

I. Among these works, there is some variance in the portrayal of women, however one common thread is that they all depict strong female characters. None of them are explicitly defined by this strength aside from, perhaps, Ana Calderón. They all display a number of different characteristics that never detract from their strength. For instance, they all have moments in which they are highly vulnerable. Ana, a character whose defining attribute is usually her strength, is still especially vulnerable when she is taken in by Hiroko Ogawa, and later when she lives with the Basts and births Ismael. Her arc eventually matures with her going from “rags to riches” as it were, but she is still somewhat of a tragic and complicated figure in spite of her strength and success. She is still shown to develop and come to some form of peace, which indicates the importance of her inner strength.

In this work in particular, many of the heroes are female. Hiroko keeps Ana safe from her father, and Amy is more of the central figure and the one to truly take her in as Ana continues north. At the same time, many of the portrayals of women indicate that they are subservient, though not by choice. Hiroko speaks of how she was not given a choice of who she married, and how her father was free to do what he liked to her, as all men were. But many of the cases of women being subservient also end with their escape from this yoke. It’s an important distinction that the author makes.

Similarly, Juana, while living a desperate life, has the same kind of fortitude and gumption as Ana. She is aggressive and driven, and she is often faced with harsh realities that are far from normal for a girl her age. Her courage is something that is displayed often throughout the book. When she goes to pick corn for her mother at night, for example, it shows not only how compassionate she is, but also her bravery and willingness to work hard. She shows that same bravery when the police and Don Elias show up at her house and try to take her mother.

Juana/Adelina has a lot in common with Ana Calderón in that both find success after coming from nothing. They also both travel north to do so, and return home in the end to find absolution and peace. Similarly, Ivon’s return home ultimately provides her some peace, though she suffers immensely along the way. And Cleófilas must also return home to know peace, which is how her story ends, though with far less detail. Ultimately, the homecoming represents a strong sense of self for all the main female characters of these stories, which is an interesting representation. This may be something that all people feel, in general, but the fact that it is such a defining part of all of these female-driven stories is significant.

Ivon is probably the most fleshed out of all the main female characters among the selected works. She is shown as hot-headed, butch, and strong, but still charming and desirable. And though a lot of this is made clear by the things men say to her, this is still an important aspect of the portrayal of women in the novel in general. They are all multi-faceted. In Ivon’s case, it is important to note that the author doesn’t create an environment in which her butchness and lesbianism make her any less of a woman. They also don’t bar her from receiving the same mistreatment as any of the other women in the book. Rather, she is someone who faces her own

particular set of challenges on top of this as a queer brown woman with short hair and the trappings of a butch lesbian.

She is also an intellectual, and on her way to becoming a full-fledged professor. This is something women are historically “not allowed” to be. Among the many professions women are socially barred from, academia is near the top of the list. This is not something that stops her from being a dozen other things, however, that often seem contradictory.

In many literary works -- especially those written by men -- women are portrayed as ideals, or personified characteristics. Or, even more often, sexual objects with no depth or character development. And even if there is some depth or character development, they are still objectified in other ways. This is not something any of these authors do. The most important thing about the portrayal of women in these stories is that they are seen as people, and not placeholders or story movers for the main character. In these stories, as in real life, they can be heroic, tragic, strong, vulnerable, emotional, smart, scrappy, and anything else because they are people. Seemingly contradictory aspects are a part of every person, and this is displayed in all of these works.

Another common theme among all these works is the ways in which men mistreat women. In “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cleófilas finds a way to escape her abusive husband to save not only herself, but her unborn child. She is the main character of this story, however, she finds help in the form of women who, though only briefly mentioned, remind me of characters from the other works. They fascinate Cleófilas in that they are different from her, freer and wilder. She thinks this when Felice yells as they cross the river called Woman Hollering Creek, and ends up laughing along with her as she speaks of other things.

It is also touched upon, in “Woman Hollering Creek,” that men can kill women almost with impunity. This also goes for abuse and any other mistreatment men enact upon women. This is a symptom of our sexist society, and is something that is a main theme of *Desert Blood*. The abuse and use of women is commodified and enjoyed in *Desert Blood*, it is a catalyst for change and a saddening reality in “Woman Hollering Creek,” and it is a major, formative part of Ana’s life in *The Memories of Ana Calderón*. In *Across a Hundred Mountains*, Juana’s mother is raped by Don Elias as “repayment” of her debt to him. Much like in *Desert Blood*, Lupe’s suffering is commodified. She does this because she is left no choice, and wants to take care of her child. It is important to note that this is a perceived slight by both Don Elias and Juana’s father, who, for all they knew, had simply abandoned them.

The reactions women have to the slights of men in each work say a lot about the way women are treated respectively. Sometimes, women are overwhelmed by the tragedies caused by men, and other times they overcome them. Whatever the case, all of these women are shown to be deserving of respect. They aren’t shoved aside by the narrative just because they break down. Rather, they are usually embraced further. This is an important thing because the common narrative is so often that women who are hysterical, overwhelmed, traumatized etc. are nasty or villainous. How often do we see in books, television, and movies the “crazy old woman”

stereotype? A woman who is left tortured for some reason, and ends up mentally ill, and is so often portrayed as a terrifying figure. Someone with very little screen time and very little dimension. She is simply there to be ugly and upsetting.

Unlike this portrayal, Lupe's development in *Across a Hundred Mountains* is treated mostly with respect. Her suffering is not mocked by the author, though the people of the town she lives in say disparaging things about her and Juana. She is a tragic figure, left by the man she loved and taken advantage of by a man in power. She takes her revenge and her fate into her own hands and murders him, which was both upsetting and satisfying.

The importance of having works that show women as people can not be overstated. This is especially true of brown women who are so often fetishized, idealized, and objectified in the media and popular culture. This is actually touched upon in *Desert Blood* when Ivon finds sites advertising Juarez as a prostitution destination. But this is something that happens to all women. And that is why these works, and others like it, are so vital. These are true-to-life, humanizing portrayals of women, and we need that to progress as a society.

II. B. Richard Rubio's life is portrayed as a straight line towards escape. Like the light at the end of the tunnel, Richard's getaway is what underpins his life's journey. He is someone who does not feel free or established where he is, and throughout his whole life, he is always in flux. His birth is symbolic of this, as he is born on a border.

Most of Richard's issues stem from him feeling like an outsider. Whether it be because he is a sort of sensitive (supposedly), literarily-inclined boy, or because he is Mexican, or because he is just "different" he cannot escape the feeling that he doesn't belong. No matter what group he involves himself with, he finds something wrong. His family, his childhood group, his academic friends, the pachucos, and general society all feel wrong to him in some way. He's the only son of his family, and his mother's semi-feminist ideals (her attempts to break away from Juan Rubio's hold and defiance of him in general) do not sit right with him as he idolizes his macho, sexist father. He also doesn't want the responsibility of being the man of the house, though he admires his father. This is illustrated most strongly in chapter 11 by the line, "As long as I am here, he told himself, this thing I must do. Until I go away--until then only." (174) This is after he begins his job at the steel mill and has become the breadwinner for his family. He feels that taking care of his family is something holding him back, and he plans to escape from it, though he is often conflicted about this.

His childhood friends are stagnant and childish, in his eyes. He sees that they are staying in their hometown doing next to nothing, and that doesn't sit right with him. He wants experiences out in the wider world, and perhaps he feels some wanderlust. Whether he wants to get out into the world for the sake of seeing it or not, he wants to do something that he feels he can't do in their town. He often expresses that he wants to write, but this is not something he thinks he can do at home. This also links back to how he feels about his family, because he cannot write and also take care of the expectations and needs of his family.

The pachucos are an even stranger group for him to be with than his family and friends. He feels very little kinship with them, and seems to only seek them out to explore his Mexicanness further. This is during a particularly pivotal time in his life, as he is about to truly become the “man of the house.” He is also at a more rebellious stage, but cannot find an outlet for this rebelliousness.

When he briefly attempts to associate more with intellectuals, he finds yet another wall between himself and them. “But then he began to understand them and did not agree with some of their ideas, because they constituted a threat to his individuality, and his individuality was already in jeopardy. And it bothered him that they should always try to find things in his life that could make him a martyr of some sort,” (this in spite of his self-martyrization vis a vis his familial duty) “and it pained him when they insisted he dedicate his life to the Mexican cause, because it was the same old story, and he was quite sure he did not really believe there was a Mexican cause--at least not in the world with which he was familiar.” (175) This displays not only his inability to find people he can fully identify with as a complex human being, but also his naivete of the wider world. He is only tangentially aware of racism and other issues that might concern him; this being the “Mexican cause” he believes doesn’t exist in his world, or which doesn’t involve him, somehow. It displays another part of his coming of age journey, which is increasing understanding of the world as a whole. Or perhaps exploration of society.

He is also often offered options for the escape he so desperately wants throughout his coming-of-age that he usually scoffs at or finds patronizing. One such offer is to become a boxer, which is one of the earlier offers afforded him. He doesn’t take this, as it doesn’t feel like the right path for him and, again, he doesn’t “fit in” with the boxing crowd. “Everybody was telling him what he should make of himself these days, and they all had the same argument, except that this guy was thinking of himself.” (107) Richard’s allusion to the argument that he wouldn’t get the same opportunities because he was Mexican ties back to his lack of awareness of society. He believes, throughout the book, that he can overcome this by being different. That these issues don’t actually affect him. Racism is not a force he sees as an institutional barrier, but as something completely unrelated to him as an American. He does not ever seem to completely understand that society doesn’t care what your nationality is, it will still operate as a racist complex. This is something that is not well-explored in the novel, but it is something that Richard is consistently confronting without ever understanding reality.

It still comes back to him being unable to find a “group” which can be interpreted as his inability to fit in with society as a whole. This can also be interpreted as a symptom of his introversion, though that is never made clear. He certainly seems to seek out belonging, but at the same time, his own goals are the most important. Even when he’s not around other people, he has things he wants to do and that is what he focuses on. So in reality, he could simply be something more of a loner, but maybe doesn’t feel that this is acceptable since society ostracizes those who aren’t joiners.

Richard also doesn't ever seem to care strongly for any group he joins, but rather for specific individuals. The only female character he ever treats well is Mary, for example. And his friendship with Joe Pete Manoel is very important to him. This seems to indicate that he is not someone who can ever embrace a group mentality, as he values individuality most of all.

All of this bouncing from group to group, and his inability to fit in anywhere, are the crux of Richard's journey to growing up. The process of becoming an adult is only completed when he finds his escape, something that he had been longing for since childhood. Escape from the yoke of his small town, of his family, and of the groups he could never fit in with. That is why the novel ends with him on a journey. He is seeking out the place he belongs in, and also the freedom to do what he wants. Shucking off his bindings is what brings Richard through his coming-of-age process.

III. I had an immensely hard time picking which work was my favorite. I narrowed it down quickly to *Into the Beautiful North* and *Bless Me, Ultima*, but between those two, the choice was nearly impossible. The writing style in *Bless Me, Ultima* appealed to me far more, as did the magic realism and somber tone. However, *Into the Beautiful North* had characters I could identify with far more, as well as a fantastic mixture of realistic grit and playfulness. I loved them both equally, overall, but I think *Into the Beautiful North* is my favorite (at least for the moment). Nayeli was a compelling and interesting character for me, and Tacho was my favorite character in any story I've read for the entirety of this course. The various female characters were all fairly complex and each character held different views and values, which is something not all stories succeed in portraying without beating you over the head with it. Characters were often at odds with each other about certain things, but that never severed their bonds or created a situation in which they were fighting to the point of splitting up. For example, Aunt Irma's distaste for "illegals" in Mexico from other countries is something that shocks Nayeli. But it's also not something that is dwelled upon for an excessive amount of time. Nor is there some "big bad" for Nayeli to defeat and be at odds with in a direct manner. Sure, there are characters who are clearly "bad guys," but none of them are caricatures or pure personifications. Even the skinheads, who might appear this way, are a realistic part of the tapestry of racism and xenophobia that serves as somewhat of an underpinning for the whole story.

What mainly appealed to me about this book was the tone. If I were to write anything, I would probably want to write in this style. It was effective in many ways, and I wish I had the talent to write in the same manner with the same success.

IV. Choosing my least favorite work was not nearly as difficult as choosing my favorite. In fact, I enjoyed every single work to a similar degree *except* this one. The only work in the course I disliked was *Pocho*, and it's probably fairly obvious why. Sexism was such an integral part of the narrative, you couldn't escape it for even one page. It was dripping with it. From the way the main character idolizes his philandering abusive father, to how he treats his mother as a shameful

manifestation of old world values holding him back from the life he truly wants to live, you can feel how much this author hates women. And I do not say that lightly. You cannot treat women this way (even in fictional prose) and claim you care about them. Women are dehumanized at every turn, which is common of male authors modern or otherwise. In *Pocho*, they hold the main character back, they're sexual objects for him, and at times, they are ornaments for him to wear out on the town. You could call this sexism a symptom of the times, but that is no excuse. There are other older works that do not depict women in this way, and certainly do not portray the main character as a victim of the women that he, in reality, is victimizing. When he hits his sister, it is something he is shown doing wearily, as though it's just part of a man's duty. And it is strongly implied that he's justified in doing it as "the man of the house." I could write pages more about my issues with this book, but those are the key points.