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ROMANTIC WOMEN AND *LA LUCHA*

DENISE CHAVEZ'S FACE OF AN ANGEL

FRANCINE K. RAMSEY RICHTER

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplated
—William Blake

Denise Chavez's skillful and evocative *Face of an Angel* (1994) examines the inequitable and discomfiting, yet somehow powerful, place of women in New Mexico border culture.¹ Their lives are mainly devoted to the hard work of serving others, and Chavez connects

the past and present of the women of the area through the life story of the main character Soveida Dosamantes (born in 1948). Much of what makes up Soveida's present, everyday existence has its origins over the border in Old Mexico, and the established customs and traditions have a great deal of impact upon Soveida and her family in their lives in Agua Oscura (importantly, "dark water"). Although they are American citizens, the fact of their ancestors' immigration and their own cultural separateness makes them in a sense reminiscent of the statement made by Wallace Stevens about poets: "[They] are never of the world in which they live," for they do not seem fundamentally linked to the United States at large. Denise Chavez has mentioned that her characters represent *la Lucha*, or the struggle that Mexican Americans have to live through in order to survive. This is likely why they do not feel a part of the major culture.

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Denise Chavez. © Marion Ettlinger 1993.

Certainly, a central concern in the novel is the cultural dislocation and discontinuity the characters experience. For Soveida particularly, who writes as she waitresses, a cultural, devalued labor identity and the lack of value accorded individual women's action are bitter realities. She is a woman in a world not of her own making, one that no woman would willingly make. Writing her *Book of Service* indicates Soveida's intense desire for transcending through art the mundane and the often static condition of her own and others' lives. It is these harsh facts of reality that struggle in opposition to a highly romantic beginning of the work and the romantic theme carried throughout the novel by Soveida. Her perceptions of her relatives, for

example, are protected by a vivid, benevolent imagination—what actually amounts to lies about real, horrendous actions. Mara, Soveida's cousin who is as close to her as a sister, and who is said to have "the face of an angel," represents the sometimes horrific, actual reality of their lives. The shocking, ironic meaning of the title with its multilayered hermeneutic possibilities becomes clearer and clearer as the novel progresses—it forces one to ask what society demands in its assessment of women having "the face of an angel." What is life like for an "earthly" angel? Why is Chavez's central image a symbol of the eternal and untouchable, while these women are touched and used in vile, reprehensible, and sadistic ways?

Certainly, the juxtaposition of "angel" and "incest victim" makes the deed that much more horrifying. In another way, the value of the symbol is that the reader (and characters) are put in touch with the supernatural and everlasting, which are important, expected aspects of Mexican culture and as mythically necessary for *Face of an Angel* as for Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Angels figure largely for Catholics and pseudo-Catholics in their day-to-day lives and in the afterlife; they are a compelling representation of eternal stasis—the image connects heaven and earth, as it were. Hence, part of the irony of the image is that the present, sublunary stasis will continue in the heavenly hereafter. The presence of angels in art is ubiquitous as we near the end of the twentieth century and apocalyptic literature abounds. The fact of their presence indeed rivals Renaissance art, and copies of works representative of the era are extremely popular. Additionally, the novel itself is an escape from the often frenetic present, and the image at its core affords the greatest escape possible from a flawed earthly existence, but at some point one must solve, or at least attempt to solve, the problems from which escape was sought in the work of art. Thus, the novel makes a comment on the transcendent power of art while it simultaneously points

out, in its later graphic representation of life, that this is not the only type of power or purpose of art. The antithesis or dialectic set up from the first therefore finds its end point in a metafictional statement on romantic and realistic art, along with the creative act of writing. To substantiate the brave claim, then, that there are romantic elements in Chavez's work, one must look at nineteenth-century gender roles and what is often termed "woman's sphere" and its close connection with Chicana experience in the United States.

To begin with, the American and French revolutions, with their new ideas for human rights and freedoms, should have greatly changed the position of women of the nineteenth century. Additionally, advocates for women's rights were by no means missing or silent. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft had written her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and Hannah More and Anne Finch had written effectively even earlier. But despite these and others' protests, women's lives were not a great deal better than they ever had been—this is because the law still held women confined, and custom, that which is stronger yet than law according to John Stuart Mill, held women in a place of secondary status and confinement. The existence of a private "woman's sphere" pervaded the thinking and writing of even the greatest of liberals. Jean Jacques Rousseau, from whom we might have expected much better, did not demand *human* liberty for women. Indeed, in the middle of the eighteenth century he advocated a hugely restrictive role for women, writing in his 1762 novel *Emile* a profile for the ideal woman, one that includes the qualities of submission, decorum, purity, and the angelic.² Of course, Rousseau was not alone in his avowal of a misogynistic "lady-like" code of behavior—many others with him asserted a like ideal of the feminine. Cruelly, even women operated within the myth of the feminine and advised in their own writing self-abnegation and self-effacement for all women's personal gratification, ambitions, and desires.

The important point of these historical facts for contemporary Chicanas in general and Denise Chavez's *Face of an Angel* in particular is the perception of the model woman as "angelic." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that "in fact, for many writers, such a self-sacrificing and *angelic* woman [as one who is extravagantly selfless] became the paradigm of renunciatory Christian love" (*italics mine*). This highly circumscribed ideology of femininity is gripping in its perception and application to women's lives in Britain and America in the nineteenth century, and the modern Great Plains border region of the United States and Mexico in the twentieth century.⁴ The debilitating rhetoric of this ideology is derived from religion and ultimately characterizes "the good mother as a kind of Madonna and the dutiful maiden as a virginal angel."⁵ Issues and concerns for women of both eras, then, quite amazingly coincide. Awareness of the nineteenth-century ideology of the feminine moves the reader of *Face of an Angel* closer to the similarities that existed between the women of the Romantic age to what Mexican American women experience today or in the relatively recent past. We may observe in Mary Robinson's and Charlotte Smith's writing the strain that the French Revolution and other wars caused on the daily lives of women. The politics surrounding the immigration and migration patterns of Mexicans and the displacement this causes leaves the reader of her novel understanding the parallels between Chavez's characters and those of British Romanticism.

Certainly, the Romantic notion of imagination and recollecting one's self in memory is well exemplified in the character of Soveida. In addition to the *Book of Service*, Soveida records an oral history of the elderly family servant Oralía and writes a term paper for a Chicano history class she takes at the university. As a child, she wrote a brief autobiography. So compelling is her need for self-expression that she, in one way or another, must tell her own story and the story of those mentioned before the narrative proper begins

and in her narration protest their historically ineffectual voices,

My grandmother's voice was rarely heard,
it was a whisper, a moan. Who heard?
My mother's voice cried out in rage and
pain? Who heard?
My voice is strong. It is breath. New Life.
Song. Who hears? (n.p.)

The three voices differ significantly, yet none of the women is truly heard. Soveida cannot be heard and "saved" through her attempt at writing—art—in the novel because the romantic longing for the transcendence of time through art and the apprehension of something of permanent value is always elusive and, finally, impossible. Soveida's writing is a temporary respite from the awfulness of the real world, but it does not have the power to deliver her completely, for a common mythic past constitutes Soveida's, her cousin Mara's, and her great-grandfather Manuel's (and others') congeneric memories and has a gripping hold on them all. Mainly because of their failed present, the characters participate in a backward-looking focus that leaves them always dedicated to an unending counting over of the events of their lives; unfortunately, art itself has a dependence on memory.

It is indeed memories that constitute the novel's romantic beginning recounted in time present by Soveida. On the "Dosamantes' Family Tree" given before the novel begins, the names of Manuel Dosamantes (1850-1935) and Elena Harrell (1867-1931) appear first. Trying to make it all the way to California but never getting there, Manuel had been born in Guanajuato, Mexico, and came through Nuevo Laredo to work for a while in Texas. An ingenious and talented worker with high values and exemplary character, Manuel was in great demand as a hired hand, even, on one occasion, being offered a partnership in a cattle ranch. The problem with the deal was the catch—Dosamantes had to marry the "passed over," highly unattractive heiress of the owner. "That magic, soul-sinking pull of West Texas"

greatly affected him, and "he longed to stay awhile, maybe a long time, in that place that had almost brought him peace," but he could not love the "dark-skinned, flat-chested daughter, Tobarda Acosta," the sound of whose name seems to reflect her condition. She was, Chavez writes, "like a piece of meat with all its natural juices gone" (5). Manuel walks away from the arrangement that would change his and his progeny's lives forever, with great regret, as he years later related the story to his son Profetario. The night he left, part of the history of the family was also lost, for as Manuel walked away from his clothes, his horse, his gear, he also left his photographs behind, "the picture of his mother, Galardita, in her high-collared dress, her braided hair wrapped around her head like a halo; his father Pacifico, with his white beard, seated next to his mother, she standing over him, ever watchful, stern; his brothers, Juan Maria and Evaristo, as children, in long, white dresses, and himself, as a boy, standing next to a dried tree, in a nowhere land on the out-skirts of his colonial hometown, Guanajuato" (7). When Manuel left the mountains near Fort Davis, he quite poetically "ran toward the heat and the desert, toward the mesquite and the scrub brush" (7). When he wearied of travel, he discovered Agua Oscura in Natividad County, New Mexico. It was here that Manuel planned a memorable future for himself and his descendants. Developing a mystical relationship with the land, "He would work here and make his money here. He knew how to farm, to build, to handle animals. He had all the experience anyone needed to survive in this harsh land. Its severity suited him. He responded to this land as a hearty, hungry woman does to lovemaking. He found it gave him what he needed: a response. He was able to see the change, dramatically. Water was this land's lover, and this love affair, the push and pull of nature with man, a man with his spirit, was what drew him to Agua Oscura. It allowed him to feel, at last, at home" (7).

But the past is never easily left behind, and Manuel realizes that in this gain, he will un-

dergo the painful loss of his homeland: "He would never again see those mountains, those valleys. The view was now of another land, a land where his children would grow and flourish" (8), almost as if they are plants the elements will nourish. But when Manuel gets to Agua Oscura he suffers from recurring nightmares, and is the first of several characters throughout the novel who endure unsettling dreams and nightmares and who seek reconciliation with the past. After a long period of delayed gratification (ten years) and extremely hard work, a Mexican Anglo—the second name on the family tree—appears in Agua Oscura to visit her aunt. In 1885, then, all Manuel's dreams, at age thirty-five, come true when he finally marries the long-awaited woman of his fantasies, the enchanting eighteen-year-old Elena Harrell of the "blond hair, blue eyes, and lovely face" from Chihuahua, Mexico (9). In this sequence of events is embedded much of the traditional path of the hero: the departure from the homeland and separation from all that is familiar, the quest or difficult task that must be performed, and the reward, in this case the beautiful damsel with a kingly father and prosperity in a new land where the hero is a near king himself, having acquired a 500-acre farm, "various" employees, and a great deal of land in Agua Oscura.

Besides these heroic characteristics, it is noteworthy that Manuel's character is drawn in the manner of local colorists Zona Gale, Mary French, and Susan Glaspell, who was born in Davenport, Iowa, and in particular learned from her father's family, some of the first settlers of that region, to have high regard for the idealistic, the practical, the independent, and the morally upright qualities of human nature. These writers, and others like them, strove to save for posterity the peculiar characteristics of thought, language, and region that the area affords and that make it singular. Their characters often find fulfillment in working the land and experiencing a strong connection between nature and themselves. Such romantic, pastoral themes regu-

larly appeared earlier in the literature of the nineteenth century, when realistically depicted contemporary issues were less important than that of native-born Americans receiving spiritual strength in their metaphysical relationships with the surrounding world of nature. Only very occasionally invoking more immediate themes in her earlier writing, Glaspell, after she was strongly influenced by George Cram Cook's iconoclastic and visionary antiprovincialism, concerned herself with particular characters who sought, at almost any cost, the meaning of their lives. Neither relationships, nor fortune, nor any worldly achievement could thwart them in their quest to realize completely their ambitions and potentialities.⁶ Manuel's character has aspects of both these types in Glaspell's writing, for he is a sort of modern pioneer who endures noteworthy physical and mental stresses out of his normal environment, finding that the old ways of existing, thinking, and experiencing will not fit the new area. Therefore, he must cross not only geographical borders but psychological ones as well as he challenges himself to find innovative ways of dealing with a new way of life in the southwestern setting. These considerations, and the fact of his "lost" past, perhaps are the source of the deep-seated conflicts that manifest themselves in his nightmares and the smell of Tobarda ("a lingering mustiness and the scent of decay") that followed him and "sometimes . . . caught him unawares, and he would be back again in Guanajuato or Fort Davis, or in the grave, or all those places at once, with all those he'd loved, the living and the dead." Even when Manuel is elderly, "he could summon up that smell at will; it had pervaded his life and permeated his clothes." The smell is said to come from the resentful dead, "a bitter scent of the spirits who were angry at what had been done to them" (8).

In the modern idea of the self, drawn from European Romanticism, Manuel's ego is incapable of erasing the memory of his family and the repulsive Tobarda Acosta, who is probably "still alone, childless, with a womb tight

as a walnut, her once red teats now brown, small dry outcroppings on a dying cottonwood—far away in a forgotten field” (11). Undoubtedly, Manuel’s “interiority” is fully developed, as seen when Chavez later writes about Manuel and Elena: “Both were loners with keen intellects. Both were young, hard-working, physically rooted people in full flower. *Both had eyes that looked constantly inward*”(9) (italics mine). Here, authentic value and meaning are found in the inner lives of humans. Unfortunately, it is also characteristic of interiority that one may suffer as Manuel has in his haunted dreams, with the inner life entertaining negative thoughts, such as a lack of personal confidence, uncertainty, and insecurity.

Decidedly, it is not until Manuel meets and mates with Elena that he feels he belongs in the new world in a tranquil and firm manner: “The night they were married, his nightmares stopped” (10). Fortunately for these two, the ties that bind are bound quickly and securely—“both were Mexicans hungry for a preservation of language and custom” (9). The issue from the blessed couple extends to five: Elena made up names for her children, names that “would give her children a fighting chance, . . . names even the demons would have trouble pronouncing, . . . names with a ring to them of paradise” (11). Then, “Manuel was very happy. All the rest of his life, until he died at the age of eighty-five, he thanked God he had awakened in time to leave that darkened room in Fort Davis, Texas, Tobarda Acosta burning there, in her private, inextinguishable hell. With Elena, he had long, light nights of liquid dreams” (11). The significance of the name Dosamantes (two lovers) for Manuel, therefore, is the severe contrast between what may be considered his two “lovers.” Here, except for the “bitter scent of the spirits who were angry,” that make the smell of Tobarda ever-present for the aging Manuel, the romanticism of the work ends and graphic reality sets in for the rest of the novel, a reality that Soveida, as main character, consistently attempts to deny.

The most important of Manuel and Elena’s children out of Teodelfino, Clotildora, Amparinata, Ismindalia, and Profetario for *Face of an Angel* is Profetario, Soveida’s grandfather. Soveida never knew her great-grandfather Manuel Dosamantes, and she did not really know her grandfather Profetario very well. Mara, her cousin, her “best friend, [her] almost sister” (97), who is the voice of stark and often horrifying reality, informs Soveida after they are grown and via long-distance, late-night phone calls of the secrets about Profetario and others that Soveida was either unaware of or could not bear to face, as she often says to herself on the telephone, “get off the phone, get off the damn phone, Mara. Stop telling me lies! Lies, all of them. Or so I wanted to believe” (52). The neatly drawn family tree, then, represents the appearance versus the reality of a family with a blemished past and present—after the illustrious pair of lovers (Manuel and Elena) live out their honor-bound, exemplary lives. The Dosamantes name will diminish significantly in value as Profetario changes tradition with his keeping of *two* households, fully equipped with *two* wives; thereby it was said of Profetario that he never needed to visit “loose” women for sexual favors. Soveida had all her life thought of Profetario as “a blustery man, big as the sky, always yelling at my grandmother Lupe . . . a rascal,” but a worse truth reveals itself when Mara and Soveida in their adulthood “corrected the lies: Papa Profe beat Mama Lupita” (52). Certainly, it is not surprising to Mara and Soveida and the other children that they were not told the customary ghost stories of the “make-believe people” of their culture, the stories of La Llorona, La Sebastiana, El Coco (El Cucui), or any of the others “used as threats to settle children down, to sober them up, to put them in their children’s place of terror and dread. Obedience, parents called it.” They are not surprised because they have plenty of “ghost stories” of their own, right in their own families. “All our relatives were make-believe, with make-believe lives,” Soveida relates. “But

we children really knew the truth. Only we couldn't talk" (52).

What has happened in the degeneration of the Dosamantes family from the felicity of its promising beginnings is the failure of the romantic vision and the heroic, exemplified in the honorable Manuel and Elena, to carry through to the successive generations. For Profetario and his wife, Lupe, had lived on Manuel and Elena's farm when they married. The farm was over 500 acres, and Papa Grande (Manuel) wanted his oldest son, Teodelfino, to take over the operation. Desiring a judgeship, yet knowing it was probably an impossible dream for a person of color, Teo joined the military. He was killed at Castigny and Papa Grande never recovered from the immense and overwhelming grief of losing his oldest son. Profetario took over the farm, had an affair with the daughter of Papa Grande's ranch hand, who bore him a son the couple promptly named Manuelito, after his "grandfather." Profetario set Dona Maria up in her own household. Unhappy with this arrangement, Manuel left the farm divided equally among the daughters and Profe. Angered, Profe moved into town and went into the grocery business. The farm was sold, Papa Grande's health failed, and the result was "the end of whatever peace there ever was in the Dosamantes family" (134). After Profetario's deviation from honor, Luardo, the molester and lecher in the next generation, will haunt the lives of Mara, his niece, and Soveida, his daughter, and any other vulnerable women he runs across in his job as a minor office manager in an employment office. As Mara said about him, "I had my boogeyman too, hell, and he had me. Luardo would come into my room and touch me. I wanted to scream. I had nightmares that Dolores would find out. That she would tie me to the bed and beat me. She knew. I could never call him Dad anymore. That's when I started calling him Luardo" (52-53). For Soveida, too, Luardo presents a horrifying problem. When Mara asks, "Did Luardo ever come into your room and do those things he did to me?" Soveida responds, "I'm not sure.

But I was always afraid of the dark and of something in the dark touching me." Mara answers her, "I'll never understand. Never. And I'll never forget" (53). An argument between Luardo and Dolores, Soveida's parents, corroborates Mara's and Soveida's conversation. Luardo says to Dolores, "It's not good, it never was. And now you suspect me of *that*. I never did *that*, not *that*. Not to my own child!" Dolores answers him, "Mara wasn't your child! She was my dead sister's child!" Luardo's response is, "You expected too much!" (24).

Like Manuel, Luardo has a dream: "I'd like to move to Mexico and live with a sixteen-year-old girl. There. That was it. A dream." That was his long-term dream; his short-term, recurring dreams are about making love. They seemed to last for years on end, and he knew simultaneously that "he was both asleep and awake to ecstasy at these times." During the dreams, Luardo "was always in the stage of either sucking a nipple or taking as much as he could of a breast in his mouth." And, while Luardo might be forgiven (in the novel) for not wanting to know anything about what he calls "women's work," such as cleaning and scrubbing, he moves beyond the limits of human decency when it is revealed that he wants no knowledge of "anything living or non-living that required attention, care, and maintenance." These had no concern for Luardo Dosamantes—what was of greatest importance to him was his dream (13). Luardo's delightfully passionate dreams turn grotesque, however, when all the various offered breasts of his joyous nightly experience turn hideous. Instead of ecstasy, he becomes quite disturbed at the new images: Manuel's tormented dreams have already been described; Luardo, too, had become "tired of always running" and had undertaken "many wanderings." Although they share dreams gone bad and wanderings, Luardo has different kinds of dreams from Manuel, and he also has different kinds of wanderings. Luardo constantly moves; as Soveida says, "I was the one who had helped him move from that last apartment, his third move in one year." She explains a tacit agree-

ment the two have: "He would help me out when I was low on cash, or needed to borrow his car, and I would help him move. Again. And again" (12). Luardo was never a real father to Soveida—more, she says, "like an unpleasant uncle." Her *real* family consists of her grandmother and her cousin Mara (3).

Manuel had escaped from the poverty and "parched dreams" of the "nowhere land on the outskirts of his colonial hometown, Guanajuato," and from the clutches of Tobarda Acosta, "the woman whose husband he felt he should have been" (10). Yet, Guanajuato and the symbolically named ranch he could have had with Tobarda, "La Esperanza," or Hope, are abiding memories, with Tobarda becoming a "parched memory" and Guanajuato reinforced as a powerful and inescapable memory by this vivid and evocative image: "Guanajuato, that celebrated place where the clay in the earth preserved its buried corpses. Yes, he was far away from those human mummies that were later dug up and displayed for the tourists: leering men, defiled women, and pathetic children, with leathery, caked limbs, dusty, sparse hair, flaccid breasts and crumbling penises that reminded him of who he was, where he was always going" (7). No matter what success and love Manuel finds or works exceedingly hard for in Agua Oscura, he has moved from "nowhere" to "Hope" to "Dark Water." Symbolically, though, he has found "that woman he'd always waited for: someone to ease his tormented dreams, someone to give him children and make him feel as if all his expended energy and sweat hadn't been for nothing" (9); he still knows "where he was always going" because of where he came from. For Luardo and Manuel, there is no real and lasting escape.

The question of why Chavez would set up a romantic tale to begin her increasingly graphic novel, then, becomes clear: humanity tends toward decay and corruption, as exemplified in the Guanajuato image; even with auspicious beginnings, the romantic is doomed to failure. Additionally, women are never accorded full humanity, especially women of

color. Nothing ever really changes, as Mara explains to the naive Soveida, "It was cruel, don't forget it. It's that way for all women, Soveida, so wake up! I hate to see you play the same damn role that your mother played, Soveida, bowing to all the men who come into your life and then scraping up their crusty filth and saying thank you, sir" (53). Undoubtedly, the structure mocks the romantic in literature and life, for the work turns back on itself in an indisputable manner. The heroic rhetoric of the beginning becomes just that; the work clearly struggles to separate appearance from the terrible reality that engulfs mainly the women of the novel. Humanity is perverse, and this point is demonstrated in the Dosamantes family tree, as representative of all of humanity. As Robinson Jeffers has said in another context, "The human race was perverse, repeatedly demonstrating in individual and collective acts (that is, those of civilization) its meanness and its unworthiness of the world of natural beauty created by God."⁷ To offset the nihilism and cynicism that these observations may engender, Chavez has her main character search the past and present to find traditions that may, perhaps reshaped, help her formulate an authentic relationship with her world. Soveida becomes, in some admittedly limited ways, a "new" woman seeking self-fulfillment and the achievement of her dreams in an often hostile and unresponsive environment, as the novel almost denies lasting value to individual action. And, as stated before, the power of memory permeates the work throughout, as Soveida's grandmother Lupita says, "The memories are the clothes in your closet that you never wear and are afraid to throw out because you'll hurt someone. But then you realize one long day, m'jita, that there's no one left to hurt except yourself." Oralia, the long-term family servant, teaches Soveida about the past and memories also. She says to her, "Soveida, a person gets so tired of her past trailing her like a hungry animal, one that whimpers until it is fed. Unless you heal yourself of memories when you are alive, there is no telling what death will

bring" (136). Soveida agrees, "Their memories are mine. That sweet telling mine. Mine the ash. It's a long story" (4). Yet, this work is not about absolutely hopeless cycles because Soveida's questioning and imagination break through them. Through her imagination she can disdain the negative occurrences in her life because she has discovered fallible human beings behind the occurrences, and, as an adult, she describes her family thus, "Luardo my father. Dolores my mother. Hector my brother. Mara my cousin. The concept of naming gets in the way. Now that I am older I can allow myself to look at my family as people. People like myself with hunger and hope. People with failings" (3). "Art can outface history," says Seamus Heaney in an article on Yeats. "The imagination can disdain happenings once it has incubated and mastered the secret behind happenings."⁸ These lines are fitting and elucidative for what Soveida experiences as she strives to overcome and subdue memory and the past. But is this merely another rationalization on her part, forgiving, soft, and angelic as she has been since her youth? L. C. Knights has said that "Romanticism in literature, we may say, is the expression of a sensibility deliberately limited, both as regards its objects of interest and the modes of consciousness that it employs."⁹

Decidedly, if the paper Soveida wrote for her Chicano history class, a pleading treatise on the subjugation of Mexican Americans, appeared first in the novel, readers would immediately suspect a political motivation for the novel, but Chavez embodies her themes in passionate, fleshly, memorable characters engulfed in the struggles of real-life, uncensored situations.

In tracing the changes the Dosamantes family members experience as they look back over the Mexican border for their heritage in Guanajuato, but simultaneously toward the larger American society (and finally, in a very limited manner, to higher education) in their search for self-actualization, Chavez is exploring the new and often frightening psychological and physical landscapes of a new way of

being when people move away from an intense relationship with the land to centers of often dense population. Soveida's ancestors have come from what Chavez has described as "the push and pull of nature with man" (7) to Profetario's owning grocery stores to Luardo's becoming a minor government manager in an employment office. The enormity of the coming change may be best foretold at that crucial moment when Soveida's great-grandfather, Manuel Dosamantes, exhausted, slid off Tobarda Acosta's "dry, bumpy, uncharted . . . body," in a failed attempt at physical love, and he is overcome with self-questioning doubts, "Dios mio, what have I done, what am I doing, he thought to himself as he arose, startled from his nocturnal walk toward hell, or freedom, he didn't know which. What have I done? What am I trying to do?" (6). The walk toward "hell or freedom" is a main concern because of the vast difference between the worlds these characters' ancestors have inhabited in the past and the one that they inhabit in the present, for the vigorous holding onto customs and preservation of the language slowly disintegrates. The new society, with all its change and mechanization, means calling the past and memory, and the present into question. As Soveida says at one point, "I am sick again, but never too sick to reach into the past" (371). The center certainly does not hold for the Dosamantes family tree. Discipline, tradition, order, beauty, and loyalty—all of these are lost or broken in some way or to some degree in *Face of an Angel*. It is surely no wonder, and undoubtedly prophetic, that Manuel questions himself as he gets up, "startled from his nocturnal walk." In this instance Manuel foreshadows the modern self, which is at times "confused by its own freedom." Because he has started life as an immigrant, his progeny will experience what has been stated about immigrant writers who will as likely as not find that their new country has more problems and limitations than the immigrant ever thought of—what began as a quest for freedom brings a profound disillusionment in new and different restrictions and limits. These paradoxical new

beginnings that turn into a long sequence of ever new losses and failures have been a strong theme in the writing of immigrants.

Along with the restrictions comes what has been called Soveida's "formless evil." Although she had heard as a child about all the spirits of Mexican folklore (the aforementioned La Llorona, La Sebastiana, El Coco/El Cucui), her own personal evil was "always formless, never had a name" (49). John Haines asserts that a formless evil is the worst of all: "If there is evil in the world, let it take visible form in the shape of a goat, faun, or centaur, or a dragon breathing fire, as terrible as you wish. Not this formless, invisible menace that haunts the crowd of modern people like the atmosphere of a plague, ready to blossom into violent sores."¹⁰

Ivan, Soveida's first husband, provides a particular set of circumstances to one interpretation of what may be a "formless evil" for Soveida when she shows her ignorance of the inhumane conditions of Mexican-heritage farm workers and what her own heritage should mean. Soveida says that before Ivan she had never known anyone who referred to himself as Chicano and actually did not know the meaning of the word. What she knows about herself is that she is a Mexican American "and that was it." She says, "I knew vaguely that my family's roots were in Mexico, but what did Chicano mean?" (130) The workers' struggle for Ivan is a political one, and he tells Soveida that she doesn't understand what is really happening in the world. Ivan explains to her, "I've seen how the campesinos are breaking their backs in our lettuce fields. I've seen families torn apart by the great farm machine, and children hurt and damaged by pesticides. I know Cesar Chavez's struggle and I've even met him. What I want to do, Soveida, is bring some of that struggle back here to New Mexico" (130). Soveida cannot answer Ivan when he questions her about her own feelings in regard to the farm workers—she had never consciously thought about them. As she becomes more and more exposed to Ivan's way of thinking, Soveida "learned about the people

[she] was supposed to be connected to and yet barely knew" (131).

Each of the characters suffers in one way or another from some haunting personal specter, formless or specifically describable usually having to do with not knowing who he or she is in relation to the culture, past and present. Beyond Soveida's lack of knowledge, "Dolores . . . had to struggle with her past," (36) and the fact of being married to Luardo, who never lives up to anyone's expectations and his own promise, and, as Soveida says, is "a reckless, thoughtless, wastrel alcoholic" (49). Importantly, when she becomes a teenager, both her parents caution her *not* to marry a "Mexican," and this in light of the enormous mistakes they made with their own lives. Luardo says to Soveida, "You should marry above yourself. If not an Italian, an Anglo. Don't date Mexicans, they're low class, probably will never earn much money. Don't date anyone too dark, especially Mexicans, never niggers, never, or chinks" (38). Dolores cautions Soveida thus: "Whatever you do, don't marry a Mexican. I mean it, Soveida. I don't have anything against our own, except they don't make good husbands" (39). About the farm workers, Luardo thinks they are "mojados from el otro lado, and to Dolores they were people who needed jobs, jobs she let them do for her, at little pay." Mama Lupita also had low opinions of her own workers; this was observable in the inconsiderate way she treated them (130-31).

This struggling with personal demons, lack of self-knowledge, and the destruction of tradition and loyalty to their own people depicts one family's nonfunctioning as part of a coherent larger society. Their own social and psychological foundations are divided or faulty, since normally there is a complex "interpenetration, confluence, or mutual borrowing within a two-way framework of interaction for Hispanic peoples in order to configure their social matrix," but the larger society hardly ever takes this interaction into consideration.¹¹ That is, the major society does not give place to or honor what minority groups contribute to the culture as a whole. The vision of Manuel

and Elena is long since dead, and almost completely lost is the effect of them "both [being] Mexicans hungry for a preservation of language and custom"(9).

In place of a central vision and strong heritage are attitudes like Luardo's and Dolores's acceptance of the meaning drawn from the major society's estimation of the term "Mexican." For as Francisco A. Rios has asserted, immigrants from Northern European countries were called Americans within the first or second generations of their arrival to New World shores. But in the Southwest of the country, as in Texas, Mexican American citizens are referred to as Mexicans instead of Americans. Of course the term is geographically in error, but the more important problem is the connotation of "Mexican." This term implies that one is not really American because of the assumed missing characteristics: "godliness, cleanliness, a sense of justice and fair play, Yankee know-how, gumption, get-up-and-go, and picking-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps."¹² Characters like Luardo and Dolores have internalized the common attitude that these attributes are missing; a reason they may believe the prevailing myth is that they have lost their own center—their personal knowledge of the value of their own race, which is equal, but no doubt different in values and characteristics, from the major American society. They have come to believe with their detractors that the term Mexican is denigrating by its association with certain physical and moral attributes held in low esteem by the larger group. How could it indeed be otherwise when part of the zeitgeist, the larger picture or spirit of the age, holds Hispanics to be of less worth than persons with North European ancestry?

A great deal of the problem probably has to do with the later generations of Dosamantes' disassociation with the land, and, without doubt, technology played a crucial role in the immense change in the traditional way of life in America. A profound change takes place when Manuel Dosamantes chooses to walk away from the familiar, represented by Tobarda Acosta. He feels tremendous guilt for not tak-

ing what seems to be the natural and "right" choice in alleviating Tobarda's physical and social torment of being passed over by the eligible men in the fulfillment of marriage and children, part of her culture's value system. Manuel refuses to play the obviously advantageous role for a man with no connections, no land, no future. He overcomes the waves of sympathy that sweep over him for Tobarda and her hopeless circumstance and has to get away quickly before he succumbs to the temptation of staying and fulfilling her intense desire for a husband and children and of fulfilling his need to make his way in the world. If "every civilization has a hidden code—a set of rules or principles that run through all its activities like a repeated design,"¹³ as according to Alvin Toffler they do, then Manuel has repudiated what his country and civilization stands for in removing himself to the United States to seek a future for himself and his descendants. What did he leave behind? Without knowledge of the "set of rules or principles" involved, how can one know all that Manuel cast off or denied the validity or authority of?

Beyond these considerations, if a move from the land to urbanization and mechanization is seen as "violent," as Alvin Toffler insists, what sort of damage has been allowed or inflicted on the coming generations? If the principles of industrialism "affected every aspect of life from sex and sports to work and war," then life away from the home country and from the land necessarily is traumatic for Manuel's progeny. Mara, for instance, goes back to Mexico to search for her roots: "I tried to find the village my father was from. . . . I just wanted to see the place he came from, that's all. To walk the streets, to look inside the houses when it got dark, to eat the food, to wash myself clean early in the morning from water heated on a stove, and to cry with the beauty of the stars at night" (340-41). Part of the problem is that "interdependence" replaced the self-sufficiency of the earlier age. As aforementioned, Manuel seemed larger than life in his huge successes, and only he receives the credit for his amazing accomplishments. It is

undoubtedly difficult for the Dosamantes men to follow such a legend; as Soveida relates, "[Profetario] was a man who lived under the yoke of his father Manuel's perfectly balanced life. . . . My father, Luardo, was like his own father, a divided man, unable to ever come together within himself" (11). Soveida likewise describes herself and Mara as "two halves of a troubled whole" (71).

The Dosamantes family has clearly moved in time from a kind of life where agriculture and land ownership were the foundations for their lives into a capitalistic, industrial nation. Toffler says that the change from the basis of people's economy, culture, familial structure, and political organizations was a "giant tidal force . . . set loose on the world." This change he calls the "Second Wave" in human civilization and says that it "collided with all the institutions of the past and changed the way of life of millions." In the "First Wave" of civilization, those who held power were severely authoritarian, and one's birth dictated one's position in society. Furthermore, the people divided labor in a primary manner among themselves and life encircled the village center. Particularized classes existed, such as the aristocracy, the religious leaders, the warring element, the lower class, and the slaves. The most important characteristic of "First Wave" societies is that the economy was not centralized—most of the necessities of life were produced by those who needed them. Industrialism, when it erupted, "touched every aspect of human life and attacked every feature of the First Wave past."¹⁴ Nostalgia becomes an identifiable response in the Great Plains as the region began to experience the impact of industrial America.

One last important consideration in the cataclysmic changes that occurred is found in the one situation in which self-sufficiency did not win out over the old interdependence paradigm. This was the "decentralized unit" of the family home. For, in having and raising children and in passing on the culture to the progeny, self-sufficiency prevailed under industrialism. Mainly males went out to work

and the females generally stayed at home, producing not for the marketplace but for their own distinct families. Therefore, the more advanced types of labor fell to the males, and the females accomplished more rudimentary types of work. A problem with this division of labor is that it "produced a split in personality and inner life," since factories and offices work in a more collective manner. The resulting "need for coordination and integration brought with it an emphasis on objective analysis and objective relationships," and this was divided by gender as women endured isolated tasks and men continued to be interdependent in group settings. The myth, then, is that this is how men and women really are—objective as males and subjective as females—when in reality they were pushed into these roles by rising industrialism. Also, women came to be known as consumers, while men came to be known as producers.¹⁵ From all of this sprang political, social, and gender conflicts that are romantically, realistically, and magnificently portrayed in Chavez's *Face of an Angel*.

NOTES

1. Denise Chavez, *Face of an Angel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), hereafter cited in parenthesis in the text.

2. Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., "The Nineteenth Century," in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 289. Gilbert and Gubar also quote the passage, "the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them—these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy."

3. Gilbert and Gubar (note 2 above) cite the example of Coventry Patmore's long and very popular poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) to show that some writers advocated selflessness on the part of women to the point of employing terms that "suggest self-sacrifice, even self-immolation: 'Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf / Of his condoled necessities / She casts her best, she flings herself'" (p. 289).

4. *Face of an Angel* is set just across the New Mexico border in the Great Plains region of the United States.

5. Gilbert and Gubar (note 2 above), p. 289.

6. Arthur Waterman, "Susan Glaspell 1876-1948," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 3d ed., vol. 2, ed. Paul Lauter (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), pp. 1122-23.

7. Arthur B. Coffin, "Robinson Jeffers 1887-1962," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, *ibid.*, p. 1135.

8. Seamus Heaney, "Yeats As an Example?" *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (London: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), pp. 99-100.

9. L. C. Knights, "Poetry and Social Criticism: The Work of W. B. Yeats," in *Explorations: Essays in Criticism Mainly on the Literature of the Seven-*

teenth Century, ed. L. C. Knights (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), p. 174.

10. John Haines, "W. B. Yeats: The Responsibilities of the Poet," in *Modern English Poetry—From Hardy to Hughes: A Critical Survey*, ed. John Haines (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), p. 103.

11. Francisco A. Rios, in Francisco A. Lomeli, "Introduction: Hispanic Arts & Letters: An Artistic Legacy in the Limelight," in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1993), p. 14

12. Francisco A. Rios (note 11 above), p. 12.

13. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 37-38.

14. Toffler (note 13 above), p. 38.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.