The tale of ‘La Llorona’

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Specter haunts the dreams of children, adults alike

The 2019 movie “The Curse of La Llorona” portrays the legendary ghost of La Llorona as a scary spirit that stalks the night and hunts for children. As the old tale goes, her own children drowned in a river many years ago, which set off a tragic chain reaction.

But according to people who grew up with parents and grandparents telling them the Hispanic story, pop culture has completely lost the true essence of the cautionary tale of La Llorona.

Rosalia Pacheco grew up listening to the story of La Llorona, and feels a connection with the woman who many consider a harbinger of death.

In an interview with the *Sun*, she laid out the issues she has with the film, and what she considers a misrepresentation of the haunting figure.

“The movies that have been done so far have been very against, or contrary – in my view – to what I grew up with and what the meaning behind these stories is,” Pacheco said.

According to the myth, La Llorona married a wealthy Spaniard and the couple bore two children. But the relationship went terribly wrong when she learned that her husband cheated on her.

The stories vary on the ending; with one saying that she decided to drown her children as an act of revenge, and then decided to kill herself as well. Another version says that the children accidentally drowned, and she committed suicide out of grief.

Each version of the story ends with people being able to hear La Llorona crying and searching for her dead children at night.

Pacheco grew up listening to her parents share the story of La Llorona. Her father, Ray John de Aragon, penned the book "The Legend of La Llorona," and her mother Rosa Maria Calles wrote a play called "Tale of the Wailing Woman."

Now Pacheco has her own role in telling the legend; she tours around New Mexico with her show "La Llorona, the Wailing Woman," in which she sings songs and tells people the different versions of the story of La Llorona. The New Mexico Humanities Council sponsors Pacheco's show.

Pacheco ends her presentation by putting on a mask that makes her look more like La Llorona, and then she interacts with the audience as the character and answers questions. She said the audience enriches the program with their questions and their own stories about their connections to La Llorona.

Pacheco said the tale of La Llorona serves as more of a cautionary tale in Hispanic culture rather than a scary one.

"The story of La Llorona reminds us that we have to be safe, especially near ditches or rivers that could be very full," Pacheco said. "This story is a cautionary tale that has been used for generations to remind us of that need to be careful in places like that."

Markos Chavez, the director of UNM-Gallup Zollinger Library, also grew up hearing the story of La Llorona from his family members. He said his mom's side of the family told it as a cautionary tale as well.

"The reason they would tell us these stories is because it's kind of a way to get you to behave and do what you're told," Chavez said. "Your grandparents would tell you this to make sure you don't sneak out at night or go and do things when you're not supposed to. They would say that if you get caught out there that La Llorona will find you and take you away because she's looking for her missing kids."

Pacheco said that the true focus of the story has nothing to do with murder.

“It’s stereotyped as this horrible story that presents women and motherhood in a negative light,” Pacheco said. “It is used as a scare tactic for children to obey. That doesn’t come from within the people who grew up with the story.”

Meanwhile, Pacheco said she sees the story as a teaching tool rather than a spooky tale.

“Cautionary tales are a genre of myths or stories that teach a lesson that are cautionary that tell you ‘Okay, there’s this danger that you need to stay away from.’ There’s a reason for cautionary tales and a reason they’ve been passed down in oral tradition, not just in Hispanic communities but in every group of people throughout the world,” she said.

She said the age-old story can still teach modern folks a thing or two — people still drown in the Rio Grande or get their cars stuck in flooded ditches.

Pacheco just finished up her presentations for the year. She will be scheduling more for the spring of 2023, but those dates are pending.

More information about Pacheco’s presentation can be found on the New Mexico Humanities Council’s website under Public Programs.

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