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[[essay date 1995] *In the following essay, Herrera examines the idea of the house as a metaphor for personal*

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*identity in The House on Mango Street, asserting that Cisneros appropriates the traditional novelistic form of the bildungsroman in representing a young Chicana's struggle for female,*

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One writes to make a home for oneself, on paper.--Alfred Kazin

Critical essay

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Before we even open her

book, the very first image that we encounter in Sandra Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is the house. With it, Cisneros enters a tradition, adding to a wide array of houses that throughout literary history have provided writers with rich, protean metaphors. As the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard reminds us, the house "constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are always re-imagining its reality."<sup>1</sup> From a post-Freudian vantage point, the architectural layout of the house, with its various levels, has been made to parallel the different layers of the psyche, and with its multiple openings and passageways and its interior and exterior design, to suggest the body. In both the East and the West mystics and philosophers have linked the human soul with the image of the house: frequently, the body is figured as the house of the soul. Teresa of Avila envisaged the "way of perfection" as a dynamic progression through the seven mansions of the soul. The English Romantic poet John Keats compared life to "a large Mansion of Many Apartments" and described the development of the human thought process as a journey through the "chambers" of consciousness. Writers have also used the metaphor of the house to represent (quite literally) "structures" of economic, political, and social power. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "big house novel" the old manor house signified social and economic status; it was either bequeathed from generation to generation or acquired and maintained through venture capitalist enterprises. In the same vein, the image of the decaying house has been employed as a symbol of political or social instability and decline by writers as various as William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Isabel Allende. Women's experience has especially been linked to the home, the domestic sphere as it were, and within that sphere there are clear-cut spatial boundaries which are designated as male and female. For example, the kitchen has traditionally been regarded as woman's place, whereas the study is male preserve. For scores of women writers the house is simultaneously a symbol of female enslavement and male privilege or guardianship. Finally, the metaphor of the house has been implemented to represent both the literary canon and the art of fiction-writing itself.<sup>2</sup> Referring, presumably, to Euro-(Anglo)American literature, in the preface to his *Portrait of a Lady* Henry James writes:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million--a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.<sup>3</sup>

The image of the house looms large in American literature. As Marilyn R. Chandler observes, the "prominence" that houses have occupied in American novels is directly related to the fact that the United States is "a country whose history has been focused ... on the business of settlement and 'development.' ... 'The American Dream' still expresses itself in the hope of owning a freestanding ... dwelling."<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, establishing, maintaining, or possessing houses has been, in fiction and in life, a male enterprise; the house, therefore, has often been a symbol of male success or failure. Rather than using the image of the house as a measure of "cultural enfranchisement," many American women writers of the twentieth century have employed the image of the house as a symbol of cultural disenfranchisement.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, they have used this architectural metaphor in order to define and articulate the (female) self in relation to the larger community. For Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*) houses symbolize the materialistic, patriarchal ideology that entraps both men and women and prescribes limited and repressive behavioral patterns to females, offering them few options outside the context of marriage. The house is the metaphor through which Paule Marshall (*Brown Girl, Brownstones*) explores

the relationship of beauty, identity, and self-perception; but the house that the heroine seeks to possess reveals the "ugliness" of the culture which she wants to enter in light of its association with the ideas of power and appropriation, as well as self-creation and identity. And in Toni Morrison's work (*Beloved*) the house functions as a symbol of white supremacy; it is haunted by a past which all of the characters must confront and come to terms with before they can join as a community and, together, forge their future.

For Sandra Cisneros the house on Mango Street simultaneously represents all of the systems that oppose or challenge her as a woman, a minority, and a writer. In the last ten or fifteen years Chicana writing has been dedicated to examining the question of personal identity; frequently, not unlike African American and Native American literature, the process of private inquiry therein dilates into an exploration of self in terms of the community and in relation to the wider world. In their writing, Chicanas have attempted to pierce new windows into "the house of fiction." *The House on Mango Street* has as its central subject the Chicana writer's struggle for female, communal, and literary identity; the house that Sandra Cisneros constructs stands as her attempt to better understand, define, and synthesize the (interior) self in terms of the (exterior) Chicano and Anglo-American community. Simply, Cisneros has reinscribed the age-old metaphor of the house in order to explore the themes of sexism, racism, and the struggle of the female minority writer to appropriate the word in the Anglo-American "house of fiction."

Recent criticism has focused on the idea that Chicanas, like African American women, are caught in a kind of double bind. First and foremost, they are discriminated against and marginalized by both Anglo-American and Mexican culture, an idea subtly emphasized in Cisneros's novel by the fact that a house in Esperanza's and Nenny's neighborhood (in America) reminds them, for no particular reason, of houses they had seen as toddlers in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> In Gloria Anzaldúa's words, Chicanos live "on the border," the "fault line," the "wound" between two cultures; although they share aspects of each, ultimately they are dispossessed from both. Further complicating the issue is the idea that Chicanos must come to terms with their fractured Mexican past before they can begin to negotiate their present.<sup>7</sup> The struggle to synthesize this bifurcated sense of personal and communal identity is frequently depicted in Chicana literature by the blending and intertwining of the Spanish and English languages. This idea is illustrated in *The House on Mango Street* by the fact that many of the characters have two names: Nenny's real name is Magdalena (a name that also resounds with biblical connotations); Meme Ortiz's name is actually Juan, and his sheepdog has one name in Spanish and one name in English.

In attempting to establish self-identity in relation to the larger Chicano community, the Chicana's task is further complicated by the fact that she is subordinated, because of her gender, within her own culture. The skewed sexual politics within the *movimiento Chicano* during the sixties exposed the asymmetry of the male-female relationship in Chicano culture and prompted the development of a specifically Chicana aesthetic. In effect, the Chicana is a minority within a minority, for women are endowed with a secondary status in Chicano culture. The dual struggle against (external) racism and (internal) sexism, a subject which also informs the writing of female African American authors, surfaces again and again in Chicana literature; it is one of the central concerns of Cisneros's novel.

Aiming to create an aesthetic that addresses her particular needs and concerns, the Chicana writer is faced with other obstacles as well. In attempting to explore her identity through the written word, both as a Chicana and as a woman, she is faced with a difficulty that all female American writers (and readers) encounter when attempting to write with (or read) a language or a literary tradition that is essentially male. Moreover, the Chicana must battle with the fact that the American "house of fiction" has been "dedicated," as Judith Fetterly observes, "to defining what is peculiarly American about experience"—in other words, white, male, Anglo-Saxon experience.<sup>8</sup> Cisneros combats these problems in several ways.

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Throughout *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza longs for a "real" house of her own, signifying, perhaps, Cisneros's desire for a "legitimate" literary formula or pattern with which she can adequately express herself.<sup>9</sup> While Cisneros seeks Virginia Woolf's literary "room of one's own," Esperanza finds her father's house on Mango Street neither fulfills her needs nor her expectations. The longed-for house that Esperanza describes at the close of the novel is much more than a single room:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in the 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. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem.<sup>10</sup>

Though it is altered and transformed, the house is an imaginative vision of Mango Street resurrected, reconstructed, and rendered through language: "Mango Street, sad red house I belong but do not belong to. I put it down on paper" (101). The vision expresses the desire on the author's part (Esperanza-Cisneros) to reconstruct the uncomfortable dimensions of her father's house in response to the desire its partial adequacy awakens.

Although Cisneros fashions a house from ordinary paper and ink--the materials most frequently used by writers--it is the scaffolding of her design that draws our attention. In a word, Cisneros invokes and implements traditional narrative patterns and motifs only to disrupt and reconstruct them. Simply, she uses "the master's tools" not to disassemble the master's house, as Audre Lorde suggests, but to remodel it according to her own aesthetic purpose. This idea is cleverly underscored by the fact that practically everything that Esperanza "inherits," from a bag full of shoes to her great-grandmother's name, is second-hand.

The overarching narrative formula in *The House on Mango Street* is a conflation of the *Bildungsroman* (the novel of formation) and its correspondent variant the *Kunstlerroman* (a novel that "culminates in the artist's" literal or imaginative "withdrawal to the inner life which leads to a discovery of his or her vocation").<sup>11</sup> Yet *The House on Mango Street* is a transformed, expanded variant of the novel of development. Unlike traditional nineteenth-century patterns of female development and character formation, Cisneros's narrative takes into account variables such as language, history, gender, and particular cultural practices. In the same vein, unlike the traditional female *Bildung*, such as Maria Luisa Bombal's "The Tree" or Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, which almost always concludes with the heroine's psychic or physical death or her "consolidation" with cultural expectations, *The House on Mango Street* comes to a close with the heroine's self-discovery and, moreover, social involvement. It is a cathartic process which is made possible through the act of writing. In Cisneros's re-visionary novel the heroine, Esperanza, synthesizes and harmonizes her public and private lives; in the process she is endowed with a significance that has traditionally been denied to female characters. Moreover, her inner development is transformed into a public, creative response to stultifying and seemingly untenable circumstances. Further defying the conventions of the female *Bildung*, Cisneros adopts a typically male picaresque formula in order to chart Esperanza's development, something which is evidenced in both the form and the setting of the novel. One need only glance at the table of contents to see that *The House on Mango Street* is a discursive, episodic novel which displays the peripatetic quality of the picaresque.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, not unlike the picaro, Esperanza tests her self-image in the wider world: her adventures and education take place in the streets of her neighborhood. Her experience of the world is anything but vicarious, unlike the scores of women depicted in her novel, who gaze longingly outside their windows entrapped in their domestic roles. Finally, Cisneros avoids the flat circularity of the female *Bildung* by writing beyond traditional plot endings: marriage or death. Esperanza's projected mental return to Mango Street is spiral rather than circular. Derivative of the male *Bildungsroman*, her discovery and validation of an inner life, realized outside the context of marriage and motherhood, leads to a vision of social integration rather than death, madness, or isolation.

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Cisneros's adaptation of the *Bildungsroman* charts the growing sexual and social consciousness of Esperanza as she grows up in her father's house; we learn at the conclusion of the book that she is a Chicana writer who has rejected the Chicano definition of woman's role and status. In her discussion of Chicana poetry, Elizabeth Ordoñez states, "the theme of sexuality consistently serves as a poetic vehicle whereby the Chicana comes to the authentic core of her being and creativity."<sup>13</sup> One could easily apply Ordoñez's statement to Cisneros's novel, for to borrow Barbara Christian's terminology, Esperanza's "trajectory of self-hood," which culminates in artistic expression, is defined in sexual terms.<sup>14</sup> Carefully choosing the experiences she wishes to represent, at the outset Esperanza depicts herself as an innocent child on the threshold of sexual awakening. In her own words, she is "a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (11). She is not totally unaware of the things which distinguish her from others, and in the opening chapter Esperanza discontentedly perceives both her own difference and lack. It is the house on Mango Street, the house that somehow falls short of her dreams--her "T.V." image of a "real" house--that evokes her dissatisfaction and disappointment. As the novel progresses, Cisneros carefully traces Esperanza's increasing ability to differentiate between herself and others. At first her observations are somewhat simplistic. She notes, for example, that each of her family members "have different hair"; she is aware that "boys and ... girls live in separate worlds" and that her name has a different meaning, a different sound, depending on where it is spoken. Yet she soon learns that there are distinctions between people, and thus her mother forbids her to play with the "bad" Vargas children, who were "without respect for all living things,

including themselves" (30). Again she enunciates her consciousness of her own inferior social status: Cathy, a neighborhood "friend" whose family is just a rung above Esperanza's on the economic ladder, thoughtlessly tells her, "as if she forgot" Esperanza had just moved in, that they were moving "a little farther *north* from Mango Street" (emphasis added) because "the neighborhood [was] getting bad" (14-15).<sup>15</sup>

As Esperanza matures she becomes increasingly conscious of her changing body and her sexuality; it is at this time that she begins to grow apart from her younger sister, Nenny. In the chapter entitled "**Hips**," Rachel, Lucy, and Esperanza discuss the possible functions of their widening hips. Nenny innocently points out that they distinguish men and women and "rock the baby asleep inside you," an idea Esperanza ascertains and explains in scientific terms that Alicia, a young college student, has taught her (47-48). Yet Lucy quickly adds that "you need [hips] to dance"; in other words, you need hips to attract men. Indicating their transitional level of maturity, the three older girls conclude their discussion by weaving the sexual themes of their "adult" conversation with nonsensical, rhythmic verse which they chant while skipping rope:

Skip, skip,  
snake in your hips.  
Wiggle around  
and break your lip.

Aside from obvious physical changes, the girls also discover the social significance of clothing. Reminiscent of Marguerite Duras's novel *L'Amante*, Cisneros uses shoes as a metonym for female power and sexuality. Gleefully receiving a bag full of old high heels, Esperanza and her girlfriends find that they are somehow transformed the moment that they put on the shoes; for the first time they become conscious of their legs, despite the fact that they are thin and covered with satiny scars. "Today we are like Cinderella," Esperanza happily comments, yet in the next breath she acknowledges that "it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg" (38). Strutting through the neighborhood wearing the "magic high heels"--outside of their fathers' houses--the three girls become immediately attuned to the fact that the shoes attract the male gaze (38). "The men cannot take their eyes off us," Esperanza observes; the grocer, Mr. Benny, warns them that the shoes are "dangerous" and threatens to call the police; and a drunken bum on a stoop tells Rachel that she is "prettier than a yellow taxi cab" in her lemon-colored heels and offers her a dollar in return for a kiss (38-39).<sup>16</sup> Yet Esperanza finds that she can be beautiful, she can attract attention, wearing "ordinary" shoes as well. She recalls that as she moved across the dance floor with her Uncle Nacho, "like in the movies," "my mother watches and my little cousins watch and ... all night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance" (46).

Despite her growing consciousness, Esperanza remains largely innocent and naive. She skips rope in her high heels, moving her hips in steady rhythm to the "double dutch" (48).<sup>17</sup> It isn't until Sally is led into the "monkey garden" with Tito's "grinning" buddies, on the pretense of retrieving her key, that she falls from innocence. It is a scene which reverberates with mingled Darwinian and biblical overtones.<sup>18</sup> Of course the garden that her family "took over" is, on one level, a symbol of America as the new Eden; the disillusion and perhaps failure of the Chicano to domesticate or shape the garden--property (the house)--is signified by the fact that the garden soon grows unkempt. But it is also the locus of Esperanza's sexual awakening. Armed with three sticks and a brick she discovers, much to her consternation, that Sally does not want to be saved.<sup>19</sup> Throwing herself on the grass in tears, she realizes all at once that the garden "isn't a place to play any more" (91).<sup>20</sup> Esperanza longs for the androgynous state of childhood when she could run in the garden "fast as the boys" (89).<sup>21</sup> Symbolically, she longs for her own (sexual) death and observes that when she got up her dress was stained green (an obvious symbol of growth) and her feet "in their white socks and ugly round shoes ... seemed far away": "They didn't seem to be my feet any more" (90). Her conscious awareness of the potentially perverse aspect of human sexuality commences in the episode in which she takes her first job at *Peter Pan* Photo Finishers; yet her sexual awakening brutally culminates in the scene at the amusement park in which she is (presumably) raped behind the tilt-a-whirl with the laughing red clowns.<sup>22</sup>

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***The House on Mango Street*** raises disturbing questions regarding both female nature and the realities and the fictions of development for women in general, and Chicanas in particular. Cisneros's novel reverberates with mythic allusions and fairy-tale motifs.

Yet her reformulation of Christian models and fairy tales, reminiscent of writers such as Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas, not only underscores the developmental and psychological changes Esperanza undergoes in her passage from childhood to womanhood, but it forces us to recontextualize and revise her original sources. The self which Cisneros defines is, in effect, defined both in relation and resistance to conventional plot formulas. Cisneros refashions archetypal paradigms, such as the Fall, the Peter Pan syndrome, and the Cinderella cycle; in this way, she exposes the limited narrative strategies and "patterns for maturation and behavior," to borrow Karen Rowe's terminology, available to female authors writing in, and against, a male tradition.<sup>23</sup>

Like the narrative formula of the *Bildung*, myths and fairy tales enable Cisneros to underscore and reiterate her major themes and investigate or bring to light the limited maturation and behavioral patterns that fiction has offered to women. Repeatedly, she emphasizes the fact that Esperanza wishes to belong, to fit in; the theme of friendship is woven throughout the novel. Yet as she grows older she not only becomes conscious of her own sexual identity, but she becomes aware of the fact that the romantic vision offered to Chicanas in "storybooks and movies" is a debilitating, self-diminishing myth that fails (93). In effect, Esperanza becomes conscious of the fact that her interior sense of self does not correspond with the accepted self that her culture has carved out for her; in fact it collides with the image offered to her by society. *The House on Mango Street* is a virtual portrait gallery of disillusioned, passive women who are victimized, or victimize themselves, because of their sexuality; Cisneros interweaves their narratives with mythic, fairy-tale motifs. Rosa Vargas is a single parent who, like the old woman in the shoe, has "too many" kids; Lois, who can't tie her own shoes and smells "pink like babies do," laughs and drinks beer and follows her boyfriend Sire into dark alleys; Ruthie whistles "like the Emperor's nightingale," recites poetry from *Alice in Wonderland*, used to write children's books, and sleeps on her mother's couch, despite the fact that she married a man who gave her a "real" house of her own; locked in her bedroom by a jealous husband, Rafaela leans out of her window "dream[ing] her hair is like Rapunzel's" and drinks coconut and papaya juice because she wishes there were sweeter drinks; and finally Sally, "the girl with eyes like Egypt" and paints her eyes "like Cleopatra," marries at thirteen and sits at home alone staring at the "linoleum roses" on her kitchen floor in her "wedding cake" house (28, 30, 64, 76). Ironically, even the women within her own house bear a similar destiny; Esperanza is literally surrounded by women who "consolidate" their subservient nurturing role by exchanging "one domestic sphere for another"; in effect, they have fulfilled what Abel, Hirsch, and Langland call "the conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood."<sup>24</sup> Her great-grandmother, whose name she has "inherited," was carried off like a "fancy chandelier" to her husband's house and spent her life looking out the window; her mother sings *Madame Butterfly* with "velvety lungs" and sadly tells her daughter that she "could've been somebody"; and her aunt, the swimmer-survivor, dies a blind invalid with only a photograph as a testimony to her strength (12, 83).<sup>25</sup> Through their negative example, Esperanza learns that the institution of marriage--the big wedding cake "house"--is not all that it seems. Only Alicia, the girl who sees mice late at night because she sits up studying and refuses to "inherit her mother's rollingpin," provides Esperanza with a female mentor (32).<sup>26</sup> Unlike Marin, who dances on the street corner waiting for someone to "change her life," Esperanza rejects the role models which her society offers her and consciously chooses to forge her own identity through writing; and in so doing, she symbolically chooses the American translation of her name (hope) over the Spanish (waiting).

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In addition to being an exploration into the way in which the Chicano community deters the Chicana's exploration and discovery of selfhood, Cisneros's novel emphatically stresses the role of writing in the process of self-definition. In *The House on Mango Street* gender is inextricably linked to artistic development. Cisneros's novel is, in some sense, a work in process, a growing experience "recollected" in a kind of uneasy Wordsworthian "tranquility." As readers, we are acutely aware that Esperanza (alias Cassandra, Alexis, Maritza, Lisandra, or Zeze the X) is constantly, and consciously, fashioning and refashioning her identity, her history, an idea underscored by the chapter in which Lucy, Rachel, Nenny, and Esperanza name and rename the clouds. As she matures, she learns the power of language and discovers that naming creates and dispels fear.<sup>27</sup> Not only is she empowered by the scientific words that she gleans from her library books or learns from Alicia, but she is empowered by her fiction, unlike Minerva who writes visionary poetry on scraps of paper but "is always sad like a house on fire" (80). As an adult, she discovers the meaning of her dying aunt's words: "You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (56). The psychic freedom embodied in the written word is tantamount to freedom; yet it is a truth that Esperanza comes to understand only when she has managed to free herself, if only imaginatively, from Mango Street. Only then can she become an independent, self-determining agent. Yet independence does

not imply isolation. For Esperanza the act of writing and recollecting (perhaps something akin to Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory") enables her to synthesize, critique, and recuperate her own personal history and, by correlation, the history of her culture. Writing enables her to realize the redemptive vision of the mystical sister with marble hands:

When you leave you must remember always to come back ... for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know: You can't forget who you are. ... You must remember to come back.(97-98)

Significantly, the old woman imparts her message at Rachel's and Lucy's baby sister's funeral; it perhaps foreshadows Esperanza's eventual rejection of marriage and motherhood. Only in retrospect does she realize her redemptive role, a role almost mystically signified by her name Esperanza (Hope) Cordero (sacrificial? Lamb).

Widely characteristic of contemporary American minority fiction, the final vision of *The House on Mango Street* is the individual defined within the context of the larger community; it is an idea that is evidenced by the fact that we gradually acquire a fuller understanding of Esperanza's identity as she acquaints us with the various members of her family and neighborhood. In effect, Esperanza's development is thrown into high relief against both her family's and her community's history. Simone de Beauvoir once commented, "The ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house, whether cottage or castle; it stands for permanence and separation from the world."<sup>28</sup> Unlike de Beauvoir's isolated, idealized house, the house that Cisneros built is a meeting place, hospitable and inviting. It is, to borrow Bachelard's vocabulary, "better built, lighter, and larger than all of the houses of the past"; and though it stands in "symmetrical relation" to the houses of the past, the house she was born in, it is living, and protean, and impermanent.<sup>29</sup> Cisneros seemed to know that "it is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality."<sup>30</sup>

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That Sandra Cisneros drew on an established tradition to accomplish her own ends is readily apparent in *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros's adaptation and reinscription of established narrative patterns enabled her to explore the psychological, historical, and cultural forces which shape individual and collective identity. At the same time, her revisions reveal the way in which the writer can shape and reshape not only personal history, but cultural history as well. Ultimately, *The House on Mango Street* calls attention to the near impossibility of rendering, and thus harnessing, human experience and human nature with language, for in the process of refashioning, Cisneros points up the artificial, subjective, and often political nature of artistic creation. Nevertheless, rearranging the furniture in the house of fiction becomes for her both an act of defiance and, in Adrienne Rich's words, "an act of survival."<sup>31</sup> Unlike Mamacita "no speak English," Esperanza refuses to preserve some fixed image, some photograph, of home. On the contrary, at the end of her narrative--her (his)story--she affirms the idea that home resides within the individual "heart." Like the four skinny trees in her neighborhood, she "reaches" and does not forget, despite the bricks and concrete (71). As we close her book we are left with the feeling that Cisneros's "house" of paper and ink, her "house made of heart," is extraordinarily resistant and durable.

--garigots--

## Notes

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Books, 1964), 17.
2. It is impossible to overlook the fact that nowadays the word "canon" has virtually lost its currency. In effect, it has become a kind of a pregnant form, expanding and contracting according to the individual will.
3. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribner's, 1962), 46.
4. Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1.
5. Ibid.
6. This notion is later emphasized in the episode with "Geraldo no name," the man who has no name or address in America and is never heard of again at home in Mexico.

7. Gloria Anzaldúa, *La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, Calif: Spinsters, 1987).
8. Judith Fetterley, "Introduction: On the Politics of Literature," in *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).
9. Of course the question of what is real or what is perceived to be real is thrown into high relief in Cisneros's novel.
10. Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Publico Press, 1985), 100. All subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and citations will appear parenthetically in the text by page number only.
11. I am using Marianne Hirsch's definition of the *Kunstlerroman*; it appears in her essay "Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm," in *The Voyage In* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), 46. I must also add that the essays in *The Voyage In* provided both the inspiration and the narrative framework for my own investigation of Cisneros's novel.
12. One might also suggest that the narrative gaps in the fractured chronological plot not only challenge the conventions of the linear or "realistic" plot, but, in the tradition of *écriture féminine*, gaps signify women's absence or omission from cultural productions such as writing.
13. Elizabeth Ordoñez, "Sexual Politics and the Theme of Sexuality in Chicana Poetry," in *Women in Hispanic Literature*, ed. Beth Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 318.
14. Barbara Christian, "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction," *Black Feminist Criticism. Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1985).
15. The chapter entitled "Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark" signals Esperanza's first encounter with death and her consequent realization that her father is vulnerable.
16. Symbolically there are three pairs of high heels—three is a kind of mystical, quasi-religious number that recurs in folklore and fairy tales. The colors of the shoes are significant as well: red suggests female sexuality and passion (it also recalls the image of Dorothy's ruby slippers); yellow seems to signify fetishized, even prostituted, sexuality (as the bum points out, it is also the color of a taxi cab, a vehicle that can take you anywhere you want to go as long as you're willing to pay the price); and the pale blue shoes that used to be white symbolize lost innocence (the fact that it is lost in the dance, an obvious symbol of unrestrained sexuality in Cisneros's novel, is worthy of attention).
17. Cisneros underscores this theme by including a number of parallel sequences in her novel which trace Esperanza's maturation process; for example, in the beginning of the novel she contributes five dollars toward the purchase of a used bicycle, and at the end she pays Elenita, a fortune-teller who, like Jean Rhys's character Christophine, mingles Christian superstition with voodoo-like practices to read her fortune.
18. The Darwinian leitmotif resurfaces in the scene in which Esperanza reads Charles Kingsley's *The Waterbabies* (1863) to her dying aunt.
19. The kiss that the boys demand from Sally recalls the episodes with Rachel and the "bum man" and Esperanza and the old Chinese man at the photo finishers.
20. While playing in the garden Eddie Vargas falls asleep beneath a hibiscus tree "like a Rip Van Winkle," the archetypally henpecked husband, a detail that reinforces the overall mythic atmosphere of the garden.
21. The overtly phallic gesture of shaking the stick at Sally underscores this theme. This theme is also developed later in the novel when Esperanza "wages a quiet war" against pretty women who "wait on the threshold waiting for the ball and the chain": she adopts chauvinistic male behavior such as "leaving the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (82).
22. The scene in the "photo lab" parallels the episode with Rachel and the "bum man."

23. Karen E. Rowe, "'Fairy-born and human-bred': Jane Eyre's Education in Romance," *The Voyage In*, 69.

24. Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 7-8.

25. Cisneros repeatedly uses the photograph in her novel. Esperanza, for example, works at a photo finishers and the photograph taken at her *abuelito's* tomb is a photograph of a pink house in Mexico. In Cisneros's work, photographs represent the attempt to preserve memory and, in Roland Barthes's terminology, make oneself historically significant.

26. At this junction in the text Esperanza also becomes conscious both of her own "ugly" physical appearance and of her mother's "shame" (82-84).

27. This notion is emphasized in the chapter entitled "Those Who Don't" in which she demonstrates that fear and danger are relative.

28. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1953; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 501.

29. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 61.

30. Ibid.

31. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (New York: Norton, 1975), 35.

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Cisneros' Writing Style. Both *The House on Mango Street* and *"Woman Hollering Creek" and Other Stories* by Cisneros may seem to the hasty first-time reader to be casually, even loosely constructed, yet the careful reader suspects that nothing could be further from the truth. The poet W. B. Yeats writes, about writing: "A line may take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The "stitching and unstitching" Yeats meant was the writing of poetry, the painstaking effort to make it look eff