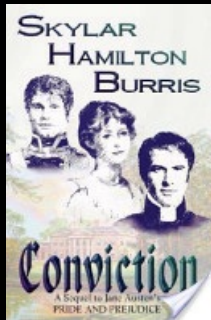
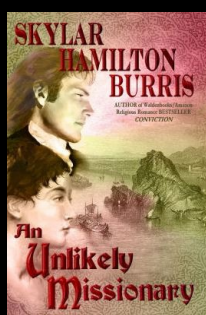


A Formalist Reading of Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek"



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This is an academic exercise that takes a formalist critical approach to Sandra Cisneros's short story. This is not intended to be a well-developed critical paper, but it should prove a useful tool for examining *one aspect* of Cisneros's work. It should also serve to help students learn more about the use of the formalist critical approach to literature. There are many other tools for analyzing literature, which students can learn about in my [overview of critical approaches](#).

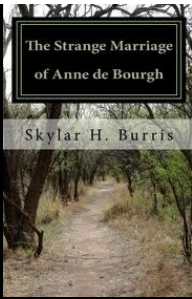
If a critic were to take into account external historical and social considerations when interpreting Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," his initial natural prejudice might be to view the modern United States as a likelier place for a woman to find liberation from oppressive masculinity than Mexico. However, a formalist reading of "Woman Hollering Creek" reveals that, in this story at least, just the opposite is true. The United States town to which Cleófilas moves with her new husband casts a distorted mirror image of the town from whence she came. This juxtaposition in the setting, as well as the characters, symbols, and point of view, all combine to amass their weight toward one conclusion: life in the United States is less liberating for the Mexican woman than life in Mexico.

That the United States town is steeped in masculinity to the exclusion of femininity is evidenced by the symbolism of the setting as well as by the characters. The town is North of Cleófilas's home town; it is upward (erect), implying masculinity. The primary character that takes an *active* part in Cleófilas's life, her husband, is masculine. Across the street is Maximiliano, so macho that he "was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl" (51). There is no feminine identity for Cleófilas to relate to in her neighbors; Dolores is no longer a mother and Soledad is no longer a wife. Dolores's garden, rather than being tranquil and feminine, serves to reinforce masculine dominance; the "red red cockscombs, fringed and bleeding a thick menstrual color" (47) foreshadow the abuse that would soon leave Cleófilas's lip split open so that it "bled an orchid of blood" (47). The town has a city hall, an image of masculine rule, outside of which rests a large bronze pecan. In effect, it is a brass nut, an obviously masculine symbol for which the town possesses a "silly pride" (50).

Each of these components of setting and character have their feminine mirror in the Mexican town, which is therefore more hospitable to women. The town is South, suggesting the nether regions and therefore femininity. The primary character who takes a part in Cleófilas's life there is her father, who is more feminine than masculine, who seems to have taken over the mothering role of Cleófilas's deceased mother, making what sounds like a mother's promise: "I am your father [read mother], I will never abandon you" (43). All of her neighbors are women, and all have a sense of identity. There are "aunts," and an aunt is someone with both a sibling and a niece or nephew; there are "godmothers," and a godmother is both someone's friend and someone's protector; and there is Chela, a "girlfriend," a woman whose identity is based upon a friendship with Cleófilas, a friendship in which they can relate to one another and share dreams (44). Instead of a city hall, the town has a town center, which implies not masculine competition and rule but feminine cooperation. Instead of a bronze pecan outside of the city hall, there is a "leafy zócalo in the center of town" (50), suggesting fertility and therefore femininity.

In addition to providing a contrast between the feminine and the masculine, the relative settings of the towns also create a contrast between independence and dependence, "because the towns [in the U.S.] are built so that you have to depend on husbands" (50-51). Whereas in Mexico Cleófilas is within walking distance of the cinema, her friend's house, the church, the town center, and her family, in the United States, there is "nothing, nothing nothing of interest. Nothing one could walk to, at any rate" (50). Cleófilas's only social outings are with her husband, to the ice house, which takes the place of the church in the northern town. In the church in Mexico she could meet with other women and engage in "huddled whispering," but in the United States "the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house instead" and she must sit "mute beside their conversation" (48). TV and cinema are both readily available to Cleófilas in the southern town, but in the northern town she has no TV, and can only glimpse a "few episodes" of her telenovela at Soledad's house. Even her one solid contact with a world outside her own, "*her* book" is thrown by her husband "[f]rom across the room" (52).

Not only does the Mexican town provide more opportunities for independent action than the U.S. town, but it also provides alternatives (other than a mere husband) for dependency. In Mexico, Cleófilas can depend on her father, brothers, aunts, and godmothers. In the United States, however, she has no such option; as the doctor says, "her family's all in Mexico" (54). In the Mexican town, she can depend on God; but in the U.S. town, the ice house has taken the place of the church, and so men have taken the



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place of God. And finally, in Mexico she can depend on community. The town center implies a network of support. The city hall in the U.S., however, implies indifference or at least distance.

These contrasts between the dependence on the masculine necessitated by the U.S. town and the independence (or at least the variety of dependencies) afforded by the Mexican town become more clear as the story progresses. Initially, the narrator's point of view expresses a feeling of limitation in the Mexican town:

In the town where she grew up, there isn't very much to do except accompany the aunts and godmothers to the house of one or the other to play cards. Or walk to the cinema to see this week's film again, speckled and with one hair quivering annoyingly on the screen. Or to the center of town to order a milk shake that will appear in a day and a half as a pimple on her backside. Or to the girlfriend's house to watch the latest telenovela episode and try to copy the way the women comb their hair, wear their makeup (44).

The language of this passage makes the town appear dull and limiting until it is compared with the language of a similar passage describing the northern town:

There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek (51).

By contrasting these passages, we can see the narrator's *true* point of view. The Mexican town is not limited compared to the United States town. There are a variety of options. There is nothing to do "except . . . Or . . . Or . . . Or . . ." In contrast, in the United States town, there is nothing to do "Unless . . . Or." Variety is evidence by the three repetitions of "or" in the southern town versus the single "or" in the northern town. Furthermore, "except" implies something like "well, there is an exception to my statement that there is nothing to do" whereas "unless" implies "well, you could consider this as an option, but why would you want to?"

Finally, the narrator's point of view becomes abundantly clear as Cleófilas crosses Woman Hollering Creek on her way home to Mexico. Again, initially, the narrator's point of view is negative. When moving to her new home with her husband, Cleófilas wants to know whether "the woman has hollered from anger or pain" (46). And indeed, crossing that river to her new home is like crossing into a world of both anger and pain. But leaving that world, and crossing the river in order to ultimately return to Mexico, gives Cleófilas a new perspective. Her companion hollers when they cross the river, but not in either anger or pain. She hollers "like Tarzan" (55). Cleófilas, the narrator tells us, had expected "pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go" (56). Thus, "Woman Hollering Creek," when crossing it means returning to Mexico, becomes not angry or painful, but liberating.

A vast amount of internal evidence in "Woman Hollering Creek" (the setting, symbolism, and characters) points to the fact that Cleófilas's final return to Mexico is liberating. In the masculine town of the United States, she has no option but to submit to the male domineering of her husband. In the feminine town of Mexico, however, she has a variety of dependency options as well as opportunities for independence. And finally, these facts are confirmed by a shift in the narrator's point of view, which clarifies the positive aspects of the Mexican town.

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