

A Conceptual Framework for Identity, Metaphor and Theme in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

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Introduction

The essential charm of the *House on Mango Street* is that it is written in a simplistic and easily accessible style which consistently appeals to its many readers. In this essay I would like to provide an insight into the underlying structure of the book and in doing so I will attempt to outline the dialectical nature of the book, the nature of Mexican-American Society in America and the inherent feminist perspective within the book.

The Plot and Stylistic Structure

The *House on Mango Street* written by Sandra Cisneros and published in 1984 follows the development of Esperanza, the adolescent female protagonist born of Mexican-American parents and Latino heritage and living in an anonymous city



barrio. This barrio, a run down, poor area of a city is in America and is presumably Chicago, where Sandra Cisneros was born in 1954. The *House on Mango Street* (or 'House' as it will be referred to) is a book which is narrated by Esperanza, the female central character who is assumed to be somewhere between 11 and 13 years old. As a child of Mexican-American parents Esperanza is a speaker of both Spanish and English and this

cross cultural existence informs her world. The stories that she tells us throughout the book depict simple moments in her life when she contemplates her surroundings, the lives of her friends, the women and the men around her, and her feelings about how she might fit in to this world. Consequently this is a book which chronicles Esperanza's development and ensuing maturity and, "Overall, the stories work together so that each story builds to Esperanza's understanding of who she is" (Angel,

2010). In other words, the book is Esperanza's search for identity in the world in and around Mango Street where she lives and grows up. The book consists of a series of 44 vignettes, a vignette being a very short and highly descriptive chapter. These vignettes, as a consequence of their brevity and poetic quality move away from conventional literary chapter form and are expertly used to illustrate the day-to-day experiences and perceptions of Esperanza. The vignettes are a mixture of poems and stories in what has been called 'genre fusion' (Quintana, 2010). Cisneros has called the stories "lazy poems" (e.g. Spark Notes, 2019) of which she says, "for me each of the stories could have developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering in that grey area between the two genres" (cited in Quintana, 2010). Indeed, Cisneros began her career as a poet and the blending of poetry and a formal novelistic style of writing is added to by a unique form of punctuation where speech is recorded without the use of quotation marks in such a manner that it gives the rhetoric a childlike quality, and makes it a very easy book to read. The removal of punctuation allows the conversations to flow rhythmically and to serve as both a record of the events that occur on Mango Street, and as dialogue (Angel, 2010). This simplicity of design in conjunction with the shortness of chapters, and an often childlike quality are some of the reasons that this book is so popular in schools across the United States.

The Author's Formative Years

Sandra Cisneros was born into a Mexican American family with a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. The family was poor, and frequently moved between the barrios of Chicago and areas of Mexico where her father's family lived. In 1966 her parents had saved enough money to buy a small two-story house in a rundown Puerto Rican barrio on Chicago's north side. It was here that Cisneros spent her childhood and observed the characters around her, drawing on these experiences which contributed to the writing of *House*. As a consequence of this peripatetic lifestyle Cisneros has noted that, "Because we moved so much, and always in neighborhoods that appeared like France after World War II-empty lots and burned-out buildings-I retreated inside myself" (Gale Research, 1997.) It has also been observed that Cisneros was a quiet child with few friends, and was encouraged to read and write at a young age by her mother. There are echoes of this isolated and observant stance in the personality of Esperanza throughout the book, and particularly in the story *A Smart cookie* in which Esperanza's mother outlines the merits and value of

education as a proprietary road towards freedom (Gale Research, 1997).

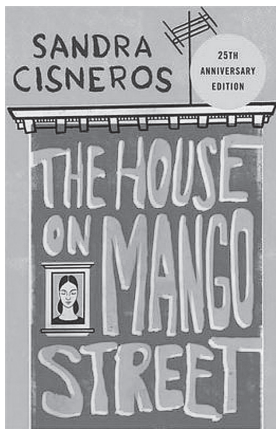
The Author's Educational Experience and the Development of the Book.

Sandra Cisneros graduated from Loyola University 1976 with a BA in English and attended a Master's degree writing course at the University of Iowa. While at Iowa University Cisneros describes how she felt alienated from her peers who were confident, wealthy and from more stable backgrounds than she was. Regarding this period of her life Cisneros has said that, "Everyone seemed to have communal knowledge which I did not have-my classmates were from the best schools in the countries. They had been bred as fine hothouse flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks" (Gale Research, 1997). In order to counterbalance this alienation, Cisneros looked for something to write about which reflected her own experiences from the barrio which were profoundly different from those around her, resulting in the genesis of this book. Cisneros has stated that this search for direction, and in an attempt to react against the worldliness of her peers, she found something that was uniquely her own voice. In her own words, she has said,

'Then it occurred to me that none of the books in this class or in any of my classes, in all the years of my education, had ever discussed a house like mine. Not in books or magazines or films. My classmates had come from real houses, real neighborhoods, ones they could point to, but what did I know? When I went home that evening and realized my education had been a lie—had made presumptions about what was "normal," what was American, what was valuable—I wanted to quit school right then and there, but I didn't. Instead, I got angry, and anger when it is used to act, when it is used nonviolently, has power. I asked myself what I could write about that my classmates could not. I didn't know what I wanted exactly, but I did have enough sense to know what I didn't want. I didn't want to sound like my classmates; I didn't want to keep imitating the writers I had been reading. Their voices were right for them but not for me. Instead, I searched for the "ugliest" subjects I could find, the most un "poetic"— slang, monologues in which waitresses or kids talked their own lives. I was trying as best I could to write the kind of book I had never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. Each week I ingested the class readings and then went off and did the opposite. It was a quiet revolution,

perhaps a reaction taken to extremes, but it was out of this negative experience that I found something positive: my own voice. The language in *Mango Street* is based on speech. It's very much an antiacademic voice—a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It's in this rebellious realm of antipoetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally'. (On Writing *The House on Mango Street*, 1994).

A Dialectical Theme in the Book



The opposition which Cisneros felt while at Iowa initiated a strong creative force which is represented by a pervasive sense of the dialectic within the book. The term dialectic is used here in the sense of referring to a person who wants to be one thing, but who is surrounded by a contradictory world, which dictates that the person should be another thing. Such a dialectical contradiction creates conflict and anxiety in a person which however, can ultimately be resolved, and lead finally to an acceptable outcome or solution. Manzo et al., (1992) have defined the nature of dialectical thinking as something that refers to the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives and to arrive at the most economical and reasonable reconciliation of seemingly contradictory information and postures. Dialectical thinking therefore is a form of analytical reasoning that pursues knowledge and truth as long as there are questions and conflicts. Esperanza's dialectical positioning revolves partially around the fact that she wants to be a writer and yet, she is surrounded mostly by people who are uneducated, and have no interest in anything remotely connected with the concept of becoming a writer, or of Art in general. Except that is for Gil, in the story *Gil's Furniture Bought and Sold* where both Gil and Esperanza understand the secret beauty of the music produced by a music box. Esperanza who is transfixed by the sounds and tells us,

'Then he starts it up and all sorts of things start happening. It's like all of a sudden he let go of a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan neck shadows and in our bones. It's like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little club to sound to it like if you were running your

fingers across the teeth of a metal comb'. And then I don't know why, but I have to turn around and pretend I don't care about the box so Nenny won't see how stupid I am. But Nenny who is stupid, already is asking how much and I can see her fingers going for the quarters in her pants pocket. This, the old man says shutting the lid, this ain't for sale'. (*The House on Mango Street*, page 20).

Here we see a dialectical contrast between of the aesthetic sensibilities of Esperanza and Nenny who is younger and uninterested in the romanticism of the situation. There is also perhaps a reference to the fact that Esperanza's youth and innocence do not provide her with the ability to be able to fully process the beauty of this moment. This book consistently chronicles such encounters between Esperanza and the people around her and in doing so the development as she grows, learns and matures, and builds her identity as a person. Ultimately *House* is about the discovery and development of an identity and through Esperanza the book asks the central question: Who am I? *The House on Mango Street* is not though a typical bildungsroman in that as a coming-of-age story in a patriarchal society (a society disproportionately controlled by men) it is shaped as such by the recognition of rigidly defined gender roles within Mexican-American society. The freedom and independence associated with male coming-of-age narratives in *House* is replaced by "female versions of loss of freedom and acceptance of subordination" (Quintana, 2010). Nonetheless, as Esperanza's coming-of-age story and as a search for identity the book has become a widely respected piece of writing which has sold more than six million copies, and which has been translated into more than twenty languages. This book is also compulsory reading in elementary schools, high schools and universities across the United States. A notable exception however to the acceptance of this book can be found in the southern state of Arizona. Legislation introduced in 2010 by the Arizona House (Bill 2281) prohibits the promotion of individual races in the state, and this ban has meant the removal of more than 80 books from the classroom and curriculum including *The House on Mango Street*. A further consequence of the bill has resulted in the cancellation of the Mexican-American studies program in the Tuscon School District.¹

¹ This ban it could well be argued is a misinterpretation of the concept of multiculturalism of which Stuart Hall says we should not look for similarities of sameness, but for similarities of difference.

The Nature of the Mexican-American Experience in America.

Historically the United Mexican States (now Mexico) lost control of their northern territories (present day California, Arizona and New Mexico) to the United States at the end of an armed conflict which occurred between 1846 and 1848. After this war and into the early 1900s, immigrants from Mexico were recruited into the United States as a low-cost labour supply for the building of railways, for mining and for other industries, especially throughout the south-western United States. Mexican immigration was widespread and was unregulated throughout the peak period of the 1920s. Between World War I and World War II Mexican immigration slowed down due to the pressures of the Great Depression in America (a period of economic recession) and Mexican-Americans were either repatriated or faced poverty and extreme discrimination (Gale Research, 1997). Even after their contribution to the Second World War on the side of America, many Mexican-Americans continued to face discrimination after the war and many Mexican-Americans were treated like second-class citizens. Despite the general push for civil rights throughout the 1960s and 1970s and despite their eagerness to integrate more fully into American society, Mexican-Americans were still treated as “outsiders” by mainstream American culture and *even today* many Mexican-Americans still face discrimination and limited opportunities for advancement (Gale Research, 1997).

A Chicano/Latina Perspective within the House on Mango Street

As people of Mexican-American cultures both Sandra Cisneros the author and the protagonist Esperanza can be described as *Chicano* that is ‘Someone who is native of, or descends from, Mexico and who lives in the United States’ (GENIAL, 2007). Sandra Cisneros and Esperanza, can also be described as *Latina* (or even *Latino*) which means, ‘Someone who is native of, or descends from, a Latin American country’ (GENIAL, 2007). The word Latina has been used by Cisneros to refer to her own culture (AARP, 2009). The term Latina includes people from Brazil *but* excludes those who were born in or who are descended from Spain. People descended from Spain can be referred to as Spanish or Hispanic and the term Hispanic therefore refers to ‘Someone who is a native of, or descends from, a Spanish-speaking country’. Confusion between the two terms *Chicano* and *Hispanic* can arise as both people of Mexican heritage, and people of Spanish heritage can both be Spanish language speakers. This confusion can also exist because the word Hispanic came into official use in the United

States in the early 1970s (during the Richard Nixon presidency) when the U.S. government decided to use the word Hispanic as a universal term to describe *all* Spanish-speaking groups in the United States (GENIAL, 2017).

As a Chicano/Latina female Esperanza is particularly attuned to the lives of the females around her, and in telling us the stories of their lives she describes the role of women in Mexican-American society. This is a life of patriarchy and it is a world into which contemporary Latina writers insert themselves, their concerns regarding the lives of Mexican-American people and their call for radical change (Haydee Rivera, 2009). Haydee Rivera also notes that Chicana female participation was often ignored during the cultural changes of the 1960s-1970s by a movement which was “largely characterized by male-dominated expression and artistic creation” (Haydee Rivera, 2009). A consequence of this lack of female Chicana inclusion in the cultural dynamic of the 1960s-1970-s was an attempt to shift the narrative towards a more female-centric position and the written word was employed as a tool to achieve this. It is within the conscious attempt to shift the narrative that House, and Sandra Cisneros can be located. It should be mentioned that this novel does not have to read as feminist novel or as a political novel and like all great literature the book can be viewed in different ways and even simply as story about a poor working class girl in America who longs to escape the barrio and live in a house of her own. Although to do so would be to ignore the wider context of the book.

At the age of 21 after graduating from the University of Iowa Sandra Cisneros was working as a high school teacher in a Chicago barrio teaching disadvantaged students who had been either excluded from school or who were unable to complete school. Cisneros was able to perceive the same experiences of exclusion and otherness based on culture and gender as she had herself felt whilst a student at Iowa University and she was uniquely placed to witness and record the experiences of the Mexican-American female students in her class. Cisneros had this to say about the experience,

‘I taught Latino high-school dropouts and counseled Latina students. Because I often felt helpless as a teacher and counselor to alter their lives, their stories began to surface in my “memoir”; then *Mango Street* ceased to be my story. I arranged and diminished events on Mango Street to speak a message, to take from different parts of other people’s lives and create a story like a collage. I merged characters from my twenties with characters from my

teens and childhood. I edited, changed, shifted the past to fit the present. I asked questions I didn't know to ask when I was an adolescent. (On Writing the House on Mango Street, 1994).

Her students were mostly young women who had lives much more difficult than hers had been and many had parents who had discouraged them from education. Others had babies who simply needed such basics as food and shelter and some were women who came to school with blackened eyes while others talked of physical abuse at the hands of boyfriends and fathers, (Angel, 2010.) Cisneros has mentioned that the novel is not an autobiographical one per se (e.g. Angel, 2010) and that Esperanza is not directly herself. Instead she has said, "I just wanted to acknowledge all the women who gave me their stories, because there were so many I wanted to dedicate this book to. I felt the list was getting too long, so I scratched all the names and wrote: 'A las Mujeres, To the Women' [the dedication at the beginning of the book], (AARP, 2009).

The House as a Metaphor for Inner Change and Inner Development

The first story in the book is called *The House on Mango Street*. This begins the book with the Cordero family moving into their own house on Mango Street, a move which itself has been preceded by the family having moved to many different locations. The House into which they finally move is dilapidated and Esperanza is disappointed that it is not the house of her dreams. She tells us,

"I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how these things go.' (The House on Mango Street, page 5).

It has been noted that the introduction of a house serves as an "identity marker" (Wenz, 2006) and Esperanza in pointing to a house which leaves her feeling dissatisfied is really pointing at herself, and her own need for change and development. Her final words, 'But I know how these things go' indicate the inner strength and resolve that we observe in Esperanza throughout the book. This previously itinerant existence, and need for change and development can be seen to have parallels in Cisneros' own life when she was beginning and developing her own writing career. She describes

this period of her life as 'wandered like a cloud for ten years, following the food supply. I was a hunter, gatherer, an academic migrant.' "I was migrating because I wasn't looked at as a legitimate writer. I don't mean any disrespect in comparing my life to the people who really do the migrant work, but I had to live, pretty much, by moving every year" (AARP, 2009)."

With regard to the inner strength and determination that Esperanza displays throughout the book, we can witness this in the philosophical approach to life of Cisneros,

"Now I would still say, as Gandhi did, that we're responsible for making the change we want to see. The older I get, the more I realize [those lines] came from a very intuitive place. I really wrote *House* by getting out of the way of the light coming through, because I wasn't that smart, and I think I'm never as smart as when I write. I still believe there's so much cruelty in the world, but there's also so much humanity to it. I'm an optimist, not a Pollyanna. Each of us has great potential to balance the cruelty in the world with kindness—within our capacity. And if we nourish our spirit every day and we can nourish our heart, we're reminded of whatever we are able to change, not what we are incapable of changing. If we change ourselves, it can affect everyone who comes into contact with us. What I didn't know in my twenties, but am certain of now, is that there's lots of miseria in the world, but there's also so much humanity. All the work we do as writers is about finding balance and restoring things to balance. You need to consider the daily choices you make to create or destroy with every single act, whether it's in words or in thoughts. The older I get, the more I'm conscious of ways very small things can make a change in the world. Tiny little things, but the world is made up of tiny matters, isn't it?" (AARP, 2009)

In order to determine whether or not the self-motivated need for change of Esperanza was communicating with the female students in my reading class² I asked them these questions, 'Did you like this book? Why or why not?' These were some of the replies I received,²

I liked this book. So I enjoyed reading it. The story is very curious because it

² This reading class is in an all-female university and publication permission has been given by the authors.

makes me [feel] joy and sorrow. I sometimes sympathize with Esperanza and sometimes respect that Esperanza tries to change her destiny on her own effort. She thinks that she want to be independent because she sees many trapped women around her. At the same time, however, she has desire to help those women. It is great point for her. I want to be [a] strong woman like Esperanza to open up a new path of life. And this book should be read by, especially teenager[s], as a lesson of the way of living.'

'Yes, I did. I liked this book so much. This is because I enjoyed reading Esperanza's progress and thinking of her feelings. She is very sensible and smart regardless of her age, so I'm interested in her way [of thinking]. Comparing Esperanza and me was also interesting. Moreover, I could sympathize with Esperanza because I often lose my identity and myself like her. For teenage girls, it's difficult to find their own identities and understand who they are. Young people have a lot of problems, including me.'

'I like this book because I feel like I have [the same problems] that Esperanza has in this story. For example, the society and the people who are in poverty. And Esperanza is smart enough to know how the society works and how the life goes of people who live in the Mango Street. And also, she finally came to think that she wants to save people like bums and she never [forgets those people] even if she had [her] own house.'

I think it is fair to say that this message of book has been communicated to those female students quoted above.

Feminism and the House as Metaphorical Limitation.

The patriarchal themes in his book can be seen as being premised on the feminist idea that, 'Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak' (Lober, 1997). An established feminist position which however had not been fully addressed in Chicana literature in significant detail until the appearance of this book³.

In the fourth story *My Name* it becomes clear that Esperanza is unhappy with her

³ Cisneros has been acknowledged as a pioneer in her literary field as the first female Mexican-American writer to have her work published by a mainstream publisher.

name when she tells us that, 'In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters', (*The House on Mango Street*, page 10). This indicates a dissatisfaction with her name, and later in the story this dissatisfaction indicates that Esperanza wants to transcend the limitations of her ethnic and gender identity as well. The 'grandmother' in this story signifies the handing down of stereotypical cultural expectations, a process which Esperanza intuitively wants to interrupt and of which she says, "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (*The House on Mango Street*, page 11). Through Esperanza, Cisneros shows readers how class boundaries and ideologies perpetuate a world that allows individuals to perform their social roles without considering the real conditions of their existence. Like other female members of poor ethnic communities, Esperanza suffers the inevitable consequences of race, class, and gender oppression. Esperanza is involved in a cycle of negative socialization which represents not only the traditional Mexican-Female experience but which makes additional moral and ideological comments as well, and describes a reality that is globally recognized. The narration of Esperanza who is both a participant and an observer conveys the social injustices that have contributed to her own "subordinate cultural position" (Quintana, 2010).

In the story *A House of my Own*, Esperanza tells us that she wants, 'a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem' (*The House on Mango Street*, page 108). Here Esperanza longs for her own house in the future and for her own space where she can flourish in safety as a writer and realize her true identity as the writer she knows she really is. On one level this future dream house reflects the success and achievement to which Esperanza can aspire however by contrast, the house, on Mango Street, is a symbol of the space that contains the women who have subordinate limitations placed upon them by Chicana society. The window which Esperanza refers to in the story *My Name* (and windows are repeated as metaphors throughout *House*) represents the idea of looking out at the world from the position of limitation placed upon females within Chicana society, to the wider context of society as a whole. The window of the house demonstrates the barrier that exists between the inside of a house, and the real world outside. There is also reference to a dichotomy that exists for Chicano females between inclusion in mainstream society and exclusion from this society. There are other particularly female metaphors in the book concerning for example physical development such as in *Hips*. In this story the girls talk about the development of their hips which symbolizes a transition from girlhood to the childbearing age of womanhood. The game they played with the skipping rope, double-

dutch, has the girls metaphorically entering in one side of the rope and leaving from the other side in a manner which parallels the transition from childhood to a childbearing age (Biddle, 2019 unpublished). In a similar manner 'shoes' are an important metaphor which represent being an adult female through the evocative design of the high heels in the story *The Family of Little Feet*.⁴

Esperanza, a True Heroine

Esperanza's voice portrays the lives of women in adverse situations who are often trapped isolated or abused by the culture in which they live. Nonetheless, Esperanza is a heroine who displays an inner quality and individuality which allows her to objectively understand the women and the world around her, which she describes in her narration. Esperanza is able to survive the difficulty of her existence by virtue of her personal and social awareness, premised on her strong desire to succeed and move into her own house in the future. This commitment and awareness allows Esperanza to reject the stereotypical roles imposed on women and at the same time feel solidarity with the women who she sees suffering on Mango Street. Esperanza does not submit to the limitations placed upon her and Esperanza's greatest achievement is "the balancing act she performs, straddling two cultures, languages, and histories, placing herself within the crux of her community while at the same time maintaining a sense of individuality and control" (Haydee Rivera, 2009). In this respect Esperanza is a champion of all similarly underprivileged groups who demonstrates that personal resolve and independence of spirit can lead to a better quality of life. Esperanza is also the voice of Sandra Cisneros and other committed Chicano writers who have attempted to use literature a tool for female advancement and for social change. Finally, Esperanza is a character who is able to speak to any reader, male or female, who has experienced isolation or alienation in any manner whatsoever.

There is a huge contextual environment into which *The House on Mango Street* can be placed, not least the search for identity which pervades the book and the feminist position which is ever implicit. This is a simple yet effective book which has

4 Other important metaphors in the book include shoes again as representative of childish clumsiness and insecurity as the *Chanclas* (Mexican sandals) in the story *Chanclas*. Trees are also an important metaphorical symbol of the resilience, independence and inner strength that we can associate with Esperanza in the book (Angel, 2010). A clear example of this inner strength is in the story *Four Skinny Trees* but can also be found in *The Monkey Garden* where the tree is located in a place of security and reflection and is 'a tree that wouldn't mind if I lay down and cried a long time' (*The House on Mango Street*, page 97), (Biddle, 2019, unpublished).

been written in a nonthreatening and accessible manner, and this is part of its beauty and significance. *The House on Mango Street* allows those who wish to do so an opportunity to explore it from an academic and self-reflective perspective, or simply as a book about a young girl living in a house on Mango Street.

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