

# The ugly in sandra cisneros' "bien pretty"



"Bien Pretty," as the title implies, is a story that invests in appearance. Throughout the story, prettiness is used as a proxy for authenticity and confidence in one's identity, while ugliness is a stand-in for performed identity. Flavio's appearance initially attracts Lupe because he physically calls to mind ancient Aztec imagery. She finds him pretty, however, not because he has symbolic cultural value, but because he is comfortable in his modern Mexican identity. Only after Flavio leaves does Lupe use 'pretty' to reflect upon her own authenticity: "Everything's like it was. Except for this. When I look in the mirror, I'm ugly. How come I never noticed before?" (160). In this passage, Lupe becomes critical of her appearance and, by proxy, of the inauthenticity of her performed identity. This self-reflection is pivotal because it begins a series of reflections in which Lupe questions beliefs she has held up to this point in the story. This passage starts the trend of self-reflection that leads her away from her despair over her lost love to a new focus on self-sufficiency and on the present.

During the first half of the story, Lupe is in constant dialogue with her lived past and what she imagines her ancestral past to be. "We have to let go of our present way of life and search for our past...Like the I Ching says, returning to one's roots is returning to one's destiny," she tells Flavio (149). Lupe seeks authenticity by reaching towards her past. She carries her lived past with her in the objects she brings to Texas and tries to connect to her ancestral past through sacred texts and trinkets. Our primary access to Lupe's personality and interests is through the objects in her life. Many of these objects (her grandmother's molcajete, her tapes, her copal) show an interest in or attachment to Mexican origins. But many others (the I Ching,

the Tibetan gongs, her references to chakras and Tae-Kwon Do) show a multicultural element to her life. She explicitly states her desire to be Mexican, but she also surrounds herself with objects that suggest a desire to connect to some universal indigenous wisdom. Lupe's hunger for a connection to an ancient heritage is present in her first interactions with Flavio. Even before she finds him pretty, even before she loves him, she is able to appreciate Flavio's physical features by relating them to Aztec imagery. She describes "that beautiful Tarascan face of his" as "the face of a sleeping Olmec". Initially, Flavio has appeal because he is a reflection of a past that Lupe is hungry to connect with.

For Lupe, prettiness isn't just about "good-lookers"; it is something more subjective. From the story's opening, she, as the narrator, tells us that "pretty" is a conditional state. Flavio "wasn't pretty unless you were in love with him" (137). Throughout the course of the story, Flavio, who begins as "just ordinary Flavio," becomes the man that Lupe can't help seeing in the faces of strangers. Although Lupe never explicitly states what she loves about Flavio, the arc of her affection seems to increase in the moments in which he displays confidence in his authentic Mexican identity. This sort of identity is rooted in family and personal stories rather than in studied or borrowed knowledge. It comes from lived experiences and from traditions with a lowercase "t" rather than from traditions built around formal rites. What historical cultural knowledge Flavio does have is only valuable to him because it was his grandmother's. Often, the moments in which Flavio displays Mexican authenticity (the dance lessons, his statement about knowing who he is) are also the moments that plant the seeds of self-doubt

in Lupe. It seems that Lupe is most attracted to Flavio's self-confidence, and the more she watches him, the closer she gets to doubting herself. Prettiness has a direct relationship to self-confidence. "It's got to do with believing it," Lupe says early on.

When Flavio leaves, Lupe finds herself in chaos. She describes anger, pain, and fear in his absence. First, she blames her situation on the inevitable havoc that love wreaks on the world. She asserts that the world operates smoothly until love comes in and causes chaos; then, immediately, she amends her statement: "Not true. The world has always turned with its trail of tin cans rattling behind it." After coming to this realization, instead of looking outward for explanations she turns inward to both literally and figuratively reflect: "Everything's like it was. Except for this. When I look in the mirror, I'm ugly. How come I never noticed before?" (160). When she says that everything is like it was perhaps, she means that the chaos she experiences post-Flavio is just another example of the trail of tin cans rattling as they always do. Or perhaps she simply means that the material facts of her life are just as they were before Flavio. The irony of the passage is that, despite Lupe's claim, for us, the readers, everything has changed.

When Lupe looks in the mirror she notices, for the first time, that she doesn't like what she sees. She, unlike Flavio, is no longer pretty. Her looks have not changed, but her willingness to self-reflect has. Given what we know about the connections between "pretty" and authenticity, Lupe's observation that she is ugly implies that she does not feel authentic. This is the first time that Lupe mentions her own appearance in the story, suggesting that it is the first time that she has been willing to look at herself critically. Early on she uses a

satirical tone to call out Isaresma Izaura Coronada and her husband for decorating their home with the veneer of cultural authenticity. She makes lists to call attention to the fact that they use academia and symbolic objects to construct identity rather than living through it. Yet up until this point, Lupe has been hesitant to look at herself through the same lens. In this moment, Lupe sees herself as ugly, unlike Flavio, whose authentic experience of Mexican identity makes him pretty. This passage implies that she has become critical of the way she mines the ancient past in an attempt to own her identity. Moreover, she not only finds her methods of performing identity ugly, but also wonders to herself why she wasn't able to see such deficiencies sooner.

This passage is important to the story because it marks a turning point. It marks the beginning of Lupe's willingness to reflect on the beliefs that she has held for the first half of the narrative. After the events of this passage, Lupe begins to question what it means to live. She begins to focus on living in the present, on being someone who makes things happen, not someone whom things happen to. She lets go of the idea of yin and yang, her assertion that complimentary forces come in pairs, and instead reinterprets *amar es vivir* to mean that she can invest in love for herself. Six pages after her initial self-reflection, she has moved away from her obsession with proving herself through ancient history and instead focuses on the present "with no thought of the future or past. Today. Hurray. Hurray!" (165).