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"Sin decidirlo me volví distinta": Gender, Deception and Development in Angeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida*

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Luisa Samaniego for the Master of Arts in Spanish, presented February 14, 1997.

Title: "Sin Decidirlo Me Volví Distinta:" Gender, Deception and Development in Angeles Mastretta's *Arráncame La Vida*

With this research I locate Angeles Mastretta's novel *Arráncame la vida* in the *Bildungsroman* genre, examine the particular forces influencing the protagonist's development and gain insight into her process of identity formation. This modern *Bildungsroman* portrays the fate of a woman in the male dominated world of post-revolutionary Mexico. I analyze how class, gender, historical moment, psychological and cultural influences are woven into the intriguing formation of the heroine, Catalina, variously constraining or propelling her forward in her quest for development.

I argue that the heroine transcends the limiting factors in her patriarchal environment, struggling against culturally sanctioned

deception, confining gender roles and the underlying *machismo* organizing it. Despite these currents and ostensibly subservient position of Catalina, I observe a shift in the relative and absolute power between her and her husband, Andrés, during the course of the novel. Andrés' characteristics and ultimately self-defeating behavior parallel changes in the larger social-historical context. Catalina creates space to develop, using strategies and icons borrowed from both the male and female realm. Often she seeks truth rather than social accomodation. My critical model emphasizes how this combined with her emerging values of love, compassion and cooperation creates a nacent sense of self in Catalina, emphasized in the open ending of the novel.

The central premise of a *Bildungsroman* that individuals develop in response to their environment is affirmed in the emergence of Catalina's strong, coherent personality by the novel's end. She represents a symbol of hope for all people involved in a struggle for self-definition and self-determination.

"SIN DECIDIRLO ME VOLVI DISTINTA:"

GENDER, DECEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN ANGELES MASTRETTA'S *ARRANCAME LA VIDA*

by
LUISA SAMANIEGO

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Contents

"SIN DECIDIRLO ME VOLVI DISTINTA"

Introduction

Weaving class, gender, psychological, historical and cultural issues into the saga of formation of her protagonist, Catalina Guzman, the author Angeles Mastretta has written a modern female *Bildungsroman* with her novel *Arráncame la vida*. Catalina confronts her fate as a woman in the male dominated world of post-revolutionary Mexico and successfully progresses to become an independent and self-actuating individual.

Facing new options and possibilities, women's horizons have expanded greatly in the 20th century. This development, together with a greater understanding of women's psychology and gender constraints, is reflected in contemporary women's fiction. In contrast to the traditional model of *Bildungsroman*, the modern female novel of this genre "has become a more open and flexible form, because it takes into account the dramatic changes in

women's lives and incorporates the increased understanding and the implications of these changes especially in regard to gender" (Frouman-Smith, 100). Mastretta's novel exemplifies the differences between the modern, open-structured version and the traditional model of this literary form.

In this thesis I propose a reading of *Arráncame la vida* that focuses on the ways in which this work constitutes an example of a modern female Bildungsroman. Catalina Guzman's self-conscious process of growth in awareness of the constraints and forces in a modern context and their impact on her personal development are characteristics of a modern *Bildungsroman*. Mastretta demonstrates through Catalina's reflections and actions her protagonist's increase in power, self-knowledge and insights about her social environment. Typically, no final conclusion is the result of this development. The end of the modern *Bildungsroman* finds the main character in an open-ended situation, in a state of continuation of the established growth process, as is the case in *Arráncame la vida*.

History and Characteristics of the Traditional *Bildungsroman*

Many aspects of life changed during the 18th century in Europe. The French Revolution heralded the dawn of parliamentary governments, the rise of nationalism and a bourgeois middle class that undermined the rule of the established nobility. Following this time of social and political upheaval, a new type of novel emerged in literature. Its name, *Bildungsroman*, comes from the German language in which this new genre celebrated its earliest and greatest successes. In the broadest sense, the term *Bildungsroman* applies to novels of education. The subject is the development of the protagonist's mind and spiritual growth, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences into maturity, characterized by the protagonist's recognition of his or her identity and role in the world (Abrams, 119).

Karl von Morgenstern coined the term *Bildungsroman* in 1819, linking it to the young hero's development, experience and his formation (Hardin xiii, xiv). Although the concepts surrounding formation and identity have evolved over the intervening 200

years, and "the evolution of a coherent self has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, it remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs" (Abel, 11). Ellen Morgan asserts the novel of female development has become "the most salient form of literature for contemporary women writing about women" (18).

It is necessary to examine the beginning of the *Bildungsroman* genre to fully understand its evolution towards the modern form. The word *Bildung* means the formation of moral character and personality. Within the context of 18th century thought, the development of the character was achieved primarly through classical education. According to Schiller, Goethe and the German idealists, the perfect man could be attained by undertaking a thorough education of mind and body. In 1850, Wilhelm Dilthey declared that moral formation and social accomodation takes place when a young man "who enters into life in a state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed

with a variety of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world" (Hardin xiv). This was a gender specific interpretation, a formula for a superficial evaluation that nevertheless reflected the new interest in the development of a young person from the naive state of adolescence to the finished product of mature adulthood. The underlying philosophy betrays the conservative tradition of the rigid social network of the 16th century, where the focus of life was centered around God, but the conviction of the perfectability of human beings brought profound changes to the belief system of the 18th century. Integrated in society, man as an individual emerged as the focal point of a meaningful life.

Franco Moretti's cultural-historical frame of reference for the genre is helpful to further understanding the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Moretti establishes a connection between the social forces and changes in the European world of the late 18th century and the development of the Bildungsroman as a genre. Decay of the feudal social structure with concurrent emergence of a middle class changed the view of the youth period of life

from a purely chronological stage of predictable development into a predetermined adult form towards the unsettling concept of self-determination (Moretti, 15). The task for the author of the traditional *Bildungsroman* was to describe the transformation of unformed and uninformed youth into a mature and harmonious adult, the path of resolution was part of a search to understand the self and to find place, purpose and meaning in life.

The early writers of the *Bildungsroman*, first and foremost Goethe in his archetypical *Wilhelm Meister*, explored the process of formation of a thoughtful and reasonable adult with didactic intent. The audience was to be involved with an unthreatening and entertaining, yet purposeful content where the result rather than the motivation was the central force of the novel. The *Bildung* of Wilhelm Meister does not offer "unequivocal certainties, unreflected values, but embodies the difficulties of those aspirations . . . it articulates the unease of a society not easily at home in the bourgeois age (Hardin 62, 63). The process of psychological development of the protagonist in Goethe's work set the standard for the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

This traditional novel of development is one effort to instruct the audience about the tension between the social order and the desire of the younger generation for development and change. By channeling the freedom of youth into socially acceptable and productive venues, the classical *Bildungsroman* often becomes an essentially conservative model for maintaining the status quo in a society (Moretti, 5). Swales further suggests that the notion of *Bildung* could be and, in fact, "was transferred into the sphere of social and political debate in Germany, and became part of the stock vocabulary of German conservatism (Hardin, 62). This argument indicates that enforced dedication and conformity to lofty ideals of self and cultural purity or superiority can stiffle self-reflection and dissent, leading to justification and sanctioning of repressive state activities. Each individual's value and right to develop uniquely is subordinated to the goals of society and particularly to the goals of a specific elite, i.e. the ruling class.

Wilhelm Dilthey gave a male centered definition to the traditional Bildungsroman in the mid 19th century where the exterior world of experience determined to a large extent the

development of the individual. But Sigmund Freud and his followers in the psychoanalytical movement added a new dimension to the discussion. Today the formation of the individual is seen as a complex psycho-social process, sometimes resulting in self-understanding and a coherent identity, but often reflecting a fragmented self where development is an uncertain, fitful process neither linear nor based in the belief of human perfectability. As a result of this acceptance of a range of influences on an individual's growth, the modern *Bildungsroman* fiction offers a broader, non-gender specific assessment where sustained reflection and choices influence the complex development of identity.

Michael Beddow suggests six characteristics indicative of the modern *Bildungsroman*:

1. The exploration of a problematic self by retracing its development.

2. a preoccupation with conflicts between socialization and personal integrity.

3. a conviction that matters of the spirit play a vital

part in human well-being.

4. a disquiet about the direction history is taking.

5. a belief in substantial connections between the writing of fiction and the human urge for self-understanding and self-development.

6. an intense interest in the transmission of values between generations (Hardin, 421).

Through the use of this criteria one can gain a more differentiated understanding of the modern *Bildungsroman*.

The Female *Bildungsroman*

With the introduction of female protagonists in novels of this genre in the 19th century, a female form of the traditional *Bildungsroman* entered the literary canon. Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* is a good example of an early female *Bildungsroman* with female protagonist and a female author. Susan Fraiman suggests that the course of "female development fiction", a term she prefers to female *Bildungsroman*, does differ significantly from the male model. She characterizes such novels as "more hesitant and conflicted

narratives" (Fraiman, 9), because women's urges to develop themselves are frequently stifled by society's demands of conformity to a narrow band of acceptable actions and behaviors. These novels rewrite a heroine's

> rise to happy maturity as a history of obstruction, imposition and loss. . . .Marriage as a 'proper' end of female development is viewed ambivilantly by the protagonist. Typically, they are caught between the spirit of the times which promises affective individualism pointing towards the ideal latitude in choice of a husband and the social reality where a woman's fate is dependent and driven by material needs on her marriage (65).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist, grows in awareness "that her reading of the world is wrong" (64). This failure of interpretation leads to the humiliation of the young woman which comments ironically on the plot and the inevitable yearning for the institution of marriage (64). Female authors used such veiled protests to question the standards of the time and the prescribed role of women in society. Often the

message of protest was encoded in a plot apparently endorsing marriage and the maintenance of the social order. Women's fictional writing mirrors the constraints imposed on women in their life. Their development was dictated by the dominant male centered values and often have created confusion and conflict in the process of female identity formation. "On one hand women wanted to conform to the prevailing social norms and to earn the approval of their environment, but often such conformity required an easure of self" (68).

Differing from its male counterpart, the emerging female *Bildungsroman* frequently chronicles a limited, hindered and blocked developmental process. Only careful reading of the encoded message will reveal some positive light through the knowledge gained, implied in ironic distance, or by the protest and questioning inherent in an account of a woman's struggle for individuation in an oppressive patriachal society.

Many novels of female development include a process of apprenticeship or awakening which leads to increased consciousness of the protagonist. In many cases the painful

struggle for this gradual increase in self-awareness leads to disasterous results. Virgina Wolf's protagonist, Clarissa, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, ends her quest for self-determination in insanity. Bertha in *Jane Eyre* also terminates her search for self insane and suicidal, as does Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *Awakening*. The outcomes for these female protagonists are not positive. Harmonious accomodation with a male oriented society was not possible for them.

To the degree a society is repressive and authoritarian, the pressure to conform and fear of non-conforming will be greater. This pressure is exerted on all levels, from the family to the community, the state and even the world. Each individual's situation and response is different and unique and it is the individual's struggle and particular circumstance, not the historical moment, gender or class question which is of crucial importance in the contemporary *Bildungsroman*.

Angeles Mastretta's Mexican Female *Bildungsroman*

Turning to *Arráncame la vida*, the contextual characteristics of the modern *Bildungsroman* as well as the hero's quest model

can be applied to gain a fuller understanding of the protagonist's struggle to achieve maturity, independence and identity. These concepts shed light on the process of individuation and identity formation and therefore are of great importance in a discussion of this topic.

For example, Mastretta's heroine, Catalina, begins to retrace her life after her husband's death, reflecting the most prominent feature of a modern *Bildungsroman*, the focus on the "exploration of a problematic self by retracing its development" (Hardin, 421). Catalina finds herself a widow without the protection of her husband or her father. This traumatic separation from her previous state of dependence on patriarchal authority marks the beginning of a new phase for her. When she begins her reflective process she is alone and, despite having previously allowed herself to be guided and controlled by male authority figures, she chooses not to turn to any man for comfort or consultation. She is the surviving parent, the matriarch of her family and as such she decides to rely on her own judgement and experience.

Catalina begins the narrative of her life at a point preceding

her marriage, when she was not yet 15. Recalling the moment when she met Andrés for the first time and declares: "Entonces él tenía más de treinta años y yo menos de quince . . . me sentaba a oirles (a Andrés y a su papá) y a dar opiniones con toda la contundencia que me facilitaba . . . mi absoluta ignorancia" (Mastretta 9, 11). By focusing on childhood memories like these, Catalina is able to show how she made the transition from the "tabula rasa" on which men inscribed their identities to a mature woman who learned to resist the control of others. Since her youth she has been on a journey filled with darkness and light, fear, deception and death, but also of accomplishments, love and empowerment.

By reflecting on the events of her life, Catalina furthers her self-understanding and her own diverse internal responses and is thus better able to identify and comprehend the truth and lies in her environment. In appraisal after listening to her husband's speech on women's rights, Catalina thinks: "De ahí para adelante no le creí un solo discurso" (58). Later she states to him openly regarding his unconvincing justification of several

murders and land confiscations: "No te creo ninguna de las dos cosas" (84). Catalina's ability to recognize the deceptive capacity of Andrés' use of language grows in direct proportion with her recognition of her own autonomous reality. The "inauthentic" image of self that Andrés labors to create is one rooted in deception and concealment. Catalina on the other hand is trying to achieve an "authentic" sense of self rooted in disclosure and revelation. This gradual self-realization enables her to find a measure of peace in knowing what her own beliefs are at this juncture in her life. By using the structure of the modern female *Bildungsroman*, the author allows the reader to move closer to Catalina and to better understand the ambiguity of her existence as well as that of language in general. This structure engenders expectations which Mastretta chooses to leave partially unfulfilled to confront the reader with the feeling of "openess" and of "possibility" that permeate the end of the novel.

In the course of the novel, the heroine frequently comments on her struggles against the norms of patriarchal society as

represented by the upper class, specifically the women with whom she forges social relationships and dominant male authority figures such as her father and her husband. Before a state dinner, Catalina reflects: "Para mucha gente yo era parte de la decoración, alguien a quien se le corren las atenciones que habría que tener con un mueble si de repente se sentara en la mesa y sonriera. . . . .La cosa era ser bonita, dulce, impecable" (Mastretta, 74). For both men and women Catalina was nothing more than an object to be properly placed at the appropriate moment. The modern *Bildungsroman* also addresses the preoccupations with "conflicts between socialization and personal integrity" (Hardin, 421). Even though Catalina must often perform in public, she finds ways to express herself uniquely. For example, while accompanying her husband on a campaign in a small Indian town she unexpectedly dresses herself and her children in local costumes. This spontaneous gesture shows the creativity of her spirit under oppressive circumstances. When Catalina hears rumors about atrocities and deaths attributed to her husband's activities, she avoids this

unbearable information by distracting herself or she is driven to find out the truth, even if it is painful. "En cambio me propuse conocer los negocios de Andrés en Atencingo. Empecé por saber que el Celestino, que su muerte fue la primera de una fila de muertos" (89). For Catalina to maintain her personal integrity even while recognizing that others considered her an accomplice was of prime importance in the conflict between socialization and personal integrity: "Yo era la cómplice oficial. ¿Quién hubiera creído que a mí sólo me llegaban rumores que durante años nunca supe si me contaban fantasías o verdades?" (72). In front of herself, her integrity remained intact.

The modern development novel often contains "a conviction that matters of the spirit play a vital part in human well-being" (Hardin, 421). The spiritual question in *Arráncame la vida* is controversial in as much as religious faith as represented through the Catholic church is portrayed as weak and hypocritical. On a personal level, religious faith either fails Catalina or proves itself to be ineffectual. She turns to the church as a last resort as when she prays while awaiting

Andrés' release from jail. On a socio-political level, the church as an institution that provides a safe haven to those seeking refuge from oppression falls short of Catalina's expectations. This is evidenced in the scene where Catalina's lover is prevented from gaining freedom by locked church doors. Catalina herself is accused of bringing filth and disrespect into the house of God by an old woman in Tonanzintla: "¿Qué no les da respecto a Dios? -dijo-. Si quieren hacer cochinadas vayan a hacerlas a un establo, no vengan aquí a ensuciar la casa de la virgen" (Mastretta, 214). Clearly, the Catholic Church does not have a meaningful role in Catalina's life either on a figurative or literal level. It proves to be an institution that is once vulnerable to and occasionally complicit with the horrors perpetuated by her husband for political expediency. Pragmatism, greed and self-interest dominate Andrés' goals. He uses and abuses everyone in his environment on his ruthless road to power. Little spiritual message can be found for Catalina in her life with Andrés or from the conservative force of the Catholic church which supported the landed class in exploiting

the poor and the women (Riding, 155).

However, the novel is not devoid of spiritual elements. In stark contrast to Andrés, the Indians are portrayed as humble, weak and politically naive, but through their mute presence, innocence and powerlessness Catalina finds compassion and spiritual growth in herself. In addition to the Indian influence, Catalina responds eagerly to her lover's passion for classical music. "Lo miraba como si él fuera la música, . . . Era otro, puesto todo en algo que no tenía nada que ver con nosotros, que le venía de otra parte y lo llevaba a quién sabe dónde" (Mastretta, 175). This man, Carlos, his love and his music offers a new and welcome spiritual element for the desert of Catalina's parched spirit.

Strongly apparent in Catalina who feels the ideals of the Mexican revolution are betrayed by Andrés in his ascent to power is another characteristic of the modern *Bildungsroman*, a pronounced "disquiet about the direction history is taking" (Hardin, 421). Hearing him espousing women's rights in a political speech, but knowing his real conviction about this

subject make Catalina realize that her husband's tenure in office as governor of Puebla will not further the course of the revolution. History is apparently moving in a negative direction for everyone but Andrés himself. The revolutionary ideals of equality, equitable distribution of land and wealth and women's rights (Riding, 61) are only empty rhetorical devices in Andrés' mouth. In the course of the novel, Catalina must transcend these ideals in her personal life to achieve relevance and even revenge over her husband's betrayal.

In an isolated instance, Angeles Mastretta chooses to depart from the modern *Bildungsroman* norm "of a substantial connection between the writing of fiction, as expressed by a fictional character, and the human urge for self-understanding and self-development" (Hardin, 421). Frequently, a strong connection appears between the retelling of a life in a literary form and "the huge and many-layered problems of self-censorship" (425). By leading the reader to a direct participation in her heroine's quest for personal truth in an adverse environment, Mastretta approaches the problem of revelation

and truth on various levels. Unlike some contemporary German *Bildungsromane*, exemplified by Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, which focus on self-delusion, explored and examined within a fictional narrative, Catalina, although aware and preoccupied with the differences between truth and falsehood, sees the problem not as one arising from self-delusion, rather from the distortions, silences and lies told to her by her husband and embodied in the structure of society. Contemplating her situation in the writing of fiction is not part of Catalina's strategy for self-understanding. Mexico of the 1930's is beginning its process of modernization, but its people are still rooted in the traditional culture where oral history has a greater importance than the written word. Mastretta lets her protagonist narrate her story in the tone of personal history, thus lending the book an authentic and believable structure. Mastretta makes this decision for artistic reasons and it contributes to the authenticity of the historical period in which the novel is set.

Catalina hopes that her own struggles and experiences,

particularly her position in marriage, will serve to influence her step daughter Lila's choice of husband and to strengthen in Lila a determination to oppose her father's demands, mirroring another established characteristic of the modern *Bildungsroman* which emphasizes "the transmission of values between generations" (Hardin, 421). Catalina tries, but fails to transmit her values and experiences to her daughter, largely due to the weight and power of the patriarchal system. Her failure to subvert Andrés' will in this case lends credibility to the novel in its congruence to the actual relative balance of power and authority between men and women in Mexico (Riding, 32).

Catalina's Mythical and Psychological Journey

As a complement to the presentation of *Arráncame la vida* as a modern *Bildungsroman*, it is useful to apply Joseph Campbell's classic quest pattern of development to Catalina's pursuit of identity. This model offers another approach and furthers our understanding of Catalina's growth. It is a psychological interpretation of a path of self-development,

moving an individual from a childlike state of ignorance towards adulthood. It examines and interpretates actions in light of archetypical myths and identifies symbols at transition points. Luisa Valenzuela supports this approach when she states in an interview:

> If we don't look at things through myths, the structure of our deepest unconscious, we are not going to understand them. Because events spring from myths, a person acts in accordance with myths in real life . . . Using myths gave an added dimension and the possibility to delve more deeply, to use the metaphor, which is the only thing that can really teach us (Gazarian Gautier, 306).

Campbell's three stages of quest can be summarized as separation, descent/initiation and return (Campbell, 30). These stages offer a framework for the psychological analysis of a protagonist in a modern *Bildungsroman*. In his analysis every individual, male or female, must progress through these stages, but in a personalized and unique manner.

Conforming to this pattern, the 26 chapters of *Arráncame la vida* can be divided into three sections which parallel Campbell's stages. The first six chapters illustrate Catalina's long and slow separation from her safe and innocent childhood. By marrying Andrés, she transfers her allegiance from her father to her husband. Her nostalgia of rememberance is mixed with astute and ironic observations. She remembers her father saying to her as a child: "Ya no se puede ir la niña, la tiene atrapada un sapo que quiere que le dé un beso . . ." followed by the tart observation referring to Andrés: "Y de veras me atrapó un sapo" (Mastretta, 11). The fairytale atmosphere and her innocent love for her father are interrupted by a harsher reality. Her frog-prince, Andrés, never turns into a human prince. In the end Catalina will recognize the non-existence of fairytales and that she has evolved and changed while her husband has stagnated in malevolent ugliness.

Chapters seven to nineteen, comprizing the bulk of the novel, are dedicated to Catalina's descent and initiation. Mastretta shows Catalina's unhappy realization that her role as wife and

mother bonds her inescapably to this man, making her an accomplice in the eyes of society. The experience of guilt and complicity, the desire to separate truth and lies and the struggle to define her own values, all characterize Catalina's descent. Initiation can be seen as being represented in two contrasting spheres. Her entrance into the world of politics, as she participates in Fito's presidential campaign, and her initiation into the world of love, offered to her by her adulterous experience with Carlos Vives.

The author alters the final stage of her protagonist's return in chapters 20 to 26. Catalina emerges from her lowest point, the death of her lover, with grief and resignation. But this experience makes her stronger and more resolved to attempt her own and her daughter's rescue which in a cirquitous way leads to her husband's eventual death. In this final stage, Catalina has outgrown her need for his support. His death is a revenge, albeit a passionless one, a symbol of how she has finally detached herself. These final chapters show Catalina's return as a mature woman who no longer lives in childhood

dreams nor in fairytales and who can master reality on her own terms. The concept of return in Catalina's case does not imply reaching a destination or an end point in her development, rather it suggests a woman who has gained the means by which she can continually recreate herself without being controlled by the forces of society. It is an example of the open ending of a modern *Bildunsgroman* where multiple possibilities exist simultaneously.

Campbell proposes that the quest in traditional societies entailed finding meaning through universal symbols contained in the group and in the world. In such societies, the carrier of the spiritual content of the quest were religion and the social unit. He points out that the social unit has lost this function in modern times by becoming an economic-political unit (Campbell, 387). This differentiation between traditional and modern societies is of critical importance for understanding the quest for meaning and identity and its symbols and psychology. Mastretta located *Arráncame la vida* in Mexico during the period of the 1930's and 40's which falls in the transition time

between the traditional and the modern period. Catalina's search for self-development and maturity is drawn against both, the failing traditional organizations of society, thus the nostalgic tone and the dilemas inherent in the search for meaning in modern society.

In Campbell's psychological terms, Andrés symbolizes the figure of the greedy father, the tyrant figure he names "Holdfast", described as:

> the monster of the status quo . . . (he) is great and conspicuous in the seat of power; he is enemy, dragon, tyrant, because he turns to his own advantage the authority of his position. . . .The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for substance; it is his destiny to be tricked . . . tyrants of human breed, usurping to themselves the goods of their neighbors, arise and are the cause of widespread misery. These have to be supressed (337).

This heroic task falls to Catalina, but she has to prepare herself. She has to discern the tyrant under the mask of father, husband, and protector. She has to strengthen herself, first through motherhood, but more by freeing her creative powers from the fear of Andrés' oppression. She has to resolve issues around identification with the aggressor. Adultery committed by Catalina marks the beginning of her open rebellion against the marital authority of her husband. Carlos Vives, her lover, whose name can be seen as representing a new life for Catalina, is the mythical helper whose creative energy, love and music, stands in direct contrast to Andrés' destructive powers. Through the act of sexual intimacy and the subsequent breaking of the taboo of loyalty to her husband, Catalina aquires Carlos' positive powers for herself. To fully own his creativity, she must renounce this love when he dies to complete her process (353). She redeems herself, and after a period of purifying grief she is able to initiate the process resulting in her frog/monster/husband's death. His destiny and hers are tightly intertwined.

The reversal of roles in the novel is striking. While Catalina is young, weak and inexperienced in the beginning, she grows to be strong, powerful and experienced. Andrés' development goes in the opposite direction from a position of strength and power he slowly becomes childlike, weak and dependent on Catalina. By the end of the novel they have exchanged their roles completely. The apprentice has become the master. And the flawed master, Andrés, is vanquished. Catalina's task is to aquire her mentor's power without losing her humanity. The art of the novel lies in the subtleness with which Catalina develops and Andrés declines. The juncture when their opposite trajectories cross is suggested when Andrés' demands one night after a fight: "¿Quién te autorizo a irte de cuzca?" and Catalina replies: "Yo me autoricé . . . Y quítame a los guardaespaldas. No valen lo que les pagas" (Mastretta, 115). This interchange is followed by the first example of a failure of Andrés' political judgement.

Angeles Mastretta uses numerous elements of the modern *Bildungsroman* and the archetypical mythical symbols of the

quest motif, although she has clearly altered the mold of the modern *Bildungsroman* to address Catalina's unique reality. The author's deformation of these models brings the individuation process Catalina has undergone and the unusual set of external historical circumstances in the backdrop of this novel to the reader's attention. Catalina's development is influenced by both, the internal factors and her external environment, the socio-political and cultural environment in Mexico during the post-revolutionary years which comprize the novel.

The Socio-Political Setting of *Arráncame la vida*

It is not known why the author chose the post-revolutionary period of her novel of female development, but some possible motives can be suggested. When women reinterpretate historical events, their aim might be to shed some light on daily affairs and to fill the blanks of the official record books. "In some cases the representation of the past makes comments on the present" (Menton, 25) and allows ignored and marginalized people to speak for themselves. By focusing on a mere wife of a

politician, Mastretta was able to move away from a male centered viewpoint of history. Through the development of female characters and particularly Catalina's development, the author illustrates the existence and significance of interior spaces removed from the public sphere of power. These interior spaces allow room for the voice of the officially silenced groups, the poor and women, to develop. Birute Ciplijauskaite states that "female historical novelists tend . . . often to revise the image of famous men" (Ciplijauskaite, 128). With her focus, Mastretta may well have desired to show the corruption of certain historical men as well as the ramifications of such corruption in the lives of the women and subordinates who were part of the oppressor's orbit. This would underline her choice for Catalina as the central character of *Arráncame la vida*, the wife of the powerful and ruthless governor Andrés Ascencio.

This post-revolutionary period, during the aftermath of the Mexican revolution in the 1920's and 30's, was a period of fundamental change. Life in Mexico had been shattered by ten years of violence and chaos when, fueled by the desire for

equal rights, freedom and democracy, the revolution toppled the regime of the dictator Porfirio Diaz. However during the post-revolutionary period the lofty ideals of the revolution quickly evaporated when the nation was ruled by a succession of strong men who paid mere lip-service to the proclaimed goals of a new democracy (Riding, 71). As their main concession to the revolution, they rotated the office of the presidency every six years, but only among themselves, and thus keeping the newly consolidated and institutionalized power within their own group. General Andrés Ascencio fills the role of one of these 'insiders' in Mastretta's novel. Their influence in the public domain extends the monopoly of power they enjoy as husbands and fathers in the private sphere.

The historical events mentioned in *Arráncame la vida* took place between 1915 and 1946. Many minor characters in the novel are given their actual names: Francisco Madero, Porfirio Díaz, Huerta, Carranza, Zapata, Villa, etc. The resemblence to historical personalities for other characters is evident. The figure of Catalina's husband, general Andrés Ascencio, is based

to some degree on Maximino Avila Camacho, a Mexican revolutionary general who, as Andrés did in the novel, fought against the "cristeros" and who was a repressive governor of the state of Puebla during this period. Maximino's infamous deeds as military general and later as governor are used by the author to create the character of general Andrés Ascencio. Many other characters in the novel have a similar model taken from history. "El personaje de Heiss está inspirado en el del millonario norteamericano - poblano. William Oscar Jenkins Bidd, nacido en 1863 en Shelbyville, Tennessee, y muerto en Puebla en 1963" (Lemaître León, 43).

The novel's official history follows these people and recorded events at that time. Angeles Mastretta anchors the events in her novel in well known national occurrences, strikes, massacres and assassinations which are provoked and acted on by her male characters. This reinforces the concept of a linear male centered and controlled history. In contrast, a type of unofficial history plays behind the scenes. It is the intimate world of reflection in a female narrator's voice of women and children,

and the lives of the poor and the subordinates.

The actions and fates of these marginalized people rarely appear in official records of history, leaving it as a fertile area for exploration by writers of fiction. Mastretta both masks and reveals the 'real' historical identity of her characters. The referral to some characters by their real names adds authority and verisimilitude to the text. On the other hand, it reinforces the legitimacy of the fictional players in the novel. Birute Ciplijauskaite explains why contemporary female authors are writing historical fiction: "Surge, la necesidad de explorar las razones del silencio previo, el deseo de mostrar que la mujer tenía su lugar en la sociedad también antes aunque pasara desapercibida y que ya entonces lograba vivir su propia vida" (Ciplijauskaite, 123). She comments on the rebellion of the "nueva escritura histórica femenina" (125), a group in which Mastretta could be included. Ciplijauskaite believes that these writers present their female protagonists in a different light than men would envision them. These authors insist that emotional and affective elements have prominence combined

with a personal intimate vision almost atemporal in its focus on interiority (125). Mastretta balances her novel between the interior world of Catalina's thoughts and desires and the exterior back drop of the post-revolutionary period which shapes her protagonist.

Reflected in *Arráncame la vida* is the fervor and revolutionary rhetoric of raised hopes for human rights and a new vision of possibilities of social changes in the post-revolutionary period (Foster, 123). Catalina can be seen as an example of a woman swept up by this wave of idealism. In part due to the ferment of the times, but also due to her own unique temperament, she experienced a degree of emancipation unthinkable for a woman of an earlier age. At the beginning of her marriage she recalls: "Nunca fuimos una pareja como las otras" (Mastretta, 23). This crack in the monolithic social structure allowed sufficient light to shine on Catalina's developmental process to nurture new possibilities.

The Mask of *Machismo* in Mexico

The ideals of the revolution struggled not only against the

power hunger of its leaders, but had to face a deeply entrenched structure of social and gender roles. One of the fundamental threads of this tightly woven system is *machismo*, the cult surrounding masculinity. Octavio Paz describes the result of this Mexican phenomenon: "The essential attribute of the *macho* - power - almost always reveals itself in a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating" (Paz, 82). Andrés' style and personality follows closely Paz' description. He is a general and shrewd politician, adding power through aggressiveness, brutality and excess. This posture, dominating his identity as male or *macho*, is finally responsible for his death.

The relationship between power, alienation, oppression and the damage *machismo* creates in men is further elaborated on by Michael Kaufman's article "Men's Contradictory Experience of Power" (Brod, 142-163). Andrés learned his modus operandi during the revolution and its trademarks, self-promotion, intimidation and the use of violence to crush any resistance, served him on his rise to status and fame. But the thrust toward

power, furthered by *machismo*, isolates him and makes him distrustful. The Mexican social philosophers Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz speculate that the Mexican men may feel inferiority due to the Spanish conquest of the Indians. The majority of the people of Mexico are *mestizos* and feel uneasily suspended between their mixed heritage of the Spanish conquerors and the defeated Indians (Weinstein, 68). In defense and as compensation, Mexican men isolate themselves to prevent further injury and betrayel. Their relationship to other men is a split between feeling superior or subordinate, trying to curry favors and gain power from those above and to maintain dominance over those below (Riding, 108). This hierarchical jokeying for positions leaves the participants isolated, suspicious of one another and distanced from other men as well as the women in their environment.

The constraints of *machismo* limit the flexibility and the coping mechanisms of the Mexican male and Andrés is no exception. He uses his connections to his superiors from the revolution to ascend to the governorship of Puebla and

dreams of climbing on to the Mexican presidency using the same tactics. His dream is frustrated, but he achieves a measure of Richelieuan power by gaining the post of presidential advisor by 1940, twenty years after the conclusion of the revolution. In these twenty post-revolutionary years the aging generals were increasingly replaced by technocrats with more refined means of manipulation of power (Riding, 81). Andrés' *machista* personality does not allow him to adapt. He is too emeshed in his inflexible, one dimensional thinking of dominance through violence. The nation had embarked on modernizing itself, but Andrés' excessively brutal style becomes an inappropriate reminder of the bloody past. His inability to change costs him power and influence and dooms him in the end.

The Importance of Female Mexican Archetypes

While Andrés is an accurate representation, almost to the point of caricature, of the Mexican *macho*, Catalina portrays a much more complex reality. In her development she is influenced strongly by several female images, or archetypes,

of the Mexican culture. One is the Virgin of Guadalupe who embodies the good, long suffering, patient and forgiving mother-protector. Her image is in part responsible for the Mexican idealization of motherhood. In contrast to the virgin's virtues is the image of *La Malinche*, the Indian woman who is considered the betrayer of her people and to a great extent guilty for their defeat and genocide of the Indians by the Spanish invaders. Women identified with the image of the traitoress were punished by death throughout Mexican history (Stern, 341). This grim threat was used by the patriarchy to keep women in their obedient and subservient status. A Mexican woman can never be as 'good' as the Virgin of Guadalupe, and can only pray not to be categorized as the 'bad' one. Trapped in this inescapable duality, women are denied the full spectrum of human emotions and tendencies (Stern, 17).

These cultural icons are deeply embedded in the Mexican soul and psyche, dictating and in many instances limiting the development and range of expressions of the individual. Mastretta incorporates these factors in the creation of Catalina's

environment while integrating her heroine's story into the paradigm of the modern female *Bildungsroman*. Octavio Paz sees the result in the Mexican cultural view of a woman being a *Chingada* or to be so unfortunate to be nullified (Paz, 37). Roger Bartra combines the strivings of the positive and negative forces in women in a new cultural icon, the "Chinguadalupe", the duality of Malintzin-Guadalupe expressed as one (Bartra, 222). Stern detects inside every devoted mother, or revolutionary *soldadera*, the latent *Malinche* who could reveal herself under the right circumstances. He continues to describe another female archetype, *La Llorona*, a mythical female figure who, infuriated to horrible anger after an act of betrayal, commits "the most chilling and destructive act available to women - the killing of her own children" (Stern, 343).

Among the multiple interpretations of this myth is the explanation of the historical orphanhood of the Mexican people and a grave warning for the consequences of betrayal (344). In retribution for her 'rightful' revenge, *La Llorona* is condemned to ceaseless wanderings in search for her slain children. At one

level the myth functions as an answer to the helpless and hopeless state of *La Chingada* or *La Malinche*, empowering women in a time of crises to take their fate into their own hand.

Underlying all these images of female archetypes is the problem of loyalty and disloyalty. The idealized woman in the image of the *Virgin of Guadalupe*, *la soldadera* or *la madre* is honored due to her loyalty to her family, her men and to the patriarchal system. But the extraordinary value placed on loyalty breeds a high level of fear and suspicion around women's potential disloyalty, represented culturally as *La Malinche*, *La Llorona* or *La Chingada* (Riding, 364).

This belief system of representational archetypes formed the cultural background of the Mexico of Catalina Guzman. Indeed, Puebla was and is a particular locus of conservatism and Catholicism (404). As limiting as gender stereotypes are, they define at the same time the parameters of male and female identity in concrete terms. Catalina fuses in her own growing sense of self these contradictory images of womanhood. For a while she tries to imitate the 'goodness' of Eulalia, Andrés' first

woman, who he describes as politically naive and idealistic, the picture of the selfless mother and "good woman". Eulalia serves as Catalina's model until she realizes her husband's shortcomings. He is not the good and just patriarch who would be the opposite pole of the pure woman. Although struggling with this sobering realization, Catalina's intelligence and morality do not permit her to live in denial of the true nature of her husband. She says: "Me enteraba por mis hermanos o Pepa y Monica, que en la ciudad todo el mundo hablaba de los ochocientos crimenes y las cincuenta amantes del gobernador" (Mastretta, 71).

Following the mythical path of *La Llorona*, Catalina creates the space to affirm her own values in opposition to those of her husband's. His betrayal allows her to break away from him and to search an authentic identity for herself. In her repeated refusal to acknowledge motherhood as the most revered bastion of female value, she takes decisive steps toward rupture with the idealized woman archetype. Straightforward in her devaluation of motherhood, she exclaims: "Yo mis dos embrazos

los pasé furiosa. Qué milagro de vida ni qué la fregada" (129). About her first pregnancy she says: "Todo el tiempo estuve pensando en lo terrible que resultaría ser mamá" (38). She refuses to endorse motherhood even to the president and his wife when she recalls after the official inauguration of the commencement of *el monumenta a la madre*. "Tuve la nefasta ocurrencia de disertar sobre las incomodidades, lastres y obligaciones espeluznantes de la maternidad" (273). Catalina ends her involvment with her own children when she becomes aware of the contamination they receive through the immoral influences of her husband incured by her own daily involvement in their upbringing: "Resolví cerrar el capítulo del amor maternal" (88).

After turning her children over to the care of a trusted servant, Catalina resolves to find out the nature of Andrés' business dealings in Atencingo. By giving up her traditional role as mother, she has her first psychological departure and disloyalty from Andrés' sphere of power. Although she still moves within a cultural paradigm, she has created some room to

grow in her own direction, empowering herself and ultimately becoming her husband's antagonist. But first she must learn how to wrest power from Andrés and she succeeds while ostensibly staying with him and under his protection. She realizes the difficulty in negotiating this perilous path between maintaining the belief in her own loyalty and finding means to afirm her desires without becoming the 'disloyal woman'. She comments to Andrés one evening after an adventure in Mexico City: "De todos modos yo juego en tu equipo y ya lo sabes" (115). Although she continues to be useful to her husband, she is not confined to the archetypes of *la soldadera* nor *La Virgin de Guadalupe*. She is still emeshed in the constraints of gender roles in Mexico at that time, but the very rigidity of gender expectations gives her the impetus to break free and to develop her consciousness. In this slowly widening space she establishes a contingent authority and mutuality in collaboration with other women who invariably either assist or advise her on this path.

The details of her strategies to achieve confidence and

power can be categorized by their sources. She learns and appropriates from the male domain while being surrounded and aided by the women in her world. The complex nature of her culture offers a wide array of influences. Both female and male sectors of society teach and form her in very different ways, but she has to integrate the lessons into her existence in post-revolutionary Mexico. Catalina receives and reacts to these messages from the male and female domain which impact her development significantly.

Crossing Gendered Boundaries

As described by a modern *Bildungsroman* type novel, an individual's developmental processes occur in an environment filled with opportunities for learning from experience and actions. The learning experience is filtered through each person's unique history, innate characteristics and temperament and results in changes in character, behavior, thoughts, level of maturity and self-perception. Taken by themselves, every day occurrences might appear irrelevant or even chaotic, but when decoded as a continuum of events, they form discernable

patterns of development. Identifying these patterns from the mass of details told in stories is one way to understand how changes in the development of the protagonist have occurred. Elizabeth Abel asks some pertinent questions about reading a female *Bildungsroman*: "What psychological and social forces obstruct maturity for women? What are the prevailing patterns of women's development in fiction? How does gender qualify literary representation?" (Abel, 4). The answers to these questions lie in a detailed examination of Catalina's struggle in *Arráncame la vida*.

Catalina Guzman tells her story of development beginning as a young girl at the age of fourteen concluding when she is a mature woman in her thirties. Although she recounts events and details of her life in a fairly chronological order, the information must be categorized and analyzed as patterns of events to fully understand how she changed and forged her identity. By following and grasping her process of change, the interplay between the individual and the surrounding environment can be better understood.

Catalina is young at the beginning of the novel, barely fourteen years old. She proclaims to be waiting for things to happen to her. She shows her strong sense of pride and personal honor when the parents of a first boy friend who forbade their son to see her due to her lower class status, are humiliated and lose face. Their defeat is an agreeable and just retribution for Catalina. She demonstrates natural intelligence and quickness as well as powers to initiate information gathering when she takes matters in her own hands to educate herself about sex after an unsatisfactory introduction by Andrés. Claudia Schaefer remarks: "She is obsessed with a desire to 'feel' (sentir) . . . This desire to feel, to test the limits and to try out new things governs her actions throughout the novel" (Schaefer, 96). She is curious and questions conventions readily as is apparent in her marriage ceremony when she questions the custom of assuming her husband's name while he will not use hers. From these incidents grows the image of a lively, yet observant, curious and proud young woman who questions the social conventions surrounding her.

After marrying Andrés, Catalina exchanges the rule and guidance of her father for the authority of her husband. This seemingly new situation creates new expectations and experiences for her. Her husband attempts to continue her education according to his personal advantages. First he teaches her to ride, because he wants a mobile and capable woman. The names of their horses, *Pesadilla* and *Al Capone,* are portents of her future. Too soon she will awake to the nightmare of living with a gangster.

During the early days of their marriage Andrés frequently takes Catalina to all male meetings and political gatherings. This unconventional behavior suggests he hopes for Catalina to comply with his traditional vision of the idealized *soldadera* from his revolutionary days. This conclusion is supported by his congratulations when she expresses an original opinion during their courtship: ". . . ¿Quién te pidió tu opinión? Hace cuatro días que hablas de lo mismo, ya me dió tiempo de tener una opinión." "Vaya con la señorita. No sabe ni cómo se hacen los niños y ya quiere dirigir generales. Me está gustando"

(Mastretta, 13). Learning from her husband and observing other men around her further her understanding of the male domain where action, power and hierarchy are the organizing principles. "Rather than stopping her growth, the wedding of an adolescent to a middle-aged general is the catalyst for her personal search for independence as a compensation for this relationship" (Schaefer, 96).

From Andrés Catalina gradually learns about his expectations and his vision of an idealized woman. In part he communicates this vision by telling her the euologizing story of his life with Eulalia, the mother of his first two children. He reveals a self-serving history of his own role as this "perfect woman's" heroic supporter, a common man who raises in the course of the revolution from a *lechero* to a general. Impressed, Catalina tries to imitate Eulalia to gain Andrés admiration and love. But as she gradually finds out about the doubtful truthfulness of this and other stories told to her by her mentor, she rejects imitating another woman. Her disillusionment leads to a more realistic assessment of her husband. She recognizes his political promises

of redistributions of land and wealth as deceptions unless they serve to enrich him personally. Jorge Fornet comments: "Andrés provee a las palabras el mayor grado de disinformación posible, se especializa en hacer promesas que nunca cumplirá" (Fornet, 122). He liquidates his enemies ruthlessly and appropriates whatever he covets.

> Según contó la señora, a mi general le había gustado la casa y llamó a su marido para comprársela . . . Con la amenaza encima, el doctor aceptó vender y puso precio. Andrés lo oyó decir tantos miles de pesos y después sacó de un cajón la boleta del registro predial con la cantidad en que estaba valuada la casa para el pago de impuestos. Era la mitad de lo que pedía, le dio la mitad y lo despidió dándole tres días para desalojar. (Mastretta, 67)

Catalina's intelligence and keen observation soon detect Andrés' true nature, and her sense of honor and moral convictions move her slowly, but inevitably into an antagonistic position. Monique Lemaitre León comments on the nature of power in the novel and on Catalina's growing awareness of it:

"La narradora nos ofrece un caleidoscopio de la dialecta del poder en donde las mujeres muchas veces ayudan a perpetuar el mismo sistema del cual son victimas. Catalina tiene cada vez más conciencia de ello conforme avanza su narración" (Lemaître León, 50). Once she learns how to apply his own techniques against him, she uses them very skillfully. She begins to bargain with her husband to remove her father from involvement in Andrés' corrupt business dealings. Impressed with her negotiating skills, Andrés complies with her wishes and accepts her favorite horse as ransom for her father. Later she uses blackmail to get her horse back when she finds out details about Andrés' role in a peasant massacree. In these situations Catalina displays great capacities for dealing with her husband on the same level and with the same methods he uses to gain his ends.

Life with the corrupt governor of Puebla offers her many opportunities to develop and impliment her intelligence and capacities. He delegates to her a variety of tasks, from running the enlarged household and caring for seven children to

organizing state dinners and raising money to help finance an orphanage. She grows in importance by the side of her powerful husband, receiving petitions and requests to intervene in state politics. All these activities educate her in the realities of government and the political life as run by the male segment of society. As she increases her knowledge and abilities through experience, practice and through access to her husband's power, Catalina's assistance becomes more valuable to Andrés and in turn he relies on her more, and is even subtly influenced by her opinions. When Catalina organizes a political reception for the president of the republic, her successful completion of this task gains her an even stronger influence in the power structure and with Andrés.

The election of Andrés' *compadre* Fito as president instead of Andrés himself heralds a shift in the relative power between Catalina and her husband. Andrés takes advantage of his wife's new abilities and sends her as his representative and spy during the national tour of the political campaign. She excells in this position and he praises her: "En la tarde llamó Andrés para

darme las gracias. Completó la otra mitad del discurso en torno a mis glorias. Eres una vieja chingona. Aprendiste bien. Ya puedes dedicarte a la política. Manténme así al gordo - dijo" (Mastretta, 121).

Catalina's intuitive savvy and dignified demeanor under stress gain her praise even from the president himself. Despite Andrés' new position as a presidential advisor, his power and influence over political decisions wanes during the course of Fito's *sexsenio*. He continues his intrigues and manipulations behind the scenes, but he can not prevent his gradual replacement by a rival with a smoother technocratic style. Andrés usefulness in the political arena as well as in his role as teacher for his wife is coming to an end.

This shift in power is exemplified by Catalina daring to turn to a new man, Carlos, whose teachings are radically different from those of her husband. Carlos' activities open up new vistas of experience for Catalina to explore. He is the national symphonic director, young and cultured with an European education. His political views are progressive,

supporting the poor, the unions and the right of the working man, pitting him in direct opposition to Andrés. Through Carlos, Catalina enters into a completely new and unknown world. There she learns about different political views, but more importantly to her spiritual development, through Carlos she awakes to new feelings of desire, sensuality and love.

Her whole hearted foray into adultery marks the final departure from Andrés' initial hold over her. The disloyalty and treachery to the marital bond and authority serves several purposes in her development. It meets her needs for expression of mutual affection and communication with a man of much greater depth than she had experienced with Andrés. It serves her as revenge for Andrés continued and excessive self-centered immorality. And it terminally breaks her dependent relationship with Andrés.

Mastretta comments to some extent ironically on Catalina's newly found spiritual growth and passions by expressing them through sentimental songs. Her use of popular Mexican ballads from the 30's and 40's throughout the novel serves to bridge

the space between the personal story of Catalina and the larger re-created historical context. The lyrics and the sentiments of these songs form connecting links between the individual and the culture either by reinforcing cultural norms or by inciting a symbolic resistance against them. With the music Mastretta offers a vehicle for the expression of intimate feelings and a supressed national voice at odds with the dominant political hegemony of the national ruling party, represented by Andrés (Schaefer, 90 - 95). During a celebration, a popular singer encodes in boleros the passionate sentiments of Carlos and Catalina, with Andrés, drunk and ignorant, ordering the songs as an unknowing accomplice to his wife's affair. It is a stark reversal of power from earlier days when Andrés forced Catalina into the role of official accomplice of his repugnant and evil deeds. Although aging and losing power in the political sphere, Andrés wields his authority over his wife in a show of ruthlessness and cruelty when he orders her lover killed. However, with this murder he loses the remnants of Catalina's love for him, and seals his own fate.

Gaining ever increasing authority, Catalina has modeled herself in many ways on the male environment of the Mexican culture, and particularly on her husband. But she has used her knowledge and skills for something other than the personal meglomania and agrandizement of Andrés. Her experience with Carlos give content and form to a latent vision of love and affirmation of life. When Carlos is dead she shows through her grief and mourning the maturity she has achieved. Taking charge of his funeral, she arranges a last offering of beauty and love to her dead lover. Andrés provoked her by his cruelty, but she outwardly gains control of herself and the situation by interiorizing the pain in public. She shows awareness of the danger of completely burying her feelings as she was taught by Andrés. Aided by her new authority and competence she finds relief of her pain and grief in a small house where she allows herself to express her emotions freely.

By consciously shutting out the hollow funeral speeches of Andrés and Medina, the union leader, she enforces her rejection of the false, meaningless and death bringing male world on

either side of the political struggle. She has been an eager student, but now she has come to the end of her many lessons. Andrés succeeded in numbing her to life by killing her lover Carlos, but he could not kill her female spirit, quietly teaching her to endure and to deepen the pleasures of life. From her interactions with the women in her world she learns different lessons. They enhance her development in the realm of emotional adjustment and adapting to the gendered boundaries of her culture.

Both males and females show Catalina the value of appearance and deception. Emotional outbursts, sadness and crying are private matters and not for the public eye. Catalina adheres to this standard, but it doesn't come easy. She comments one evening before a state dinner that she wishes she could shut herself away from the responsibilities, from forever having to appear as the gracious wife of the governor and be permitted to cry. Open expression of her emotions is not an available option for her and she has learned this lesson well. Acceptance, dignity and courage are the hallmarks of the as yet

inarticulate female strength in her. After the death of Carlos, she retreats into the female realm, opened to her by the teachings of the women around her, for gathering strength and comfort in the intuitive and emotional sphere.

The female figures who touch Catalina's life represent a complex and multi-dimensional reality in the novel. Her mother, insecure and dependent, or her unhappy friend Bibi lead obscure and strangled lives void of self-determination and freedom of choices. Catalina observes, interacts, or offers assistance to them. Women like her mother or Bibi are the visible manifestations of the translucent rules of the gendered society in post-revolutionary Mexico. Catalina learns to observe and to chose which part of herself to affirm or to reject, and her identity slowly coalesces.

Catalina's mother, a weak and conservative presence, serves her as a negative role model. She observes her mother and comments: "Llegó mi madre con cara de ya es muy noche para que andes fuera de tu casa. Ella nunca estaba fuera de su casa después de las cinco de la tarde menos sin su marido. Yo

le resultaba un escándalo" (Mastretta, 141). The image of a woman who is afraid of what others think of her and who seems to have little enjoyment in life pushes Catalina early on toward rebellion from society's limited proscribed roles for women. Her own and Andrés' mother as well as the older generation of upper class *poblanas* represent a negative, repressed pole from which Catalina recoils and is propelled towards openess and freedom of expression.

Other women in her circle show similar evidence of the male oppression she wants to avoid. Her friend Pepa is caught in an unfortunate marriage with a man who, not permitting her to leave the house, acts more like a jailer than a husband. Bibi, a consort of a general, is imprisoned in her house and in one instance physically abused and partially strangled in front of Catalina and other guests by her husband.

Catalina's quick intelligence uncovers the unjust limitations, either imposed by the woman herself in the case of her mother or by husbands or fathers and she rejects them. Witnessing other women's repressions motivates her to struggle for a

degree of independence. She feels fortunate to be encouraged by her husband Andrés to strive for, albeit limited autonomy. Although superficially supportive of Catalina's will to empower herself, Andrés is nevertheless arbitrary in his dominion over women. He affirms his right to use his daughter Lilia to further his business dealings when he imposes his choice of husband on her.

> A mis hijas no se las lleva cualquier cabrón de la noche a la mañana. A mis hijas me las vienen a pedir con tiempo, para que yo investigue al cretino que se las quiere coger. Yo no regalo a mis crías. El que las quiera que me ruegue y se ponga con lo que tenga. Si hay negocio, lo hacemos, si no, se me va luego luego a la chingada. (207)

The women in Catalina's world either accept oppression or rebell in covert, subterranean ways. One friend, Monica, must learn to run her husband's garmet factory, because of his paralysis. Thus having become self-sufficient to some extent, Monica becomes more assertive. Another friend rebells against

her husband's intolerable jealousy, takes a lover and reveals to Catalina her state of grace: "Cogemos como dioses" (109). Catalina sees quickly the advantages to be gained by subverting the traditional role of abnegated wife and mother. She refuses to embrace society's appraisal of motherhood as the ultimate status and attainment of women.

She is encouraged in her outspokeness by Andrés, perhaps due to its orginiality, a curious and refreshing aberation in a young female, and judged therefore as entertaining by him and her family and friends. It is Catalina's frankness and insubordinate spirit which propells her in her search for truth and personal identity beyond the boundaries of her patriarchal society. Her traditional teachers, the Salisian nuns, teach her little of importance. Her free-wheeling spirit detects no relevance in knowing names of the tribes of Israel or how to cross stitch table cloths. Instead she gathers less conventional advice from the gipsy woman in *el barrio de la luz* for the enlightening knowledge of sexual enjoyment. She feels no bonds to the conventional and puritanical *poblanas*, nor does she hold

malice toward the legions of women who are Andrés' mistresses or have liaisons with him. She feels envious of them not because of their sexual role, but because society does not judge them, like her, as the official accomplice of the criminal governor of Puebla. She even feels sympathy for them as fellow sufferers of Andrés' unpredictable tyrany.

Women who are blatant victims of his crimes, the daughters and widows of his assassination squads, receive Catalina's whole hearted sympathy. She realizes clearly the impact the death of a husband or father has in a Mexican family. Having been kept dependent on the male provider for the family's livelyhood, these women have suddenly lost their main resource for survival. Becoming so enraged by Andrés' malicious and corrupt rule, Catalina refuses to have sex with him in a first sign of utter rejection of his methods, and as a symbol of withholding her life force from him in return for his deadly dealings.

> Su cuerpo encima me enterraba los broches del liguero. -¿Quién lo mató? -Pregunté. - No sé. Las almas puras tienen muchos enemigos. -Dijo-. Quítate esas mierdas.

> Está resultando más difícil coger contigo que con una virgen poblana. . . . Pero yo seguí con las piernas cerradas, bien cerradas por primera vez. (99)

This type of rejection underlines her solidarity with the victimized women. Alicia Llarenas comments about her refusal of sex with Andrés: "Es entonces cuando ese feminismo como nueva perspectiva de analisis que denuncia y questiona radicalmente las falsas hegemonías" (Llarena, 470). This sense of female unity and support for each other is evident in numerous situations in the novel. Catalina speaks about the limited freedom of women in selecting fathers for their children to her friend Bibi: "Deja la nariz, las mañas. No sé como nos hemos atrevido a reproducirlos" upon which Bibi replies: "No tienen que ser iguales" (Mastretta,128). In their openness with each other lies tacit, but complete recognition of the evil of their respective spouses.

In another instance Catalina saves a peasant woman, Carmela, from Andrés' henchmen with far reaching consequences. It is through this woman Catalina receives later

the poisonous tea which leads to Andrés' slow death. Carmela's words are simple, truthful and timely for Catalina:

> No entendía que yo siguiera viviendo con el general Ascencio. Porque ella sabía, porque seguro que yo sabía, porque todos sabíamos quien era mi general a no ser que yo quisiera, a no ser que yo hubiera pensado, a no ser que ahí me traía esas hojas de limón negro . . .
>
> (el té) curaba de momento pero a la larga mataba. (258)

About the tea, Carmela says: "Las hojas (son) buenas pero traicioneras" (259). Herbal knowledge has been traditionally women's knowledge and it can be used by women to defend themselves from betrayal and oppression by unjust males. Here the spirit of *La Llorona* reappears. Women, just like the aformentioned tea, may be good, but they also have the capacity to be treacherous and vengeful when betrayed or oppressed.

Catalina's adversarial position to Andrés gradually becomes clearer to herself when she realizes she can't trust him to tell her the truth. As she experiences his deceitful ways, she also increases her ability to dissimulate. Due to the value of

unquestioning loyalty in the Mexican culture, particularly in political matters (Riding 110), dissent or open disagreement are not possible for the governor's wife. Catalina learns the rules of her world which prohibit her from breaking down in public or from revealing her true feelings when this might compromise her position and status as Andrés' wife. Her instinct of self-preservation and to keep life as harmonious as possible for herself dictates her surface behavior towards Andrés. Nevertheless, her conversations with him are full of irony and double meanings. The reader can only guess at how much of the meaning behind this ironic sparring is understood by the contestants. Catalina wields her power of ironic language carefully. She walks a fine line, torn between fear of her husband and a brazen nonchalance towards him. As part of her education from her male as well as female teachers, she masters the skill to detect deceit and learns to deceive effectively herself.

To gain freedom for her supressed emotions, she interiorizes a pattern for separating conflicting feelings. This ability is

mirrored in the descriptions of the houses she inhabits. Her main residence outside of Pueblo is a big house with many rooms. The formal dining room contains the space for entertaining, a large billard room can be found in the basement, the kitchen, the children's floor, a room with a large fern, her own bedroom and the governor's sleeping room, a garden, all provide ample living space for her and her family. But furthermore, each space corresponds to certain people and functions.

Andrés ensconces himself in the basement billard room, suggesting the Freudian image of the subterranean and unruly Id crouched in the unconscious. Political guests and their deceitful and superficial behaviors are confined to the formal entertaining rooms on the main floor. The children live on the top floor like angels who float above all, out of harms way, especially after access to the poluted regions downstairs has been denied them by Catalina. She has selected a special remote room upstairs for Carlos and herself, *el cuarto del helecho*. The large fern as a primitive plant implies innocence, lushness and

pristine nature, conjuring up the secretive image of a primordial ferny hollow. When she removes the lights on the stairway to permit unobservable crossings between her room and Carlos' fern room, she exchanges decorum and pretense for abandon and pleasure. In the darkened hallway, she bridges with invisible emotions her worlds of interior desires and external enforced behaviors.

Although her presence is felt throughout the house, she emphasizes living primarly in her bedroom and in the garden, just as she keeps the separate space in herself to be mother and loyal wife apart from the adulteress and the shrewd politician. She focuses and gives herself completely to each of her occupations, but none of them can claim to capture all of her complexity. Andrés comments on this multi-level existence in his speech on his death bed: "Yo sé que te cabe muchas mujeres en ese cuerpo y yo solo he conocido unas pocas" (Mastretta, 288). This strict compartmentalization of feelings and behaviors is a method Catalina developed to cope with her untenable situation. It is a practical way to separate her

conflicting loyalties and to keep herself whole and untouched by the sordid corruption in her environment. Such strategies of accomodation and deceit are often belittled as weak or treacherous, but in this case as a means of survival and to gain time to learn and grow, they become necessary tools for the fight for an authentic identity.

In addition to the large house in Puebla, Catalina has homes in Mexico City, Acapulco, a ranch in Atlixico and a small house across from the graveyard in Tonanzintla. For Catalina these houses mean places to create order, ritual and security. It is telling that only the little house by the cemetery and the house in Acapulco have greater significance for her. In the first she is allowed to grieve openly, while the latter is her window to escape and to rejoice. All the other buildings offer little more warmth than a prison to her, a reflection on her inner state when living there.

Catalina travels on several occasions to the sea, each time with a different purpose. Andrés initiates her to sex on their first excursion, while Carlos shows her the fullness of love as a

mature woman on their journey to the ocean. Her seaside home in Acapulco helps her to recapture memories of love for Carlos after his death, and to realize her potential for freedom and authenticity. Next to the expansive ocean the need for pretence and adherence to society's constraints become meaningless. The ocean's untamed freedom ignites an exuberance for life in young Catalina and the delirious magic of love when she returns as an adult woman. Finally, the sea becomes a refuge and place of tranquility where she can ponder her life to find meaning and answers to her questions about herself and her authentic place in it.

"Sin Decidirlo Me Volví Distinta" (Mastretta, 271)

The person Catalina has become by the end of the novel is a result of her developmental process. Her personality shows few signs of the conservative social accomodation so well described in the earlier European male oriented *Bildungsroman*, nor does her situation resemble the frequently tragic ending in death or insanity of the female version of the genre in the 19th century.

An authentic identity goes necessarily beyond cultural conventions and dictates.

> It is important to realize that education is a cultural imposition on us; it does not give us self-knowledge. Only self-knowledge gives us understanding of culture as opposed to the dualistic knoweldge that culture transmits as indoctrination. Self-knowledge is based on realization and understanding; its source is non-dualistic (Meek, 24).

An essential question is whether Catalina has developed an authentic and complex identity over the course of the novel, including self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

In this thesis I argue that reading *Arráncame la vida* as a modern *Bildungsroman* offers important insights into the novel and it's protagonist's development of identity. Viewed from a feminist perspective, *Arráncame la vida* has been categorized as a novel without evidence of development of the protagonist. According to these readings, *Arráncame la vida* reaffirms the male dominated social hierarchy rather than illustrating the

case of female development through the assimilation and transgression of male norms. Peggy Job's interpretation concludes:

> Aunque Catalina sea una mujer simpática, ha aceptado la corrupción y el ejercicio despiadado del poder de su marido, incluso el asesinato de su amado-amante; es una mujer que al fin y al cabo se vende; su *joy de vivre*, una illusión. (Job, 131)

Aralia López González agrees in part with Job in a negative appraisal of Catalina's final development. She concurs that Catalina has remained in a "posición infantil, irresponsable, dirigida por el principio de placer y tomando al hombre-amante como mediación entre ella y el mundo" (López-González, 6).

I contend, however, that the text underscores the opposition to authority and the power and value of the marginalized voices of women and the poor in the Latin American literary tradition. The heroine finds the value and meaning of her own evolution and a nacent sense of self in the space created by the narrator within the patriarchal structure. The text presents ample

evidence to refute Job's and López González' readings of Catalina as an immature or undeveloped character. In her marriage to Andrés she rapidly surpasses the image of a housebound wife and mother, entering her husband's world of power politics where she learns to manipulate events to her advantage. She decides to have only two children and successfully prevents further pregnancies. Important psychological issues around oedipal feelings are resolved, as are her tendencies to identify with the aggressor. Facing these issues and acknowledging them diminishes their hold over her. She rejects her husband's cruel political methods, rejects him sexually in disgust and takes her fate in her own hands by becoming an adulteress. Her fears for her lover's as well as her own life are justified when Carlos is ordered killed by Andrés.

Catalina continues her struggle against the patriarchy when she tries to assist her stepdaughter in a love match in opposition to the marriage of business convenience Andrés ordains. Ever rebellious, she toys with the idea of wearing a sexy red silk dress to Andrés' funeral. Part of her would be satisfied to stand

up against the social convention, but instead she chooses to wear black and be what Andrés would call "una viuda de buen ver" (Mastretta, 301). Her rejection of nonconforming is not a sell-out to society, rather it indicates her move beyond public rebellion against cultural constructs. She recognizes the emphasis and validation such flamboyant gesture would give to cultural norms. It also would show Andrés' influence to be prevailing over her own even after his death.

Reflected in these examples is a woman who makes a realistic appraisal of her situation and her possibilities, given the constraints imposed by her husband and by the Mexican culture. Finding unpalatable the exterior public circumstances in the male dominated world, she embarks on an interior journey.

Catalina's love cannot be bought, although Andrés tries by purchasing a historical landmark in Mexico City for her. He must realize that her love is on a different plain than material goods, no matter how extravagant. General Andrés Ascencio personifies the excess and oppression but also the ignorance

of the patriarchy. Ernesto Sábato argues that "modern times have aggravated the oppression of women, because the technical and abstract society evolved out of patriarchal society, carrying the predominance of the male mentality to catastrophic consequences" (Sábato, 134).

In contrast to this view, Catalina moves on to follow her practical education and imagination to a better world where love, compassion and cooperation are the guiding principles. Marjorie Agosín maintains that many Latin American women writers "question the spheres of power and of knowledge, as well as the relationship between the two, in order to rebel and create their own space where valorization of affection, intimacy and sisterhood are central" (Agosín, 40). Mastretta's novel follows in this tradition and creates a protagonist whose vivid imagination and unique vision carves a place within the patriarchy where her spirit can be free as it has been next to the immensity of the sea.

After her husband's death, Catalina finds herself in the promising position of the powerful survivor who has begun to

transgress society's gender proscripts. Probing carefully and within the limits of reason and good judgement as a result of her fifteen year long exposure to the forces of male supremacy and female subversive accomodation, she successfully crosses the gender boundaries of her culture. From this experience has emerged a mature woman who gained insight into the wisdom of cooperation where necessary and ironic distance when her sensibilities and integrity are impinged.

During Andrés wake she is reminded of the oppression of the married status by another widow who cautions her not to end the ideal state of widowhood by remarrying. Catalina has become free of Andrés direct control and oppression when he died, but she is still part, by virtue of living within it, of the Mexican social order. In the course of the novel she gains conscious disbelief of the legitimacy of this patriarchy, but she must continue to subvert its underlying tennets and principles. She must distance herself from negative influences and seek the support of positive commitments to advance her growth process and to avoid the false security of control

inside and outside of marriage.

Before her husband's funeral she gives indications she has indeed embarked on such precarious path when she muses about the balance of various people's reaction to his death. "Viejo rabo verde, cabrón, ratero, asesino, simpático - dirá alguno. 'Loco', murmurará doña Rafa" (Mastretta, 300). Catalina acknowledges the partial truth in all these opinions, but she recognizes that the entire character of her husband can not be defined by mere words. The people who judge him on his deathbed are the same who formed him in his life. Men and women face the same dilema, regardless of their status of power. An individual's formation and society's judgements are inextricably linked through the person's existence within the cultural framework. Their functional shaping is manifested either in the stunted identity formation of Andrés or in the impetus to move outward and beyond set standards to a position of relative freedom and autonomy as in the case of Catalina.

I believe Judith Payne's interpretation of Joseph Campbell's

thought to be correct in her assertion that:

> The path to transcendence or true knowledge incorporates a fusion of opposites and that the ultimate understanding achieved by the hero (whether male or female) is always that division, perceived by ordering consciousness, is illusory while unity is the true and desireable nature of reality. (Payne, 184)

Catalina evidences the overcoming of dualistic or divisive thinking and feeling when she resolves to emphasize in her memory her positive and loving feelings for Andrés rather than the darker rancour of resentments associated with the realities she doesn't deny, but has moved beyond. She has tasted from the full spectrum of human emotions: power, struggle, anger, disgust, greed, love, grief and finally separation and independence. Her saga has been a true quest with many separations, dark descents and initiations, culminating in the return and emergence of a fully matured woman who chooses to live positively facing her uncertain future in a life affirming stance. She discovers herself to be a capable woman and she

faces her future reassured with a positive identity: "Estaba sola, nadie me mandaba. Cúantos cosas haría, pensé . . . jugando con la tierra húmeda que rodeaba la tumba de Andrés. Divertida con my futuro, casi feliz" (Mastretta, 305). The moist earth on her husband's grave suggests the process of growth, fecundity and the continuation of life despite the patriarch's death. Playing with the unformed soil, she senses the opening of a new future.

Catalina's 'result' is not arriving at a state of static completion nor as a protagonist who returns reconciled to the structures and molds of society as was often the case in the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Rather, Catalina's final stages of development at the novel's end indicate the dynamic process of her own perpetual becoming, marked by epiphanies, capable of displacing, substituting and sublimating the patriarchal rule imposed from outside.

Mastretta's vision of Catalina is self-empowering and representative of the quest and the process of becoming. The open, fluid ending hints at Catalina's realization of the apparent

omnipotence of society's rules, personified by the powerful male characters Andrés, Fito, CienFuegos and Medina and their complex web of deceit that she has slowly begun to unravel. The backbone of the novel is the underlying affirmation of the alternative strategies to the societal structures of deception, competition and violence. Woman can be authentic, strong and emotional. They can support each other and create more livable spaces by cultivating courageous alternatives and rejecting the imposed patriarchal vision.

Catalina's intriguing struggle, culminating in an amorphous, yet optimistic conclusion, lends new opportunities to the process of individuation as well as a hopeful, positive angle to the genre of the modern female *Bildungsroman*.

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