

## The Spanish Language and the Magic of Words

Language plays an important role in Antonio's life. As he learns to read and write in school, he comes to believe that language has magic: "*There was magic in the letters, and I had been eager to learn the secret.*" The magic they promise is that of wisdom and knowledge, and Antonio hopes that words will reveal to him the mysteries of the world beyond his narrow experience and help shepherd his quest for understanding.

Antonio must operate in two linguistic worlds. Spanish is the language of his home and family, as well as his early understanding of religion, nature, and identity. But when he goes to school, the teacher calls him Anthony instead of Antonio. He must learn to speak, read, and write in English. This language barrier makes him feel alienated and lonely at first, until he makes friends with the other Spanish-speaking boys. For Antonio, English represents the larger American world, full of both excitement and confusion.

The many instances of Spanish vocabulary and dialogue in the novel illustrate the blending of two languages in Antonio's life. Anaya's use of Spanish alongside English helps to define certain characters and emphasize certain ideas and expressions which defy translation. For readers who do not speak Spanish, the foreign dialogue can make reading the novel confusing or obscure, creating the same feelings of alienation that Antonio feels when he is introduced to English at school.

### A Spanish Glossary

*abuelo*: grandfather

*arroyo*: stream or brook

*Ave María Purísima*: a prayer meaning, "Hail, purest Mary"

*bruja*: witch

*chango*: common term used to describe a young boy, as in "pal" or "buddy"

*¡Chinga tu madre!*: a curse meaning, "Damn your mother!"

*curandera*: spiritual healer who uses herbs and traditional healing techniques—inherited from the Indian cultures of Mesoamerica

*el Diablo*: the Devil

*encanto*: charm, spell, or enchantment

*La Grande*: a title of respect granted to Ultima, meaning "The Great Lady"

*hechicera*: sorceress

*hijo / hijos / hijitos*: son / children / little children

*el hombre volador*: the flying man

*el llano*: the open plain, a flat land used for raising cattle and keeping horses

*la luna*: the moon

*el mar*: the sea (the name Márez derives from this word)

*¡Madre de Dios!*: Mother of God!

*¡Mira!*: Look!

*muerte*: death

*una mujer*: a woman

*pecado*: sin

*¿Qué pasa aquí?*: What's going on here?

*suerte*: fate, destiny, chance, fortune, or luck

*Te voy a mater*: I will see you die

*la tristesa de la vida*: the sorrow of life

*la vieja*: the old woman

- \* Discuss the use of Spanish in the novel as it reveals important information about certain characters, and the ability of Antonio's character to communicate with these different voices.
- \* Why is Antonio so intimidated by English at school?
- \* How does language shape identity in this book?