“comes breathtakingly close to perfection.” A Washington Post Book World critic wrote,

The first version is beautifully crafted and admirably concise, but lacking in genuine compassion; the mysterious caller is not so much a human being as a mere voice, malign and characterless. But in the second version that voice becomes a person, one whose own losses are, in different ways, as crippling and heart-breaking as the one suffered by the grieving parents.

The publication of Cathedral, which received both National Book Critics and Pulitzer Prize nominations, was able to catapult Carver beyond the “minimalist” stereotype to which he had been confined. Reviewers and critics differ in their assessments, but they agreed that Cathedral marks a transition in Carver’s career. Although some critics find his later stories sentimental, most consider that they represent a significant departure toward more insightful portraits of contemporary life and demonstrate his continued artistic development.

Responses to Literature

1. Carver has been noted for his minimalist style, and commentators assert that this style helps convey the message of alienation contained in many of his stories. What other purposes might this minimalist style serve, and does this style enhance or detract from the messages Carver is trying to display? Does Carver succeed at engaging his readers’ imaginations or does he disappoint by leaving them with too little to go on to understand his characters’ lives?

2. Many of Carver’s characters were depicted as isolated from each other and unable to communicate their circumstances to others. Carver was writing in a time when modern communication methods such as cell phones, email, text-messaging, and blogging were not yet available. In what ways might these methods have changed the way Carver’s characters related to each other, and in what ways would more access to communication not have helped them overcome the difficulties they faced? Would a writer today, setting stories in the present time, be likely to present characters with these kinds of communication difficulties, or are such concerns a relic of the past?

3. Carver frequently wrote about ordinary people facing the difficult circumstances of their everyday lives. Write a story modeled on Carver’s minimalist style that puts an ordinary person in a difficult, everyday situation.

4. In two of his later collections, Carver rewrote some of his earlier stories. Choose one or two of these rewrites and write an essay comparing the later version(s) to the original. Be sure to discuss the type of artistic development displayed by the change in the story’s style and plot.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


Ana Castillo

BORN: 1953, Chicago, Illinois
NATIONALITY: American, Latino-American
GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:
The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986)
Sapogonia (1990)
So Far From God (1993)

Overview

Ana Castillo is a prominent and prolific Chicana poet, novelist, editor, and translator whose work has been widely anthologized in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. From her earliest writing she has tried to unite those segments of the American population often separated by class, economics, gender, and sexual orientation.
Ana Castillo

Works in Biographical and Historical Context

A Heritage of Struggles and Storytelling  
Castillo was born in Chicago on June 15, 1953, to Raymond Castillo and Raquel Rocha Castillo, struggling working-class people. She attended public schools in Chicago, and she became involved with the Chicano movement in high school when she was seventeen. Her family’s working-class status set the stage for a developing writer who, throughout her literary career, has examined pervasive social and economic inequities that affect women and Latinos in the United States. She also credits her Mexican heritage with providing a rich background of storytelling.

Education and the Development of a Poetic Voice  
After attending Chicago City College for two years, she transferred to Northeastern Illinois University, where she majored in secondary education, planning to teach art. She received her B.A. in 1975. Castillo’s experience as a student at Northeastern Illinois was largely negative, due to what she has described as pervasive racism and sexism. As a result of these experiences, Castillo stopped painting. During her third year of college, however, she resumed writing poetry.

Castillo’s literary career began before she finished college. At twenty she gave her first poetry reading at Northeastern Illinois University, and in 1975 Revista Chicano-Riqueña published two of her poems. That same year another one of her poems was included in the anthology Zero Makes Me Hungry (1975), and the following year the Revista Chicano-Riqueña published a second group of her poems about racial injustice, particularly the fate of indigenous peoples in America. Despite her uncertainty about the value of her poems, Castillo continued to write and develop her poetic voice. Caught up in the political fervor of the 1970s, she thought of herself as a political poet committed to talking about the economic inequality of Latino people in the United States.

In 1975, Castillo moved to Sonoma County, California, where she taught ethnic studies for a year at Santa Rosa Junior College. Returning to Chicago in 1976, she pursued a master’s degree in Latin American and Caribbean studies in 1978 and 1979. In 1977, she published a chapbook, Otro Canto (Other Song), in which she collected her earlier political poems. From 1977 to 1979, she was writer in residence for the Illinois Arts Council, and in 1979 she published her second chapbook, The Invitation, a collection that exhibits for the first time Castillo’s interest in sexuality and the oppression of women, especially Latinas. She also received her M.A. degree in 1979 from the University of Chicago and between 1980 and 1981, was poet in residence of the Urban Gateways of Chicago. A son, Marcel Ramón Herrera, was born in 1983. In 1984, Arte Público Press published Women Are Not Roses, a collection of poems that includes some poems from her chapbooks.

Beginning to Write Prose  
By 1985 Castillo was once again in California, teaching at San Francisco State University, becoming more and more involved as an editor for Third Woman Press. She began to receive wider notice as a writer when she published her first novel, The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986), which she had begun writing in 1979. The book consists of letters written between two female friends—both resembling the author in some ways, but both vastly different in personality and outlook—over the course of ten years. After the novel received the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award in 1987, Castillo was further honored by the Women’s Foundation of San Francisco in 1988 with the Women of Words Award for “pioneering excellence in literature.” Still needing money and finding it difficult to raise her son alone, she taught various courses at universities in California until 1989, when she received a California Arts Council Fellowship for Fiction. The following year, she received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

Castillo then had her second novel published, Sapogonía: An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter (1990), which had been written in Chicago in 1984 and 1985 while she was teaching English as a second language and taking care of her new baby. She received her Ph.D. in American studies from the University of Bremen in 1991 with a dissertation on Xicanismo, or Chicana feminism, subsequently published as Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma (1994).

In August 1990, before completing her Ph.D., Castillo moved to New Mexico, where she began to write her third novel, So Far from God (1993), which is her best-known work to date. Since the publication of So Far from God, Castillo has published four more novels, a short-story collection, and two collections of poetry. She has also spent her time teaching a wide range of subjects, including creative writing, U.S. and Mexican history, the history of pre-Columbian civilizations, Chicano literature, and women’s studies.

Works in Literary Context

Ana Castillo is one of a few Mexican American writers who have attracted the attention of the mainstream reading public. Her novels, short stories, and poetry all emerge from a working-class, Latina sensibility; yet, her work has crossed social and ethnic lines to examine issues common to all people regardless of their cultural backgrounds or ethnicity. Her detailed descriptions of a specifically Latino culture are the backdrop for a body of literature that speaks to people of all cultures.

A Voice for Women  
Castillo’s poetic voice speaks for all women who have at one time or another felt the unfairness of female existence in a world primarily designed by men and for men. Her first collection of poems, Women Are Not Roses (1984), examines the themes of sadness and loneliness in the female experience, particularly for Latin women. Castillo pointed out in a 1991 interview that
throughout *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, she deals with “a very real, painful reality for Mexicanas, brown women who don’t fit into the aesthetic” of what is considered beautiful in North America. According to Castillo, Teresa’s letters address “the fact that in patriarchy, all women are possessions, but the highest possession, ... is the white woman.”

**Economic and Racial Oppression** Although Castillo’s works center around the problems faced by women, she presents these problems in a broader socio-economic context. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano asserts that Castillo needs to be read with an awareness of “the realization that the Chicana’s experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture.”

**Works in Critical Context**

Castillo’s first three novels were given an enthusiastic critical reception and much scholarly attention, and she won several awards based on this early success. However, she has not since received the critical notice that she did during the late 1980s and early 1990s, though she does continue to be noted for exploring the difficult themes of identity, racism, and classism.

**The Mixquiahuala Letters** *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, an epistolary novel based on forty letters written by the character Teresa to her friend Alicia, is a provocative examination of the relationship between the sexes. A far-ranging social and cultural exposé, the novel examines Hispanic forms of love and gender conflict. Anne Bower claims that *The Mixquiahuala Letters* “is very much a quest novel ... with form and explanation taking us into the women’s emotional and artistic searches,” while Erlinda Gonzales-Berry argues that in Castillo’s “letter writing project, the letter simultaneously functions as a bridge and as a boundary between subject and object.” Gonzales-Berry believes that the letter “verbally links the receiver, (Other), to the sender, (Self), but it also posits the other as the impenetrable mirror that reflects the specular image of the speaking-writing subject.” Norma Alarcón suggests a connection between Castillo’s earlier poetry and her first novel in that “both reveal the intimate events in the life of the speaker, combined with the speaker’s emotional response to them, thus exploring the personal states of mind at the moment of the event or with respect to it.” Alarcón sees the epistolary novel as “Castillo’s experimentations with shifting pronouns and appropriative techniques for the purpose of exploring the romantic/erotic” and suggests that the female narrator “is betrayed by a cultural fabric that presses its images of her upon her, and her response is to give them back to us, albeit sardonically.”

**Sapogonia** With *Sapogonia*, critics felt that Castillo had hit her full-fledged and sophisticated stride with an intricately woven tale of the destructive powers of male-female relationships. Told from the viewpoint of the male narrator, whom critic Rudolfo Anaya has described as “an anti-hero who relishes his inheritance as Conquistador, while he agonizes over his legacy as the Conquered,” the novel traces the obsessive relationship between the narrator and the woman he is unable to conquer. On the back page of the original Bilingual Press edition of 1990, Rudolfo A. Anaya calls *Sapogonia* “a literary triumph.” Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano states that *Sapogonia* “explores male fantasy, its potential for violence against women and the female subject’s struggle to interpret herself both within and outside of this discourse on femininity.”

**So Far from God** Considered by critics to be her best novel, *So Far from God* distinguishes itself through Castillo’s use of the New Mexicans’ English sprinkled with Spanish. Reading *So Far from God* prompted Sandra Cisneros to exult on the jacket of Castillo’s book, “Ana Castillo has gone and done what I always wanted to do—written a Chicana *tele novela*—a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour with an almanac of Chicanismo.” Other Latino critics also praised the Spanish feeling of the novel, and Jaime Armín Mejía called the novel a “contagiously fast-moving, silly, irreverent, yet wise series of tales from Nuevo México.” Mejía pointed out that the narrator’s Latin voice provides “readers a not always reliable but certainly a culturally rich understanding of the *nueva mexicana* community” where the novel is set.
Responses to Literature

1. In *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Castillo uses letters from one character to another to tell her story. In what ways does this approach make her story more compelling, and in what ways does this approach limit her ability to tell the story? Would this novel work as well if written as a series of emails or blogs written from various Internet cafes, or would these more modern forms of communication be inappropriate for Castillo’s purposes?

2. Commentators note that Castillo’s works speak powerfully to women who have felt the unfairness of women’s lives in a male-dominated world. In what ways, if any, do Castillo’s works speak to men? What can both women and men learn about the world by reading Castillo’s works, and are the lessons there primarily useful for women only?

3. Castillo has been praised for attempting to unite segments of the American population that are divided by such factors as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic class. Write an analytical essay that discusses the aspects of Castillo’s writing that work towards a unification of these different groups.

4. Castillo explores the problems faced by women who are working-class and racial minorities. Write an essay that discusses the nature of these problems as presented by Castillo and assesses how well she conveys these problems to her readers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


Willa Cather

BORN: 1873, Back Creek Valley, Virginia

DIED: 1947, New York, New York

NATIONALITY: American

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*O Pioneers!* (1913)

*My Antonia* (1918)

*One of Ours* (1922)

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)