

# Dancing with the Devil and Other Stories My Mother Told Me

E. Michael Madrid, Ed.D.  
Chapman University

## Abstract

“Dancing with the Devil and Other Stories My Mother Told Me” is an analysis of the history and growth of a popular folktale genre that developed during the 15th century in Mexico and has persisted over time throughout the Southwest. The oral tradition and the telling of folktales are means by which the cultural traditions of people of Mexican descent are maintained and fostered in informal as well as formal educational settings. The study is characterized by an examination of the cultural, religious, political, and historical characteristics of the indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican cultures that nurtured and promulgated the creation of this unique folktale motif. Furthermore, the various story types—etiological, the abandoned baby, devil as caballero or gentleman, and the-devil-at-a-dance—are carefully analyzed in terms of characterization, plot, setting, religious significance, and didactic function.

## Introduction

It is not uncommon for a Mexican- American child while sitting in her mother’s lap to be regaled with a variety of *cuentos* or stories, and often it is the religious tale that a child would find most entertaining. The religious tales are very fascinating because of the humor, the wide range of the subject matter as well as variations in plot, setting, and characterization. Many religious tales deal with the adventures of the saints or an apparition of the Virgin Mary, but it also would not be unusual for a child to hear stories of *El Diablo*. The characterization of *El Diablo* is quite engaging and it is his tale—an amalgam of adventure, humor, and religious instruction—that not only arouses feelings of amusement and fright, but also affirms traditional family values as well as the teachings of the Church. Understanding the manner in which Spanish and Catholicism have affected a literary genre such as the folktale as well as the frames of reference of students of Mexican descent is essential for the implementation of culturally relevant teaching practices. That is, according to Gay and Howard (2001), educators should not only understand, but also develop pedagogical practices that have relevance and significance

to their students’ social, cultural, and political realities. The significance of the devil’s tale becomes apparent when perceived in terms of the cultural, historical, and linguistic differences of students of Mexican descent who generally are being taught by a Caucasian, middle class female workforce. Latino parents connect their families’ history and culture through storytelling, and it would behoove educators to tap into the children’s funds of knowledge to facilitate the learning, especially the learning of literature and history (Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003).

## The History

### *Spanish Colonization*

During the era of Spanish colonization, roughly from 1600 to 1800, the influence of the Church was omnipresent insofar as Catholicism affected the passions, the virtues, as well as the sins of the lords, priests, servants, soldiers, wives, and children. In particular, the teachings of the Church that pertained to the role of the family persisted as a significant force that governed people's behavior. So strong were the influences of Church and family and so intertwined were the

cepts, the boundaries between the two were essentially invisible (Davidson, 1951).

Although the teachings of the Church affected all aspects of daily life during the era of colonization, Catholics who seemingly practiced the faith with passion, fervor, and zeal frequently were targeted by storytellers who were not reluctant to poke fun at their Christian brethren (Burland, 1968). For example, tales such as "Pedro and the Devil," "All Priests Go to Hell," and "The Devil, the Goat, and Mister Bonifacio" are humorous yet benign attacks on the hypocritical behavior displayed by many members of the clergy and the upper class, especially those who professed to be pious and devout. For example, the caballeros often were characterized by egotistical, presumptuous attitudes and, therefore, "the unpredictable and competitive nature of herding and riding activities was good seed ground for hubris" (Cervantes, 1997, p.91). In other tales, the Spaniard himself, neither his riding ability nor his religion, was held in contempt insofar as he was perceived as being evil-spirited if not demonic (Ingham, 1986).

The rigid orthodoxy of Catholicism during the Spanish colonization is reflected in stories of faith and miraculous manifestations of religious characters, including not only the Virgin and the saints, but also *El Diablo*, many of whose stories served a didactic function. Because many of the devil's tales served to instruct and inform, it should come as no surprise a literary figure as engaging and entertaining as *El Diablo* was integrated into the folklore as illustrated in "Saint Lucy's Eyes," a tale that deals with an individual's unshakable devotion to the teachings of the Church.

Although there are Mayan, Toltec, Zapotec, and Aztec rascals and evil spirits, the devil as depicted in Southwestern folklore is not pre-Columbian, but essentially a European figure, which may have developed from Harlequin, a widely recognized figure in European folk literature (Ingham, 1986). The image of the devil eventually evolved into that of a red skinned creature, but in a few stories he is depicted

as a hulk, a *bulto*, who not only terrifies people, but also oppresses them (Limon, 1994). Although the image of the devil could be quite intimidating, fear of him would not emanate from his gruesome appearance, but from what he could bring to bear on sinners, which is punishment, eternal damnation, or physical injury (Espinosa, 1912). Irrespective of his physical form, be it a red demon or a stallion as in the "The Magnificent Black Horse," *El Diablo's* principal role is that of a punisher of those who have disobeyed the Church.

#### *Plot and Characterization*

Readers of the devil's tales will encounter numerous variations of plot and characterization. For example, many popular stories tell of *El Diablo* enforcing bargains with people who have promised their souls, such as "The Card Player" and "Mister Bonifacio." In other tales, the devil is somewhat of a simpleton, and it is the clever protagonist who frequently is able to "trick and cheat the devil or discourage him by being more abusive than he is" (Ingham, 1986, pp. 108). As an illustration, in "The Boy and the Devil," *El Diablo* is outfoxed by a mere lad who has become his apprentice. One day the devil finds the boy reading his book of secrets and he becomes infuriated. In his rage, *El Diablo* pursues the boy throughout a series of delightful incidents in which the devil and the boy transform themselves into various animals and objects. The climax comes when *El Diablo* becomes a grain of rice after assuming the form of a bird and falls to earth a second or two after the boy who has metamorphosed into a pebble. As the pebble hits the ground, the boy becomes a rooster and without hesitation, he eats the grain of rice. Despite the many variations of the devil's tale, the typical story contains four distinct features or characteristics. The characteristics include: (a) an ordinary human being is engaged in a normal, routine activity; (b) the characters all live in the locality of the storyteller; (c) some manifestation of the devil intercedes; (d) once the mortal recognizes the

devil's presence, he or she struggles to overcome the devil's power (Thompson, 1997). The simple structure of the devil's tale belies its significant dramatic tension, which is intensified by the audience's fear of the devil's supernatural abilities. The plots of most tales of the devil feature a single, major incident in which *El Diablo* does not engage the protagonist in open, physical combat because his power is either psychological or supernatural, and his goal is to punish the protagonist for disobeying the Church.

There are many tales in which an individual solicits the assistance of the devil. In these tales honest and virtuous people seek *El Diablo's* help primarily because he could be a "very valuable ally and helper" (Thompson, 1997, p. 45). For example, during the late 17th century and the early 18th century, Indians, slaves, and servants who were called before officials of the Inquisition often confessed they had sought *El Diablo's* protection from the injustices perpetrated by businessmen and land owners because of his skills in worldly affairs (Cervantes, 1997).

Although securing the devil's help could cost one her soul, the benefits of *El Diablo's* services could be great. For example, *El Diablo* could help in matters of the heart, provide money, and could grant wishes not only to a commoner, but also the famous such as Pancho Villa. As an illustration, the tale "Pancho Villa at the Hill of the Coffin" is a humorous account of the famous revolutionary general bartering his soul for the ability to dodge bullets.

Many of the devil's tales take place in exotic locales such as enchanted caves, magical springs, and haunted houses. It seems *El Diablo's* power was strongest in places where the influence and safety of the community were weak such as ravines, rivers' edges, and caves, which were considered the portals to the underworld (Lipsett-Rivera, 2002). "The Curse of the Devil's Gold," "The Ghost's Affection," "The Devil's Lagoon," and "The River that was Stolen" are tales that are characterized

by the supernatural nature of their settings.

Many tales of the devil are etiological, which offer intriguing if not preposterous answers to the how and why of the phenomena of the physical world. Etiological stories were common in Pre-Columbian Mexico such as "The Smoking Mountain," a tale that describes the genesis of Mexico's two great volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtlaccihuatl. Stories of an etiological nature, especially those with the *El Diablo* as the central character, thrived during Mexico's colonial period as exemplified by "The Day the Devil Ripped the Earth Asunder," a tale that depicts the creation of the San Andreas Fault. The tremors of the earth subsided following the most violent quake which had ripped the earth open when there belched forth from that great gash in the earth a cloud of black sulfurous smoke . . . emerged, apparently having ascended up from the bowels of the earth, *un caballero magnífico*. (MacLean, 1979, p. 40)

The abandoned baby is another fascinating plot variation that is characteristic of the devil's tales that developed during the Spanish colonization. The principle purpose of the abandoned baby tale, which is based on the *ejemplo* or exemplum, is to affirm the teachings of the Church (Robe, 1980). The abandoned baby tale usually begins when a couple stumbles upon an infant who has been abandoned by the side of a road or under a bridge. As the baby develops, the foster parents notice strange physiological changes in the child, which often include the development of fangs, hooves, and claws. The traditional climax of the abandoned baby tale is characterized by an exploding baby as he is tossed into the air by the exasperated foster parents or when they merely utter "Jesus" or "Mary." In addition to its humor, the abandoned baby tale serves a didactic purpose. As in other tales of the devil, the characterization of *El Diablo* in the abandoned baby tale "came to be perceived increasingly in the context of redemption: a completely subservient being

used by God for the spiritual improvement of the pious” (Cervantes, 1997, p. 24). “The Baby with Fangs,” “Mister Procopio and the Infant Son,” as well as “The Devil and the Poor Man” are excellent examples of the abandoned baby tale.

### *Devil at a Dance*

In many devil’s tales, the spiritual improvement of children and adolescents is central to the plot, characterization, and setting. It is *El Diablo* who is the agent who compels the adolescent to respect her parents, observe religious holidays, and maintain appropriate behavior as in “Horse’s Hooves and Chicken Feet.” More importantly, it is the devil at a dance plot that is most popular for addressing themes dealing with parental respect and obedience. In the late 18th century and early 19th century in Mexico and the Southwest, adults, especially parents and grandparents, held a dim view of public dances not only due to the frequent fights and quarrels, but also the great potential for vulgar and promiscuous behavior (Limon, 1994). Although the popularity of the devil at a dance tale reached its zenith in the late 18th century, it has continued to flourish because

[P]eople in urban technological societies still have fundamental human desires and needs, and that, when folk beliefs migrate with the folks to the cities, they undergo only superficial changes. Thus, whereas in previous Mexican legends the devil made his presence known to village or small town young people at local dances, we now encounter him in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico . . . at a discotheque. (Sobek, 1988, p. 147)

There are countless versions of the devil at a dance tale, which include “Dancing on Good Friday,” “The Forbidden Dance,” “The Devil at Palms in Old Town” “The Woman Who Danced with the Devil,” “The Well Dressed Man,” “Devil at the Dance,” and “The Dance Hall and Lent.” The devil at a dance story contains a series of common, predictable elements. The most persistent characteristic is the prohibition against dancing, especially on a religious holiday such as Good Friday.

The protagonist customarily is a young lady who attends the dance in defiance of her parents or grandparents and is captivated by *El Diablo*, a handsome gentleman, as exemplified in “The Well Dressed Man.” In some devil at a dance tales, *El Diablo* appears as a musician or an animal, but in the great majority of the stories he is a charming gentleman with redeeming qualities that facilitate his role of defender and enforcer of the teachings of the Church (MacLean, 1979). During the dance, *El Diablo*’s identity is revealed when someone notices his horns or spies his tail or hooves (Rodriguez, 1993). In general, the tales conclude as the devil disappears in a billow of sulfurous smoke or as he flies through an open window. In various devil at a dance stories, *El Diablo* disappears with his partner, but if the young lady is fortunate enough to escape, her luck is short lived and she is punished. Going insane, being burned to death, scarring, or consistently encountering the devil’s ghastly image in windows and mirrors are the usual consequences for failing to heed the teachings of the Church.

### **Significance**

The devil’s tale is one of many genres in the body of work that constitutes the folktales of Mexico and the Southwest, yet it is devil’s tale that provides insights into the history and storytelling tradition of people of Mexican descent perhaps better than other folktale forms. According to Nathenson-Mejia and Escamilla (2003), the value of using folktales as a basis for instruction is significant because they found teachers were able to develop and improve the students’ ability to respond to instruction in a personal manner. They also found through the use of literature that was familiar to the students, the children’s verbal skills and abilities had been enhanced. The students’ development of reading strategies, such as asking questions, making inferences and making predictions, also had improved. Furthermore, Nathenson-Mejia and Escamilla



(2003) found storytelling and ethnic literature facilitated teachers' understanding of the histories and cultures of their students.

It is imperative that students of Mexican descent relate to teachers and connect to the school culture to develop a positive perception of the educational process as well as a positive relationship with the school itself (Ladson-Billings, 1994). A significant characteristic of teachers who have connected with their students is that they not only know a great deal about their students' lives, but also their culture, their traditions, and their history.

Teachers and teacher trainers must continue the effort to close the gap between the cultures of teachers and the cultures of the children they teach, which in California includes approximately three million Latinos. According to Nathenson-Mejia and Escamilla (2003), the use of Latino children's literature in teacher training promoted the candidates' understanding of the culture, tradition, language, and issues that characterize Latino students. The training experience not only broadened the candidates' knowledge and understanding of their students' history and culture, but also positively changed their attitudes about the children and the communities in which they lived.

Current research dealing with the dropout rate (VOYCE Project, 2008) revealed a mismatch or disconnect between the curriculum and the history and culture of students of color. That is, children of color seldom see their culture or history represented in the course of study, yet many parents, including parents of Mexican descent, compensate for what is lacking in the curriculum by providing informal instruction through storytelling. If teachers would emulate parents, they would find a fertile source of historical and cultural information in the folktale, which would promote a child's understanding of her culture. Through the use of culturally relevant literature, such as the folktale that is rooted in the history of Mexico and the Southwest, students of Mexican descent would not only appreciate their culture, but also could

explore their identities. When students find the curriculum relevant and engaging, they become knowledgeable and familiar with the themes, conflicts, and historical setting of the tales, which serves as a bridge to mastering many areas of the curriculum. Furthermore, when the curriculum is characterized by culturally relevant content, the history and culture of people of Mexican descent attain a significant level of relevance and importance.

## References

- Brodman, B. C. (1976). *The Mexican cult of death in myth and literature*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Burland, C. A. (1968). *The gods of Mexico*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Cervantes, F. (1997). *The Devil in the new world: The impact of diabolism in New Spain*. Cumberland: Yale University Press.
- Davidson, L. (1951). *A guide to American folklore*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Espinosa, A. (1912). New-Mexican Spanish folklore I & II, *Journal of American Folklore* 23, 395-418.
- Foster, G. M. (1948). The current status of Mexican Indian folklore studies. *Journal of American Folklore* 4, 368-382.
- Gay, C., & Howard, T. C. (2001). Multicultural education for the 21st century. *The Teacher Educator* 36 (1), 1-16.
- Ingham, J. M. (1986). *Mary, Michael & Lucifer: Folk Catholicism in central Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco: Joss-Bass Publishers.
- Limon, J. E. (1994). *Dancing with the Devil: Society and cultural politics in Mexican-American south Texas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lipsett-Rivera, S. (2002). Mira lo que hace El Diablo: The Devil in Mexican popular culture. *The Americas* 59 (2), 201-219.
- MacLean, A. (1979). *Cuentos*. Fresno, CA: Pioneer Publishing.
- Nathenson-Mejia, S. & Escamilla, K. (2003). Connecting with Latino children: Bridging cultural gaps with children's literature. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27 (1), 101-116.
- Paz, O. (1961). *The labyrinth of solitude*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Robe, S. L. ed., *Hispanic legends from New Mexico* (1980). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rodriguez, R. (1993). The Devil at the dance, variations on a theme. *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de Musique Folklorique Canadien* 27 (3), 3-5.
- Sobek, M. H. (1988). The Devil in the discotheque: A semiotic analysis of a contemporary legend. *Monsters with iron teeth perspectives on contemporary legend volume iii*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Student-led solutions to the nation's dropout crisis* (2008). Chicago: Voices of Youth in Chicago Education Project [VOYCE].
- Thompson, S. (1997). *The folktale*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

