
Themes of Growing, Realization and Building Own House

In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator, Esperanza, recounts brief incidents and memories that shape who she becomes as she grows from a child into a young woman. From the beginning, her hope for the future is represented through her desire to have a nice house of her own. The same sentiment is echoed at the conclusion of the book, but Esperanza is no longer the same person. While she maintains her wish to get out of the neighborhood---to leave Mango Street behind---she acknowledges her attachment to the neighborhood and her duty to help those who are not as capable as she is. She cannot erase her past, as it is an essential part of who she is and who she is to become. Forced to encounter adult issues at a young age, Esperanza does not succumb to them as many characters in the book do. Instead, she is able to learn from her experiences, forming her own goals and maturing into a young woman shaped, but not held back, by the world in which she grows up.

In the opening chapter, Esperanza acknowledges how important it is for her one day to have a house she can be proud of. She is not content with the house on Mango Street, even though her family owns it. It is small and rundown, lacking the amenities she envisions in a house. She wants a "real house," and says, "But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it" (5). From the onset of the book, Esperanza's unwillingness to accept her situation is clear. Despite the poverty of her family and her seemingly unfortunate situation, she does not resign herself to a life of pity and despair. She holds out hope for something better, and it is this hope that allows her to overcome many of the problems that she faces.

Esperanza uses the meaning of her name and the story of her great-grandmother, her namesake, to show that she wants to distinguish herself and her life on her own terms, and not merely become the possession of a man. "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (10). Esperanza's great-grandmother was once a wild woman who refused to marry until one day a man physically carried her off. After that:

She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (11)

Esperanza knows that many Spanish women, like her great-grandmother, lose their dreams and their ability to live their own lives once they are married. Rather than fall into this traditional trap, she embraces the English meaning of her name: hope. She believes a new name would be

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even more fitting, "something like Zeze the X" (11), as it would represent her individuality.

Marin's fixation with impressing men and getting married provides a contrast to Esperanza's yearning to create her own life. "What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them" (27). Marin's hope for the future lies completely in the hands of men. As Esperanza describes, she "Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (27). Esperanza refuses to take such a passive approach. She would rather try to succeed through her own endeavors than rely completely on a man to save her.

Rafaela provides an example of a woman who relies on marriage to improve her life, and then finds herself trapped by her husband. She is still a young woman, but does not get to go out and dance and have fun. She "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid [she] will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). Rafaela is treated like a possession by her husband. She is not even permitted to leave her own home alone. Like Esperanza's great-grandmother, Rafaela cannot live her own life. Esperanza recognizes the loss of freedom and individuality that many women in her community experience and refuses to accept that for herself. Her hopes and dreams are based on what she can achieve, and are not dependent on the promises of a man. She does not want to end up like her great-grandmother or Rafaela, trapped in a house, dreaming of what might have been.

Esperanza's early experiences with sexuality give her a negative view of men and the manner in which they treat women. She and two of her friends are given high-heeled shoes that they wear around the neighborhood. They are excited to be wearing the shoes. Esperanza says, "these are the best shoes" (41). She notices that the shoes draw the attention of all the men, but does not immediately realize it is because the shoes cause the men to view them as sex objects, not as little girls trying to have fun. The girls ignore the man at the grocery store who says they are too young to be wearing high-heeled shoes, but decide to take them off after a drunken bum offers one of them a dollar to give him a kiss. "We are tired of being beautiful" (42). They hide the shoes and do not complain when one of their mother's throws them away. The experience with the shoes and the gawking men teaches the girls that though they may feel innocent and young, they are not viewed that way by men. The way men perceive them forces them to grow up before they should have to.

At her first job, one of Esperanza's coworkers forcefully kisses her, further proving to her that she is now viewed by men as an object of sexuality. She takes the job to help pay for school. She feels uncomfortable at first, but an older Oriental man is nice to her. He asks her for a birthday kiss, and as she is about to kiss him on the cheek, he grabs her and kisses her hard on the mouth, not letting go. Esperanza trusts this man at first, but learns that he was only being nice to her so that she would kiss him. Her early experiences with men and intimate acts are not how she imagined they would be.

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Esperanza does not see her sexuality as an escape as her friend Sally does. She is forcefully groped, perhaps raped, during her first sexual encounter. She is left crying and confused:

Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? (99)

Esperanza blames Sally for the rape. At the carnival, Sally goes off with a man, leaving Esperanza alone. She is kissed and grabbed by a man who keeps telling her he loves her. For Esperanza, the experience is nothing like it was supposed to be. "They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong. Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again" (100). Esperanza had enjoyed going out with Sally, because men would shower them with attention, but upon realizing what the men truly want, she sees that her sexuality is more a burden than an escape. This consciousness allows her to free herself from the idea that she needs a husband to live happily. Sally, on the other hand, gets married at a very young age, and soon finds herself afraid to leave her home without permission.

While her sexual maturation, and the way it is viewed by men, plays a significant role in her growth into a young woman, Esperanza matures in other ways, discovering what she needs to be happy. On her final trip to the monkey garden, Esperanza discovers that she cannot use the games she played as a child to get away from reality anymore (98). She has to make some decisions about where she wants her life to go. She knows she does not want to end up imprisoned by marriage like many women in the neighborhood. She listens to her mother when she tells her to work hard in school, because she sees her mother's regrets. "I could have been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard" (91). Her mother is not in an abusive relationship like some of the other women, but still she is limited in her freedom. All she knows is the neighborhood. She has disbanded the dreams she had as a young girl and resigns herself to her current situation. She is a strong influence on Esperanza, not wanting her to be one of the girls "that go into the alleys" (73). She envisions something better for her daughter, which contributes to Esperanza seeking something better for herself.

Esperanza learns to accept the role her neighborhood plays in her life. She cannot forget it, with its sadness and its problems, because she is shaped by her experiences in it. She feels bad for those who suffer daily, and knows she can only be happy if she helps others.

On day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house.

Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs.

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The attic grumble.

Rats? They'll ask.

Bums, I'll say, and I'll be happy. (87)

Esperanza does not feel like a victim. Instead, she learns from the difficult situations she faces throughout her life and, even as a young woman, feels a sense of duty towards the less fortunate. She believes she can help. She may not know how or when, but one day she will be successful, and she will share that success with others.

In "A House of My Own," Esperanza further describes the house she will have one day, and how it will make her happy.

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

Esperanza's dream home is free of a male to control her. It will allow her to write, which becomes her passion. She will depend on herself and be responsible for herself, and if she can accomplish that, she will be happy. The house is her blank slate upon which she can make her life. She compares it to paper before a poem. It holds the promise and potential for greatness.

In the final chapter, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," Esperanza explains how writing has helped her overcome the problems on Mango Street. "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes" (110). She can never completely erase the bad parts of her life, the poverty of her situation, but she can escape it through writing. She says, "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever" (110). While she wants to physically leave Mango Street one day, she already has left it in other ways. She is not burdened by it and does not fall into abusive or prohibitive relationships as many women she describes do. She maintains her hope in spite of the despair she encounters in her neighborhood. Perhaps most importantly, she appreciates her own situation and vows to return, "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). While all along her dream is to get away from Mango Street, she knows that is not possible. She cannot forget those who have influenced her, those who lack her hope and perseverance. They will always be a part of who she is.

Esperanza becomes aware of adult problems at a young age. In some cases, she learns from

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the experiences of others, other times, she experiences them firsthand. It becomes clear to her that she wants a better life than those around her have. She cannot rely on marriage to save her. She must create a good life for herself. Over the course of the book, she begins to comprehend what a happy life entails. She wants her own house, she wants to write, and she wants to help others. Esperanza is still a young woman on Mango Street when the story concludes, but one is left with the impression that her determination will allow her to reach her goals.

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