

The House on Mango Street

Speaker: Ray Slavens

Sandra Cisneros grew up in a poor neighborhood in north Chicago. Born in 1954, she was the only girl in a Mexican-American family with six brothers, from whom she felt separate and isolated. In about 1965, the family bought a somewhat run-down house in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago that became the inspiration for *The House on Mango Street*. She attended Loyola University in Chicago and then earned a Masters of Fine Arts from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. She is a poet, a writer of short stories, and a novelist and has won many awards for her writing. She has also taken an active role in the Chicano/a literary movement and with several organizations that promote Chicano/a writers.

The House on Mango Street was first published in 1984. It is comprised of 44 short chapters or vignettes that exist on the boundary between fiction and autobiography, between poetry and prose, between high art and accessible popular culture, accessible to those who don't read a lot but interesting to those who have made a career out of the study of literature. It chronicles the experiences and observations of the adolescent Esperanza, the first-person narrator, as she grows up in this poverty-stricken ethnic enclave. It won the American Book Award in 1985 and has been adopted into the curriculum of many high schools, colleges, and universities, despite the efforts of some to censor it.

Although the title of the book refers to the house in which Esperanza's family lives, the narrative moves beyond the house to describe the entire neighborhood. In fact, her father and brothers seem to live in an entirely separate world which the narrator either has little access to or from which she feels isolated. Her world is a world of herself and her sister and their friends and neighbors. It is a female world in which men are often oppressors and abusers, which leads Esperanza to want to escape and maintain her autonomy. Although it tackles tough subjects like sexual assault, poverty, abandonment, and various kinds of abuse, the novel maintains a tone that is moderate and positive, looking toward a better future for the narrator and those for whom the narrator is warned she must come back.

Coming-of-Age Story: As a coming-of-age novel or bildungsroman, the story is about the narrator's growth from innocence to experience, her journey of self-discovery. The story also fits within a subgenre of the bildungsroman, the künstlerroman, which is a coming-of-age narrative about an artist, in this case a writer. Esperanza dreams of becoming a writer, and as the story progresses, her desire to achieve this goal grows and matures as she does. Coming-of-age stories typically focus on the life of a teenaged narrator or character who grows from childhood into adulthood during the course of the novel.

In *The House on Mango Street*, we witness the narrator's movement from childhood toward adulthood in a physical sense. She opens "Hips" with the simple statement, "One day you wake up and they are there" (49). The growth of feminine hips signifies the movement into womanhood. But the character's quiet observation and analysis of the women around her and the lives they lead also guides her to a desire to grow up and get out of a neighborhood in which women live disappointing, stagnant, and often abused lives. Esperanza, however, grows from just wanting to save herself to recognizing that once she

gets out, she has a responsibility to others in her community and that she must “come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110).

Multicultural Literature: Kathy G. Short, et al., define multicultural literature as “literature by and about groups that have been marginalized by dominant European-American cultures in the United States. This definition includes racial, ethnic, religious, and language minorities, those living with physical or mental disabilities, gays and lesbians, and people living in poverty” (159). *The House on Mango Street* addresses multiculturalism by examining the lives of immigrant minorities, minority language communities, racial minorities, and economic minorities in an urban neighborhood filled with “All brown all around...,” where “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives” (28).

The purposes of multicultural literature are many, including giving voice to those readers and students who feel excluded from mainstream cultures, giving opportunities for those outside minority cultures to gain better understanding and appreciation for those cultures, addressing issues faced by minorities (such as race, poverty, etc.), and helping young people see a need for and the results of previous attempts to overcome social injustices in the United States and around the world.

Alleen Pace Nilsen, et al., describe multicultural young adult books: “These are powerful books because they explore the edges where young people brush up against values and practices different from their own” (131). In this sense, *The House on Mango Street*, like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, can be considered realistic fiction. The novel deals with a number of elements common to contemporary realistic fiction, such as peer groups, family relationships, friendship, and living in a multicultural world.

A number of the other books read in this class also celebrate diversity and multicultural literature: *The Code Talker* examines the place of a Native American soldier within the larger American society. *Maus* explores the experiences of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States after World War II. *The Fault in Our Stars* examines a sub-culture of the terminally ill and those who are disabled by disease.

Magical Realism: While for the most part *The House on Mango Street* maintains a focus on realistic events, settings, and characters, on occasion, supernatural elements intrude on this otherwise realistic world. Think of the three sisters who are able to tell without being told that Esperanza wants to leave the barrio, but who also warn her of the importance of never forgetting where she came from or the people she left behind. Or Elenita, “the witch woman,” who predicts that Esperanza will find her “home in the heart” (62, 64). This is essentially what magical realism is all about. Magical realist artists and writers create a predominantly realistic world into which occasional supernatural elements encroach. Writers and characters typically do not comment on this intrusion but accept it as part of the world they inhabit. Magical realism is most common in Chicano/a and Latino/a literature and art and can be found in the works of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, Laura Esquivel, and many other important authors. It is also commonly found in the work of Native American artists as well as those derived from African ancestry and culture, the African diaspora.

The American Dream: Generations of immigrants have come to the United States believing the dream that the streets are paved with gold, that America is a land of limitless opportunity, the Promised Land.

Those already in the United States have believed the stories of Horatio Alger, Jr., and other authors that tell stories suggesting that with pluck, hard work, and determination, anyone can become rich and successful. The American Dream may involve owning one's own home, having a successful career, and always, living a better life than one is already living. It is one of the reasons we buy lottery tickets and dream of becoming movie stars. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's family has achieved part of this dream. They have purchased their first house, but the dream isn't complete, as the house is in a poverty-stricken neighborhood where people seem to have given up on their dreams, like Esperanza's mother and a number of other characters. One implication seems to be that the American Dream isn't always equally accessible based on one's race or immigrant status.

Poetic Fiction: Cisneros' style is sometimes compared to prose poetry – prose (non-poetry) written in a style that is similar to poetry because of its short form and its use of poetic techniques. Notice the very short chapters or vignettes that comprise *House on Mango Street*, the detailed imagery provided by the author, and the compact, economical use of words in each section. These vignettes each contain their own short narrative, disconnected from other short episodes or sometimes only connected by the general themes of the book.

Works Cited

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Nilsen, Alleen Pace, et al. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 9th ed. Pearson, 2013.

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