

The Spanish Language and the Magic of Words

Language plays an important role in Antonio's life. As he learns to read and write in school, he comes to believe that language has magic: "There was magic in the letters, and I had been eager to learn the secret" (p. 76). The magic they promise is that of wisdom and knowledge, and Antonio hopes that words will reveal to him the mysteries of the world beyond his narrow experience and help shepherd his quest for understanding.

Antonio must operate in two linguistic worlds. Spanish is the language of his home and family, as well as his early understanding of religion, nature, and identity. But when he goes to school, the teacher calls him Anthony instead of Antonio. He must learn to speak, read, and write in English. This language barrier makes him feel alienated and lonely at first, until he makes friends with the other Spanish-speaking boys. For Antonio, English represents the larger American world, full of both excitement and confusion.

The many instances of Spanish vocabulary and dialogue in the novel illustrate the blending of two languages in Antonio's life. Anaya's use of Spanish alongside English helps to define certain characters and emphasize certain ideas and expressions, which defy translation. For readers who do not speak Spanish, the foreign dialogue can make reading the novel confusing or obscure, creating the same feelings of alienation that Antonio feels when he is introduced to English at school.

A Spanish Glossary

abuelo: grandfather

arroyo: stream or brook

ave maria purisima: a prayer meaning, "Hail, purest Mary"

bruja: witch

chango: common term used to describe a young boy, as in "pal" or "buddy"

¡Chinga tu madre!: a curse meaning, "Damn your mother!"

curandera: spiritual healer who uses herbs and traditional healing techniques – inherited from the Indian cultures of Mesoamerica

el Diablo: the Devil

encanto: charm, spell, or enchantment

La Grande: a title of respect granted to Ultima, meaning "The Great Lady"

hechicera: sorceress

hijo / hijos / hijitos: son / children / little children

el hombre volador: the flying man

el llano: the open plain, a flat land used for raising cattle and keeping horses

la luna: the moon

el mar: the sea (the name Márez derives from this word)

¡Madre de Dios!: Mother of God!

¡Mira!: Look!

muerte: death

una mujer: a woman

pecado: sin

¿Qué pasa aquí?: What's going on here?

suerte: fate, destiny, chance, fortune, or luck

Te voy a mater: I will see you die

la tristesa de la vida: the sorrow of life

la vieja: the old woman