

# *My Father Was a Toltec* by Ana Castillo

Week: 2 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pp. 6, 48, 138

## Themes:

- Gender roles
- Expectations of women by men/society
- Division of labor in marriage
- Family relationships

**Recommended Opening:** “I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't.” ~ Audre Lorde

- What stands out to you about this quote? Do you agree with all/some/none of it? Why/why not?
- What do you think about Lorde’s claim that “we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves”? In what ways would you say women are taught to respect fear more than ourselves? What are some examples of how this might look in the world?
- Why does she say “we’ve been taught that silence would save us”? Why does she say that it won’t? Why might women think that silence will save them? Why might women think that silence won’t save them?
- What have you been taught about speaking up as a woman? How do you decide when to speak up and when to be silent?
- What would you tell a woman who is too afraid to speak up about something?

## Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read “Saturdays” pg. 6

- What’s happening in this poem? What do we know about each of the “characters” (mother, father, daughter)?
- What sense do we get of the mother’s life from this poem?
- What do you think of the division of labor in this family? What responsibilities fall to the wife? What responsibilities fall to her husband? What responsibilities fall to the daughter?
- Why do you think the poet goes into so much detail about the wife doing the laundry?
- How accurate does this feel for the time it’s taking place (1968)? Do you think her situation is still a real one for women today? Why/why not? Do you know women who have experienced something like this?
- What kind of woman is the man going out to meet? How is she different from his wife? What do you make of this?
- Who has the power in this relationship?
- Why does she stay with him? What does she get out of her relationship with him? What does he get out of his relationship with her?
- What is the daughter’s role in this picture? Where does she fit? How do you think it might have affected her to grow up with this dynamic in her household?
- Do you think the mother and daughter know where the man is going? Why/why not?

Read “A Marriage of Mutes” pg. 48

- Who is this woman? How would you describe her relationship with the man?

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- Why is this referred to as “his” house? Why is she described as “the woman who lived there”?
- Why is this poem called, “A Marriage of Mutes”? In what way are they “mutes”? What is each of them not saying?
- Why does she never seek the woman across the lawn? Why do you think the poet chose to include this detail?
- What is the significance of the crow? (*Scavenger known as most intelligent bird/ Some believe can be taught English/ ravens, crows, and other black birds symbolize death in some cultures / birds in general often represent the soul*)? Why do you think Castillo made this choice?
- What do you make of the fact that he knocks over *her* belongings & the baby’s shoes as he gets ready to fly off?
- What do you think the crow would have said “had his beak contained teeth” as the poet suggests? Why?
- Why would she be grateful to have lived with him? Why was his time and affection too much to ask for? What do you make of the last line: “it had always been too much to ask”?
- Is this scenario accurate today? Why? How can/do we change this dynamic?
- What are you ways you see or know of women changing these dynamics in their relationships or marriages?

Read “El ser mujer” pg.138

## **Translations-**

- “*Querida Mami*” - **Dear Mommy**
  - “*Cabellitos De Oro*” - **Little golden-haired one**
  - “*Mami, dime por favor, si puedes:*” - **Mommy, tell me please if you can**
  - “*Persignate, mi hija*” - **Cross yourself, my daughter/dear** (Cross yourself in religious terms.)
  - “*Mi Querida Madre*” - **My Dear Mother**
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- What's happening in this poem? What's the setting? How old do you think the daughter is?
  - How would you describe the narrator’s relationship with her mother? How, if at all, do you think this has changed since she was a young girl?
  - Why does the narrator ask her mother, “must I be a woman now?” What does she mean by this?
  - What are the "trying years" to which she refers? What is she afraid of?
  - Can you think of a woman who’s been through trying years? What have you learned from her? What advice do you think would she have for you?
  - What do you think it takes to know your own strength? What do you think might have happened to make the mother know her strength now?
  - What kind of support can women gain from other women (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, friends etc...)? Can men provide the same kind of support? If so, how? If not, why not?
  - Why does the mother tell her to pray? Why does she respond by saying she'll pray "to" the mother?

**Recommended Poetry:** “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” by Alice Walker

- How would you describe the “mama’s generation”? What do we hear about them?

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- How does that seem to compare to the narrator's generation? What changes do you think women have seen between these generations?
- What kind of language does Walker use to describe what her mama's generation did (military language, household/domestic language)? Why do you think she would use both of these side-by-side?
- What is the importance of discovering, "books/ Desks/ A place for us"? Who is the "us" she is referring to?
- What do you make of the last line: "How they knew what we/ Must know/ Without turning a page/ Of it/ Themselves"?
- Why do you think the poem is titled, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"?
- What can we learn from the actions, lifestyles, traditions, etc. of our mother's generation? Of our grandmother's generation? What can we learn from the women in our own generation?

### **Recommended Poetry Prompts:** "Must I Be A Woman Now?"

Think about the strongest female figure (mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin, sister, friend, etc...) in your life. Like Castillo and Walker, think about what she might have to teach or advise you about being a woman. What fears/concerns/worries do you have? What would she say to you in response?

### **Recommended Closing:** "I know I am strong..." by Laura Veuve