (209). In telling the stories of her family, Celaya is able to emotionally react to the events and situations that she is presenting. This allows her to either express emotions she was not able to express when the events actually occurred or to react differently when she has time apart from the events. When Celaya first tells the Grandmother's story, she does not see resemblances between herself and Soledad.

It is only with the telling of the story of her romance with Ernie and the story of her father in the hospital that she begins to realize she is more like her grandmother than she would

like to be. She realizes that one way she and her grandmother are alike is the love they both share for Celaya's father, Inocenio:

> I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of Father, I'd kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad. I've turned into her. And I see inside her heart, the Grandmother, who has been betrayed so many times she only loves her son. He loves her. And I love him. I have to find room inside my heart for her as well, because she holds him inside her heart like when she held him inside her womb, the clapper inside a bell. One can't be reached without touching the other. Him inside her, me inside him, like Chinese boxes, like Russian dolls, like an ocean full of waves, like the braided threads of a rebozo. *When I die then you'll realize how much I love you*. And we all are, like it or not, one and the same. (*Caramelo* 425)

This passage, possibly more than any other in the entire novel, speaks volumes about what Celaya is trying to accomplish in telling her story, even though she does not seem to know what that purpose is at first.

Not only does Celaya gain understanding through telling the stories that she and her grandmother have many commonalities, but she also begins to realize that the members of her family cannot separate themselves from one another. Instead, they have to try and understand one another. Celaya cannot avoid loving her grandmother because of the relationship between her father and grandmother which, in turn, connects Celaya to her grandmother. The two women are further connected by the fact that they are removed from the other women in the family. Soledad did not have time to form a relationship with her mother before the woman died, and so she has cut herself off from her daughter, daughter-in-laws, and granddaughters. Although

Celaya's removal is not as drastic, she is still unable to form a strong relationship with either Zoila or Soledad and is not allowed to form a relationship with her hidden half-sister, Candelaria. Only through telling the their stories can Celaya bring both herself and her grandmother back into the female family line: "Lala, by telling her grandmother's story, picks up the broken thread, weaving the Awful Grandmother and herself, back into the female strands from which they have been severed" (296). The act of storytelling places the females in Celaya's family back into the matriarchal line from which culture and familial tragedy have disconnected them.

In telling the stories of her family, Celaya is able to learn from their mistakes. Cisneros follows in the wake of Garcia Marquez and Allende in creating characters that have to reconcile the past of their families with their own lives. Bode considers the notion that "[i]gnorance of the Awful Grandmother's story leaves Lala vulnerable to repeating it" (Bode 297). It is only through an understanding of the grandmother's story that Celaya can begin to understand her own story. The first section of the novel only shows the Awful Grandmother as the rest of the family understands her, but the second section allows the audience to understand the identity of Soledad: "The plot forces the reader to reckon with Lala's humanization of her grandmother and sets up the patterns of behavior that Soledad inaugurates and Lala repeats. Lala tells 'just enough, but not too much' to make her reader understand Soledad's identity" (Alumbaugh 64).

Soledad's identity is possibly more important for Celaya than for any other family member as she finds more similarities between Soledad and herself than she does between herself and any other member of the family. Celaya is surprised the first time that she sees the image of Soledad in herself: "Fumble to the bathroom, flick on the lights, and it's her! The Grandmother's face in mine. Hers. Mine. Father's. It scares the hell out of me, but it's only me. Amazing the way I look different now, like my grandmother is starting to peer out at me from

my skin" (*Caramelo* 394). Celaya is beginning the process of accepting that much of her anger towards Soledad resulted from the fact that they were so much alike. By telling her grandmother's story along with her own story, she can see the ways in which they are connected. This allows her to bring healing to their fractured relationship even if Soledad is already dead.

Storytelling, in essence, becomes the vessel through which the family can find healing. The narrators, then, become the guards of that vessel, passing along the stories when necessary. Esperanza and Celaya are able to learn not only about their family members but about themselves. This knowledge allows them to recognize strands of similar pain and anger that exist between them and their family members, where the narrators previously thought there was none. Once Esperanza and Celaya begin to truly understand the damage that the individual family members are causing to the family unit, they are able to give voice to those mistake and regrets, allowing the family to move on from them and begin to heal. Cisneros, through her beautiful weaving of stories and characters, reveals to us one of the important human truths that literature has the capability of teaching, which is that only through remembering the past can we truly move on from the past.

Chapter Five – Conclusion: Why We Tell Stories

Discussion of the act of storytelling does not appear only in the field of literature, but it exists in the study of films, music, art. No matter the medium, it is the manner in which the story is told that holds the most weight in shaping both the story and the knowledge that is gained from the receiver of the story. The works of Cisneros are prime examples of how the way in which stories are told can control how many layers of understanding are contained within the story.

Mango Street tells the tale of the residents on Mango Street, most specifically, the Cordero family, through the voice of Esperanza. Because Esperanza chooses to tell only brief snippets of her experiences and the experiences of the people around her, the emotion, rather than the plot, becomes the most striking element of the novel. For narrator Celaya, in *Caramelo*, she believes that she has to tell certain stories more than once, while at other times she completely changes the story from how it happened. In doing this, the novel contains different angles of how to look at different sections and different levels of understanding of the events taking place as we receive both Celaya's understanding of the events when she was a child, her understanding of the events years later, and others' views of the events as family members later tell Celaya. In many ways, the novels give off a feeling of the narrator sitting down with the reader and showing pictures in a family album, followed by the true explanations of what is taking place in the pictures. In other words, the stories are told conversationally and as though the narrator is revealing secrets. This manner of telling stories reveals far more of the emotion behind the stories than if the act of storytelling had been constructed differently in these two works.

Cisneros may allow her narrators to guide the two novels, but she provides clear insight to all of the members of both the Cordero family and the Reyes family. As the narrators reveal

defined family members who have either, on purpose or on accident, removed themselves from the family unit, the implications of that removal and the broken threads of the family structure come to the forefront of the novels. But even more importantly, the very revealing of the individuals separating themselves from the unit allows the narrators and the audience to recognize the importance of bringing healing to the wounded bond of the family in order to make the family whole once more. Cisneros demonstrates this herself in the purpose behind her own writing. She explains that when her father said he had "seven sons" she felt as though she was "being erased," and, as a result, everything she writes is "to win his approval" ("Only Daughter" 121, 120). In writing, Cisneros is not only attempting to avoid being erased from her family, but to reconnect with her father. For her, the act of storytelling becomes a way to write herself back into the family. Cisneros, in many ways, creates characters that echo her personal attachment to telling stories.

Mango Street and *Caramelo* are not novels that simply tell a story; they are carefully constructed narratives in which every element from simple word choices to the order in which the stories are told is carefully chosen. Cisneros's writing does not simply tell a good story, but says so much about how to tell a good story. These novels have become important pieces of literature not because Cisneros loosely uses facts from her own life to drive them, but because she knows how to use fiction to find truth. In an essay discussing loosely biographical works, Julia Alvarez considers that "even the black woman writing her black woman story is not writing a factually true story. The minute she composes those quantified, observable, recorded facts into language and narrative, she is constructing, emphasizing things, leaving things out, selecting this word and not another" (165). If the purpose of telling stories is to remember the past and to get at human truths, then what is the purpose of fiction? In *Caramelo,* Cisneros demonstrates exactly

why fact is often blended with fiction in order to reveal truth. When Soledad comes back as a ghost and requests that Celaya tell her story, the necessity behind giving Soledad a voice is clear: she can say as a ghost what she could not say in life. Cisneros uses the supernatural to reveal why knowing the stories of family members is important. Beyond that, this scene also shows why sharing stories is an important act in general.

The completion of this study, though meant to fill an apparent void in criticism, actually shows the need for further study. After all, family has been in the forefront of popular themes in literature for centuries and, it seems, is continuing this tradition into the 21st century. The importance of studying the family as an integral part of human emotion and behavior is one that, hopefully, will always be necessary. As this study lends itself to the specific by focusing on one particular author, it would certainly be interesting to examine this topic with a wider scope. Research within the U.S. Latino literary field could consist of many areas connecting to the topic of family. For instance, although the female characters within U.S. Latino works have been compared to each other in multiple studies, it would be interesting to compare male characters from Cisneros's works to male characters in other Chicana works or, perhaps, compare the men in Cisneros's works to male characters in the work of a Chicano writer. Within the field of comparative literature there is also great room for expanding this study. Considering the importance of narration and narrator within these two novels, Celaya and Esperanza could be compared to narrators from other cultures. This would allow for an understanding on how culture dictates both the way in which we tell stories and what areas of life the narrator might focus on. The comparative field would also permit for a study completed on how different cultures view storytelling and the sharing of intimate details of the home life.

In telling stories, we engage in an act that is purely human. After all, we are the only creatures that study history and keep family albums in order to remember. But what is our purpose in remembering? Our purpose is partly to learn from the mistakes made by those in the past and partly to not forget those who came before us in the same manner that we hope to not be forgotten. Memories become the foundation for stories, and stories, in turn, bring healing to the memories. That literature, the written form of stories, revels in the concept of the family so often is unsurprising as it is the family unit of human beings that shapes so many memories. After all, family is made up of those beings that "jar us at every moment."

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