

# [ The Search for Identity in “Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros ]

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**[Abstract]** *This paper explores the search for identity in the short story “Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros, examining such identity characteristics as ethnicity, race, gender, and marital status. Additionally, such defense mechanisms as denial and projection are analyzed, as well as the structure of the story. Overall, the analysis shows that finding one’s identity is so crucial that if a person does not comply with the conventions of human society, he or she may start looking for possibilities of identification outside the human race.*

**[Keywords]** *Identity; ethnicity; gender; race; marital status; defense mechanism; projection; denial*

## [1] Introduction

In the short story “Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros (born in 1954), the protagonist, Clemencia, claims that she is “amphibious – not belonging to any class” (Cisneros 71). This paper explores Clemencia’s search for identity, arguing that being amphibious goes beyond the socioeconomic characteristics of her identity: ethnicity, race, gender, and marital status. Additionally, the paper examines such defense mechanisms as denial and projection, related to Clemencia’s low self-esteem, and it also touches on the structure of the story and its narrative strategy, which reveals the protagonist’s attitude to marriage and motherhood. Finally, the paper investigates references to animals in the short story, in order to determine whether Clemencia in fact identifies herself with something outside the human race.

“Never Marry a Mexican” is a short story from Cisneros’s collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). The story concerns the hardships of a Mexican American woman, Clemencia, who struggles with her complicated family background and later with issues in her own personal life. Cisneros touches upon the complexity of a marriage between a Mexican-born Mexican and an American-born Mexican, describing the relationship between Clemencia’s parents. She then explores the impact of the derogatory treatment Clemencia received from her mother while growing up, leading her to a point at which she does not regard herself as worthy of marriage. Lastly, the story focuses on Clemencia’s relationship with her married lover Drew, and later his son.

The theoretical background of the current analysis is rooted in Kaufman’s ideas on shame and identity (1974, 1980), Cixous’s discussion of female passivity (2004), Quinodoz’s (2004) and Bonanno’s (2009) interpretations of Freudian defense mechanisms – projection and denial respectively – and animal symbolism in literature (Byrne (1974), Gates (2004) and Dussol (2011)). The relevant concepts are defined and explained in the course of the analysis in order to support and interpret the inferences based on textual evidence.

It is also important to note that in many aspects related to Clemencia’s identity, this paper refers to ideas expressed by Gloria Anzaldua in her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldua and Clemencia have contrasting backgrounds – the former was raised in a Mexican environment and taught to comply with Mexican traditions, while the latter was born in the U.S. and her mother was always telling her that Mexicans, especially men, are unworthy. The outcome of such an upbringing is the key difference between the two. However, the comparison is relevant only in such aspects as ethnicity, race and gender. The difference in sexuality (Anzaldua is homosexual) does not allow us to draw plausible conclusions regarding marriage and motherhood.

The comparison and contrast between Clemencia, a fictional character, and Anzaldua, a real person, is viable because, although Anzaldua’s book bears features of an autobiography, it is largely fictional. Therefore, the Anzaldua referred to in this essay is a fictional character based on a real personality. This is explained in more detail in Section 2.

## [2] The Acceptance of One’s Identity: The Comparison of Anzaldua’s and Clemencia’s Cases

As it has been noted in the Introduction, while *Borderlands/La Frontera* can potentially be regarded as non-fiction due to its autobiographic elements, it also contains a considerable element of poetry, which is a fictional genre. In the preface, Anzaldua states that the book speaks “of [her] existence” (n. p.), but at the same time, its purpose is not so much to tell readers about herself, but rather to communicate that “[the] Chicanos [...] no longer need to beg entrance” (n.p.). She ends her preface by including herself in the Chicano (i.e. Mexican American) community and using the first-person plural pronoun rather than the singular form. All of this means that the first-person narrator in the book is a fictional character who can be compared and contrasted with Cisneros’s character of Clemencia.

Anzaldua claims that “[she feels] perfectly free to rebel and to rail against [her] culture” and “[fears] no betrayal on [her] part because, unlike Chicanas and other women of color who grew up white or who have only recently returned to their native cultural roots, [she] was totally immersed in [hers]” (1021). By contrast, Clemencia relates a different experience with her mother: “Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always” and “I never saw [Latino men]; my mother did this to me” (Cisneros 69); “she said [all this although] she was a Mexican, too” (68). The words “my mother did this to me” convey a sense of blame and offence. The conflict between Clemencia’s mother being a Mexican, yet also telling her daughter never to have a Mexican husband and children, is a crime against Clemencia’s identity. A possible explanation for this conflict could be that Clemencia’s mother is not entirely Mexican due to having been born and raised in the U.S. This shows how much pain the contradiction between ethnicity and upbringing can cause, and what prejudices it can result in, not only against the *other* group but also against oneself. The parental influence on Clemencia is explored in detail throughout this paper, and its impact on Clemencia’s perception of marriage is examined in Section 5.1.

## [3] Looking at Clemencia’s Identity from Kaufman’s Point of View

According to Kaufman, “identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside” (*Shame* 68). Clemencia’s experience of the self is disrupted by her mother’s attitude towards her ethnicity and race. In another article, Kaufman claims that “the need for a secure, self-affirming identity [...] lies at the core of each of us. Identity is a sense of self, of who one is and who one is not, and of where one belongs. It is a sense of inner centeredness and valuing” (“Meaning of Shame” 569).

Clemencia's identity is not secure. She is a Mexican in American society, and her ethnicity is denied by her own mother. She cannot identify *who she is and who she is not*, because her parents come from different backgrounds, different *sides of Mexicanness*: the mother was born in the U.S., while the father was born in Mexico, and “it is not the same” thing (Cisneros 68). Anzaldúa points out the same idea: “[the Mexicans] distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* (of the other side) and *mexicanos de este lado* (of this side)” (1029). The society which is so divided, in which one half of it does not support the other, decenters one's sense of belonging and also undermines self-value. This is where Clemencia's low self-esteem and sense of shame comes from. In fact, it diminishes her self-esteem to a literal nothingness. This idea is elaborated upon in Sections 6.1 and 6.2.

## [4] Shame and Gender Identity

Shame is “the underlying sense of being [...] defective which somehow separates one from the rest of humanity” (Kaufman, “Meaning of Shame” 569). More recent sources, such as Salice and Sánchez (2016), also describe shame as a self-conscious introverted feeling: “the intentional object of these emotions is assumed to be the subject that experiences them.”

Clemencia's shame, however, extends further – she is ashamed not only of her skin color or her body, but also of everything that surrounds her – her mother, whom she denounces as a traitor, and her clothes (“All of a sudden I looked at my shoes and felt ashamed at how old they looked” [Cisneros 79]). Thus, she is ashamed of being where she is, with whom she is, and what she is wearing. By contrast, her lover Drew is ashamed of being naked – “You're almost not a man without your clothes. [...] You're so much a child in my bed. [...] You were ashamed to be so naked” (Cisneros 78).

Clemencia's shame is not simply a shame of poverty, but also the shame of being female. A married female, from her point of view, is so passive that she is hardly human: “there was a time when all I wanted was to belong to a man; [...] [to] be worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day” (Cisneros 68). Meanwhile, an unmarried female who earns her own living is perceived as a prostitute: “Sometimes I get paid by the word and sometimes by the hour. [...] Any way you look at it, what I do to make a living is a form of prostitution” (71).

A similar discussion of stereotypical female roles in society can be found in Anzaldúa's text: “Instead of ironing my younger brothers' shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing” (1018). She also relates how resistant the society was to accept the attempts to break these stereotypes: “Nothing in my culture approved of me” (Anzaldúa 1018). She argues that culture as such has become patriarchal by definition: “Culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (1018). Women are constantly labelled for every action they undertake; the majority of these labels are not flattering: “If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish; [...] if a woman remains a [virgin] until she marries, she is a good woman”

(1018). These cultural stereotypes also influence the choices women are allowed to make in their lives: “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (1018). Such limitations in terms of life choices force the feeling of shame upon those who choose a different path. As will be seen below, Clemencia, unlike Anzaldua, is unable to look at these limitations critically, and instead of blaming society, she blames herself for not fitting into the world.

## **[5] The Shame of Ethnic Identity and Its Connection to Marital Status**

### **[5.1] Parental Influence**

Cisneros’s story implies that Clemencia was taught by her mother that never marrying a Mexican did not cancel her obligation to marry at all. Her mother herself finds it acceptable to marry a white man after her Mexican husband dies: “When she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father’s house, it was as if she stopped being my mother. Like I never even had one” (Cisneros 73). From Clemencia’s point of view, her mother has betrayed her father, and she has betrayed her race, as well as Clemencia’s identity. At this point, it seems that Clemencia’s Mexican identity dominates over her female identity. Her Mexicanness is also reflected in the sentence mentally addressed to her lover Drew: “I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving” (74). Her language gives her a sense of self-centeredness, self-value. It should be added that language is mentioned only briefly in this story, and it is not emphasized as a separate identity characteristic. Instead, it is merged with ethnic identity.

### **[5.2] Denial as a Defense Mechanism Against Failures in Love and Marriage**

Still, Clemencia’s awareness of her Mexican identity does not make her proud of it. She remains the same Mexican girl who is not worth marrying. The path of being *home as a mother* is blocked to her – by her upbringing and her low self-esteem. This is what makes her so jealous of married women. This jealousy prompts her into secret revenge: “It’s always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill [married] women like that, [by sleeping with their husbands], without their knowing it” (Cisneros 76–77). Having renounced marriage, she also renounces motherhood by throwing a Russian baby doll in the dirt. This is Clemencia’s form of denial, which arises from her shame at being of the wrong race, ethnicity, and social status. According to Bonanno, denial is “a kind of defense we employ to fend off potential blows to our self-esteem” (116). Ironically, Clemencia’s defense mechanism makes her more and more hopeless and ashamed of herself.

Denying marriage and motherhood, and having never considered becoming a nun, Clemencia sees only one path for herself – prostitution, even if this means translating brochures or teaching children. Clemencia’s view of herself as sinful and dirty is reflected in a scene after spending a night with her married lover Drew, when she decides to leave traces of her presence – gummy bears – for his wife to find. Her actions look like polluting the place, which has been described as “immaculate,” so clean that it “[makes Clemencia] want to sneeze” (Cisneros 81). She then imagines Drew explaining to his wife that these gummy bears are the “cleaning woman’s Mexican voodoo” (81). This phrase expresses the neglectful and ironic view Clemencia has of herself. Given that she is making the place dirty with gummy bears, she is the opposite of a cleaning woman. On the other hand, she is the inferior, the servant here, the mistress, not the wife; she is Mexican and she is wicked.

## [6] Clemencia’s Low Self-Esteem Caused by Her Identity

### [6.1] The Feeling of ‘Nothingness’

There are indications in the text that Clemencia perceives herself as *nothing*, both as a female and as a Mexican; this is explained through the defense mechanism described in Section 6. 2. The passivity of women in philosophy and society is discussed by Helene Cixous: “Whenever it is a question of [a] woman, when one examines kinship structures, when a family model is brought into play, [...] either [a] woman is passive or she does not exist” (349). At the same time, Clemencia’s Mexican identity is crushed between Hispanic and Anglo-American cultures. As Anzaldúa puts it, “I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (1029). The struggles in the search for identity, according to Kaufman, can lead to “[assuming] partial identity, or [giving the search up] entirely” (“Meaning of Shame” 568). Clemencia does neither – throughout the story, her struggle does not end in her lifetime. She never agrees to assume a partial identity; she keeps trying to accept herself in her entirety, despite her constant failures. Section 6.4 provides a possible answer to her struggles.

### [6.2] Projection as a Defense Mechanism against the Feeling of Nothingness

Clemencia does not state her *nothingness* explicitly – in fact, she projects it onto her lover. Projection is one of the Freudian defense mechanisms, “an immediate discharge into the external world of an intolerable [suppressed] internal perception” (Quinodox 105). Clemencia thinks: “You’re nothing without me. I created you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to” (Cisneros 75); in fact, she

means *I am nothing without you, you created me [...], you can snuff me between your finger and thumb [...]*.

The discharge of her internal struggles onto Drew is also Clemencia’s attempt to exercise control over him, her object of projection (Quinodox 153). Her attempt fails – in reality, it is Clemencia who depends on Drew so much that she tries to fill the emptiness that follows their separation by having an affair with his son, “to make the boy love [her] the way [she loves] his father” (Cisneros 82).

### [6.3] The Reflection of Low Self-Esteem in the Use of Pronouns and the Structure of the Story

In Section 3.2, it has been demonstrated how, through the misleading use of pronouns, Cisneros shows Clemencia’s projection defense mechanism in action. The substitution of *I* by *you* is one of the most obvious examples of how the protagonist’s low self-esteem is manifested. However, the effect of blurring the boundaries between Clemencia and other characters is also realized through the peculiar structure of the story.

The story is structured so that the shifts between the two different addressees of her inner monologue – Drew and his son – can barely be perceived, and this creates a feeling that Clemencia merges them together in her consciousness. It is the use of pronouns that helps us to faintly distinguish whom she is addressing at any particular point in the text, especially the possessive pronouns referring to Drew’s wife: when she is *his mother*, Clemencia is addressing Drew; when she is *your mother*, she is thinking of Drew’s son. There is an instance when she refers to Drew’s son, first in her address to Drew – “He was just an idea in his mother’s head” (Cisneros 75) – and then to his son – “You were a moth inside your mother’s heart” (76). This reflects her different, conflicting attitudes towards her young lover. In the former case, he is *an idea*, a broad abstract notion; in the latter, he is *a moth*, a living but non-human creature – tiny, insignificant, contemptible. There is also a contrast between head and heart, an initially cool-headed plan to start a family and then, once the boy is born, unconditional maternal love. Clemencia is so *religious* about motherhood that she even supposes that the birth of Drew’s son was the result of “immaculate conception” (82). One can also look at this from a different viewpoint: what if the mention of the *immaculate conception* is sarcastic and in fact refers to the lack of sexuality in Drew’s wife, implying that she is only a mother, but not a desirable woman? What speaks in favour of this idea is Clemencia’s vengeful attitude towards Drew’s wife. However, this is still open to interpretation.

The shifts in Clemencia’s monologue from Drew to his son are thus an exploration of two intertwined roles from which she has banished herself – the roles of wife and mother. In a way, she tries to realize her motherhood through the age difference between her and her young lover – she even refers to herself as *mamita* (mummy) during their time together, merging both forbidden roles and making the relationship emotionally incestuous and dysfunctional.

## [6.4] Jealousy and Identification with an Animal

Clemencia’s jealous attempts to secretly ruin Drew’s family are against her nature. When she calls him, saying that his wife is *stupid*, she admits that “no Mexican woman would react like that” (Cisneros 77) – at this point, she feels how her female jealousy has overpowered her Mexican identity, and contrasts her own behavior with Mexican cultural conventions.

At some point, as a result of her jealousy and adultery, Clemencia starts comparing herself to animals and even identifying with them. While sentences containing *as* and *like* grammatically indicate a comparison, i.e. “I’ve been waiting patient as a spider all these years;” (Cisneros 75) “Then I got the hell out of there, chattering like a monkey all the ride back with my kids;” (80) “I didn’t know what to do, just stood there dazed like those animals crossing the road at night when the headlights stun them” (79), the use of *paw* instead of *hand* in “I grinned like an idiot and held out my paw” (79) can be interpreted as identification with an animal. Moreover, even the sentences containing mere comparisons can be seen as Clemencia’s identification with a spider, a monkey and, presumably, a cat, as she refers to the common qualities she shares with these animals.

Although the references to cats are not explicit in the examples cited above, the ending of the story is sprinkled with overt allusions to them. Once Clemencia comes home, she is alone among cats, who follow her everywhere – to the bathroom, into her bed – and understand everything that happens to her. It is as if she is alone among her kind, surrounded by those who understand her better than humans. When Clemencia calls Drew, he “[startles] her away like a bird” (Cisneros 83) – a cat’s prey – by answering the phone, and goes to sleep beside his wife, “warm, radiating her own heat [...] and smelling a bit like milk” (83), just like the cats who now sleep in Clemencia’s bed. Thus, cats are associated with the peace and confidence which Clemencia could not find earlier in her life.

In order to interpret the story’s references to spiders, monkeys and cats, it is instructive to consider research exploring the symbolism of these animals in literature. It has been found that all mentions of spiders in the Bible are “unambiguously negative;” the spider is “hell’s creature” (Dussol, n. p.). However, there is another interpretation given in the same article – that of a spider as a “female power symbol [...] [reclaiming] dignity for single women” (Dussol). When comparing herself to a spider, Clemencia still dwells on her wickedness, but also attempts to justify her marital status and stop feeling inferior. Meanwhile, the mention of a monkey could be a reference to the signifying monkey Esu Elegbara, a character from African American folklore (Gates 988). Esu is a “[messenger] to the gods, [a mediator between] people and gods [...] [and the] guardian of the crossroads” (Gates 988). This interpretation has been chosen because of Esu’s mediating role and its relation to the crossroads, which is exactly where Clemencia finds herself while searching for her identity. Finally, the cat, the last animal mentioned in the story, to whom most of the allusions are made, is known in literature for its “complex personality,” “mysterious nature, complete independence, cunning evil and patient intelligence [and ability to resurrect]” (Byrne 955). It is necessary to add that the allusions to cats

made in the story represent them in a kinder light, as warm, caring creatures, asking for love in return (implied in the passage where cats *follow* Clemencia everywhere, dependent on her presence). The conventional perception of cats and Cisneros's attitude to them in the story form a contradictory yet true representation of how Clemencia feels, what qualities she possesses, and who she would like to be. The latter assumption is based on Byrne's claim that cats “demonstrate the kind of personalities [humans] would most desire to develop” (955).

What also cannot be ignored is the general belief that cats have nine lives and can be reborn. There are several mentions of death in the last passages of the story – “Then I drove home and slept like the dead” (Cisneros 82) – and even suicide – “And if it was *me* I killed instead?” (83). Clemencia's breakup with Drew can be seen as her symbolic death; starting a relationship with his son can be viewed as the beginning of her next life.

It could be assumed that, by identifying with all these animals, Clemencia thinks herself to be worse than all the rest of the human race – at the time when the short story was published, animals were widely thought to be inferior to humans, as discussions on the moral issues related to using animals for human benefit (scientific experiments and alike) were just beginning (Ryder, n.p.). However, it would not be quite accurate to suppose that throughout the story Cisneros only emphasizes the protagonist's low self-esteem. Although it has been argued that Clemencia's struggles in coping with her identity never end during her lifetime, another, more hopeful interpretation is also possible.

The allusions to animals imply that Clemencia, as an outsider from the conventions of the human society, has started to search for her identity in the animal world. The last paragraph shows that she projects the image of a cat onto people passing by; she wants to “stroke them,” and they strike her as “lovely” (Cisneros 83). Although she compares them to guitars rather than cats, the fact that she wants “to reach out and stroke someone, and say ‘It's alright, honey [...] there, there, there’” (83), indicates that she is referring to a living being. She is not likely to refer to a child, since she has renounced motherhood, and she has instead surrounded herself with cats. This allows us to conclude that to a certain extent, Clemencia begins to identify with the qualities of a cat – this is where she has arrived in her search for her unique identity, which was so difficult yet so crucial for her to find. Also, since cats are said to have nine lives, such an interpretation reveals that Clemencia probably hopes to be reborn in the next life as someone without identity struggles, or to achieve this goal after another symbolic death – such as a breakup with Drew's son, for example.

## [7] Conclusions

All in all, Clemencia's identity in human society is the opposite to *amphibious* (which means *both*) – it is *neither*, according to all the characteristics of identity examined in this paper: neither a wife nor a prostitute; neither a Mexican *de este lado* nor an Anglo-American; and, in her relationship with Drew's son, neither a mother nor a lover. She is someone who is lost between these social roles. As a result, she identifies herself with

the qualities of cats, surrounds herself with these animals and projects their image onto the people around her. This shows that she has found the identity which comprises all her characteristics – longing for home, but independent; devilish, but loving and caring; and, finally, able to resurrect and start her life all over again. Clemencia’s arrival at such an identification shows how crucial it is to have a sense of self-centeredness and self-value (in accordance with Kaufman’s ideas), but it also shows how hard it may be to find such a sense when adhering to the conventions of human society. Given the supernatural qualities of cats, such as their possibility of rebirth, the frequent mentions of these animals may imply that the protagonist hopes to be reborn and finalize her search for identity in the next lifetime or after another turning point, as her current low self-esteem does not allow her to come to terms with who she is.

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