Chapter Five

Katherine Mansfield and Sandra Cisneros

The two stories considered in this chapter seem worlds apart. They are separated by seventy years and a hemisphere. There is a mandarin quality in Katherine Mansfield’s work, even in this story about a life-battered charwoman, that is out of fashion today. We prefer the earthy ethnicity at the heart of Sandra Cisneros’s lyricism. Yet both stories have a lot to say about the social influences on identity formation. So vividly do both stories portray the constraints on female expression, autonomy, and fulfillment, that they appear to be documentation for a feminist argument.

In today’s literature classroom, where the emphasis is so often on matters of race, gender, and class, these stories are eminently usable. It is a failure of responsibility to study and appreciate them fully without regard to their “messages.” There are times, however, when the social significance is so much in the air, so much a part of the context in which the stories are read, that the cultural index precedes the narrative experience. In these cases, preclosure study is, in my view, a healthy alternative. It offers a way of starting with the story and ending with the relevance, an approach that is fairer to the author and truer to the art form. Here are two cases in point.

Early Twentieth-century London, a Literary Gentleman’s Apartment

She’s a widowed charwoman. Yesterday, her loving little grandson, the light of her dreary life, was buried. As servant, wife, and mother, she’s the
generic British working-class female at the turn of the century—cowed by drudgery and burdened by loss. Her husband, a baker, died of “white lung” disease, and those children who survived the high rate of infant mortality fell victim to other ills of the late-Victorian underclass: emigration, prostitution, poor health, worse luck. This is the life of Ma Parker, who comes to work after her grandson’s burial, stunned by a grief she can barely stand. Her employer, a “literary gentleman” out of touch with humanity, hopes “the funeral was a—a—success.” What a day! What a life! If only there were someplace to go—certainly not a room of her own, but a corner, a stoop—where she could “be herself” and have, for the first time in her life, “a proper cry.” As the final line says, “There was nowhere.”

Katherine Mansfield’s “Life of Ma Parker” is an unabashed tearjerker. The old cleaning woman keeps her eyes dry, but we’re not supposed to. In fact, the emotional bribery is so patent, the assault on pity so bold, it’s hard not to dismiss this story as an embarrassing lapse, one of quite a number of stories in which Mansfield’s tougher insights and cooler ironies fail to control her sentimentality. The story is dissipated in the emotive response, which is triggered too simply and spent too quickly.

At the same time, there is a quantity of sociological detail, an imaginative empathy, a spare iconography of working-class life that make the story a perfect set piece for cultural studies. Indeed, in today’s climate of social awareness in the literary classroom, it is very hard to find readers—either students or teachers—who will not approach this story primed to talk about gender and class issues. Such readers, one would think, are just the ones to appreciate the story.

What often happens, however, is that the issues, valid and important as they are, frame the reading process so exclusively that the story becomes an ideological product. Like Ma’s employer, the literary gentleman who takes a passing interest in “this product called Life,” such readers hypostatize the “life” represented in the story (capitalizing Women and Working-class). While they do so with much encouragement from Mansfield, and with considerably more insight and sympathy than her male character displays, they, too, are allowing the story to dissipate and escape them.

As a short story theorist and a teacher, I want to know what we can find in this tale when we do not “spend” it too quickly as sob story or, for that matter, as protest story. The question might be worth asking simply because “Life of Ma Parker,” composed in 1920, dates from the same pe-
period as those firmly controlled masterpieces, “Miss Brill” and “Daughters of the Late Colonel.” However, it is also worth asking because the sins of this one little story—exaggerated affect, subordination of character to type, social pathology, oversimplified message—have all, at one time or another, in various guises and degrees, been charged against the genre of the short story.

While it is obviously true that this one text does not stand for all stories, nor even for one category of fictions (modernist, impressionist, working-class, feminist, etc.), I am once again suggesting that my approach fits many a tale that claims our attention yet resists our engagement, either because (as in chapters 2 and 3) the story presents special difficulties to the student or because (as in this instance) it can be grasped too easily. I want to slow down the reading process in order to track it more carefully, to net more value from a short[er] fiction.

As a context for what I am about to do, let me first mention two of the more usual ways of approaching Mansfield’s story: formalist and biographical. “Life of Ma Parker” is rarely anthologized and hardly ever taught, and then only, one supposes, as a checklist of modernist techniques: controlled point of view (it shifts deftly from one character to the other in the first half-page), free indirect discourse (we often hear echoes of Ma’s speech in the narrator’s voice), cinematic flashbacks (with implied fade-ins and fade-outs), a pair of famous impressionist images (in the rainy street, “the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats”), and the signature open ending that withholds resolution. Calling students’ attention to these technical achievements, to the ways in which the sujet is transformed into the fabula, is certainly worth doing, although there are better examples in the Mansfield canon. Yet, in the case of this rather slim artifact, I’m inclined to agree with the cultural historians: a formalist approach, used alone, is unsatisfying.

More inviting, especially to those who see Mansfield as a tragic figure, are the biographical echoes. The grandson who dies of pleurisy (one of Mansfield’s own diseases) evokes Charlie Walter, the sickly little boy sent to Mansfield, like an emotional care package, while she was recovering from a miscarriage at a German spa in 1909. Ma Parker, one of a number of working-class, female isolatos portrayed with genuine sympathy and understanding in Mansfield’s work, may well derive from one of the servants Mansfield employed over the years, a class of woman she seems to have observed closely. It is tempting to see the unnamed literary gen-
tleman as a sly joke on her occasional roommate, fellow writer, and eventual husband, John Middleton Murry, whose delicate aversion to “this product called Life” often frustrated Mansfield. Or the portrait may be an even slyer, gender-bending parody of her own inadequacies. The literary gentleman is royally insensitive but also awkward, misguided, and alone in the world.

However, the relationship at the core of the story—the coy and tender interaction between a child and a mothering grandparent—reaches back into Mansfield’s childhood. These scenes strongly resemble more famous ones between Mrs. Fairfield and Kezia in the autobiographical stories “The Prelude” and “At the Bay.” All biographers of Mansfield agree that she never received the love she needed from her withdrawn and self-centered mother, finding some modicum of steadiness and affection in her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Dyer. Thus, in the relationship between Ma Parker and little Lennie, the childless (and eventually sterile) Mansfield inhabits the position of the loving mother she did not have and could not be, as well as the position of the beloved child, which she never was and could not have. A story we disparage for overflowing sentiment looks suddenly efficient, encoding vast amounts of hurt in 202 sentences. The biographical approach shows us, in particularly succinct terms, how art can transform an excess of self-pity. Yet, again, there is more to the story.

It’s easy to find that “more” in the social content of the tale. Flashbacks from Ma Parker’s own history—her cruel apprenticeship as a cook’s helper, her husband’s death from an occupational disease, her family’s diaspora into the byways of poverty, emigration, and prostitution—read like a lesson in demographics. The good student, therefore, will speak feelingly and expertly about the absence of a welfare net, about the limited social and economic choices for the working-class family, about the class-coded barriers to communication between the charwoman and the literary gentleman, about the gender-coded expectation that Ma should swallow her suffering. These readers will know what the author is telling them: that women like this one were marginalized by society. End of story.

“Not so fast, not so fast,” I want to tell them. But, in teaching as in writing, it is better to illustrate. So—naturally—I ask them to do a preclosure exercise. I give them a transcription of the story with the sentences numbered and paragraphing removed (though, in this case, section breaks were marked by Mansfield’s ellipses). I ask them to list the sentences that give them a feeling of closure—as if the story could have ended at that
point. I turn my students into a distributed reader. As I have elsewhere shown, this empirically defined reader, no matter how naïve the constituent real readers may be, has a kind of wisdom no scholar can offer.

In the present case, I gave the exercise to two different undergraduate classes at the University of Iowa, for a combined total of 51 readers. The ratio of females to males was 38:13, or almost exactly 3:1. Altogether, 149 preclosure points were chosen. As usual, I will focus on one or two choices with special relevance, and then on the set of most-favored choices.

My first discovery was a noticeable gender bias in some of the results. Just as I found in the Cortázar experiment, readers choosing the earliest preclosure points were disproportionately male. The very earliest choice, defining the very shortest putative story, occurred at sentence S/15. The sentences leading up to it describe Ma Parker’s arrival at her employer’s flat, his awkward attempt to acknowledge her personal tragedy, his culminating faux pas, and Ma’s response to it. Here is what happens:

S/9  He could hardly go back to the warm sitting-room without saying something—something more.
S/10  Then because these people set such store by funerals he said kindly, “I hope the funeral went off all right.”
S/11  “Beg parding, sir?” said old Ma Parker huskily.
S/12  Poor old bird!
S/13  She did look dashed.
S/14  “I hope the funeral was a—a—success,” said he.
S/15  *Ma Parker gave no answer.*
S/16  She bent her head and hobbled off to the kitchen . . . (484)

Although only one person chose S/15 as a preclosure point, it is not an eccentric choice. The previous sentence ends with inverted syntax (“said he” rather than “he said”), a linguistic marker associated with closure. The sentence after it denotes a change of venue—one of the most common and powerful markers of narrative initiative, back-signaling closure in the previous sentence. The target sentence itself, S/15, includes a lexical closural signal, the negative absolute *no*.

If we look at the putative story that would end at S/15, it is a minimal one, indeed. Not much more than an anecdote. What “happens” is a failure of communication caused primarily by class difference (note the employer’s assumption about “these people”) but also by the difference be-
tween a peremptory male and a grief-burdened woman. Although this is not the subtlest of Mansfield’s portraits of social and gender difference, it has her deft economy, her needling wit, her fluid sympathy. In the first fifteen lines, the viewpoint is *bis*, not hers. I found it interesting that the only reader who could imagine the story ending here was a male.

Five readers chose S/24, still very early in the text (12 percent of the way through). The literary gentleman has returned to his breakfast, Ma Parker is removing her hat, her coat, and the boots that cruelly pinch her feet:

S/22  To take off her boots or to put them on was an agony to her, but it had been an agony for years.
S/23  In fact, she was so accustomed to the pain that her face was drawn and screwed up ready for the twinge before she’d so much as untied the laces.
S/24  *That over, she sat back with a sigh and softly rubbed her knees...* [Mansfield’s ellipsis]
S/25  “Gran!” [Here begins a remembered scene with her grandson.] (484–85)

Once again, a change in venue—this time a dramatic flashback—signals a new beginning, giving closural force to the sentence before. That sentence also features the strongly closural word *over* (in the sense of completed, done), and a heightened lexical feature (the assonance of *that, sat,* and *back* combined with the alliteration of *sat, sigh,* and *softly*). At first, this putative story seems to add little to the anecdote mentioned above, simply following each of the characters into his or her separate world within this one dwelling, and zeroing in—very much as a cinematic close-up might—on the telling image of the aching feet. Note that the viewpoint has shifted. Now it is *hers,* not his.

Nevertheless, of the three readers choosing this preclosure point, two were male and one was female. Overall, if we look at the choices of sentences prior to S/25, we find that four were made by four different men and two were made by the same woman. This 4:1 ratio of male to female readers is all the more startling when we remember that the ratio of male to female readers was 1:3. At least within the limits of *this* distributed reader, there is clearly a gender bias in the choice of early preclosure points. Male readers were more willing to accept the story as “over” much sooner.
As I mentioned above, it is not my intention to avoid or downplay the importance of social issues in this or any story. My objective is to keep students from plugging in ready-made concepts and responses that say more about their prior course work than about the story at hand. Preclosure exercises are a way of engaging one part of their knowledge, their story competence, while temporarily suppressing another part of their knowledge, their issue awareness. The purpose is to bring them back to the issues via the reading experience of this particular story.

When I reported my findings to the readers who had generated them, I had their attention. They were as full of questions as I. Why would male readers be more receptive to these putative stories? Why the shortest ones? Why the ones with anecdotal force? Why the ones that depict an encounter between two persons of unequal power and sensitivity, an encounter that encodes the difference without resolving it or absorbing its emotional fallout? (Here, in response to revelations from the reading experience, was the place for the lexicon of gender relations.) Our answers, our further questions, brought us back to the literary gentleman’s treatment of Ma. Why is he so willing to wrap up his response to her, to dismiss it—and her—summarily? To readers who have just been confronted with their own gender bias, the answers to these questions can seem much more telling.

Gender bias on the female side is evident in another choice, which happens also to be the most-favored preclosure point. By the time we reach S/167, we know all about the financial and emotional deprivations of Ma’s life; we know that Lennie was the focus of all her love, all her joy, all her hope. Now, for apparently the first time, she acknowledges to herself that she has had a hard life. As this thought gains momentum, as her misery deepens, she realizes she has never cried in front of people. All her life, she has internalized her sorrows, accepting them, going about the business of serving her family and her employer. For what?

S/162 Lennie gone—what had she?
S/163 She had nothing.
S/164 He was all she’d got from life, and now he was took too.
S/165 Why must it all have happened to me? she wondered.
S/166 “What have I done?” said old Ma Parker.
S/167 “What have I done?”
S/168 As she said those words she suddenly let fall her brush. (489)
Thirteen readers (25 percent) chose S/167. Twelve were female, one was male. Even with the higher percentage of women in the group as a whole, the gender bias is clear: women were more likely to choose this preclosure point and, consequently, the putative story it caps. None of the other highly favored preclosure points shows this degree of gender bias. Most show little or none. Not only were women more likely to respond to this sentence, but they did so in large enough numbers to make it the most popular choice overall. Why? If male readers were more willing to wrap up the story as a telling anecdote, why were female readers more willing to end it with an open-ended question that is either plaintive or assertive—or both?

Before we can speculate about these questions ourselves, we need to look at the results of the experiment as a whole. Interesting as it may be to study individual choices that are especially revealing, the wisdom of the distributed reader is to be found, as always, in the series of putative stories defined by the most-favored preclosure choices. In determining these, I had to decide whether to look only at the individual sentences, or to count, as one slightly vibrating point, a cluster of two or three neighboring sentences that were highly favored. As I’ve done in the past, I decided to follow the second course, using only the top five clusters. I’ve listed them in the order they appear in the story, noting some of the preclosure signals that helped to trigger these choices:

1. Ten readers chose one of the sentences that end Ma’s interaction with her employer. Possibly to redress his own feeling of inadequacy in dealing with Ma’s grief, he has just accused her, indirectly, of stealing a spoonful of cocoa:

   S/136 And he walked off very well pleased with himself, convinced, in fact, he’d shown Mrs. Parker that under his apparent carelessness he was as vigilant as a woman.
   S/137 The door banged. [closural word] (488–89)

2. Eighteen readers zeroed in on the words bursting from Ma’s lips after she reviews her hard life. As noted above, S/167 was chosen overwhelmingly by women:

   S/167 “What have I done?”
   S/168 As she said those words, she suddenly let fall her brush. [syntactic inversion] (489)
3. Twenty-two readers chose the moment shortly after, when Ma wanders out into the London streets:

S/172 She was like a person so dazed by the horror of what has happened that he walks away—anywhere, as though by walking away he could escape . . . [Mansfield’s ellipsis]
S/176 And nobody knew—nobody cared. [repetition; negative absolute]
S/180 Gran wants to cry. (489–90)

4. Eleven readers focused on her growing need to cry:

S/185 She couldn’t put it off any longer; she couldn’t wait any more . . . [repetition; negative absolute] (490)

5. Nine readers chose the next-to-last sentence:

S/201 And now it began to rain. [change of space/time/condition] (490)

There is no doubt that the true ending is grim. Unfortunately, it is muddied by overdone pathos. Ma looks everywhere for a place to cry, but even her family offers no refuge, for it needs her to be strong. There is no public or private space for her to be by herself and for herself. She’s utterly alone. “And now it began to rain.” Whether a naturalist fillip or a London verity, the drizzle is too much. And yet the very last line, the actual closure of the story, has an echoing bleakness: “There was nowhere.” It is Mansfield chiming in with the empty universe.

The actual story is very sad, indeed. But what of those putative stories we have discovered along the way? Here is my list of them.

Social Vignette. When the employer strides off, pleased with himself and letting the door bang behind him, we’re left with a story whose “point” is to reveal the character of these two parties to a relationship: male and female; employer and employee.

Epiphanic Tale. When Ma asks “What have I done?” she is, for the very first time, questioning life’s equity. This is the primeval “Why me?” At first, the words suggest a desire for information: did she in fact do something to deserve this kind of life? However, as the question echoes in the reader’s mind and in hers, it becomes a protest, for
she hasn’t deserved her pain. There is a dawning awareness of ingrained injustice, although the full epiphany is reserved for the reader as part of the emotional and intellectual modulation effected by the story.

Existential Parable. This is the story that ends with Ma becoming Everyman who suffers. She is compared, rather objectively, to “a person so dazed by the horror of what has happened that he [note the generic pronoun] walks away. . . ” The closural force of the negative absolute [“nobody knew; nobody cared”] echoes the existential themes of loneliness and abandonment.

Feminist Exemplum. Realizing her loneliness, Ma thinks of her grandson, Lennie, and imagines herself talking to him: “Ah, that’s what she wants to do, my dove. Gran wants to cry.” Throughout her life, her wants have rarely been satisfied; more to the point, they have rarely been acknowledged, even by herself. Now, however, in the short declarative statement that ends this story, Ma states what she needs. Behind the third-person of she and Gran, an urgency is developing, an I is emerging. From a feminist perspective, this is a tragically meager, yet relatively great achievement for a woman like Ma.

Psychological Case Study. In another pair of negative absolutes (not any longer, not any more), we’re told that Ma has arrived at a crisis: she must cry, and she must cry now. Desire becomes decision. The story that ends here brings Ma through diffidence and depression to a point of built-up pressure that threatens to explode. She is on the brink of a crying jag, a flood of tears that would, in both feminine lore and post-Freudian psychology, offer healing release.

Each of these putative stories is different, even though the basic roster of characters and events remains the same, and even though portions of the text are identical from story to story. Each acts on us differently, both emotionally and intellectually: we are wryly, maybe poignantly amused by the social vignette; moved by the epiphany that questions the moral universe; chilled by the bleakness of the existential parable; stirred by the feminist exemplum, the gain in self-consciousness; satisfied, perhaps cheered, by the everyday truth of the psychological study.
Our experience of these stories in succession is an integral part of what it means to read “Life of Ma Parker.” I believe this to be true even though, obviously, other experiments might yield a slightly different configuration of preclosure points, and even though my choice of just five putative stories is arbitrary (those chosen by at least 15 percent of the readership). And, of course, under “normal” conditions, we are not conscious of ticking off preclosure points and, therefore, of making our way through a series of putative stories. However, we can raise that consciousness by activating story competence. I must leave to the psychologists the question of whether putative stories register cognitively in normal text processing, any more than story grammars or other macrostructures do. What interests me is their power, once hypothesized, to uncover and characterize the much that lies hidden in a “little” text.

The sequence I sketched out above creates a metastory, one in which Ma Parker questions her fate, stands for existential humanity, takes a step toward self-assertion, and reaches a critical mass of emotion. Nothing in this sequence changes the sadness of the outcome, but everything in this sequence changes some valence in Ma’s life. Momentarily, at least, the emphasis shifts from tallying her losses to appreciating her gains—those barely noticeable ways of “be”-ing more aware, more centered, more dramatically interesting than she has ever been before.

That seems to me the likeliest explanation for the dominantly female recognition of the epiphany story. It is the first moment in Mansfield’s text where this downtrodden woman says, in effect, “Hey, wait a minute.” It is hardly the sort of breakthrough we would call forceful or heartening, nor does it change any balance of power. We cannot know, finally, whether we hear “What have I done?” or “What have I done?” Guilt or resentment? Submission or resistance? Perhaps the reason women were more likely than men to respond to this line has something to do with their life experiences or their tolerance for ambiguity. I do not know, for I am far less wise than my distributed reader.

I do know, however, that the putative stories give me a perspective on the story that raises it in my estimation. Enriched by the added (or, I should say, the elicited) putative stories, “Life of Ma Parker,” like Ma herself, begins to assert itself. It becomes more complex, less easily dismissed, less tidily summed up. We know that it is not enough to cry for Ma Parker. Our emotions—both the jerked tears and the social outcries—are modu-
lated by the putative stories, not just through a changing sense of what the plot is but by a serial subjection to different types of stories.

I still regard “Life of Ma Parker” as a minor work by a sometimes-great writer, but I do not let my students “spend” it too quickly, as either a sob story or a protest story. For me, it is the tale of a Frank O’Connor–style heroine, a female descendent of Nikolay Gogol’s Akakey Akakeivitch, a member of a “submerged population” for whom life, after a given moment, never looks the same. Her lonely plight, foregrounded in the existential parable, reminds me of Elizabeth Bowen’s comment on the short story in the modern world: “The short story . . . [places its character] alone on that stage which, inwardly, every man is conscious of occupying alone.” Every woman, too.

Late-Twentieth-Century Chicago, an Hispanic Neighborhood

She’s an impregnated teenager. Eighteen weeks ago, she was sent to her Mexican relatives to escape her “shame” and await her baby. Addressing an unidentified listener for whom the reader is a stand-in, the girl tells her own story. She’s the daughter of a Mexican mother, who was exiled to the United States for a similar reason—to give birth to an illegitimate baby. That baby becomes the narrator. The city is apparently Chicago. There the narrator was left with her grandmother and uncle, sent to school, and eventually put to work selling food from a pushcart. One of her customers is a mysterious man called “Boy Baby.”

She’s not sure we would like him—a “bum,” with “greasy fingernails he never cut[s],” and a bed in a cubbyhole behind an auto repair shop. To everybody else, he’s a grease monkey. To her, however, he identifies himself as Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, the heir of a glorious civilization destroyed by white conquerors. As some readers may know, Uxmal is a real place, the site of Mayan ruins, including the Pyramid of the Magician. In the story, Chaq claims his father took him to the “Temple of the Magician” and “made him promise to bring back the ancient ways” (30). According to Chaq, his own future son is destined to rule an empire.

There are two wishful scenarios: the girl yearns for a sexual initiation that will be not tawdry and quick, but “like a tent full of birds” (28); the man speaks of reclaiming his ancestors’ heritage. He takes her to his shabby lair, reverently shows her the guns he has stashed there, and de-
flowers her on a cot. It is a “holy night,” but it is also no “big deal” (30). Like every Girl Baby, she has waited and waited to learn about sex. Now she knows. But there’s more to find out. Her lover having decamped, she is sent to her mother’s family in San Dionisio de Tlaltepango, where the news finally reaches her: Boy Baby is just an ordinary Mexican whose real name means “fat-face.” Not only does he have “no Mayan blood,” but, according to later news clippings, he may be a serial killer of young women.

History, myth, and desire come together in this story of a girl who is touched by a love that is identity changing, life altering, and either glorious or sinister—or both. Her impregnator is the male principle (he’s baby, boy, and man in a timeless present), the personification of a tawdry fate (unwed pregnancy is both a sin and a commonplace in the narrator’s family), and the incarnation of a Mayan king-god. His touch, like that of Mexico’s later God, can make a virgin into a mother on a given holy night. The reader may have Mary in mind, but the girl identifies herself as Ixchel, the queen of “Tikal, and Tulum, and Chichén”—and (although the story doesn’t mention this relevant detail) the Mayan goddess of childbirth. Virgin Mary? Mayan consort? This girl is an eighth grader. In the end, she is just another pregnant teenager, if you go by sociology. But if you go by mythology, the sexual body, the dreaming soul? This girl has been touched. She has received a powerful and ambivalent gift she calls love. Perhaps it is the same old trap that has snared women for centuries. Perhaps it’s a transcendent experience.

The story I have been summarizing is called “One Holy Night,” and it appears in the short story collection Woman Hollering Creek (1991), by Sandra Cisneros. Like other stories in that volume, it has been praised for its sensitivity to the female psyche and for a lyricism that dignifies while it does not mitigate the tension between Mexican and American identities. Unlike Mansfield’s “Life of Ma Parker,” which may strike some readers as well-intentioned but sentimentally simplistic and patronizing, Cisneros’s work is likely to be viewed as timely, vital, and politically correct. My contention is that both stories can be packaged too easily by our interest in their issues.

Mansfield’s story is a consciousness-raiser, showing the plight of the British working-class woman in the early twentieth century. Cisneros’s story is a diversity-enabler, showing the mainstream American reader what it is like to live in a Mexican-American barrio, or a Mexican village. It is also a gender-sensitizer, showing these same readers what it is like to
be female in a place that may be alien culturally but can be, and should be, emotionally accessible. While the older tale may suffer from its author’s fading image, perhaps the newer one suffers from its author’s—and its issues’—visibility. Like other stories by writers identified by their ethnicity, it is overdetermined by its author’s success. It is replaced by what it stands for. Is there a way to retrieve its “original” storyness?

Perhaps—if we enter the story with eyes peeled for closure. We never know where we will find it, or what sentence conceals it. We may see it coming, or we may stumble into it. Every reader’s adventure is different. On this occasion, I was my own sample reader and will tell you my experience. Previously, I had read only this writer’s story “Mericans,” but I was generally aware of her reputation and themes. I was ready for an encounter with a sensitive and thoughtful Chicana, but I had no idea what else to expect. This was my first preclosure point:

So I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir—Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. (30)

You will have to take my word for it that, while doing this exercise, I looked only for whole-storyness. Only after the sentences had been identified and listed in isolation did I begin to dissect them. In the sentence just quoted, the most obvious preclosure signal is a global syntactic one: the end of an arc from innocence to knowledge. It is one of the most familiar narrative types in short fiction, and it is named for us in the sentence: initiation. On the local syntactic level, there are two forms of repetition: the parallelism of the two adjectives (“great and mighty”) and the identity of the two apposite nouns (heir = Chaq). There is also a faint inversion created by the passive voice: not he initiated me but I was initiated by him. Lexically, the sentence offers several closural words: the excessive-degree terms ancient, great, and mighty, and the logical-conclusion term so. The sentence ends in four keywords.

Self-evidently, the narrative that ends here is an initiation, although it has been presented atypically as a flashback. This is a story schema modeled on the rite of passage, making us think of anthropology, of close-knit cultures, of ancient observances marking natural cycles. Using this Ur-script, Cisneros is extraordinarily effective in mapping one girl’s story onto a biological template and a Mexican heritage.

My next preclosure choice followed immediately:
I, Ixchel, his queen. (30)

If Chaq is a Mayan king, or at least the descendant or representative of one, then his mate is also Mayan royalty. On the global level, this sentence completes the naming process begun in the previous sentence: heir = Chaq Uxmal Paloquín; I = Ixchel = his queen. In its elliptical simplicity (without the copulative verb), this sentence offers a three-way parallelism of identical terms, with *Ixchel* a keyword because it is Mayan. With the addition of just this three-word sentence, we have a wholly new putative text. It’s no longer an initiation story. It’s a *revelation*. The model is not anthropological. It’s Aristotelian. The “I” discovers its unforeseen identity, causing a leap from ignorance to knowledge (anagnorisis) that changes her life. “He said he would love me like a revolution,” confides the narrator at the beginning of the story. Just as guns and the phallus are transparently equated in a story about the advent of a lost empire’s savior, so the breaking of the hymen is a revolution, a recognition of a newly defined self. “I” am “Ixchel.” That is a revelation, indeed. Once, “I” was a lonely, imaginative, Chicana virgin; now “I” am a Mayan queen, a woman, and [soon] a mother. That is peripeteia.

My third preclosure sentence is the one that caps the narrator’s discovery that her hero is a fraud. “He was born on a street with no name in a town called Miseria.” His parents are poor working people, a knife-sharpener and a fruit vendor. He, himself, is nearing middle age (he’s thirty-seven), with a laughable cognomen (meaning “fat-face”), and, of course, There is no Mayan blood. (33)

Once again, on the global level, there is a dramatic reversal. The pretender is unmasked, the tall tale is leveled, and “truth” is revealed. On the local syntactic level, the expletive bumps the subject behind the verb. Lexically, there’s the absolute *no*, the keyword *Mayan*. Short and declarative, the sentence has a ring of finality. We may forget that it is not the narrator who authorizes this truth. She merely relays what her relatives have learned about Boy Baby. Yet, for the reader, the information creates what Thomas Leitch calls a “debunking rhythm,” a closure through disillusionment. It is a variant of the initiation story, except that the knowledge acquired here is an *unknowing* of what was previously known or thought to be true. Leitch claims this pattern can be found in many American short
stories, and surely the unmasking of Chaq ends in the potential for disillusionment. For lack of a better term, I’ll call it a reality check.

As a moment of truth, however, it means more to the reader than to the narrator. For she doesn’t care about the “facts.” She has a “truth” of her own. She loves “fat-face” or Chaq, regardless of his name—perhaps regardless of his crimes, if he has indeed killed the women whose bodies have been found “on the road to Las Grutas de Xtabûnxuná . . .” (34). Pregnant and rusticating among her cousins in Mexico, the narrator thinks of her lover as neither king nor bum, reality nor myth. He is something of all, yet essentially a “man.” That is magic enough. Referring to the girls who know nothing about sex, the narrator tells us:

They don’t know what it is to lay so still until his sleep breathing is heavy, for the eyes in the dim dark to look and look without worry at the man-bones and the neck, the man-wrist and man-jaw thick and strong, all the salty dips and hollows, the stiff hair of the brow and sour swirl of sideburns, to lick the fat earlobes that taste of smoke, and stare at how perfect is a man. (34–35)

This was my third preclosure point. There is a knowledge here that counteracts the ignorance shown by “they,” the virgin cousins. Since the narrator herself was a virgin not so long ago, there is a kind of image recursion, too. Is this a more advanced initiation story? No, not exactly, because the narrator has already acquired this experience and is now remembering, summarizing, delivering, and reliving it.

The sentence is overloaded with local preclosure signals. Repetition is everywhere, from the many alliterated s’s to the central parallelism of four verb predicates: “to lay,” “to look,” “to lick,” and “[to] stare.” As resounding as a Hawthorne finale, the line ends in a verb/subject inversion: “how perfect is a man.” Meanwhile, the words sleep, dark, and all are closural, and man is a keyword.

What kind of story ends in this sensuous, lyrical, yet earthy inventory of the male head and torso? Before I hazard a label, let me remind you of the normative pattern for preclosure progression discussed in chapter 4. According to the historical survey conducted there, anterior closure offers a tentative conclusion. In my reading of “One Holy Night,” anterior closure is reached in the initiation scene. And, indeed, although the narrator believes in her transformation into Ixchel, she is wrong, in the literal sense,
about her lover’s identity and will modify her claims later. Penultimate closure is reached in the survey of the lover’s body. Characteristically at this stage of closure, an obstacle is removed; now, indeed, the narrator can “see” in the “dark.” It is also common for sentences at this stage to reach a high point of lyrical and rhetorical stability, and that is strikingly true of the elaborate syntax and vivid imagery of this meditation on the male body. It is almost as if Cisneros has internalized the normative progression I discussed in chapter 4.

Yet it is hard to identify the putative story ending in the penultimate preclosure point. Following the earlier revelation about Boy Baby’s identity (“no Mayan blood”), the narrative seems to subside. What follows is reflection. “I don’t think they understand,” says the narrator about her cousins. What they don’t understand is “how perfect is a man,” but also how attentive is love. This story—the one that ends in the memory of a nighttime vigil over the sleeping body of the lover—is a testimonial to the loneliness and intensity of female devotion.

The actual story ends with a declaration of and about love. After telling us “[t]his is how it is with me,” the narrator clarifies what “it” is:

Love I mean. (35)

According to the survey in chapter 4, there should be local lexical signals at the point of actual closure, and that is indeed what we find. Subject and verb are in normal order, but the predicate is bounced to the front of the sentence, causing a noticeable dislocation and emphasis. Every word is a keyword.

This time, when we ask what kind of story ends here, we are no longer talking about putative narratives, but about the text as written, studied, loved, and remembered. This, finally, is Cisneros’s story. If you recall, the three stages of closure typical of the Contemporary period (1960–80) follow the sequence: This is the way things seem. → This is the way they feel. → This is the way it goes. In “One Holy Night,” published about a decade after the last story in my survey, the pattern is still visible. Indeed, it seems that the auto mechanic is a noble Mayan. Indeed, the reverie on the lover’s body is about how things feel to the narrator. And, if we look at the next-to-last sentence that is so closely linked with the elliptical “Love I mean,” we find even greater conformity. I admit to being shaken by how closely the actual sentence (“This is how it is with me”) follows the model (This
is the way it goes), which I had formulated years before I read the Cisneros story.

“One Holy Night” is from the late twentieth century, but it is in many ways a traditional narrative. It embeds one of the oldest story schemata, the initiation familiar to anthropologists; it moves on to a revelation with echoes of anagnorisis; next, there is a reality check, a classic American type. Is her lover a sordid criminal with a con man’s appeal, or a people’s savior disguised as a tramp? We must take the narrator’s lead here. She loves the man who made her a woman, and this is a story about that love. Finally, perhaps, we’re drawn away from narrative altogether, toward lyrical exposition featuring lists and definitions.

Looking back from this perspective, we notice how often the narrator struggles to define the essence or nature of things. She tells us early on that she’s different from the girls of Allport Street. She didn’t want sex to be a fumbling grope in an alley or a car: “I didn’t want it like that . . . I wanted it . . . like gold thread, like a tent full of birds. The way it’s supposed to be . . .” (28; emphasis mine). Later, trying to describe Boy Baby, she concludes, “[H]ow do I explain?” Speaking about her cousins, she doesn’t “think they understand how it is to be a girl,” or “how it is to have a man,” or “what it is to lay so still [and watch him] . . .” (34; emphasis mine). The answer she gives them is that the thing they’re curious about—sex—is “a bad joke” (35). To herself and to us she tells a different truth, ending with “This is how it is with me.” (35; emphasis mine).

Perhaps she has just given us one more testimonial? In a sense, yes; however, it follows not only the rejected Allport Street notion of love but also two alternative definitions that carry more weight. According to one of her closest friends, love “is like a big black piano” falling on you; according to another, “it’s like a top” that spins all colors into white. Without commenting on these analogies, the narrator moves past them. For her, love is like having a harmonica always at your lips, through which you breathe in and out, so that your every breath is amplified, not as music but as life itself. The story is, finally, an anatomy of love, ending in a privileged definition.

The narrative has subsided into an exposition that has been heralded along the way by the narrator’s many attempts to define meaning. In this way, both the narrator and the author can abort the narrative expectations raised by the question of who finally impregnated the narrator—an impoverished drifter, a serial killer, or the incarnation of a Mayan king.
Instead, the question becomes a far more general one: what is love? Love is what allows the narrator to conflate Chaq + “fat-face” + criminal into one core identity, the only one that matters: he = the man she loves. Because of the narrative momentum established by the earlier preclosure points, the meditative turn at the end of the text fakes narrative closure. Let’s refer to the normative sequence again: from anterior congestion and/or complication (borne out in this story), to an almost lyrical or rhetorically stable highpoint in the penultimate slot (amply demonstrated here), to a multidetermined field in the final slot. Assertively simple as “Love I mean” is, these three words are the point at which the narrative question (who’s Chaq?) impregnates the expository question (what’s love?) to conclude, by example and by definition, that love—the transformer of identity and circumstance, the hum in the breath—is divine inspiration.

Unlike Mansfield’s “Life of Ma Parker,” the Cisneros story does not need to be raised in anyone’s estimation. In today’s literary and academic environments, it is highly regarded. Socially and pedagogically, it is a useful work of art, appearing on reading lists for courses in Chicana literature, and in general anthologies for ethnic diversity. I would not leach from this powerful and beautiful story one iota of its cultural and ideological relevance, impact, or mission. Still, in a sense, the story no longer belongs to Cisneros, nor even to its narrator, but rather to the feminist critics who have framed so much of the discussion that surrounds—and sometimes precedes—our acquaintance with the text.

According to Katherine Ann Payant, “[t]he 1980s and 1990s . . . have been the decades of the Chicanas [as opposed to the Chicanos, who spearheaded political movements in the 1960s], and “Cisneros is perhaps the best known of these Chicana writers.”9 It has been this author’s mission, says Laura Gutierrez Spencer, to “criti[que] the fate of the heroine in Western patriarchal literature . . . by reveal[ing] the truer-to-life consequences for women who are socialized to live their lives waiting for the happy ending.”10 Sometimes overtly, and almost always by implication, the narrator becomes a “site”—of multicultural tensions, of revisionist storytelling, of negotiated discourses. The subtitle of an article by Maria Szadziuk captures the common view. Cisneros writes about “Becoming a Woman in Bilingual Space.”11

There is no doubt, of course, that Cisneros is deliberately rewriting domestic and public histories from a woman’s point of view. Still, three sam-
ple readings of “One Holy Night” show how easily assumptions about female subjugation to social norms, male rhetoric, and physical violation can be mapped onto the plot of a given short story. Jeff Thomson thinks “the narrator is correct in believing that her seduction is also her initiation into a society of women—‘We were all the same’—however the society is one of seduction and abandonment and not the glorious rise of the Mayan Sun Kings as Boy Baby would have her believe.”12 Elaborating on this theme, Payant finds that the narrator is seduced by a false rhetoric, a calculated abuse of the ancient legends for inglorious and sexist advantage. “Here Cisneros wryly combines traditional native myth with the harsh realities for a teenager growing up in an American barrio . . . Unlike in the title story [of the collection] and ‘Bien Pretty,’ where native myth is a source of empowerment, here it is falsified and used to seduce.”

She goes on to explain that “[t]he protagonist is not only seduced by the romance of the myth, she seeks sexual experience to possess the knowledge of adult women . . . [but winds up illustrating, once again, how] the cycle of female oppression continues.”13 Note that in both of these interpretations, Boy Baby’s story about his ancestry is viewed as patently false, malevolent, and manipulative. It has no other value or purpose than to subjugate his young victim.

That view reaches an extreme in Mary Pat Brady’s analysis of the story. She argues that women are socialized to believe that they are at risk in public places—such as the street where the narrator is selling her mangoes and cucumbers. Almost by definition, it is a predatory male who approaches her there and lures her into his cave-room.

“One Holy Night” illustrates the myriad discourses that help to naturalize this spatial logic and render it invisible. One of the most interesting means of obscuring this use of spatiality is the discursive refusal to characterize the narrator’s sexual encounter as rape, even though it involves a young, vulnerable, clearly naïve girl and a much older man . . . [S]he avoids describing her experience as rape by emphasizing her own agency. She thus builds a case for her own culpability and suggests that this assault was what she desired because she was “in love” with Boy Baby.14

Rape? Assault? As we have seen, preclosure analysis leads me to a different interpretation of the encounter between these two people. While I hold
no brief for Boy Baby, I do not see him as a quondam rapist, nor am I so sure he isn’t to some extent the victim of his own fantasies—even if that means he really is a serial killer of young girls. Although he disappears temporarily, he does return, seeking the narrator at her grandmother’s house. To say that he abandons the girl he seduced is to forget that the old woman chased him away with a broom. Perhaps he has returned simply to add another victim to the list of murdered girls; perhaps he has come to redeem himself from the generic charges leveled at his sex—“the infamy of men.” In my reading of the story, this point is left moot. In the space of this indeterminacy, we are free to remember that, in the observance of their religion, the “real” Mayans killed young women. Like ancestor, like descendent?

Be that as it may, when it comes to the narrator’s fate, I sharply disagree with the critics I have mentioned. Payant sees the initiation into womanhood as “[leading] to stasis and entrapment” (98). As we have seen, the sequence of preclosure points highlights the story’s turn toward meditation, toward an exploration of the meaning of love. Perhaps the narrator is “entrapped” by the mores that punish unwed mothers. Yet her thoughts are active, even aggressive, in coming to terms with her situation. Payant gives her no credit for her description of her own feelings, telling us the girl “was ‘in love,’” with ironic quotation marks. The critic is denying the girl credence, discounting her voice—a response that may be justifiably cynical from a feminist point of view, but, oddly enough, smacks of “male” disregard for the narrator’s inner life. I prefer to trust the shape of the story, which tells me that this girl has, indeed, been caught in the “same old story” of the women in her family, but which shows me, too, that her imagination gives her a leverage and a freedom I want to appreciate.

While I do not agree with the interpretations of Thomson, Payant, and Brady, I do not quarrel with their right to bring their own assumptions to the story. As critics, we all find what we’re looking for. When I interpret the pattern of preclosure choices for a given story, I have no illusions of objectivity, nor of privileged access to the “real” story. In the case of “One Holy Night,” perhaps I am only jettisoning the feminist template in favor of a pattern of serial preclosure that is far less neutral than I wish it to be. However, it does seem to me that we are closer to the grain of the work itself if we come to it without words like “site” and “rape” at the ready. I can see no harm, and believe there is great benefit, in using
preclosure study as a check on the current tendency to map issues—and politically correct attitudes towards those issues—onto a text, even when, especially when, the text invites a socially conscious reading.

In Cisneros’s work, love is not invalid because it is wrongly bestowed or abused by the male. Her better-known story, “Eyes of Zapata,” gives us a much more mature heroine, a woman in many ways subjugated and betrayed, yet capable of luminous integrity in her fortitude, her constancy, and in her reverie on the sleeping and naked body of the revolutionary hero—a companion scene to the inventory of the lover’s body in “One Holy Night.” In this author’s work there is something deeply affecting and inflaming about the sufferings of women, but there is also something that was missed or devalued by the feminist critics I cited. There is something powerful and definitive about the capacity to dream, to savor, and to love. Cisneros’s vision is greater than her agenda. Preclosure study is not the only way to arrive at this understanding, but it is a very effective and direct way of doing so.

Whether the text is a forgotten one on the shelf like Mansfield’s, or a recent one in the spotlight like Cisneros’s, if we read first for social relevance, we shortchange the story, stereotype the author, and cheapen the issue. By reading first for storyness, we do not lose or diminish topicality. Neither are we distanced from the characters. We are actively “in” the story, discovering its themes within the folds of the narrative.