

LITERATURE GUIDE

READ • LISTEN • TELL



“Ghost Trap” by Gloria Anzaldúa

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"Ghost Trap" by Gloria Anzaldúa

Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island (pp. 126-131)

STORY SUMMARY (adapted from the headnotes in *Read, Listen, Tell*)

In "Ghost Trap," the main character Ursula la Prieta is a recent widow so consumed by grief and loneliness that she unwittingly conjures the ghost of her late husband. This playful work of short fiction is an incisively written tale of how Ursula ultimately responds to her husband's unexpected return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR (adapted from the headnotes in *Read, Listen, Tell*)

Gloria Anzaldúa, who self-identifies through her work as a "chicana dyke-feminist, tejana patlache poet, writer, and cultural theorist," was born in South Texas Rio Grande Valley in 1942. Her parents were both sharecroppers and field-workers; however, her father died when she was fourteen, leaving Anzaldúa with no choice but to work the family fields in his place throughout high school and college. She persevered in earning a BA from Pan American University, as well as an MA from the University of Texas. Her best-known work is *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1987), for which she was awarded the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and the Sappho Award of Distinction. Anzaldúa, as one of the first openly lesbian Chicana writers, has played a significant role in redefining Chicana/o, queer, feminist, and female identities; and additionally, developing inclusionary movements for social justice. Her academic theories and her code-switching have influenced readers and scholars even beyond the field of Chicano/a studies.

PAIRED READING

This guide can be paired with the complementary guide for Sandra Cisneros's "Never Marry a Mexican." Cisneros's and Anzaldúa's stories deal with similar themes and issues within a comparable cultural context, and the article by Laura Paz (on Cisneros) will help you delve deeper into important Mexican female archetypes such as La Llorona, who is referenced in Anzaldúa's story. The guide on Cisneros's story, with its focus on the inextricable ties between gender socialization and culture, help illuminate the complexities of the relationship between Ursula and her husband in Anzaldúa's story. Similarly, the discussion of code-switching in this guide will be useful in highlighting the relationship between language and culture in Cisneros's story.



PRIMARY THEMES

- Hybridity and Border-Crossing
- Female Sexuality and Empowerment
- Contesting cultural and gender stereotypes
- History, myth, and narratives

KEY VOCABULARY

Code-Switching

The practice of alternating between any two or more languages.

Literary Realism

A European literary movement that attempts to depict reality in a naturalistic way, with an emphasis on the everyday modern world with all its unremarkable daily occurrences.

Magical Realism

A 19th century Latin American literary movement (see below for further discussion).

Mestizaje

The Spanish word for miscegenation (mixing of races or ancestries).

INTRODUCTION

Questions to Consider While Reading

Anzaldúa wants every Chicana to speak and write bilingually, think in ambiguities, live from paradoxes, transcend sexual roles, and construct their own gender. Anzaldúa’s desire of language is for all of us: ‘I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, White.... I will overcome the tradition of silence.’ (Garcia 42)

From beginning to end, Anzaldúa’s story is notably characterized by **code-switching**, a term which refers to a speaker alternating between any two (or more) languages in writing or conversation. In everyday life, code-switching can occur without a second thought, as English speakers regularly adopt foreign language expressions. For example, the idiom “c’est la vie” is a French expression meaning “that’s life” which is regularly used by English speakers. For monolingual English-speakers, a few common reasons for code-switching are as follows: the word or phrase (1) was picked up through mainstream media, (2) sounded humorous or fashionable as an alternative to its English counterpart, or (3) helped the speaker to either fit in or stand out, as desired. In the latter case, for instance, you would want to know some basic Spanish phrases to greet locals on a trip to Mexico; on the way back, these same phrases could be used to brag about your vacation.



Now consider how the motivation for code-switching might differ for bilingual or multilingual speakers. Generally, multilinguals may be motivated to code-switch for the following reasons: (1) it serves to identify the speaker as part of a cultural group, (2) it allows the speaker to have a private conversation in a public space, or (3) the speaker needs to convey a thought or concept that does not quite translate. These motivations may overlap, and they may also be misinterpreted by those outside the cultural in-group. For example, imagine that a monolingual friend is offended when their two bilingual friends suddenly code-switch in a conversation and begin laughing, then change the subject without translating. The monolingual friend is offended because they fear that a joke was made at their expense; meanwhile, the bilingual friends were simply handling their nerves about speaking in their second language by having a laugh over their mutual struggles.

The situation you are asked to imagine above may seem trivial, but code-switching can actually be dangerous for marginalized people. Janell Ross, writing for *The Washington Post*, reports how—in July 2016—Nazia and Faisal Ali were among the first to board a return flight from Paris to their



home in Cleveland, and found themselves with time to “murmur a few words of prayer asking for safe travel” (Ross). Their prayer code-switched to end with “inshallah,” meaning “God willing” in Arabic. They sat down and waited for departure, but nearly an hour later, they were asked to leave the plane instead. According to Ross: “Advocacy groups say the number of complaints filed by people removed after flight crews or passengers raised security concerns related to *innocuous conversations in a foreign language* or other matters tied to skin color or religion spiked in 2016” (emphasis added). This anecdote emphasizes how code-switching can have very real consequences for some individuals, especially in light of larger social or geopolitical inequities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of any words or expressions in another language that you have used or heard while conversing in English? Once you have thought of an example, take a moment to reflect on why code-switching occurred in that conversation.
2. Now that you have a sense of the general motivations for code-switching among English speakers, especially monolinguals, how do you think these motivations might differ for bilingual or multilingual speakers? If you have a multilingual background, you may wish to reflect on your own experience.
3. What would you say to mediate a conversation in which code-switching is occurring if a situation led to an argument between two parties? Consider the perspectives of both sides before answering. Can you think of a solution that would satisfy everyone involved?
4. Take a moment to read the article by Janell Ross in *The Washington Post* [here](#). If you were asked what the airline could do to better handle a situation like this in the future, what would you advise? How do you think employees should be trained to respond professionally to prejudicial complaints from customers?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Students should be divided into small groups to answer these questions.

1. What was your overall first impression of Anzaldúa’s story? What did you think the author was trying to achieve through code-switching throughout her prose? Having considered the discussion above, has your impression of the story changed at all?
2. How were you inclined to handle the multilingualism in the story? For example, did you skim over the Spanish code-switches or turn to the glossary for help?

3. How did the story’s constant code-switching make you feel? Were you frustrated or did you approach it as a challenge? Do you think the story would be more or less engaging if it was written predominantly or exclusively in one language? What do you make of the fact that Anzaldúa does not give any instructions for approaching the piece?
4. What message(s) do you think Anzaldúa was trying to convey by code-switching so heavily as she told this specific story? Support your points with specific examples.

MAGICAL REALISM

Anzaldúa’s story can be classified as **Magic Realism**, a literary movement which took shape in Latin America during the mid-19th century. Although Magic Realism is not quite a genre in the traditional sense, the style is nonetheless defined by a set of characteristics which are evident in Anzaldúa’s story (discussed below). This is not to imply that the story was written to fit a particular categorization. “When I write,” states Anzaldúa, “it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act” (qtd. in Garcia 31). Her words offer a clue as to why Magic Realism as a style is distinct from the fantasy genre.

Fundamentally, Magic Realism does not offer an escape from reality, but a way to return to it with a new perspective and a sense of empowerment. It is a style which is so invested in reality that its function might best be understood as “fictional non-fiction.” As a writer, Anzaldúa exemplifies this by “[drawing] deep into her collective psyche of magical realism, and her spirituality to write about the forces that oppress her” (Garcia 37). She “[calls] for a shift in perception to ‘see’ in a deeper way” (Garcia 42). Magic Realism can serve as a learning tool in achieving that shift. As you study the characteristics of the style, think beyond the fiction and notice the ways in which Anzaldúa asks you to reconsider your assumptions of reality.



The primary characteristics which define Magic Realism, along with a bit of context for their use and importance, are as follows:

- **THE MUNDANE:** As you can observe in Anzaldúa’s story, Magic Realism is typically set in the everyday modern world with all its unremarkable daily occurrences. The setting for Magical Realist literature is our own mundane reality, which is both an intentional nod to **Literary Realism** and an aspect of the style which sets it apart from pure fantasy or surrealism.
- **THE FANTASTIC:** In whatever way the fantastic enters into a Magic Realist narrative, the foundational sense of the mundane is not affected. In other words, there is no attempt to explain or justify the fantastic; the occurrence is neither a plot twist nor any type of illusion. For example, a Magic Realist narrative would

not explain away unusual events by adding in a sentence such as: “And then I woke up and realized it was all a dream.” Instead, it is more likely that a work of Magic Realism will leave unusual events *unexplained* due to their matter-of-fact context in the narrative (see below). Ironically, Magic Realism could almost be characterized as treating the fantastic as if it’s not fantastic at all.

- **MATTER-OF-FACT NARRATIVE:** Magic Realism is characteristically narrated in a deadpan way. The characters are no more perturbed by the apparition of a dead relative in their home than they would be if a bear came rambling out of the woods. While the fantastic is not necessarily sought out or expected, it is encountered with no real surprise.
- **HYBRIDITY AND BORDER-CROSSING:** Whether splicing together binary opposites or experimenting with unlikely combinations (think chocolate-dipped veggies), Magic Realism will often blur and cross lines. This characteristic can occur within the narrative in any imaginable form, and may be overtly fantastic (for example, Ursula’s late husband crossing over as a ghost into the world of the living) or more subtle (his requests for clothes, food, beer, sex). This particular characteristic is often utilized as an analogy for literal borders (i.e., the U.S.-Mexico border), or to comment on the experience of mixed race peoples (i.e., chicanas, mestizos, etc).
- **MYTH AND FANTASY:** Magic Realism tends to draw upon foundational cultural myths, expecting that the intended audience will be familiar with any allusions to popular stories and archetypes embedded within the narrative. Anzaldúa does this almost immediately in her story, invoking the name “La Llorona” in the opening paragraph. This can be translated as “the weeping woman” (Anzaldúa 130). The myth underlying that name would be immediately familiar to an audience with Mexican heritage in the same way a Western audience would connect the name “Eve” to the Biblical myth of Eden.
- **SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITIQUE:** The style of Magic Realism is well known for its socio-political critique, an aspect which sets these texts staunchly apart from the fantasy genre. This is not to say that socio-political critiques cannot or do not occur within fantasy, but rather that it is not an essential or expected characteristic of the genre. Although Magic Realism dabbles in the fantastic, this style does not provide an escape from the real world. In fact, Magic Realism is so rooted in the mundane because, historically, the literary movement served as a way for Latin American authors to encrypt and share socio-political critiques while living under dictators who violently suppressed free speech.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the ending of Anzaldúa’s story. What do you think Ursula is going to do next? Do you think her “ghost trap” will succeed in freeing her from the presence of her late husband? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Anzaldúa ends the story at such an exciting moment, without telling us *what happens* to the main characters? How do you think she is challenging Western models of storytelling in making this choice?
3. The Spanish-language title of Anzaldúa’s story is “Trampa de Espanto,” which means “Fright Trap.” This usage is similar to how “spooks” is a synonym for “ghosts” in English; however, this specific translation opens up a new layer of meaning for the story. In what ways is Ursula trapped by her husband’s ghost? How might her own fears restrict her?

FURTHER RESEARCH AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Reflective Writing

There are two possible ways to approach this exercise:

This exercise may be completed independently, with an adequate amount of time allotted for thinking and writing out a response. Afterwards, students may hand in their papers or discuss their thoughts in small groups. Or students may draft their responses in a reading journal, before expanding one entry into a short reflective essay.

1. Identify and briefly describe the mundane settings identifiable in the story. As you do so, look closely at the passages. What does Anzaldúa reveal in her descriptions? What details is she withholding? How does her descriptive style affect the tone of the story, and where is the reader’s attention focused? (You may answer this generally or by close reading one or two paragraphs from any point in the story where the setting is prominent.)
2. Select and close read a passage which depicts a mundane occurrence in the narrative, carefully examining how the fantastic exists and operates in relation to the mundane. These questions may prompt your thinking: What about the passage indicates the fantastic? How does the fantastic respond to the mundane world? How do mundane people interact with the fantastic? What relationship does the fantastic have with material objects? Give at least one specific example.
3. Choose a short scene in which the fantastic is active in a mundane setting. Imagine that the scene is being observed by someone skeptical of the fantastic. You may wish to imagine a specific person, such as a friend or family member. What do you think they would see? How could the scene be rationalized into a mundane occurrence? How might Ursula’s behaviour be affected?



4. Find a passage or fundamental characteristic of the story that deals with hybridity and border-crossing. Analyze the example you have identified with respect to what you know of Anzaldúa from her biography. What do you think the author is trying to convey about the real world through this aspect of the story? Why do you think the author chose this specific way to convey that message? (You may refer to the overarching narrative to support your argument.)
5. Research the story of La Llorona, the weeping woman, whom Anzaldúa references in the opening paragraph of the story. What do you think the significance of this mythical allusion is, either in the context of that passage or the story overall? What do you think the author is trying to convey about Ursula by comparing her to this mythical woman? Explain.

SOURCES

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